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New Exhibit At The Museum Of Sex Examines Sexuality In The Work Of Outsider Artists

By Adam Lehrer



Left: Edwin Lawson, 'Untitled,' (1970s), all images courtesy of The Museum of Sex; Right: Morton Bartlett, 'Polynesian Girl Standing Wearing Hat,' (circa 1950)

Sexuality is undeniably one of the primary impetuses of all artistic creation. Michaelangelo's David, Pablo Picasso's erotic watercolors, The Rolling Stones' song 'Under my Thumb,' and David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive* are just a few masterpieces inspired by its creators' grappings with sexual desire, confusion, torment or consummation. But of course, that is not news to anyone. But in the world of conceptual art, in particular, there is an interesting albeit problematic dichotomy in the way artists present their sexualities in their work. Often, if an artist knows that he/she will be showing work, it's easy to either present an idealized version of his/her sexuality to bury sexuality beneath the subtext of the work. Balthus, for instance, has been argued to have held an uncomfortable infatuation with underage girls in his paintings, but he masks this supposed sexual fixation in layers of ambiguity. Sexuality can also be explored by artists and then muddled in conceptual conceit, so the work becomes more about explorations of sexual concepts than a window into the artist's personal sexuality. The work of Marilyn Minter, for example, is undeniably sexual but explores concepts of the male gaze and sexual presentation in media. It is very difficult to find art work that directly reflects artists' unfiltered sexuality and desires. Aware of this conundrum, The Museum of Sex Director of Exhibitions Mark Snyder and curator Frank Maresca organized the exhibition *Known/Unknown: Private Obsessions and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art* (open to public January 19) that showcases over 100 paintings, sculptures and photographs made by self-taught or so-called "outsider artists" that examine these artists' sexualities and hidden desires. All of the work in the exhibition was made by the artists without the intention of ever showing the work to a viewing public. Therefore, the exhibition

provides portals directly into the deep recesses of these artists' sexual minds without conceptual conceit. "We wanted to create an exhibition that explored art made purely out of a desire to create it, rather than out of a desire for this work to be seen by others," says Snyder. "Many of the artists did not intend for their work to be seen in museum or galleries, so often the fantasies and obsessions that get revealed are raw versions of the truth. The featured works allow a glimpse into these fantasies but also simultaneously gives us a rare peek into the minds of the creators."

Consistent with The Museum of Sex's mission to explore a whole spectrum of human sexuality, the works in the exhibition range from the domestic to the voyeuristic, the wholesome to the perverse, the traditionally "normal" to what is more commonly thought of as sexually "abnormal." On display will be Milwaukee-based 20th Century self-taught Eugene Von Bruenchenheim's loving portraits of his wife offering a window into a man's love and passion for his wife. Miroslav Tichý, a Czech self-taught photographer known for building his own homemade cameras, offers viewers a taste of the voyeuristic with his photographs stolen of women on the streets in his home of Kyjov. Perhaps the most controversy prone of the selections will be the inclusion of works by 20th Century Chicago-based outsider artist and writer Henry Darger. Darger died in 1973 and left behind a 15,145-page, single-spaced fantasy manuscript called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. Some of the illustrations in the book will be on display, and these images often depict graphic scenes of ritualistic and sadistic torture of young girls. Art historians have argued that Darger's work manifested the man's own grappling with the abuse he suffered as a child. The exhibition essentially forces the viewer to not only confront these different manifestations of sexuality and fantasy, but also to self-analyze our own perspectives on these sexualities and our own sexualities. "We are often unaware of the way our private worlds manifest themselves outwardly and often we unintentionally share much about ourselves that we do not intend to: our Internet search histories, private journals or subconscious doodles," says Snyder. "Even the Museum of Sex brings typically private explorations of sexuality into a communal experience. At times we may feel like voyeurs, but hopefully we also end up being researchers and historians as well."

Snyder and Maresca took some time to answer questions I had about this fascinating exhibition.

Adam Lehrer: How did this exhibition come together? Why was it decided to look at eroticism outside the confines of conventional art history and in the vast swathes of outsider art?

Mark Snyder: We found ourselves drawn to the unfiltered expression of self-taught artists and other artists, who found themselves making art outside of the mainstream. We were inspired by these artists' obsessions and the ways those obsessions manifested in the work. Their unfiltered expressions revealed truths that many mainstream artists seemed to go out of their way to keep hidden from their work. During the development phase of this exhibition, the Museum began conversations with Frank Maresca because of his extensive experience in the field of outsider art. We quickly realized that Frank could offer a unique curatorial perspective to the project.

AL: The exhibition themes range from the domestic to the voyeuristic, from Eugene Von Bruenchenheim's portraits of his wife to Miroslav Tichý stolen pictures of women from his city. Was it important to show the different manifestations of sexual desire?

Frank Maresca: Yes, the broad objective of the exhibition is to present a diverse spectrum of sexually themed works within the specificity of folk, self-taught, and outsider art—and in doing so, to illustrate the

possible differences between the three categories, as well as how they MIGHT differentiate from the so-called “norm.”

Folk objects come from a utilitarian necessity. Yet they also offered the makers an excuse (of sorts) to express their innermost sexual desires. In the case of outsider and self-taught artists, the works seemed to express and materialize very private obsessions. Tichý photographed his subjects without them knowing and Von Bruenchenhein shared his vision only with his wife and muse Marie. In both cases, the photographs were never intended to be seen and perhaps satisfied the artists’ needs for voyeurism or fantasy. Therefore, the viewer becomes implicated as a voyeur in these intimate worlds. When it comes to self-taught artists, such as Thornton Dial (who covered many subjects: from race and politics to the joys and adventure of sex), I should say his work owes nothing to art history. Instead, it owes to life. Here’s a person born in rural Alabama, without the dubious benefit of a “proper” art education, producing works that are indistinguishable from those of the most accomplished academic artists. The main difference seems to be that folk, self-taught, and outsider artists are fundamentally unconcerned with their “products” being shown publicly.

MS: This is not a show about the peculiarities of sexuality, but how when viewed together these varying perspectives create a broader view of human sexuality. We wanted to explore the ways that obsession and desire take different forms in each of us. Some of us like to look, while others like to participate. Some of us are moved by a single muse or idea, played over and over in many different ways, while others of us are working through a complex range of personal experience and histories.

AL: Building on that question, how do you present all these forms of sexual desire without demonizing the more lurid as being perverse? How do you make the entire exhibition a celebration of sexuality in all of its complexities?

FM: I’m neither looking to elevate or demonize. The whole exhibition can be thought of as a roller-coaster ride between the two extremes, and this ride tells a story shaped by the viewer, like an inkblot test. You can agree or disagree with the content, but the bottom-line for me is that it’s all visual information and, as such, it’s all valid. With an artist like Royal Robertson, most people wouldn’t agree with his visual and verbal depiction of women. Curiosity can make it interesting to view the world from extreme points of view. It’s almost like looking at images of war... I don’t intend to compare the horrors of the Holocaust with the extreme marital problems of Robertson, but information is still information.

MS: The Museum tries to embrace a very broad and inclusive view of sexuality. When we start to explore the circumstances around the work, we allow ourselves to be a bit more open and empathetic in our responses to the work. This exhibition doesn’t seek to dictate a “right” or “wrong” type of sexuality.

AL: Ultimately though, something like Henry Darger’s work cannot be read as celebratory, so maybe that’s the wrong term. So was the aim a more broad manifestation of the way sexual desire and perversity manifests in an artist’s work?

FM: Actually, there are aspects of Darger’s work that are celebratory. Yes, the Vivian Girls are often depicted in disturbing and violent situations, but in other works we see them in lavish bucolic scenarios that commemorate the beauty of childhood and nature. We also see them celebrating victories of war over the villains of their story. Within the moodiness of Darger’s oeuvre there’s also joy. Darkness can’t exist without light.

MS: Perhaps “revelation” is a good word. We wanted to give a truthful look at human desire and did not want to shy away from sensitive subjects. So often people are in the habit of rewriting their own sexual histories, editing out the parts they wish to keep private. Human sexuality is as diverse and individual as humanity itself.

AL: I’m curious about your opinion on Darger in particular. There are other artists obviously who seem to be expressing something lurid about children in their work, even something as sublime as Balthus seems to be grappling with insidious desire. So to me it begs a question, "Can someone be offended by an art work?" Are you trying to present Darger without judgement, to allow the audience to draw their own conclusions about what he was trying to express in his writing and illustrations?

MS: The story of Darger is an interesting one. As to why, he created these works, we might never know. We should keep in mind that Darger’s work is a work of fantasy, and therefore not bound by the same rules as that of physical action in some ways. We can only speculate where Darger saw himself in these works and how particular traumas in his life may have led to the creation of his artwork. The title of the exhibition, Known/Unknown references this idea.

FM: I would prefer to compare Balthus with [20th century freelance photographer and graphic artist] Morton Bartlett rather than with Darger. I’m reasonably certain that both Bartlett and Balthus were moral individuals, though their fascinations and (perhaps) latent desires manifested themselves as the artworks that we know. Bartlett’s sculpted plaster children were produced as subjects for photography, beyond that fact there’s really no saying if they materialized something insidious. During Bartlett’s life, Yankee Magazine published an article about his work. The piece, dated April, 1962, was titled The Sweethearts of Mr. Bartlett. The question is: just who were Bartlett’s sweethearts? We know who they were in the case of Balthus.

AL: Another compelling element in this exhibition is that it implicates the audience in voyeurism. Because these are works possibly made to never be shown to the outside world, it’s like we are spying on peoples most private inner worlds. Was this idea discussed at all throughout the exhibition’s curation?

FM: The question is valid, but there’s no one answer. We have no way of knowing, had circumstances for these artists been different, if they would be open to the idea of showing their work. The photographs of Marie Von Bruenchenhein were shown for the first time after Eugene’s death but while she was still alive. In fact, she attended their first exhibition at the Carl Hammer gallery in Chicago. According to Carl, she seemed to be delighted with the attention. When you witness the pure private world of an individual, there are no extraneous agendas; you’re only left with the truth. Is the intimacy of the truth too private? Should it be buried along with the artist? I don’t think so.

AL: On the exhibition, W Magazine commented that not all erotica is sexy, but it is always bizarre. When is bizarre also sexy?

MS: What people consider to be “sexy” is subjective. People are constantly revealing themselves in ways that others may find different, scary or even repulsive. I think we start to see ‘bizarre’ as ‘sexy’, when something starts to resonate within us; whether we are intrigued by something new or see ourselves reflected.

AL: I might be reaching here, but it seems to me a theme in this exhibition is that of trauma, and that trauma can both result in new creative and sexual energy. Thereby, the act of sex and the act of creation are inextricably linked through pain. Do you believe there is any truth to this?

MS: The human mind is a powerful thing. We are the sum of all our experiences. Trauma may influence the way we experience pleasure, but equally the happiest moment of our lives could change our core desires.

AL: There is something deliciously confrontational in this exhibition. I often rant about the contemporary societal ill that is the “cult of relatability.” Everyone needs to be liked. Everyone needs to be accepted. If you have an opinion contrary to common opinion you can be viciously attacked on social media. People can’t like something that they can’t relate to. People are more easily offended than ever. But this exhibition throws widely unknown artists’ most personal perversions in viewers’ faces. In private, nothing is relatable. Do you welcome the herd of millennial PC social justice warriors who will probably take issue with certain artists in the show for misogyny, etc.?

MS: If the Museum gave in to every criticism it received, it would have never opened its doors to the public. Again, we never set out to create a definitive view of what sexuality should be. The Museum is a dialogue. We welcome differing opinions and perspectives. We want people to come and explore sexuality, and criticism is certainly a part of this exploration. I urge visitors to come and visit the Museum with an open mind.

AL: One more thing, this idea from the press release: “Eroticism is usually thought of as a prelude to the sexual act, but it can just as easily be part of a reorientation of transformation of sexuality, often driven by singular obsessions—such as power in Marilena Pelosi’s ink sketches of various scenarios of penetration—that blot out all considerations of conventional sensibilities.” How is eroticism just a prelude to a sexual act, and not actually sex itself? And how is this a transformation of one’s sexuality? Specifically how does this idea relate to the exhibition?

FM: Eroticism is fueled by the imagination and not necessarily conditioned by the physical consummation of sex. It’s both a prelude and an afterthought. It exists in the mind. The works in “Known/Unknown” express a wide array of fantasies, some explicit and some elusive, but all transcending the sexual act. I relate the line about the transformation of sexuality to the symbolic and illuminating power of turning experience into art.

MS: By our definition, “foreplay” is as much a part of sex as is “intercourse.” As a culture, however, we typically use the idea of “eroticism” to try to separate artistic expressions of sexual desire from our biological impulses. In this exhibition, we are exploring how sexual desire can be reworked and transformed through art, obsession, and the power of the creative mind.