

SLOW on the draw

Working for an audience of one, self-taught artists approach each work with monastic dedication, taking years to complete each one. **Jasper Sharp** is mesmerised by a new exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum in New York

In 1943, the director of the New York Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr Jr, mounted an exhibition of 30 paintings by a virtually unknown 71-year-old Polish emigré named Morris Hirshfield. It was the first time Hirshfield's work had been seen in public, and included every painting he had made to that day. He had taken up art in 1937 following a period of ill health that necessitated his retirement from a career in clothes manufacturing. What began as a form of occupational therapy quickly became something more consuming. For nine years, until his death in 1946 from a heart attack, he worked day and night to produce 72 painstakingly detailed paintings.

Hirshfield had had no tuition, no contact with other artists and had never taken an interest in New York's galleries or museums. His work had been discovered in 1939 by art dealer Sidney Janis, who prepared and curated the MoMA show. Such an exhibition was not without precedent. Since the 1930s, American collectors such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and museums, including MoMA, the Metropolitan and the Whitney, had been acquiring works by self-taught artists and displaying them alongside those by 'legitimate' artists.

But Hirshfield's work met with a storm of condemnation. While the *New York Times* conceded that non-academic art was a 'pleasant side street', other critics described the exhibition as 'one of the most hated shows' the museum had ever put on. *Art Digest* summed up the controversy as, 'accusations that MoMA

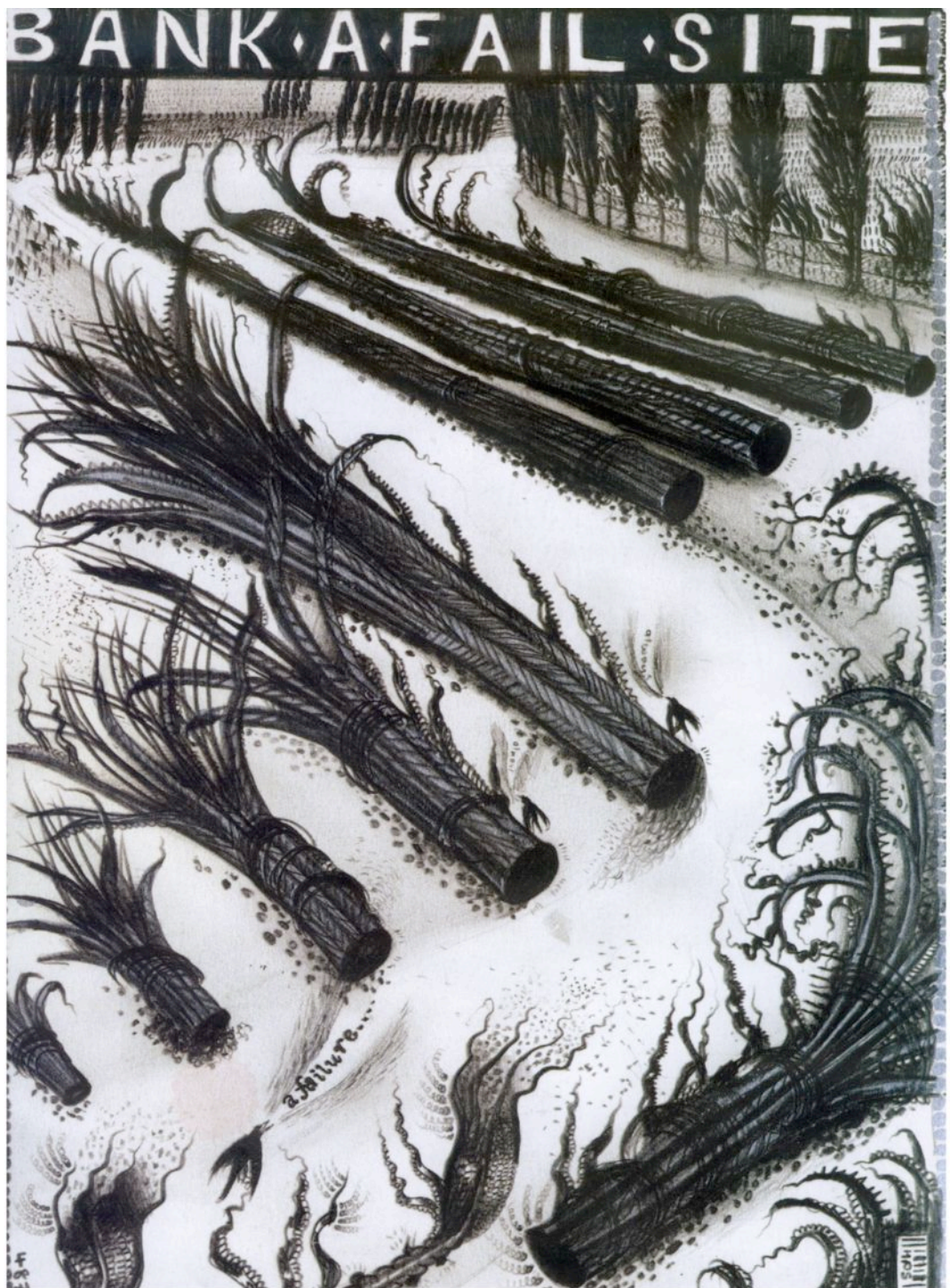
was victimising the poor man; that he was victimising the poor museum; that he was a phony; that anyone who liked his work was a phony'. The museum was seen as doing a disservice to professional artists by cluttering up their exhibition space for months with the works of an unskilled amateur. Barr was fired later that year, and with his departure MoMA's pioneering advocacy of non-academic art came to an abrupt end.

That the art of Hirshfield had attained such prominence within the 'high' art establishment in the first place was due in part to the fact that the United States lacked a modernist tradition comparable to that of Europe. The emergence just a few years later of Abstract Expressionism, America's first homegrown avant-garde movement of international significance, would change that. The figurative and more easily appreciated works of 'naive' painters were disregarded in favour of the predominantly abstract, cerebral, more 'serious' canvases of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and the New York School.

Since then, the parameters have shifted favourably with each passing generation. By whichever catch-all name it is given – folk, non-academic, naive, primitive, self-taught, outsider – this type of art is today just as varied and challenging as academic, educated, sophisticated, insider, art-school art. Many educated artists working in the mainstream pay it the ultimate homage: by imitating it, attempting to mimic its 'crude' look and spirit.

These artists are hard to pigeon-hole, not simply because ▶

Opposite: Chris Hipkiss, *Bank A Fail Site*, 2005, graphite on paper, 21.0 x 15.2cm



Some artists are obsessive-compulsive, driven by the horror of the empty page and a need to self-heal

They operate on or beyond the fringes of a chronically inward-looking art establishment, but because they now work in the full range of mediums, from painting and sculpture to installation, sound, film, video and internet art. Their popularity and commercial value have increased accordingly, encouraged and regulated by a lively market of specialist fairs and galleries. While in the 1930s and 40s naive art functioned as the conscience of Modernism, as something curious and fascinating, prized by Surrealists and Grand Tour socialites alike, it is taken far more seriously today.

Nextdoor to MoMA and at the top of a staircase on which there hangs a painting by Hirshfield, the critically well-received exhibition 'Obsessive Drawing', at the American Folk Art Museum, introduces the work of a group of self-taught artists from the four corners of the earth. Included among them is Eugene Andolsek, an 84-year-old making his public debut. 'Obsessive Drawing' examines the forces that drive these individuals to make art, whether as a means to deal with illness or dark emotions such as fear, bereavement and loneliness. Not one of them set out to become an artist, and they seek neither fame nor financial reward. Rather, they create as an instinctive necessity, using the skills they have taught themselves to make sense of and survive in contemporary society.

A thread running through the show is the labour-intensive nature of each work. Andolsek is an interesting example of the compulsion known as 'horror vacui', or the need to fill the page. Working with a ruler, compass and a sheet of graph paper, he begins by laying down a highly decorative symmetrical framework of black lines, not unlike the leading of stained-glass windows. The various sections are then filled with coloured ink of vividly contrasting hues that he meticulously mixes himself. The images that result pulsate with jarring rhythms reminiscent of the designs of Dutch African fabrics.

Andolsek began drawing in 1950, and over five decades has produced 2,000 to 3,000 ink drawings. He would work at night, at his mother's kitchen table, and often found himself slipping into a trancelike state. 'I would wake up and the drawing was there and I didn't even know how it got there.' Shy, never married and without children, he worked as a clerk for various railroad companies up and down the East Coast in a constant state of insecurity, inexplicably convinced that he would be fired every new day that came. Making art helped him cope with his anxiety, as it did with the solitude and regret that followed the death in 1984 of his mother, whom he had nursed through a long illness. Andolsek now resides in a Pittsburgh nursing home, having given up drawing two years ago due to failing eyesight. During his entire 'career' as an artist, barely a single person saw his work. He felt that the drawings weren't interesting, and continues to question the attention they have since received.

Another artist appearing in public for the first time is Martin

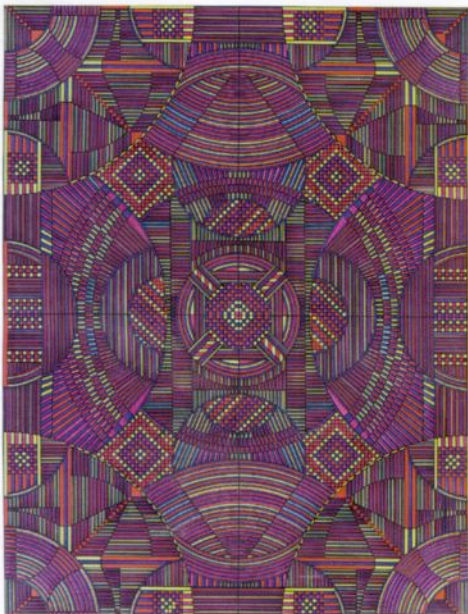


PHOTO: COURTESY AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM; ANDolsek: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; HIPKISS: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; DOI: JEFFREY M. HARRIS

Thompson. Almost 50, he lives in Wellington, New Zealand, a self-designated outcast sleeping on the streets. His work, which he makes each day at an art-therapy workshop, involves a similarly meticulous practice. Using graph paper, he works with fine-tipped ballpoint pens and a handsaw, the straight side of which serves as a ruler, to create positive-negative diptychs whose sequences are dictated by the number 10. Faulty squares are removed with a scalpel from the graph paper, which Thompson backs with sticky tape prior to starting work, and replaced with new ones taken from the sheet's margins. The finished works resemble pixelated photographs or the screens of early computer games such as Pac Man.

Thompson's drawings are as logical as anything produced by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt or Robert Mangold in the 1960s. This rigid, rule-based approach couldn't be further from that of Hiroyuki Doi, who draws only circles. Doi, who is nearly 60 and has been making art for more than three decades, works as a chef and cooking teacher in Tokyo. For him, making art by hand is an attempt to resist the tidal wave of technology that has engulfed his country.

Following the death of his younger brother several years ago, Doi purged his visual vocabulary of all but a single motif: the circle. 'Suppose every creature is a circle,' Doi says. 'How many of them can I draw?' With a patience bordering on the monastic, he fills huge sheets of handmade rice paper with thousands of ink circles, in tones from pale grey to jet black, from the barely visible to the size of an orange. Drops of his sweat stain the paper. At some point I started to feel that something other than myself allowed me to draw these works. I have to keep on working, otherwise nothing will be brought into existence. By drawing circles I feel I am alive and existing in the cosmos.'

In all three artists mentioned, the practice borders on meditation. And the results are as soothing and uplifting for us, the viewers, as they are intended to be for them.

Interestingly, given the old battle lines drawn between naive figuration and cerebral abstraction, only one drawing of the 40 on display depicts a human form. *Lonely Europe Arm Yourself* is the work of Chris Hipkiss, a British artist now resident in France. Two years of work to be precise, all drawn by hand with graphite and an occasional underlay of silver ink. A magnificent and dark visual opera, 35 feet long, it presents a post-apocalyptic landscape, ravaged by war. Hipkiss, a family man and environmentalist, debunks the theory that illness or mental instability is required to produce visionary work. His world is every bit as new, disquieting and hypnotic as that portrayed by Charles Benefiel, who has obsessive-compulsive disorder.

There is something tremendously engaging about art that eschews irony and looks beyond in-jokes and references to a narrow version of art history. The fact that it is often not intended for an audience beyond one, the artist, makes it all the more compelling. It seems likely, in retrospect, that Barr saw this before almost any of us. If he did, someone owes him an apology.

'Obsessive drawing', to 19 Mar, American Folk Art Museum, New York (+1 212 265 1040, folkartmuseum.org). Eugene Andolsek will have a solo show 3 Mar-1 April, American Primitive Gallery, New York (+1 212 966 1530)



Opposite, top: Chris Hipkiss at work Bottom: Eugene Andolsek, *Untitled*, n.d., ink on graph paper, 53.3 x 40.6cm This page: Hiroyuki Doi, *Untitled*, 2003, ink on paper, 107.6 x 68.6cm