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DRAWINGS FROM MANY WORLDS SUSAN TE KAHURANGI KING

REVIEWS BY PAUL LASTER FROM MAY/JUN 2015

NEW ZEALAND USA



SUSAN TE KAHURANGI KING, *Untitled*, c. 1978, Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 18.4 × 29.2 cm. Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.

A self-taught artist from New Zealand, 63-year-old Susan Te Kahurangi King finally made her solo gallery show debut in late 2014. One of 12 children born to working-class parents, King inexplicably stopped speaking at the age of four and soon after started expressing herself solely through drawing, which was greatly encouraged by her family. Her long-overdue survey, organized by writer and curator Chris Byrne at New York's Andrew Edlin Gallery, featured 39 works, which included drawings in graphite, colored pencil, ebony and crayon, several sketchbooks and serving trays made of paper decorated with multicolored Plasticine.

The dynamic display of works, all of which are untitled, featured a playful 1960 sketchbook filled with various figures and forms and two wildly surreal drawings from 1961, made during King's childhood. There were also several works from 1965, which included a drawing that

depicts popular cartoon characters—such as Woody Woodpecker, Donald Duck, Porky Pig and Daffy Duck—floating around an angry young woman, and a colorful piece portraying a beach with topless, bikini-clad girls and other nude figures morphing into monstrosities. Elsewhere on view was a 1967 drawing depicting a flock of seagulls, fragmented cartoon characters and rock-like forms in a multitude of colors.

The exhibition featured many works from 1978, with a total of 15 drawings from that year. One gem was a mostly black-and-white drawing of multiple Bugs Bunnies, whose body parts have been rearranged to form fantastical, mutant figures. Another notable piece blends scores of comical heads into an undulating landscape. A third standout drawing shows a heavenly arrangement of colorful, abstract forms on the top part of the work, a black-and-white purgatory in the middle, and a vibrant, psychedelic mix of Mickey Mouse and Flintstones figures at the bottom.

Two drawings from 1980 rounded out King's early works within the show. A character resembling Looney Tunes' Beaky Buzzard is repeatedly drawn and manipulated across a sheet of paper, becoming increasingly nightmarish as the sequence progresses. The other piece is a dark assemblage of female body parts, which evoke outsider artist Henry Darger's depictions of numerous young girls battling unknown forces. In King's drawings, fragmented nude torsos and legs—complete with children's Mary Jane shoes—are strewn about a desolate landscape filled with bits of human and animal heads and groping hands wearing Mickey Mouse's signature white gloves.

King stopped making work around this period. Her drawings were highlighted at a benefit held by a school for special-needs students that she had been attending in Auckland. A lecturer from a local art college, who saw a newspaper article about King's works, suggested that she study at his school. Since the special-needs institution wanted King to focus on making utilitarian objects that it sold as part of its program, its administration took away her drawing materials. King subsequently fell into a deep depression, and for the next 20-odd years she did not produce any work.

Her creativity was unexpectedly rekindled in 2008, while being filmed for a documentary about her life and work. For the occasion, her mother set up a worktable and laid out pencils and paper, which eventually sparked a response from King. It was as though she decided to pick up where she had left off—and she has been drawing joyfully ever since. Byrne, meanwhile, discovered King's work through Gary Panter, an artist and set designer for the 1980s American television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, who learned of King via animator and composer Devin Flynn, who, in turn, had stumbled upon her Facebook page that is managed by her sisters.

King's Facebook page regularly shows new drawings, which makes one wonder why the only recent works that were in the exhibition were four decorated trays from 2014. Reportedly none of her works are for sale, and they were only exhibited to stimulate interest in the development of a foundation that would house King's archive of 10,000 drawings, sketchbooks and scrapbooks and initiate shows worldwide. Worthwhile as an introduction to King's compelling oeuvre, this intriguing display successfully stirred one's thoughts while instilling a strong desire to see more.