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Art: On the outside looking in

Two exhibitions at IMMA show how pure art can be child's play, writes Cristin Leach

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Pedersen's work, along with that of Appel, Constant, Corneille and other Cobra artists, is currently on show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The group was active for only a short period, from 1948 to 1951, and its work has never been shown in Ireland before. While this long overdue retrospective is fascinating in itself, tying it to another show running concurrently at the museum that IMMA also poses some interesting questions about art and our attitude to the creative process.

The related show, *The Tail that Wags the Dog*, features a selection of Outsider Art from the Musgrave Kinley Collection, which is on indefinite loan to the museum. Hosting the two shows together has been a long-time ambition of Outsider Art collector Monika Kinley. She describes it as "an interesting exercise in looking", but it is also much more.

In their search for a common artistic language to create "people's art" in the aftermath of the second world war, the Cobra artists looked towards images produced by the very young and the mentally ill. They strived to achieve the spontaneity, the kind of instinctive mark making that is also a feature of Outsider Art — the term used to describe the output of untutored artists, often living on the margins of society.

The work of both groups can and has been described as childlike, but upon examination the art in these shows is anything but. Children are often encouraged to "fill the page" when they put pen or crayon to paper. The reason they have to be asked is because they often don't want to. Exasperated parents try to elicit more than one determined squiggle in the corner of a page. But maybe that is enough. For children the act of making the mark is more important than the impression itself.

This unadulterated purity of expression is what the Cobra artists were trying to achieve, which is also an integral aspect of the work of the Outsiders, but the work of neither group is childlike. Unprompted, the Cobra artists fill their pages nicely, belying their knowledge of composition. The Outsiders also fill the page, but it seems more likely that they do so because the creative impulse sometimes continues long after the paper has run out.

Poor quality materials are a feature of Outsider Art. Gaston Teuscher, for example, drew on cigarette paper and chewing gum wrappers. *The Tail that Wags the Dog* is full of works made using crayon, poster paint, ballpoint and felt-tipped pen on cardboard, wallpaper and newsprint. The Cobra artists struggled for money but they still produced works on canvas and Japanese paper as well as disseminating several publications. The show at IMMA is full of oil paintings, lithographs, pastel drawings and magazines.

Individual biographies and a history of the Cobra movement are included in the show's accompanying catalogue. They were interested in automatism and surrealism, they were anti-elitist and anti-war, they published manifestos and were influenced by other artists such as Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky and Miro. The Outsiders on the other hand were, and are, individuals with no manifesto and no political agenda. To find out about them visitors must consult a series of A4 folders filled with photocopies of articles, CVs and faxes.

In contrast to Cobra's self-conscious search for the truth, many Outsiders claim to be unattached to their creative processes. Madge Gill refused to sell her work — although she created thousands of paintings and drawings — because she said they did not belong to her but to a spirit that drove her to the page. Some Outsiders have never been identified: the Philadelphia Wireman, for example, was never found.

In 1983, 700 pieces of sculpted wire and metal were discovered by the side of the road in a poor black neighbourhood in the United States. Leaflets and house calls failed to reveal the owner and these symbolic objects are now regarded as anonymous Outsider artworks.

Despite clear differences in the impulses driving the creative process, there are interesting visual links between the exhibitions. In both, eyes and mouths are everywhere; "eye" and "mouth" are among the first words children tend to learn and the symbolic power of both are important elements of primitive art forms such as mask making. An interest in masks can be seen throughout the Cobra show, while among the Outsiders Dismic Kusmic's Mouth on Wheels object echoes mask iconography, while Robin Warren's Hand Head drawing envisages the thumb and forefinger baring teeth.

The aesthetic value of handwriting is a central element of outsider art and was also of interest to Cobra.

Outsider Francis Marshall makes his twisted human figures from stuffed nylon tights, bits of wood and other found objects. They are inscribed with the words that inspired them and yet, having shown them once, he abandons them, often dismantling them to create other pieces. The Cobra artists collaborated to create works that incorporated words and images, often publishing them in book or leaflet form.

IMMA has not positioned Cobra and Outsider works side by side: they are housed in different buildings at the Royal Hospital. But in associating them, it asks viewers to make connections. The overall feeling the comparison elicits is that the Outsiders show Cobra up. Cobra's works may be more impressive technically, but the honesty of the Outsiders wins out over the forced experimental nature of Cobra's spontaneity.

Outsider John Hauser's compositions feature scribbles and blocks of colour. They are the kind of marks people describe as childlike, but the pressure of the pencil or crayon on the page is a conscious and important part of the work. The drawings of Cobra's Asger Jorn may include childlike faces and bodies, but the medium is handled professionally, the composition is pleasing and there is something about them that feels too composed, too perfect. Similarly, a design for a poster by Appel is somehow too confident in its supposed naivety.

Time has dulled the impact of the Cobra works. We have become used to the idea of finding inspiration in “naive” art, but it is important to remember that in post-war Europe their ideas were radical. In 1949, a mural by Appel for the Amsterdam town hall canteen was found to be so outrageous it was covered up for a decade.

While the Outsiders may seem to epitomise Pedersen’s statement that everyone is an artist, it is a sentiment that is irrelevant to them. Their creative process has nothing to do with being an artist, for Cobra members it was all about being an artist. The Outsiders did not seek affirmation; therein lies the power of their work.

Cobra: Copenhagen Brussels Amsterdam, until September 29, and The Tail that Wags the Dog, until January 4, 2004, at IMMA, Dublin

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Kim van der Horst

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