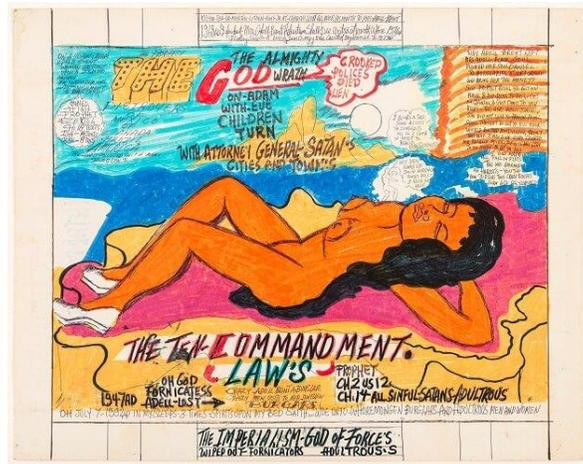


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Known/ Unknown: Private Obsessions and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art

By Robin Scher



Royal Robertson, Untitled (The Ten Commandment Laws or Dustard Sinfulness Farm), c. 1980, Marker and ink on poster board. Courtesy of Andrew Lemeshevsky, Jr. and Shrine Gallery, NYC.

Could there be two better bedfellows than that of outsider art and sexual taboo? Both all too often sit at the periphery of society; be it through matter of circumstance, prevailing norms, or, what is simply considered “proper.” It is for these reasons, and many more, that the two worlds enjoy a remarkable overlap. “Known/Unknown: Private Obsession and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art,” an exhibition currently at New York’s Museum of Sex through September 16, stands as a testament to this bond.

“Everyone who makes the decision to come to the Museum of Sex is already open-minded to start out,” said Lissa Rivera, a co-curator of the show alongside Frank Maresca, one recent Friday afternoon before a walk through of the exhibition. This description of course stands to reason given her institution’s name, but it goes beyond that. Inclusivity in this case doesn’t pertain strictly to kinks or fetish. Instead, as “Known/Unknown” so readily demonstrates, this open-minded spirit also lends a particularly fertile territory to the realm of outsider art.



Take, for example, one of the first pieces on display upon entry: a previously unexhibited Henry Darger watercolor titled “At Sunbeam Creek/At Wickey Lansinia.” This piece forms part of Darger’s epic 15,000 page Vivian Girls

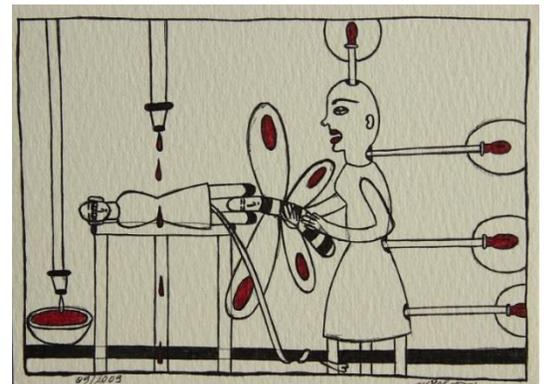
saga. Like most of this artist's oeuvre, the piece offers two rather brutal scenes—which appear back to back—depicting the seven Vivian sisters engaged in violent clashes with fascist-looking adult men who seek to enslave them.

The image on the back side of the work stands out in particular for its depiction of the children all naked, some sharing both sets of sexual organs, some being brutally strangled by men in uniforms. Disturbing and powerful, the work speaks to a certain kind of trauma, perhaps experienced by Darger, or the countless others throughout history who have faced persecution due to their gender, or sexual identity. Which might go a way toward explaining why this particular painting hasn't been shown in public until now.

“That's kind of the point of the exhibit,” Rivera explained, alluding to the overt sexual content of this Darger and other pieces in the show, which tend to push the purview of other, more mild-mannered exhibition spaces. “Eroticism is such an important theme in outsider art, yet in museums that are more mainstream there's not a way to really deal with it directly.”

The same could be said of many institutions that come up against what is considered to be the permissible barrier of sexuality. The fruits of disrupting that dynamic are exemplified both in this show and a series of R. Crumb-esque drawings by an Austrian artist named Johann Garber. In the late 1970s, a 19-year-old Garber was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in the village of Gugging, Vienna. As fortune would have it, Garber came under the care of Dr. Leo Navratil who encouraged his patients to express themselves however they liked through art. In Garber's case this manifested in his series of erotic illustrations of butts, boobs, balls and all, which he aptly called his “Sexi-Blatt” (Sexy Paper.) Together, Garber and his fellow inpatients later came to form the Gugging Artist Group, revealing what is possible when expression is allowed to roam free.

Merilena Pelosi, an artist of Brazilian origin, further exemplifies this emancipatory power of free expression. At a young age Pelosi was taken by her father to visit a Macumba priest (Brazilian form of voodoo), where she experienced a series of life-altering traumatic rituals. Years later Pelosi would flee to France, eventually finding a sense of solace, helped in large part by her art practice. Typically, Pelosi's artwork involves simplistic, figurative drawings of bodies undergoing violent transformation, often of an erotic and sadomasochistic manner. Pelosi's artwork can be read as a translation of her internal wounds into an beautified, external form.



Merilena Pelosi, Untitled, 2009, Ink on paper. Courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery, Finland

In the case of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, a Milwaukee baker by day, it was rather out of love than hurt, that he found inspiration for his artwork — his wife, Marie. “I call this room, Marie's Palace,” Rivera said with a large smile, gesturing to a wall filled with glamorous black and white photographic portraits of Marie, taken by Von Bruenchenhein. Over the course of two decades starting in the 1940s, the couple produced thousands of these images together. Most of them feature Marie set against various, lush backdrops, and adorned in pearls and similar such opulent ephemera.

“They were able to have this rebellious life and live the way they wanted to,” said Rivera, who believes this adventurous and curious spirit is what “Known/Unknown” is truly about. “[These are] people who built worlds, and had very specific fantasies. There wasn’t any media that related to them, which drove them to create art.”

This exhibition then, in other words, is a set of lifelines that connected people to their innermost desires. Most of these artists lived in a time before the internet (or, the MoS for that matter) and—like so many in the world of outsider art—it was only through the act of creation that they could fully manifest their true selves. For that reason, there is both a beauty and hint of melancholy that pervades the show.

Take Morton Bartlett’s delicately crafted, anatomically accurate, half-sized sculptures of children that were only discovered after the artist died. Bartlett, like Darger, was orphaned around the age of 8. Later in life, while living alone in an apartment in Boston and working as a graphic designer, Bartlett began his craft.

“At night,” Rivera explains, “he would go home, listen to old-timey radio shows about families, and make these dolls with interchangeable parts. He then took photos of them to make them look like they were alive.” Those photos, also on display beside some of the dolls, are strikingly life-like. After each doll had its close-up, Bartlett would carefully wrap and lock them up in a cupboard, where they stayed unrevealed to the world up until the artist’s death many years later. Adorned with clothing also made by Bartlett, these figures, imbued with the love one reserves for a child, represent the pinnacle of both Bartlett’s craft and ambition.

As much as we do know about Bartlett, though, we can never truly know what fueled that ambition. Was it sheer loneliness, or something a bit more sinister? Either way, by creating his dolls he was saved. And thanks in part to our more liberally-minded society, Bartlett and his fellow kin can now also be celebrated.



Left: Eugene von Bruenchenhein, *Untitled (Portrait of the Artist's Wife Marie)*, c. 1940s, Scan of 35 mm color slide. Courtesy Lewis and Jean Greenblatt, Chicago.;
Right: Morton Bartlett, *Polynesian Girl Standing Wearing Hat*, c. 1950, printed 2001, unique digital print. Courtesy Marion Harris, New York.