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Freewheeling space for the human mind



©Marcel Duchamp

Is there an archetypal museum? Some, even now, are hushed, dignified and forbidding; others are noisily hands-on. Some are eccentric Victorian labyrinths; others are no-nonsense white cubes. Some are almost wilfully niche; others are cheerfully catholic. Now Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery blows the field still further open with Museum Show, a provocative, stimulating survey of museums created by artists themselves.

The heretical spirit running through this international show is summed up by the irrepressible Marcel Broodthaers. The Belgian artist created his "Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles" in 1968. Using his own house and studio as the setting for a renegade institution, Broodthaers took the role of "museum director" and filled it with a shifting array of exhibits. The Arnolfini – celebrating its 50th anniversary with this two-part show – shows the bird that gave the project its name, a carved eagle atop an antique mirror, its wings raised defiantly. Also on display is a plastic panel, painted black and announcing starkly: "Museum: enfants non admis", a critique of museums' snooty exclusivity.

Broodthaers was not a pioneer in this. During the 20th century, an ever-increasing number of avant-garde artists offered their own alternatives to museum display. In 1935 Marcel Duchamp began working on his "Boîte-en-Valise", a "portable museum" containing 69 reproductions of his work. "Everything important I have done," declared Duchamp, "can be put in a suitcase." Eventually he created more than 320 versions of this classic piece, and became the self-appointed curator of his own retrospective exhibition. At the Arnolfini, the version on display contains reproductions of Duchamp's landmark works such as "Nude

Descending a Staircase”, and also includes a unique hand-coloured piece based on the lower half of his “Large Glass”. Signed and numbered by Duchamp, the small reproductions inside the “Boîte” are also signed by his beguiling female alter ego Rose Sélavy.

Duchamp’s notion of the “portable museum” was influential, freeing many artists from the frustrations of depending on institutions to display their work. In 1961 Robert Filliou set about creating a “Galerie Légitime” in his own hat. A year later, he hit the streets with a cap full of miniature artworks, approaching passers-by on the pavement and politely asking: “Are you interested in art, monsieur?” If the answer proved positive, he would say, “Well, you know I have a gallery”, and would produce his exhibits. The version at the Arnolfini, made in 1968, is a tall plastic hat containing four works by Filliou and six pieces by other artists including Dieter Roth.

The Arnolfini show testifies to Filliou’s enduring influence by also displaying François Curlet’s “Intuitive Gallery”, made in 2010. Here, next to a flamboyant and brilliantly coloured poster designed by M/M (Paris), we find a blue plinth supporting a hat containing a plaster sculpture of a brain. Made by Katarina Fritsch, it pays witty

homage to Filliou’s determination to create a freewheeling space for the human mind, far removed from the institutional confines of a museum.

Not all the Arnolfini exhibits take such a succinct form. Meschac Gaba overwhelms us with a large structure containing shelves where the theme of art and religion is explored. Unlit candles have been ranged around the top of this walk-in work. A visitor could spend hours there, inspecting everything from faded reproductions of paintings to keys, dice, spoons and playing cards. I found it exhausting to investigate, whereas Guillaume Bijl’s “Voting Booth Museum” provides a far more focused experience. Inside a darkened room, we discover the spotlight shapes of booths supposedly waiting for voters to exercise their democratic rights. Yet there is nothing optimistic about Bijl’s installation. Several booths are shrouded by shabby curtains. And even when we peep inside, the graffiti-covered interiors inspire little confidence. Although some contain pencils or crayons, others supply nothing to vote with at all.

So it is a relief to escape from such a blighted space and find, elsewhere in this ambitious show, Herbert Distel’s “Museum of Drawers”. Some are lodged in a tall white cabinet, but six of the drawers have been removed and displayed in glass cases, so we can discover just how cleverly Distel used them to show miniature works by significant artists. During the 1970s they responded to his invitation to contribute and, over seven years, Distel amassed 500 works. Each drawer is divided into 25 minuscule white galleries, which harbour works by artists as diverse as Miro, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Hockney. The outcome is immensely enticing, its conciseness a refreshing alternative for anyone whose pursuit of art has ever left them with sore feet.

'Museum Show Part 1' continues until November 19; 'Part 2' runs December 9 to February 5
www.arnolfini.org.uk

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