



John Devlin: Out of a Heart of Quiet
Curated by Kate Whiteway
July 30 – August 27, 2022

John Devlin makes artwork most days from his late grandmother's desk at his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Once a picture is complete, he scans it, uploads it to a Dropbox folder, and files it away. His works on paper, numbering nearly two thousand, contain variations of dots, moons, cosmos, calculations, cocks, and gold monoliths. The artist knows a picture is done when he feels his joy has convened and then abandoned. The time in between finishing one picture and starting another is painful. He calls these inert moments between works "the terrible times." *Out of a Heart of Quiet* is the first solo exhibition of John Devlin's work in Canada outside of Nova Scotia. It is also the first exhibition, anywhere, of the artist's current, post-1980s body of work.

I first saw John Devlin's work while thumbing through an issue of *Raw Vision*, the London-based magazine of "outsider art" devoted to profiling artists "untrained, unschooled and uninfluenced by the art world." In 1972, British art historian Roger Cardinal pressed for an alternative, anti-cultural art movement in his book *Outsider Art*. He saw culture as a fundamentally disciplinary and moralizing mechanism, one that results in art that bends to the invisible hand of the market – art that knows how but doesn't know. Outsider art expanded on the French painter Jean Dubuffet's call for *art brut*, laid out in his text *Asphyxiante culture* in 1968. People claimed by *art brut* and outsider art rejected social and cultural standards or were rejected by them. Their impulse to create was thought to spring from raw "psycho-physical unity" as opposed to a schematic, emotionally neutral, and socially appeasing tendency. The naturalization of good taste and good art was refused on the premise that these values were created by specific education and class but pretended, very successfully, not to be. Dubuffet and Cardinal were looking for art that could disrupt generally accepted "good" culture, but in the process, they insisted on creating a profile of otherness often based on the mental, physical, spiritual, racial, or economic positions of the artist.

Biography is always the crux of the outsider artist, the interpretive key to the otherwise errant body of work. If the codes of a work are not readily culturally legible, one looks to the artist's life to explain what one sees. Biography is one of the most effective tools for othering. Simon Rodia, featured in Roger Cardinal's book, was an uneducated Italian immigrant to Los Angeles who built the Watts Towers over thirty years of late-night walks after work. Augustin Lesage heard a voice from deep within a coal mine guiding him to become a painter and medium. And John Devlin converted to Catholicism and went to the University of Cambridge in 1979 at twenty-five years old to study theology, fell in love with a priest, and endured breakdowns which returned him to Nova Scotia to convalesce. Between 1984 and 1989, he made 365 architectural drawings of a utopian city on an imagined, lily-pad island in the middle of Minas Basin in Nova Scotia. These works, the *Nova Cantabrigiensis* series, recreated a cosmic version of the place, Cambridge, where he had been the happiest and most in pain. The series was batch-bought and remain largely the only works by the artist to receive critical attention or exhibition. At the end of 1989, John Devlin came out of another period of hospitalization. He moved

out of his family home into the group home where he still lives and felt he had to start anew. He began by drawing dots.

Out of a Heart of Quiet is installed in a fugue-like composition, where subjects repeat and evolve as one moves deeper into the space of the gallery. John Devlin's studies in architecture were central to his 1980s series of drawings of the utopian university city. Blueprinting is still present in his simple dot and line drawings that open this show, noticeable in the titles of certain works: *Design of a Spaceship to Neptune* (2014) and *Tattoo for a Biker* (2013). There are other designs in the exhibition: *Sphincter Drawstring* (2021), for instance, sketches the elimination of zippers from pants or briefs and *3-way Sounding Rod* (2021) illustrates a tripartite urethral sounding technique. The cosmic series, on view in the front room of the gallery, are drawn as negatives to be flipped and colour inverted so that the white page becomes a sensual black sky and gold leaf looks like the dented blue surface of the moon. They revive the artist's teenage astronomical explorations, when he learned to directly photograph "heavenly objects" through a refractor telescope. The works return to his time printing stars in an improvised darkroom in his parents' house.

In my first conversation with John Devlin, we talked about gold. I had thought of it as a conflicted material, simultaneously literal capital and pure fetish. Marx called gold "solidified light raised from a subterranean world." This resonated with John Devlin, as for him, gold holds the intensity of the icon and theatre and eroticism of the Catholic mass. It began appearing in his work in 1983 in short stories, emerging as full-blown gold leaf collages by 2017. While the artist is aware of the ecological footprint of the material (what he calls "the gold reality"), he began using it in his work after a trip to New York City in 2014, where he saw one of Klimt's golden women (*Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, 1907). He sees gold leaf as a discipline, one that has its own temperament, calling for calm, quiet, and personal superstition. He has long meditated on the significance of the number 79, gold's atomic number and the year his illness began. But he isn't too precious about it, issuing these unfeigned words: "Even gold has no beauty in a darkened room."

Erotic vision rules over John Devlin's work. In the series *Nova Cantabrigiensis*, his sexuality underwent a subversion, propelled by subterranean impulse to create a utopian universe. In the gold leaf collages, it is overt and hypersexual. The artist's daily reality of sexuality is a means and not an end. It literally creates the movement of the work. In an interview for the magazine *Inspirational 53*, he said: "Even when the work has no apparent outward erotic content, it began with erotic intensity." His Catholicism is queer to the core. It is earthy and visceral, less the "meek and creepy thing it is today."

The outside is not fixed, it's an orientation, one that looks away from what's inside. If in the context of 20th century Europe, outsider art was mobilized as a revolt to acceptable culture, it's potential seems to have been lived out predominantly as a marketing category, used by gallerists to traffic works across boundaries. For John Devlin, it is an intellectual category that leaves him cold, coming from the psychology of curators and the rules of art history that feel inaccessible to him. Regardless, he sits at his grandmother's desk, making pictures out of a quiet, desiring heart.

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