

ART
BRUT
IN
AMERICA



THE
INCURSION
OF
JEAN
DUBUFFET

By James D. Balestrieri

NEW YORK CITY — Before you read this, look at the images that accompany this essay. Consider them individually, then compare them. Are you curious, enthralled, appalled, dismissive? Do you want to know more? Do you recoil? Do you say to yourself or out loud to the person beside you, “I could do that.” Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) collected these works and thousands more under the banner of a term he coined: Art Brut — brut meaning crude, unformed, raw. The French painter, sculptor and printmaker would grant not only the validity but the necessity of all your visceral reactions. But, to your “I could do that...,” he might reply, “True. Why don’t you?”

Untitled sculpture by Auguste Forestier (1887–1958), Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole Psychiatric Hospital, France, circa 1935–1951. Carved and painted wood with fabric, leather, zipper, buttons, medallions, aluminum foil and nails; 20¼ by 7¾ by 10⅝ inches. —Claude Bornand photo

Page Above: “Pâûlîchinêle gânsthêrs vitrêshê’-he [sic] (Punchinello gangsters vitrêshê’-he)” by Gaston Duf (Gaston Dufour) (1920–1966), Saint-André-lez-Lille Psychiatric Hospital, France, 1949. Colored pencil on drawing paper; 27 by 19¼ inches. —Arnaud Conne photo



It is easier to define Art Brut by what it is not than by what it is. Art Brut is not a movement, like Impressionism. It is not a school, like the Hudson River School. It does not name a group of artists, like the Taos Founders or the Ten. It is, in a way, Outsider art, but it is not folk art, with its handmade, handed-down traditions of naiveté and craft. Art Brut shares something with asylum art, yet it is not concerned with finding clues to pathologies in the productions of the institutionalized. Children's art begins as Art Brut, but as soon as children want their art to imitate the world of their parents, Art Brut questions the purity of the impulse.

Despite all that it is not, the exhibition "Art Brut in America: The Incursion of Jean Dubuffet," at the American Folk Art Museum

ART BRUT

"Baptême de Pie XII / Un Baiser à l'aviateur – Le Pape Pie XII monnayeur et son Sphinx sur le siège (Baptism of Pius XII / A kiss to the aviator – Pope Pius XII counterfeiter and his Sphinx on the seat)" by Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964), De La Rosière Psychiatric Hospital, Gimel, Switzerland, circa 1955. Colored pencil on a sheet of paper folded in the middle, double-sided; 59 by 39³/₈ inches. –Olivier Laffely photo





through January 10, is fascinating, not in the facile way that we throw that word around, but in the way that the sun, scintillating on the water, or a fire, licking and crackling in the darkness, fascinates us into a kind of waking trance. If it sometimes takes an effort to confront these works, it takes even more to tear yourself away from them.

Art Brut is found art, art that arises directly from the impulse to make art, art that does not know it is art: doodles and scrawls, the productions of obsessions and distractions. It is art before artfulness, art that would surprise the artist if the artist knew it was art. It is a beautiful cat the color of cappuccino foam padding out of a shock of ruddy weeds and lemony brush beside the train tracks at the moment — as I write this — when the train



Untitled by Jean Mar (Jean Marchand) (circa 1828–1911), Bel-Air Clinic, Chêne-Bourg, Switzerland, circa 1905. Newsprint, blue paper, plant fiber and white and black string; $3\frac{5}{8}$ by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. —Caroline Smyrliadis photo

stops to let another train pass. Art Brut is accidental art, a car crash between the psyche and the image. (The images of the cat and the car crash should give you the flavor of Dubuffet's own, extensive writings on art and his insistence on setting down the lightning immediacy of first reactions.)

In 1945, just as the horrors of World War II were both winding down and coming to light, Jean Dubuffet began amassing an assemblage of works that would become the foundation for the Collection de l'Art Brut, based in Lausanne, Switzerland. From late 1951 until 1962, the collection was displayed at the Creeks, the East Hampton, N.Y., home of wealthy artist Alfonso Ossorio, and was available for private showings for artists like Jackson Pollock, Henri Matisse, Mark Rothko and



Untitled by Heinrich Anton Müller (1869–1930), Münsingen Psychiatric Hospital, Bern, Switzerland, circa 1927–1929. Colored pencil on drawing paper; 22⁵/₈ by 16³/₄ inches. — Claude Bornand photo



scores of others. Some were enthralled by what they saw; many seemed indifferent. Few, in hindsight, were entirely unaffected, for, while Dubuffet found Art Brut at the edges of education, culture and sanity, he also insisted that this same impulse slept in the breast of every one of us, that it was a common birthright, even if it came forth uncommonly and expressed itself idiosyncratically, under unusual conditions.

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Untitled by Francis Palanque (Francis Palanc) (1928–2015), Vence, France, 1953. Finely ground eggshells on canvas; 31½ by 23¼ inches. —Henri Germond photo

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