

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Joys and Terrors of an Outsider Artist

While Susan Te Kahurangi King has never consciously worked in or against a fine art tradition, her work is surely original.

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Susan Te Kahurangi King, *Untitled (1966-67)*, 7 5/8" x 11". (All images courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary.)

LONDON – “A certain strangeness,” wrote Walter Pater, “is an element in all true works of art.” The hermetic worlds depicted by many so-called outsider artists can be beautiful in their strangeness, but also suffocating, as if governed by a tyrannical logic. Think of the dizzying perspectives of Martin Ramirez, or the obsessive cartography of Adolf Wölfli. They are like medieval illuminations of private religions.

By contrast, the drawings of Susan Te Kahurangi King (b. 1951) feel closer in spirit to Henry Darger or Bill Traylor, two very different artists in whose work a sense of joy has survived the transition to a realm of private symbolism. At its best, her work is buoyant, varied, and, while often sinister, saturated with pleasure. It rewards extended looking. Its vibrant color gives it a wish-fulfilling aura.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, Untitled, c. 1966-1967 graphite, colored pencil and ink on found paper 10 1/8 x 8 in.

King is severely autistic, and has not spoken since the age of 5. She started to draw very early and has continued for much of her life, stopping around the late 1980s and resuming in 2009. Family members have always encouraged her art. Already well known in her local community in Auckland, New Zealand, only recently has the wider world taken notice of her talent. The illustrator Gary Panter made important efforts to showcase her work in the U.S., and Chris Byrne has put together shows at New York's Andrew Edlin Gallery (2015) and now London's Marlborough Contemporary. Both shows have focused mainly on drawings from the 1960s and '70s.

Her scattered, surging compositions often include figures based on Disney and Warner Brothers characters, while many of the drawings at Marlborough feature the Fanta Man, a character from a soft drink advertisement. (Originally a flat, static icon, she brings him to life, portraying him from many angles.) The way in which the paper surface is treated as a flat expanse to be filled in recalls the look of children's art. Closer attention reveals a sophisticated ability to manipulate space in original ways. A field of body parts can loom up like a wave, or remind us of a Tiepolo ceiling in which angels are massed at the edges of clouds. The twists and convolutions to which her figures are subjected alter the space around them, denying flatness and creating a dynamic force

that energizes the page. Her compositions can be as lush as those of Arshile Gorky, or as subtle as a Jasper Johns. She is always experimenting.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, *Untitled* (c. 1965-1975), 6 7/8" x 6 3/8 in.

Alex Katz once defined originality as “a combination of being inside your own head and responding to everything outside... it’s the combination of the two that makes something original.” What’s “outside” might be subject matter, one’s medium, artistic precedents, and culture in general. While it’s probably fair to say that King has never consciously worked in or against a fine art tradition, her work is surely original, and looking at it is a refreshing experience. Is she an “outsider artist”? To acknowledge a tradition, even in order to reject it, might be what makes one an “insider.”

And yet we are all, to some extent, insiders if we speak a shared language. And we are also outsiders, not quite at home in the language we inherit. King might be less at home in verbal language than most, and yet her concerns suggest an interest in the world as much as in the possibilities of her medium. For the psychoanalytic writer Marion Milner, art becomes more than therapy when it demonstrates respect for the independent integrity of its symbols, giving us renewed insight into whatever aspect of the world it pictures. The fact that King’s interests and imagery have overlapped with those of her mainstream contemporaries (whose work she had no way of seeing) is

fascinating; her works teaches us something about the peculiar appeal of anthropomorphic cartoon animals.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, Untitled, 1966-67, graphite and coloured pencil on found board, 16 1/4 x 13 in.

Her treatment of various cartoon ducks is a reminder that all communication originates in the body, in its actions and passions, affects that must be cathected onto objects or surrogates if they are to be tamed and integrated. These figures appear riven by nameless forces, twisted this way and that, gesticulating wildly, dismembered, or literally tied up in knots. There's implicit wisdom in King's choice of classic cartoon characters as vehicles for pre-linguistic affect, recognition of something in their structure that speaks to the early experience of omnipotence, of the childish or regressive body. When Peter Saul or Markus Lüpertz were drawn to Donald Duck (at the same time as King) they were likely responding to similar qualities. But King foregrounds those qualities exceptionally well. Her use of Donald feels less like an

obsessive preoccupation than a fruitful engagement. Her confident line draws attention to the way the brim of his cap echoes the Moebius-like convolutions of his beak; in one drawing the beak is a floating object, symmetrical and self-contained – a beak without a duck.

Besides other visual artists, the most compelling connection for me is with a contemporaneous poem by John Ashbery, in which Popeye “heaves bolts of loving thunder / At his own astonished becoming” (“Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” 1927). What is it about cartoons that might have inspired such startling, masochistic imagery?

Gary Panter believes King’s approach is basically observational, that what she draws is a version of what she actually sees. Maybe she sees these things because her perception is unusually free from the utilitarian demands that filter and focus our ordinary experience. If this evokes Dubuffet’s glamorizing of the raw and unfiltered, I would only add that it’s her use of the limiting schema provided by cartoon imagery that has made that overwhelmingly complex inner activity communicable, or perhaps given it enough structure to be seen. Whether it is a question of autonomous visions which she transfers to the page, or of a creative use of symbols similar to an “ordinary” artistic practice, we can only speculate.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, Untitled (2 Sept 1965), 8 1/4" x 10 3/4".

During Tate Modern's 2013 Global Pop symposium much of the discussion concerned the emergence, during the 20th century, of a worldwide "monoculture," particularly in the visual field. How has the international dissemination of American iconography from the 20th century onwards threatened local particularities and differences? King's work, coming from the time and place it does, inevitably looks like a commentary on this phenomenon (no less than, say, the early collages of Scottish Pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi). The insights her work provides could be compared to those of Sergei Eisenstein, who traveled to the United States in 1930, where he met Walt Disney. Eisenstein was immensely enthusiastic about Disney's creations, which he saw as constituting a modern revival of animism with deep roots in mythical thought. "How much (imaginary!) divine omnipotence there is in all this!" he wrote, "What magic of reconstructing the world according to one's fantasy and will! ... And you see how the drawn magic of a reconstructed world had to arise at the very summit of a society that had completely enslaved nature – namely, America." Whatever conflicting energies found expression within the popular visual culture of the 20th century, King has embodied them in her turn, and in the process illuminated them for us.