



The Beguiling Outsider Art of Susan Te Kahurangi King

After 50 years of relative obscurity, the prolific self-taught New Zealand artist has finally earned the international attention she deserves.

This story was first published by Creators, a new lens on modern creativity.

On a torn scrap of paper, a menagerie of humans and humanoids wiggle and wave in a wash of red. Most of **Susan Te Kahurangi King's** work is cacophonous and this piece, included in the artist's **recent solo show** at **Marlborough Contemporary** in London, is no exception. One can practically hear the shouts, laughs, and groans issuing from the many open mouths. It is as if King—who has spoken only a handful of words over the past 59 years—has poured a lifetime's worth of sound onto the page.

King's exhibition in London was just the latest in a string of high profile shows dedicated to an outsider artist who spent the first fifty-plus years of her career virtually unknown. King

grew up in Te Aroha, New Zealand in a household with 11 siblings. As a child, she entertained herself and her family, by drawing, singing, laughing, and acting out imitations. As her self-taught skills with pencil and paper honed themselves, however, her capacity for the rest slipped away. By the age of seven, speech was a thing of King's past.



*Untitled, c. 1966-67, Ink on paper, 36.5 x 18.5 cm,
Courtesy of the artist, Chris Byrne and Marlborough Contemporary*

King spent stints in the psychiatric ward of a hospital in Auckland in her teens. While the doctors and nurses could do nothing for the young girl's condition, those visits made a lasting impression on King. Her drawings from that period turn to noticeably darker themes: faces washed with tears, strangulations, scenes of mass nudity, gender confusion, and the combined bodies of animals, humans, and characters from the cartoons she loved.

"The figures [in these pieces] are often lined up, intertwined or embedded into the hills behind," Petita Cole, King's sister, explains to *Creators*, "sometimes featuring lesions, body piercings and gruesome appendages or deformities." In the 1970s, King's work began to also include, as Cole describes, "groin-clutching figures with meat-mincer heads."



Untitled, c. 1965-67, Graphite on paper, 26.5 x 20.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Chris Byrne

"Mum and dad were well aware Susan would have seen some pretty weird if not disturbing things in her time," says Cole, "particularly during her stays at the psychiatric ward at the

Auckland Hospital in 1965. They also had reason to believe she had experienced ruthless if not negligent attendance while under the hospital's care. Under the circumstances, they weren't particularly surprised at the nature of her drawings, also taking into account her ability to portray thoughts and feelings in such a vivid, imaginative way."

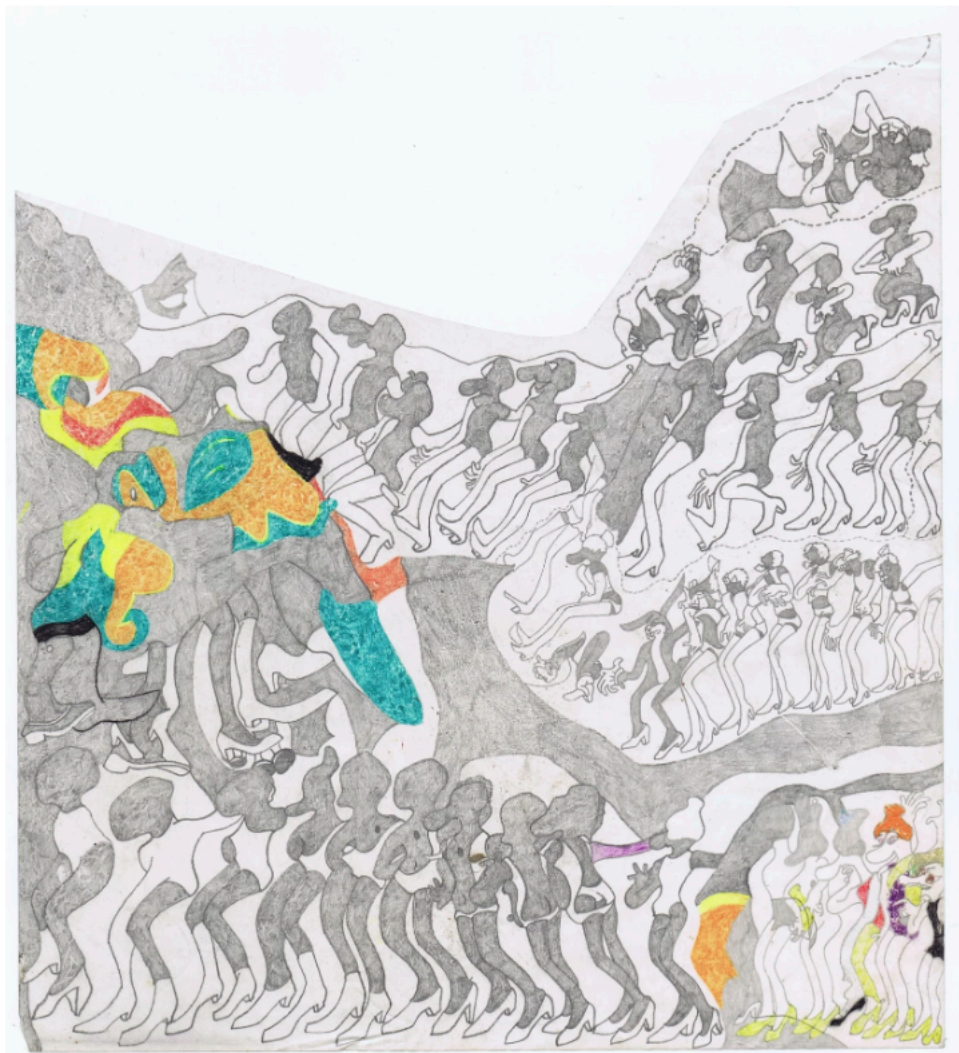
Her mediums were then, as they are now, graphite, pens, and paper—unmarked or marked. King never sketches and never uses an eraser. "Every mark she makes on paper is confident and well-defined. Finite," her sister describes. Cole also says that, "sometimes she's drawn with black pencil on black paper, or white on white. Or she's continued to draw with a pen, even after the ink has run out, leaving the impression only."



Untitled, c. 1965-67, Graphite on paper, 26.5 x 20.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Chris Byrne

These techniques, her sister muses, could be an indication that King does not draw with an audience in mind. But maybe they are just another bit of trickery on King's part, who also tends to "camouflage figures, motifs or emblems in a scurry of swirly lines." Says Cole, "Like real treasure, maybe the harder [the image] is to find, the bigger and more satisfying the discovery."

As King continued to draw away throughout her adulthood, her audience remained limited to the family circle. As everyone in the family was well aware, King's work would stay unnoticed unless someone in her family deliberately promoted it. Then, in the early 1990s, King stopped drawing. It was during this period of King's inactivity, which would last for over fifteen years, that Cole, who had attempted to do so on fruitless occasions before, dedicated herself once again to the task of sharing her sister's work with the world. Perhaps, if King knew her work was appreciated, she would go back to the thing she loved the most.



Untitled, c. 1966-67, Graphite and crayon on paper, 28.5 x 25.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Chris Byrne

This time, Cole decided the first step was to take advantage of the technology available—the year was 2005—and to digitize years of King's cataloged work. Soon, a Facebook page had been established and King's work was accessible from anywhere. And finally, after all these years, King's pieces reached the right eyes. In 2008, director Dan Salmon began filming his documentary on King, *Pictures of Susan* (2012). Then, in 2009, a solo show of her work went up at the **Callan Park Gallery** for self-taught and outsider artists at the University of Sydney. King started drawing again, with renewed vigour.

A few years later, freelance curator and Dallas Art Fair co-founder Chris Byrne discovered King's work. Since then, Byrne has curated the vast majority of her shows, starting with her booth at the Paris Outsider Art Fair in 2013. Along the way, special events called, "Drawing with Susan," were added to King's show's programs, inviting the public to come and make art alongside the artist.



Untitled, c. 1965-67, Graphite on paper, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, Courtesy of the artist, Chris Byrne and Andrew Edlin Gallery

King is now widely regarded as a prolific artist in conversation with many different areas of contemporary art. She is both an outsider artist and a self-taught artist; she engages with popular culture, with trauma, and with identity politics; and of course her work is even more remarkable for the fact that it remained private for so long. "Susan's success," Cole adds, "no doubt suggests hope to others who may also exhibit a combination of special abilities and disabilities."

Susan Te Kahurangi King's work will be featured in **an upcoming show**, opening August 10th, at **Robert Heald Gallery** in Wellington, New Zealand. For more information about the artist and to see more of her work, check out **her website**.