

EILEEN SCHAER

George Melly examines the position of those who although not true outsiders somehow have a claim to their roots of creation

According to its original post-war promoter, the French painter, Jean Dubuffet, the creator of genuine 'Outsider' art must 'draw everything from their own depths'. He demands 'a chemically pure artistic operation springing from pure invention and in no way based, as cultural art consistently is, on chameleon or parrot-like processes'.

The number of times this definition has been quoted in this magazine and elsewhere would be absurd if it were not also necessary. This is because any work of art which fails to clear all its conditions, any artist, however close to the spirit and imagery of 'raw art', who breaks even one of its clauses, must be ruled out.

This may seem pedantic, but the point is that the true Outsider is only the pipe through which his or her compulsive imagery passes. As soon as points of artistic reference, aesthetic considerations, economic possibilities or conscious intervention become involved, a different kind of art, however interesting or impressive in on view. Those Surrealists for instance, Masson, Gorki, etc., who deliberately set out to produce what Andre Breton called 'pure psychic automatism', to unthink themselves into becoming Outsiders, produced in many cases very beautiful works, and the same is true of Dubuffet himself. Even so, they are not Outsiders because they remain, despite their best efforts, to some degree self-conscious. In art's zoo they can look through the bars with admiration, even envy, at the wild creatures in their cages who dream spontaneously of jungle or desert, but they cannot take their place.

Nor in authentic cases vice versa. A significant proportion of Outsider Art is the work of those literally 'behind bars' – the mad. Another segment is by people able to deal with reality to a greater or lesser extent, but who as artists operate in a void. Almost invariably they come from a class for whom the idea of earning a living as a painter or sculptor is inconceivable. They are sometimes illiterate and mostly isolated or alienated. Yet of course (and this is a danger which threatens neither conscious artist, nor those permanently confined), they may be discovered by those who understand and appreciate what they are doing, and in consequence lose their innocence. 'Scottie' Wilson is a prime example. Initially a true Outsider but by no means mad, he became with success, more and more decorative and repetitive. Only a breakdown late in life opened him up again to 'possession' as intense as anything in his previous work.

His would seem to present a moral dilemma. Praise and exhibit an Outsider, reveal that there is a market for their work and you may lose them. Should you deliberately keep them in the dark? I think not. To deny human being happiness or satisfaction in order simply to preserve the 'purity' of isolated obsession is surely wrong.

We are at liberty to celebrate the inner truth of Outsider Art and adhere strictly to what defines it, but we must never seek to confine those who produce it to a kind of mental monastery.

All this preamble is, I believe, necessary before introducing and describing the vision of a woman-painter whose work appears to me entirely authentic but whose history and present circumstances deny her any possibility of a plinth in the Outsiders' pantheon, and yet, and yet. If a man came to read my gas meter and, taking in the pictures on my walls, had mentioned that his mother-in-law painted things like that, and I in consequence visited her, say in a Wandsworth council flat and found these authentic? I suspect not. This imaginary scenario may appear snobbish, but it is simply realistic. The majority of Outsiders are isolated in their endeavours or mad. My artist is neither of these things. She lives with her husband David Fletcher, himself an admirable painter and teacher, and her charming son Sam in a Victorian villa in a pretty valley on the Isle of Man. Her professional name is Eileen Schaer.

Eileen is small, pretty, quirky and the owner of a great laugh which at times seems to possess her. Her husband David paints very refined abstracts, a catalogue of non-objects, beautifully placed and scrupulously adjusted in colour. Lately however he has begun a series of rather more gestural works in acrylic on paper, hovering on the edge of landscape. He is a total professional and there are a few of his generally small works hung throughout 'Mona Villa'. But apart from these the walls are covered with Eileen's pictures, some very big, while the dual studio upstairs is stacked with many more. She is obliged to work compulsively of what she once called her 'Mirrored Images'. It's an uneasy vision she reflects. There is metamorphosis, double images, disturbing humour, inventive colour and a gradual move from complication towards, in the last few years, an assured simplification. Quite often she paints out beyond the edges of the image and onto the frame, not in my view for decorative effect but because the dog's nose, the woman's bare feet, the rook's beak, demand it. Once you've taken in her work you would never confuse it with anyone else's.

Andre Breton wrote that for him the interest of a picture was 'what it looked out on'. It wasn't a literal definition of course, almost the reverse. He really meant what it looked in on, the inscape of the work. Eileen's 'inscapes' are entirely consistent and beyond any question as to their authenticity. 'Schaer City', once visited, is a permanent name on the mental map.

Eileen Schaer is not very forthcoming about her life. In a catalogue of work she exhibited in the Isle of Man in 1991/92 there is a full list of everywhere she had shown since 1971, a quite impressive list, but her 'biography' is limited to two lines, 'Born and educated in Liverpool/Moved to the Isle of Man in 1975'. Even so, both verbally and through correspondence, I have solicited a few facts as to her background. The actual date of her birth was 1948 and she is of Swiss/Norwegian origin. Her paternal grandfather came from Bern and was Chef at Liverpool's then fashionable hotel, the Adelphi. Her maternal grandfather, name of Larsen, was from Bergen. His family were whalers.

Eileen was born in West Derby. From the late fifties her parents ran a pub on the corner of North John Street and Victoria Street, near 'The Cavern'. Indeed the Beatles and other Merseyside groups used it, as did Brian Epstein and his father.

Eileen was educated at Notre Dame High School, Mount Pleasant. She met David in 1968 in the magnificently Art Nouveau Pub, the Philharmonic, when he was studying

at the nearby Liverpool Art School. They were married a year later and had a daughter, Kim.

It was in 1970 that, for reasons unexplained, she told David she could paint better than he. He challenged her, 'You do bloody better', so she picked up the gauntlet and, except for a period from 1979 to '81 when she had her son, Sam, has worked ever since.

As David had graduated to the Royal College of Art in 1971, they moved to London. In 1975, as we know, they settled on the Isle of Man, that strange reactionary island. Part Edwardian boarding houses, part dark mythology and tail-less cats. David had been offered a job there teaching a foundation course – he remains fiercely idealistic in his endeavour to arouse a sense of wonder amongst his students, destined as they are to swim in colder, more rational waters. He and Eileen found Mona Villa and had transformed it, by the time I got to know them, into a magical yet solid retreat.

Her work is populated by human beings both clothed and nude, birds some parrot-like, some like finches, but more often these days, rooks; houses (sometimes suggesting a safe refuge), cats, dogs, and elephants, the moon, rather medieval trees and solid assemblies of clouds. There are highly patterned areas suggesting oriental carpets (but these are largely to be found in the earlier work where the colour too seemed to be brighter), some but not many flowers, some phallic punning and constricting bars.

The technique is no longer as varied or blotchy as it once was, the colour less broke. From the beginning of the 90's the drawing is completely sure of itself, everything is out-lined and filled in, the palette increasingly sombre. Also, most noticeably, the rooks have arrived with their cruel banana beaks. Some are huge, some very small, but none suggest reassurance.

Nevertheless despite the improvisational ebb and flow of the early work and the comparatively manic gaiety of the transitional works, it is her menacing late certainty which seems to me the most convincing. There is, for example, an excellent early painting ('80 to '84) called 'The Whirlpool' The centre of the picture indeed whirls in on itself like a snail's shell and is very tender in colour, pinks and greens like celestial tartan. On the right, but within the shape of the whirlpool, are some steps leading up to an arrow-shaped building topped by a cross, elsewhere there are delicious explosions of pointless dots and wavy lines, while around a bamboo pole a vicious cat or dog snarls with rage at the man materialising in front of the whirlpool. He has a triangular head and seems to be mounted on a horse (a rare visitant in Schaefer's world although apparently the central motif in her very early work). The horse here is like a hobby horse; solid legs and hooves are planted at the bottom of the stair-case, it has a tail and a convincing head and mane, but its body resembles a TV aerial. It's a complicated work but very beautiful.

Contrast it however with a large work, 'The Family' of '94'. Here against a plain dark background, and leaning up against a rather phallic chair with a long face replacing the headrest, is a grinning triangular man in profile with pink lips, a simplified nose and Schaefer's ubiquitous eye, always seen as if full-face even when in profile. The man wears a pyjama-like garment, the jacket decorated with

pomegranate shapes, the trousers more like Scotch-eggs. Seeming to grow from his crotch is a smaller female head and torso with crossed arms, quite impossible anatomically and a brown rook as her hat or perhaps it's jut landed on her head for it appears over-interested in the man's fat pink lips. Finally, concealed behind its master and mistress is an untrusty-looking cat heavily decorated in the style of the man's pyjamas. The three figures; man, woman and cat stand on a narrow strip of bare floor-boards. It's a very disturbing but utterly convincing image.

What do Schaer's paintings mean? A stupid question. Even if it were possible to explain them away it would destroy all their tension and indeed their meaning. These images don't initially materialise on the board. Significantly she first draws them automatically in what she calls her 'doodle books' and then transfers them onto a picture surface using charcoal. These preliminary preparations are very beautiful in themselves. She doesn't confine herself to painting and drawing. There are also three-dimensional objects and lino-cuts but, for me, it's the pictures which most impress. I have one, quite small but very powerful.

But whatever else she might be, she is not an Outsider. What is she then? Is there a word for artists of this type? In her catalogue 'Mirrored Images' she perspicaciously printed an excerpt from Klee's essay 'On Modern Art'. It reads 'But our pounding heart drives us down, down to the deepest source of all. What springs from this source, whatever it may be called, dream, idea or fantasy, must be taken seriously only if it unites with the proper creative means to form a work of art. Then those curiosities become realities – realities of art which help to lift life out of its mediocrity

Or not only do they to some extent, add more spirit to be seen, but they also make secret visions visible'.

And his definition you note, excludes true Outsiders (what interest or knowledge have they of 'proper creative means', on the contrary...), but it encapsulates exactly those 'educated cousins' of the Outsiders amongst whom I would place without hesitation Ms Eileen Schaer, and her remarkable and unique vision.