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Explosive Drawing: Susan King's Mash-ups, Strange Landscapes, and Other Worlds

by [Edward M. Gómez](#) on November 8, 2014



Susan Te Kahurangi King, "Untitled" (c. 1965), graphite and colored pencil on paper 11.5 x 16 inches (all photos courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery, unless otherwise stated).

Very few creations are as hard to pin down as those produced by the most original self-taught artists, who primarily make their art for themselves rather than for the market or the public. These are art-makers who neither filter their ideas through academic-critical discourse nor customize what they make — often from the most basic materials, including found objects and trash — to accommodate such theories or other agendas.

One such artist is [Susan Te Kahurangi King](#), a 63-year-old native of New Zealand, who

resides on Auckland's north shore with her elderly mother. A prodigious, prolific maker of drawings on paper since she was a little girl — over the years she has used pencils, colored pencils, pastels or inks — King and her work still have not received significant appreciation in New Zealand, but in recent years the artist's achievements have begun to attract attention beyond her homeland.



Rachel King (left) and her sister, the artist Susan Te Kahurangi King (in 3D glasses), during their recent visit to New York to attend the opening of Susan's gallery show (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Selections from her vast output of drawings — to date she has produced several thousand — were presented in introductory, not-for-sale mini-exhibitions at the 2013 [Outsider Art Fair Paris](#) and earlier this year at the [Outsider Art Fair New York](#). Now, [Susan Te Kahurangi King: Drawings from Many Worlds](#), a show of more than 40 of her technically sophisticated, thematically diverse (and compellingly confounding) drawings is on view through December 20th at Andrew Edlin Gallery in Chelsea.

Curated by the American artist Chris Byrne, who is also a co-founder of the Dallas Art Fair, this attention-demanding but highly satisfying exhibition comes at a time when the specialized market for works by self-taught artists is hungrier than ever for some big, resonant discoveries of noteworthy new talents. It also comes at a time when, on the contemporary-art side, many aficionados are more open than ever to the quirky aesthetics and singular visions that have long distinguished the oeuvres of the most interesting autodidacts.

In recent months, Byrne, whose own hard-to-classify work, [The Magician](#) (Marquand Books), a mixed-media creation that is part book and part sculpture, with “performative” aspects that prompt reader-users to interact physically with its many pop-up or otherwise way-off-the-page moving parts, has made two trips to New Zealand to examine Susan King's archive of drawings and, with the help of some of the artist's family members, get a sense of the scope and quality of her production.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, “Untitled” (c. 1978), graphite on paper 18 x 22.5 inches

In an interview last week, he said, “It’s daunting, because there is so much work that is consistently good. Susan’s facility as a draftsman was evident even when she was very young. As is the case with many great artists, over time her themes and techniques have evolved. What’s fascinating is that, even now, after so many years of making drawings, which she loves to do, she continues to experiment, to try new things.” When I met King in New York last week — this was her first trip ever to the United States, which she made with some of her sisters for the opening of her gallery show — she was busy decorating plastic plates with miniscule beads made from strips of brightly colored, plastic modeling paste.

To examine King’s drawings up close is to recognize the remarkable affinities they share with certain kinds of modern art, including perspective-busting Cubist painting. Their rollicking, push-me-pull-you perspectives bring to mind the dizzying vantage points associated with the pictorial space of some ancient Japanese paintings. Unwittingly, to be sure, many of King’s pictures also beat postmodern appropriationist art-making at its own game of removing source material from its original contexts and allowing it — or forcing it — to suggest new meanings. In King’s case, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and other cartoon characters, whose familiar forms the artist distorts on her way to crafting her complex compositions, play roles in this image-subverting process. Into the mix King throws various figures or random patterns she creates herself. The resulting compositions are both intriguing and dazzling.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, "Untitled" (c. 1965), graphite and colored pencil on paper, 11 x 9 inches

King's deft line work may seem comic-book straightforward and simple, except when it's not, which turns out to be most of the time. For example, her skillful foreshortening is in evidence in an untitled drawing from around 1965, with its view of Donald Duck's dangling legs and feathery, fluffy bottom, seen from below, like that of a chubby, floating cherub in a Renaissance ceiling fresco.

The artist's knack for whipping up gleeful-kooky image mash-ups is evident in the first plain-pencil, masterfully shaded drawing on display (circa 1967), which is also one of the smallest in the show. It depicts an unfathomable tangle of rubbery, contorted cartoon-character bodies hovering in a white-space vacuum like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon on steroids — a big, bungling, otherworldly mutant, all flailing limbs and choked, smothered faces.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, "Untitled" (c. 1967), graphite, 6 x 7.5 inches

These are not anyone's familiar comic-book images. If John Chamberlain's sculptures of crushed, squashed-together auto bodies could talk, this, they would say, is a two-dimensional portrayal of what it feels like to be one of those oddly attractive, crumpled-metal concoctions.

King, whose middle name means "treasured one" in New Zealand's indigenous Maori language, was the second child of twelve in her family; she was brought up in a farming town on New Zealand's North Island. Her parents had met at the country's first Maori-language school, and her father was a lifelong, keen student and champion of Maori culture.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, "Untitled" (c. 1965),
graphite on paper, 12 3/4 x 5 1/4 inches

Around the age of four, inexplicably, Susan stopped speaking. Her sister Rachel, who now lives and works in Australia, recalls that Susan "was taken to specialists in an attempt to work out what was wrong with her." Little 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. She did so until she

was in her late twenties. Rachel remembers that, in later years, “the school had a workshop program aimed at making the older students ‘productive,’ in which Susan was assigned such repetitive tasks as putting nails in bags and making woolen mats, instead of being allowed to draw.”

Although Susan was never formally diagnosed with any disability per se, in recent years, as some of her sisters became familiar with the nature and indicators of autism, they came to recognize certain autistic characteristics in Susan’s behavior. Today, Rachel King notes, in the home the artist shares with their mother, “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 stopped making drawings. That period lasted 20 years, until 2008. Nowadays, though, she draws every day. She does not like to be interrupted when she is creating her pictures but does enjoy going out and, as Rachel observes, “can be found waiting at the front door if anyone even mentions an excursion”.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, "Untitled" (c. 1965), colored pencil, 8 x 7 inches

Of her sister's art, Rachel says that it is "hard to know exactly" what it might mean to her. Susan's "obsession and skill with drawing [intensified] as her speech dwindled," Rachel notes. She adds, "Her technical skill kept up with her boundless imagination. Some of the drawings

may be statements, some ideas, and some questions. Real people and things are all jumbled up with fictional characters. Her language is visual, but in some of her drawings you can see interpretations of verbal concepts, as in one that features both candles and pencils, burning and sharpened at both ends.”



Susan Te Kahurangi King, “Untitled” (c. 1965), graphite and ebony on paper, 17 x 27 inches

Alas, because Susan King does not speak, it is not possible to discuss with the artist herself the subjects of her drawings or what she might intend to express with or through the extraordinary images she creates. Still, in her presence a visitor gets the strong impression that she is very much aware of the power of her art to attract attention, which she appears to appreciate. That an innovative contemporary art-maker’s body of work should encourage viewers to simply consider and savor the power and fecundity of the creative energy from which it flows, rather than recast itself as something more fashionable by means of an obligatory artist’s statement — stilted, jargon-filled or bloated with hype — is another notable aspect of King’s memorable debut show. Ultimately, who needs a label to inadequately categorize — or inevitably limit — an art that seems to express, about its own making, such boundless joy?

[Susan Te Kahurangi King: Drawings from Many Worlds](#) continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (134 Tenth Avenue between 18th and 19th Streets, in Chelsea) through December 20.

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