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Outsider Art arrives in the Whitworth

Confidential has a chat with itself about the acquisition of the Musgrave Kinley exhibition

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Outsider art? Is that art in the park or on the street?

No that would be outside art. Outsider art is work produced outside the academies and art schools by self-taught artists: people who have nothing to do with the big institutions or the galleries.

Like me doing sketches then?

Well yea, if they turn out any good or if someone recognises them as such. It's all down to interpretation.

What's outsider art to do with Manchester?

The Whitworth Art Gallery have just acquired the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Collection. That's 800 works, of which more than 100 are presently on display in the upper galleries of the Whitworth. It's a real coup for the gallery and Manchester. Outsider art on the inside.

Who's Musgrave Kinley?

That would be two people: the late Victor Musgrave and Monika Kinley. The collection came into being in 1981 when the couple decided that most contemporary art was 'bland and supine in the well-crafted chains of its own making.'

Sava Sekulic opens up



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Crikey. Do you agree?

Sort of. Tom Wolfe in his wonderfully aggressive book on International Modern Architecture, 'From Bauhaus to our House' lamented the creation of the architectural/artist 'compound'. He meant by this a mental state where practitioners and critics have quite deliberately built a wall separating themselves from their clients and their public. In this self-reverential little world they seem to say, 'we have decided this particular piece is good, and if you don't like it, you're a bit thick and not a member of our club'. It's a very exclusive world and often not very pleasant as well - an unfortunate hangover from the changes in art which took place a hundred years ago.

But given the state of some modern art, where does the divide between outsider art and mainstream art lie?

Oh dear. After what I've said I'm not sure there is that much difference. Maybe the difference lies in the way the outsiders approach art in that it doesn't come via that traditional art college route. And also that there is a naive execution and often - freed from the straitjacket of the 'compound' - a strong sense of humour even wit with outsider work.

Henry Darger



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Is the Musgrave Kinley collection any good?

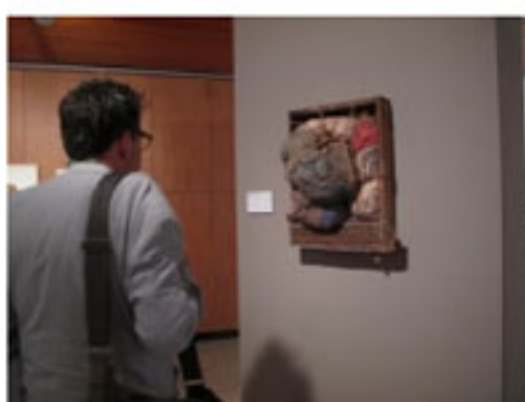
Some of the works are excellent, some I really can't stand. But then I frequently feel this about art from inside the 'compound' as well. I was recently at the Tate in St Ives and the childish - literally and figuratively - and empty work of Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker (van der Shocker it should be) got me angry. Thank the lord for the jaw-dropping exhibition also in the Tate of work from the Modern greats called Object: Gesture: Grid. I saw my first Piet Mondrian and nearly wept.

Steady on. Can we get back to the Whitworth now, what do like best?
The work of Francis Marshall, Carl Peplow, Madge Gill and above all Chris Hipkiss, stood out for me.

Describe some of the work

Marshall does fantastical stuffed shapes from objects found along the banks of the River Seine. They look like exposed innards of beasts, sometimes with faces, they are complex, bold and playful. Carl Peplow is from Manchester and until recently made graphic novel type works full of grim humour and crude word play - the poet WH Auden is labelled WH Orrdon and so forth. Peplow stopped working a couple of years ago. He sounds a right curmudgeon reportedly saying, "The best art in Manchester is in Southern Cemetery."

Francis Marshall Work - The Stuffing Hanging Out



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And Gill

Madge Gill (1884-1961) had the model traumatic life of the outsider including losing an eye (many of the outsiders have had mental health problems or physical injuries, Sava Sekulic in this exhibition lost an eye as well). She also suffered the upset of a still born child. Gill obsessively drew the same female figure against lines, crosses and zig zags: it's mesmerising, although not as captivating as Hipkiss's work. Gill refused to sell her pictures and had hundreds stacked around the house when she died.

Madge Gill



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And Hipkiss

The scale of Hipkiss' work and its complexity, holds the attention long. You get lost in the black ink on white background detail and like a child faced with a treasure map you keep finding extra things to look at. The 'London' piece in the gallery is an eye-opener, a vast work filled with people, rivers, machines but also genitalia either disguised or flaunted. It's gripping and alarming, a satire on the filthy lucre of London's financial markets created fifteen years before the banks dropped us all into the sewer.

London by Chris Hipkiss



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Will the works be permanently on display together?

No, they'll be split up and used in different exhibitions. The great thing about the Whitworth is that it constantly keeps things fresh. Having said that it'll be nice to see some of these back together as collected by Musgrave and Kinley once in a while. Monika Kinley was very sweet on the opening night.

'Outsider' Sculpture



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What did she say?

She opened the exhibition in tears saying: "I'm so emotional about the whole collection and it coming here. Sorry if this isn't a very prepared speech but I'm not good at proper procedures. I just know Victor would be pleased wherever he is. The collection has found what I'm absolutely sure is the right place to settle."

Monika Kinley



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