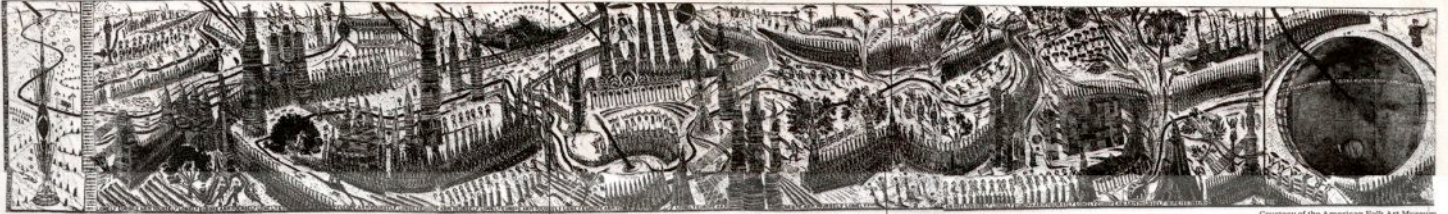


ART



Courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum

A CLOSE READING

The March Of the Scary Amazons

WHAT if women ruled the world? There would be no more war, no looming energy crisis, and those knotty environmental problems would ease.

Yeah, right, says Chris Hipkiss, an English artist whose trippy 35-foot-long drawing in an exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum imagines a post-apocalyptic world run by a race of sexy, androgynous Amazon women in skimpy outfits. It's like Henry Darger meets RuPaul.

Mr. Hipkiss, 41, lives in a village in southern France with his wife and several cats. He is self-taught, an outsider artist, if you will, whose intense, otherworldly landscape took two years and an estimated 360 3-B black pencils (but only one eraser, he says) to complete.

The drawing, made a decade ago when he was living in a rural 19th-century cottage in southeast England, was produced in parts on a giant roll of paper five feet high. Unrolling it section by section, Mr. Hipkiss worked on it on a small oak table; on occasion he would unroll the ensemble in the village hall to see how it was going.

The drawing is called "Lonely Europe Arm Yourself," a title that the artist declines to explain. It is typical to some degree of the work of other self-taught artists, like Darger, Achilles G. Rizzoli or Adolf Wolfli. There is also a similar aesthetic of horror vacui prompting that need to fill the page.

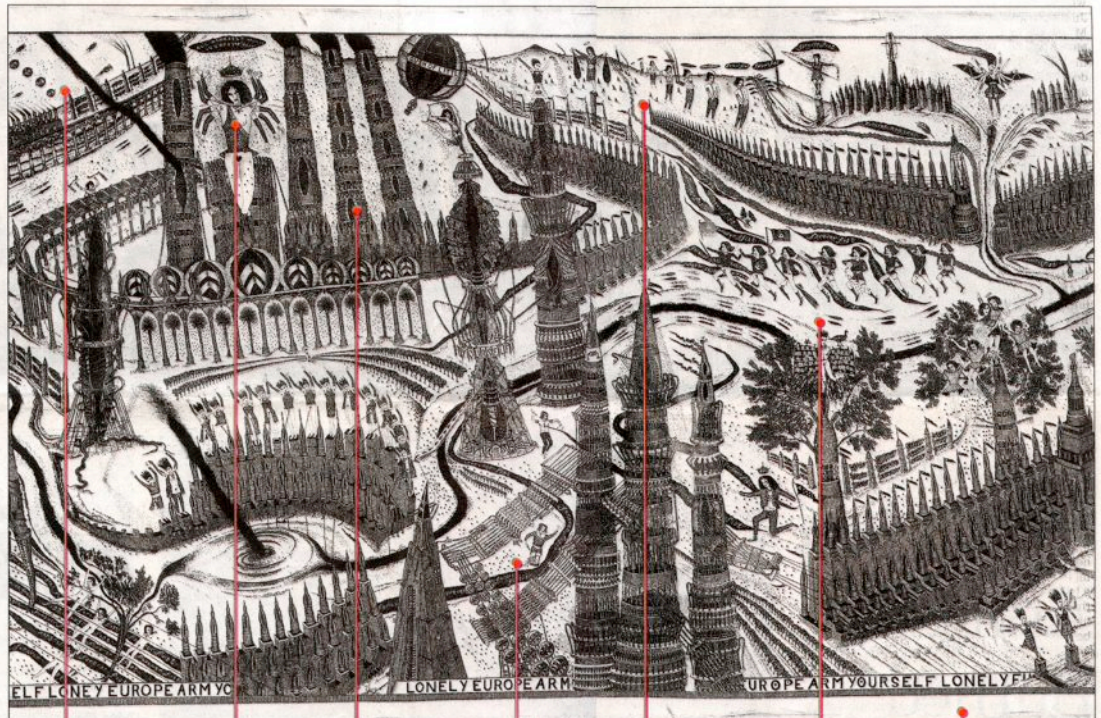
But the drawing is singular in its style and imagery, and contemporary in orientation, a blend of innocent and darkly ironic outlooks.

Mr. Hipkiss's iconography is intensely personal, which is why it is so hard to approach it in a strictly interpretive way. In an e-mail message (he declined to speak over the telephone), he gave cryptic responses or declined to comment when asked to explain many of his motifs. But insofar as this panoramic work tells a story, it depicts the world after an environmental catastrophe. Read left to right, it offers a detailed, precise and sometimes giddily eroticized narrative in which this army of women battles some ill-defined force.

Are the women within this world of smoke, winding pathways and intricate towers the cause of all this strife, or our only chance for salvation? You decide. **BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO**

OBSESSIVE DRAWING

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan, through March 19. Information: www.folkartmuseum.org.



MUNITIONS Imagery of warfare is prevalent, although the enemy remains invisible: grenades float through the air, missiles whiz about, and anti-aircraft guns shell the sky.

ARCHITECTURE The artist's imagined world is dotted with bizarre, often anthropomorphic buildings out of a science-fiction narrative, some of which have arms, legs and vaginal cavities.

LANDSCAPE It's a barren, desertlike post-apocalyptic terrain on which nothing will grow. "Brittle corn husks, leafless trees and multiple tombstones elaborate this theme," said the show's curator, Brooke Davis Anderson.

WORDPLAY Words are a formal element and add another mysterious dimension. The title is repeated many times across the bottom, often with words and letters jumbled. And "Forever fist" (sometimes "ffist") appears in different places, including on banners and buildings.

QUEEN The focal point of the drawing, this Shiva-like figure with many arms has only one breast, like the Amazon archers. Pressed on his inspiration, Mr. Hipkiss would only say, "I can't deny having seen the many-armed Indian characters, of course."

CONTRAPTIONS A grid of piping, pulleys and cables sprawls across the center foreground; it is connected to three towers. There are also hot air balloons and odd conveyor belts.

WARRIORS A squad of scantily clad Amazon women marches as if to battle. One is holding a cellphone, another has a machine gun, one is masturbating, one is pregnant, two are flying broomsticks and the last one has what may be a bomb. Other female groups appear standing in formation, perching in trees, and carrying flags, weapons and tools.