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Arts

Colin Gleadell

Art Market Focus

The artist discovered in a charity shop




Andy Holden is not a name to conjure with in the art market. You don't see his work in art fairs; he has no gallery. And you don't see his work at auctions; he doesn't make the sort of tradable commodities that today's contemporary-art speculators like to buy in galleries and flip at auction six months later for 10 times the price.

In fact, 40-year-old Holden almost deliberately avoids making readily consumable art. He resists through commissions from public institutions or bodies such as the creative-arts charity Artangel, as well as teaching, and selling objects from his website.

Eschewing the conventions of painting or sculpture, Holden tends to use things that are already there as raw material, and conjures something witty, meaningful or mournful out of them. They can be

Beano comics, bird's nests, beer bottles transformed into stalagmites, a blow-up reproduction of a chank from an Egyptian pyramid he stole as a boy – all these and more have featured in his work, which has been represented in public institutions from Bristol, London and Eastbourne to Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool.

“Because I prioritise long, sometimes complicated narratives with lengthy videos,” he says, “my work doesn't sit easily in the quick-fire art-market world of art fairs and auctions. My target is really the general public, not the market.”

Certainly, Holden has acquired a significant following. At a recently opened exhibition at the tiny Gallery of Everything in Marylebone, the attendees included Jarvis Cocker, artists

Jeremy Deller and Richard Wentworth, the Artangel founder James Lingwood, and young up-and-coming curator, Sasha Galitzine. Yet, characteristically, Holden has chosen to show at an unassuming converted barber's shop that specialises in outsider art.

Since the opening, there has been a constant stream through the gallery doors of art-world aficionados – collectors, museum curators, artists, teachers and

students. Most are there not to buy or invest in the pieces, but to engage and enjoy.

The work they had all come to see was a kind of collaboration with a deceased artist whose work Holden had discovered in a charity shop in his home town of Bedford. He found numerous paintings by a clearly self-taught Hermione Burton, all signed “Hermione” in capital letters. With them was a brief self-published biography of the artist, surname Burton, who had suffered since childhood with a heart disorder and then began to record her life in paint. Intrigued to learn more, Holden bought not one but every painting available, so that he could keep her story alive and the record intact.

Born in 1926 in Aylesbury, Hertsmere was married three times and had one daughter. For a while she lived in America with a

serviceman husband, and had open-heart surgery on a military base in the 1960s, after which she started painting as a form of occupational therapy. Returning to England in the 1970s, she was largely housebound owing to ill health, and died in 2007.

The subjects range from portraits and self-portraits – where Hermione realises her body in paint, bearing none of the scars of open-heart surgery and sometimes donning a red baret – to marriage scenes and mysterious accidents. That latter element was part of the attraction. Why had she collapsed on the floor? Did her beautiful daughter really work as an escort? It was like assembling the parts of a jigsaw.

While conducting his detective work, Holden tracked down friends of hers and filmed them, weaving their memories into a

collage of moving images, part-documentary and part-fantasy, as he narrated his voyage of discovery to a haunting soundtrack by the pop band Saint Etienne.

At the same time, as so often with Holden's work, we're left asking how he turns something of little intrinsic interest and artistic value into the reverse. How Hermione's work obtained added interest as part of an Andy Holden installation? Is there a parallel with the great artists of the past who used found objects to such effect: Marcel Duchamp, for instance, or even that inventive collector of consumer trash, Andy Warhol?

At the end of the film, Holden (as the narrator) reflects on Hermione's life, plagued by illness but liberated by art. “To be sick is to be an outsider,” he says. “In this sense, we can describe her work as ‘outsider art.’ If this show is a success, her paintings may become investable products. Perhaps Holden himself could become an art market trader.”

Don't sleep on it: a self-portrait by the late ‘outsider’ artist Hermione Burton, whose discovery by Andy Holden has been turned into a new exhibition