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## Worlds mapped by outsiders

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**VISUAL ARTS:** HENRY DARGER is one of the most remarkable of that remarkable category of people: outsider artists. That is, artists who apply themselves to creating substantial bodies of work without regard to and quite apart from not only the mainstream art world but also the social, cultural and intellectual norms of their time. They address their own worlds in their own ways. The reclusive Darger, who died in 1973, spent pretty much all of his working life as a janitor in a Chicago hospital.

Unbeknownst to anyone else, however, he devoted innumerable hours to working on a vast, sprawling, copiously illustrated epic, usually referred to as *In the Realms of the Unreal*, though that was drawn from the subtitle in preference to the actual (though much more prosaic) title, *The Story of the Vivian Girls*.

Darger's 15,000 single-spaced typed pages, as well as more than 300 intricately coloured drawings - many of them involving vast crowd scenes - puts the scale of *The Lord of the Rings* to shame, and Darger's singular imagination produced fantasies that far outstrip Tolkien's allegory.

Darger's story of oppression and rebellion involves armies of androgynous pre-pubescent girls who are engaged in a continual life-or-death struggle with implacable enemies. Several of Darger's strikingly skilful drawings are at the centre of *The World Needs a Narrative*, the inaugural exhibition at the Kevin Kavanaugh Gallery's new premises in Chancery Lane.

The title refers to the human need to frame the world's haphazardness within the order of stories, to construct coherence of some kind. Darger is a prime example of the outsider story-teller whose work, which might easily have been dismissed as simply delusional and of little interest, has attracted increasing attention in the years since his death. More, the extreme singularity of his vision is not untypical of contemporary artists who would not be considered as outsiders at all.

His mode of expression, while still controversial in some respects, has become accepted as legitimate within mainstream culture.

*The World Needs a Narrative* juxtaposes the erstwhile outsider with the insiders, including Karin Brunnermeier, Tony Fitzpatrick, Michael Kalmbach and more. Guy Richards Smit, for example, reworks the front page of the *New York Times* to provide his own sardonic and occasionally transgressive slant on the conventions of news. What's lacking in his large watercolours is a certain technical élan.

Brunnermeier and Kalmbach are both more introspective, looking to narratives of human relationships and personal experiences. There is a timelessly magical, mythic quality, not to mention the disconcerting cruelty of fables, to the inventive imagery they employ.

Some of which applies to Basim Magdy, except that his fantasies refer to such large-scale events as wars and disasters as represented in the media, and to Neil Farber, who inclines towards fairytale imagery. Jason McLean's graphic work, closely related to the more subversive wing of the tradition of comic-book illustration, visualises bizarre networks suggestive of arbitrary paranoid systems within which everything is connected.

Tony Fitzpatrick emerges as a fascinating artist. He makes packed, intricately detailed collages incorporating his own drawings and fragments of documents such as baseball cards, matchbooks, music manuscripts, maps and various printed ephemera.

Maps are perhaps crucial, because the collages are built around complex concentric patterns that suggest mazes or maps and invite our eyes to roam through their various avenues, alighting on details as we proceed. There's a nicely worn, retrospective look to the work, and the press release indicates that Fitzpatrick has in mind the documentation or description of the Chicago underworld of bars and backstreets, with its own rich textures and vigour.

Most of the work in the show is modest enough in scale, so that you might not even notice the exceptional quality of the new space with its long, high walls. All four walls are generous enough to accommodate really large work and the gallery is a welcome and auspicious addition to Dublin.

IT MAY SEEM odd to say that painter Gillian Carnegie should let herself go a little, given that she was for some time best known for paintings of her own bare bottom. Some of these mischievous works, which both invited you to look and made you feel a bit uncomfortable about doing so, featured in her Turner Prize show a few years back (Simon Starling, whose solo show is currently on at the Limerick City Gallery, won the prize that year).

There are none in her Douglas Hyde exhibition, however, though that's not necessarily why it feels like such a subdued, dispirited affair. That has more to do with the way Carnegie's methodology in her paintings seems to suck every bit of energy out of the process and, indeed, even the atmosphere around.

The work reflects a fretful concern about what is interesting or allowable in picture-making. Carnegie ranges across boundaries in making geometrically patterned abstracts, studies of flowers and careful renderings of the facades of buildings and landscapes, as if to emphasise that the point lies elsewhere, somewhere apart from our notions of style, genre, abstraction and representation. Except that it's not so clear that it does. One of Carnegie's series of yellow landscapes, for example, plays on the idea of the flatness of the picture surface as opposed to the illusion of a depicted scene.

A path extends into the distance between what look like tall hedges. You have to figure this out on the basis of texture because there is virtually no variation in colour or tone. There are other extended riffs on flatness and depth in this and other works, but they never become particularly interesting. It's odd, because Carnegie is clearly a painter of considerable abilities who has on occasion produced works of real excitement and possibility. Here you feel that she is closing down any chance of that happening, perhaps by over-conceptualising what she is doing.

It would be good to see her cut loose and follow her instincts, presuming, of course, that instinct hasn't led her to where she is now.

**The world needs a narrative, works by Karin Brunnermeier, Henry Darger, Neil Farber, Michael Kalmbach, Basim Magdy, Jason McLean, Tony Fitzpatrick, Ken Solomon and Guy Richards Smit, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, until Oct 18:  
Gillian Carnegie: Paintings, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College Dublin, until Nov 13**

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