

THE TABLET

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ARTS

LAURA GASCOIGNE

OUTSIDE THE FRAME

A unique exhibition highlights the originality of work by artists excluded from the mainstream, whether for disability, drug-addiction or lack of training

Like almost everything at the moment, contemporary art is at a crunch point. Damien Hirst's £111-million Sotheby's sale last September marked the crest of the wave – or the peak of the folly, if you like – of the investment art market, which has now entered a trough. Traditional values have been reasserting themselves in the relative buoyancy of prices for old and modern masters, but that hasn't stopped Sotheby's announcing a second quarter drop in profits of 87 per cent.

Into this seismic situation has stepped a small regional gallery with an exhibition designed to teach the commercial art world some lessons. *Outside In* (until 8 November) is the second biennial open exhibition staged by Pallant House Gallery in Chichester offering "outsider artists" an "in" to the art world. Entries are invited from artists trained or untrained who for whatever reason – emotional, physical, criminal or merely unconventional – find themselves excluded from the mainstream, with prizes of solo shows and gallery residencies. The local launch in 2007 was so successful that this year's intake covers the whole of southern England; the plan is to go national in 2011.

This year's exhibition is as good as its title in purposely fitting the outsiders in. As part of what's described as a "gentle revolution" by the gallery's Head of Learning, Marc Steene, sympathetic exhibits from the permanent collection have been chosen to hang alongside the open submissions. They include works by Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood, whose discovery in St Ives of the naïve artist, Alfred Wallis, had a profound impact on their own art. Wallis is in the hang, as is Scottie Wilson – another "primitive" whose work was collected by Picasso, and who has his own exhibition in the print room downstairs.

This is not the first public exhibition to mix the work of marginalised and mainstream artists. A notorious precedent is the *Degenerate Art* exhibition organised in 1937 by the Nazis, which aimed to discredit the avant-garde by hanging paintings by the likes of Klee and Picasso with those of the

insane. In the event, the Nazis shot themselves in the foot. The exhibition brought modern art to an unprecedented audience, and only reinforced the conviction of champions of outsider art such as Jean Dubuffet that the untutored can teach the tutored a thing or two. Can they? On the evidence of the 125 artists represented in this exhibition, yes. Since the "hard to reach" are by definition hard to reach, a large proportion of entrants were traced through social services, mental-health teams and prison-art organisations, but anyone expecting art therapy will be surprised. The standard of work is so high that before the exhibition opening many pieces had sold to the judges and gallery staff.

"Everyone in Paris, New York, and most other capitals is doing the exact same painting," complained Dubuffet; everyone here is doing something different. In the case of Kim Noble, who has Dissociative Identity Disorder, four of her 15 multiple personalities have submitted paintings in completely individual styles. On the day I visited the labels hadn't yet gone up, so the work had to speak for itself. It did so loud and clear because, unlike the sort of contemporary art that hides its lack of purpose behind obfuscation, all the work on show here was made purely in order to communicate. It's noticeable how many of the show's contributors confess in the catalogue notes that art is their only means of communication.

Contemporary art often makes audiences feel inadequate and disqualified from passing judgement without professional help. But in a show like this where the artists are "outsiders" the public has no inhibitions about making up its own mind, and it's interesting how liberating that feels. It's astonishing too how quickly the temptation to patronise evaporates. In many cases, the works' titles are enough to demolish our assumptions about the marginalised. John Mitchell's *Epilepsy Computer Virus*, Robert Keating's *Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes* and Tom Jayston's *The Blues and other primary colours* – in which the shadow of a man with a gun to his head falls across a sunny



The Blues and other Primary Colours, by Tom Jayston

red ground of bright yellow daisies – alert us that we're in sophisticated company.

"You don't have to be mad to be an outsider artist, but it helps" is a common assumption about art on the margins. One could argue, given the recent insanity of the commercial art market, that letting the lunatics run the asylum can only be an improvement. Certainly, *Outside In* is a refreshing corrective to the insincerity, commercialism and excessive solemnity of so much mainstream contemporary art. Here is art created purely for the purpose of expression, art which dares – like the genuine avant-garde article – to be ephemeral. Unlike the painted bronze of Damien Hirst's blown-up anatomical toy, *Hymn*, James Lake's meticulously modelled anatomical sculptures in this show are made of cardboard – more economical and more fragile. For many of these artists the use of recycled materials is a conscious metaphor for the hope of transformation.

The only let down was reading the text labels later describing the artists' problems and disabilities. Matisse's *Snail*, made from cut-out paper when the 84-year-old artist was too arthritic to paint, doesn't carry a disabled label in Tate Modern, and neither should the jauntily torn collage *Memory Walk* by 84-year-old Ena Robinson, registered blind. If outsider art is different, it is not directly due to disadvantage or disability. It's because those on the outside of society – the disabled, the drug addicted, the mentally afflicted, the incarcerated – are in the special position of looking in. As the Surrealist poet Paul Eluard once observed: "We know only too well that it is we who are locked up when they close the doors of the asylum: the prison is all around us, freedom inside."