

# REMARKABLE DRAUGHTSMANSHIP FROM WAY DOWN UNDER

A prodigious, prolific maker of drawings, Susan Te Kahurangi King has emerged as a leading representative of New Zealand's self-taught art world.

By EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

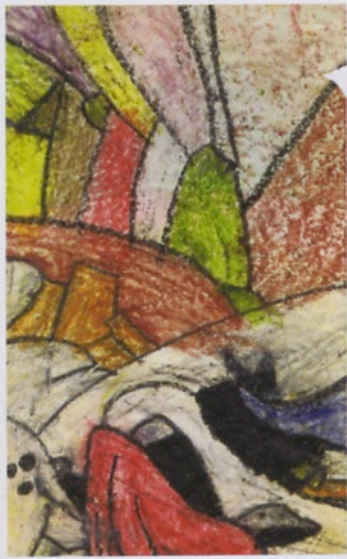


left: *Untitled*, c. 1960, crayon on paper, 13.5 x 8.25 ins., 34 x 21 cm

above: *Untitled*, 1958, crayon on paper, 8 x 5 ins., 20 x 13 cm

below: already at an early age, Susan was enthusiastically involved in making art; she stopped speaking around the age of four, and it is through her drawings, her family members believe, that she has interpreted her perceptions of the world and given expression to those ideas; photo Doug King





above: Susan Te Kahurangi King at work today at her home in Auckland, New Zealand, photo Chris Byrne

left: *Untitled*, 1958, crayon on paper, 8 x 5 ins., 20 x 13 cm

all photos of artworks by Chris Byrne and Marquand Books

Susan Te Kahurangi King's drawings on paper, which the 63-year-old self-taught artist makes using pencils, coloured pencils, crayons and felt-tip pens, have rarely been shown publicly. Recently, though, they have begun to appear in exhibitions and receive serious critical attention in the artist's native New Zealand and overseas.

Her unusual works share some remarkable affinities with certain kinds of modern art, including, for example, perspective-busting cubist painting. Unwittingly, like postmodern appropriationist art, King's pictures may take their source material out of its original contexts, place it in new artistic settings and allow it to find new meanings. In King's case, Donald Duck and other popular cartoon characters, whose familiar depictions the artist distorts and brings into her own complex compositions, play a role in this appropriationist, meaning-shifting process. The results can be intriguing and dazzling.

A selection of King's works will be shown in "Susan Te Kahurangi King: Drawings from Many Worlds" a forthcoming exhibition at Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York (November 1 – December 20, 2014.) It is being organised by the American artist, independent curator and Dallas Art Fair co-director Chris Byrne and Ed Marquand, the Seattle-based head of Marquand Books, a publisher of high-quality art books. Earlier this year, at the Outsider Art Fair in New York, Byrne and Marquand presented King's drawings to considerable acclaim. They are now assembling a book about her work.

King, whose middle name means "treasured one" in the Maori language, was brought up in a farming town in the north of her homeland's North Island. (Her father was a student and champion of Maori culture.) Around the age of four, inexplicably, Susan stopped speaking. Her sister Rachel recalls that, in primary

school, "Susan didn't join in with normal activities but would spend lesson time drawing; her teacher felt she was a distraction." In Auckland, the nearest large city, Rachel notes, "she was taken to many doctors and specialists in an attempt to work out what was wrong with her" Susan "had several trying experiences in hospital psychiatric wards, where all kinds of [treatments] were tried, such as withholding food or, even more distressing,

drawing materials, in order to force her to speak"

Eventually, the King family moved to Auckland so that Susan could attend a special-needs school. Rachel remembers that, in later years, "the school had a workshop programme aimed at making the older students 'productive', in which Susan was assigned such repetitive tasks as putting nails in bags and making woollen mats, instead of being allowed to draw"

Although King was never diagnosed with a particular mental disability per se, over the past decade or so, her sisters recognised certain autistic characteristics in her behaviour. Today, the artist lives with her mother in Auckland. There, Rachel says, "Susan's desk is set up with drawers of paper and trays of pens and pencils, which she sharpens with a blade to a deadly point."

A time came when King, for no obvious reason, stopped making art. It lasted 20 years, until 2008. Nowadays she draws every day, all day long, and she does not like to be interrupted. Of her art, Rachel says it is "hard to know exactly" what it might mean to Susan, whose "obsession and skill with drawing [intensified] as her speech dwindled" She adds, "Her drawings may [express] statements, ideas, questions. In them, real people and things are all jumbled up with fictional characters."

In New Zealand, the artist-curator Stuart Shepherd specialises in research about self-taught artists. Of King's work, he says, "It's like jazz improvisation with distortions of scale, perspectives and shapes. Like a musician sounding out melodies, Susan riffs endlessly on various visual moments." In a New Zealand newspaper article, Petita, one of King's other siblings, once said of her sister, "Not only is she happy" when she is drawing, but also that she is more "fulfilled with life in general" when she is at her work table, totally engaged in art.