

Parallel Phenomena: Works on Paper by Carroll Dunham, Susan Te Kahurangi King, Gladys Nilsson, and Peter Saul

By Annabel Keenan | June 2021

When describing an artist, the term “outsider” typically refers to someone self-taught. It has other associations as well, including hermetic, vernacular, and folk practices, and it covers a broad range of intellectual disorders and mental health issues. While it can be useful to suggest a kind of “innate skill,” the boundaries of the term are constantly blurring. To be “outside” implies others who are “inside”—but what happens when these insiders aspire to an outsider position? This distinction is what’s in question in the current exhibition at Andrew Edlin Gallery. *Parallel Phenomena* brings together dynamic works by Outsider artist Susan Te Kahurangi King and three “insiders” whose work has often resisted the artistic mainstream: Carroll Dunham, Gladys Nilsson, and Peter Saul. Highlighting these artists’ fantastical, often grotesque interpretations of the world around them, the show seamlessly blends together all four bodies of work.



Susan Te Kahurangi King, Untitled, ca. 1967–70. Crayon, ink, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 10.25 x 8.25 inches. Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery

Curated by Damon Brandt, the exhibition features works on paper, most of which were made between the 1960s and 1990s. The show includes nearly 50 pieces, and half are by the self-taught King, providing a welcome opportunity to explore her rich imagery while creating a dialog with academically and institutionally accredited artists, all of whom intentionally push the boundaries of taste and decorum. While the viewer can easily parse intentional shock tactics and direct political or social commentary in the work of the other artists, however, there is little room for such interpretations of King’s images. The artist, who stopped speaking around the age of four, will not communicate her intentions, making it much more difficult to determine what messages, if any, her works aim to impart. Well aware of this distinction, Brandt frames the artists in a way that highlights their similarities while remaining free from any forced narrative.

A common theme that arises is the depiction of fantastical, cartoonish characters. King, in particular, seems fascinated by figures like Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny, often meticulously drawing their arms, legs, and partially-formed bodies cascading across the paper. Despite the fact that she does not communicate in writing, King appears to understand that words and letters are symbols that carry meaning. When using found paper that contains text, she often delineates the existing words, perhaps mimicking speech bubbles she frequently encounters in comic books. In an untitled work from 1967–70, King has drawn a flowing assemblage of figures, cherries, cartoon hands, and strips of color that form a box around the text. The drawing includes one of

King's favorite characters: the orange, round, smiling face from Fanta advertisements popular in New Zealand in the 1960s.

Tumbling piles of figures and shapes appear often in the show, in particular in the dynamic ink drawings by Nilsson. Known for creating psychedelic, even Surrealistic, works with grotesque creatures that border on the vulgar, Nilsson champions styles outside of academic tradition. In one jumbled composition titled *Space Drawing #8* (1967), Nilsson has depicted a wave of distorted, multi-limbed figures floating in what appear to be astronaut suits and spaceships. The faces, some phallic and others bearing oversized, unsettling smiles, are characteristic of Nilsson's style. Phallic shapes, too, are featured in various other works—male genitals make up an entire figure in an untitled piece by King from 1965–70. Here, the artist has carefully populated the three pre-existing panels of a found sheet of paper, creating the effect of an imaginative, nightmarish storyboard. With heavy graphite, a material King uses masterfully to create confident, crisp lines and shading, the drawing shows the artist's remarkable skill. As is common in King's work, the composition appears to have been executed without pre-sketching or any evidence of erasure and correction.

The crisp, clean lines characteristic of both King's and Nilsson's draftsmanship stand out more emphatically in comparison with the work of Saul and Dunham, who both favor a more raw approach. In Dunham's *Untitled (7/7/93)* (1993), we see again a clustering of shapes that recalls King and Nilsson, but here the forms are more amorphous. Dunham has also retained visible evidence of erasure and revision, further accentuating the unrefined immediacy of his images. Although the composition resembles an abstract monster with two large eyes, this work is



Peter Saul, *Untitled (Queer Way to Die)*, 1963.
Pastel and crayon on paper, 27.5 x 33.25 inches. Courtesy
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(ARS), New York, Photo Farzad Owrang.

relatively tame for Dunham, well known for distinctly grotesque imagery. Here, he offers something closer to an imaginatively rendered cartoon character—an approach that recalls King's fascination with figures like Donald Duck. Similarly, Saul's *Untitled (Queer Way to Die)* (1963) is less shocking and anarchic than some of the artist's other creations. It is, however, playful and sinister, featuring a jumbled mass of vibrant yellow ducks that blend into one another. These characters are surrounded by various items and symbols—a dollar sign and two dagger-like forms are most obvious—that allude indirectly to the darker themes of death, pain, and greed that often preoccupy Saul.

Compared to King's works, Saul's image seems more targeted, aiming to challenge the boundaries of popular aesthetics. In other works, he clearly relishes the possibility of offending his audience. By contrast, King's drawings remain more difficult to interpret concretely. What Edlin's show reveals, however, is that such distinctions matter less when the artists are presented without pretense or preconception. This exhibition embraces the fluidity of the borders between Outsider and insider art, and what sticks out is not the artists' different backgrounds, but their similarities: their common interests and visual sources, the formal devices they share. Ultimately, what we encounter here is a celebration of the moments where our imaginations overlap.