

## **Clowning on the Edge of Perception**

**By Stuart Shepherd**

The selection of drawings that make up the exhibition, *Drawings 1960–1970* at Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, appear like a fine visual feast from some exotic culture. The ingredients are recognizable but the arrangements and flavours are strange. All these drawings have been sourced from the extraordinary archive of “master chef” Susan Te Kahurangi King.

At the risk of over-stretching the food metaphor, the kitchen as a place where work is done, where nutrients from the outside are gathered, processed and combined, is not a bad analogy for the way Susan produced these early drawings when aged between nine and nineteen. As a member of a family with eleven brothers and sisters, Susan was part of a busy working household. And after dinner Susan’s Grandma kept working on her own archive in scrapbooks consisting of notes, cutouts and accounts. Susan’s drawing process seems to have been similarly purposeful. Drawing was the best work she could do, her record-keeping, her contribution. Being non-verbal, drawing was the best communication channel available to her. And drawing was her only comeback to what must have been a very difficult and often unkind social world whose rules were lost to her. The page was the safe place where Susan’s playful subversive sense of humour might come out, or where a buried expression of hurt and entrapment might emerge. Susan’s mother and grandmother certainly treated her work as precious and as a key to a locked child. Every drawing was saved, even tiny work on scraps of paper. Grandma Myrtle kept notes about Susan’s behaviour and the content and context of her drawings.

It is clear to us now that Susan was a masterful draughtsperson at a remarkably early age. She had mastered the use of the contour line so that the description of three-dimensional space and of overlapping shapes could freely come and go in her work. She could play with this ability to render depth as easily as other children play with stacking blocks. And she mastered the two-dimensional space of the page on which she was working. Within this space her figures cluster, fly apart, turn into rubber, go miniature, get stylized; they entwine, they reach out, they come forwards, they recede, or else they are contained within other shaded territories on the page. In drawing after drawing Susan engages the space in fresh ways. Space is left open or it is crowded, interrupted, embroidered, and within these various volumes she is experimenting, directing and choreographing her figures into complex and confounded relationships.

We witness something quite unique and wonderful in these drawings. Non-verbal Susan is operating without the usual rules of storytelling, without the usual expectations of images to make easily readable sense, without a hierarchical ordering of the world. Susan’s particular way of experiencing things seems to be sensual and fluid rather than calculated, mapped and conclusive, and her translation of that experience to the page seems to be immediate,

inventive and sharply realized in contrast to the literal, reductive, fixed perspective, orthodox visual expression assumed by most children.

Gary Panter, the American underground comic artist who has championed Susan's work, sees psychedelia in Susan's work and compares it to his own consciousness-shifting drug experiences in the sixties, the same period as when Susan made these drawings. The distortions, the scale changes, the warped perspectives, the obsessive filling in, the extraordinary focus on unusual details and the unhesitating comic line – all these qualities can be psychedelic, or surrealist, but in Susan's case they evidence a magically unbridled graphic response to an unfathomable social world, by a child and artist who never learnt its rules.

Susan was five when she stopped speaking. David Swingley, in the paper "Cognitive Development in Language Acquisition," writes that "infants who are still developing intuitions about different sorts of events only treat a subset of objects' properties as relevant to understanding each event ... then they sort their experience into discrete categories of events."<sup>1</sup> This concept readily applies to Susan's work and the way vestiges of recognisable forms are rendered, repeated and shifted. Added to this developing, or delayed, cognitive process is Susan's particular ability to channel the graphic technique and manner of comic art. As Patrick Price has suggested, it is Susan's "use of the limiting schema provided by cartoon imagery that has made ... [her] overwhelmingly complex inner activity communicable, or perhaps given it enough structure to be seen."<sup>2</sup>

Armed with this "limiting schema," this sophisticated short-hand, this unusually confident tool, Susan's impressions get a bold voice, and her drawing comes on like a command performance without rehearsals, planning or reworking. These are in-the-moment intuitive responses to the space of the page. Susan becomes the ringmaster of her own circus space, orchestrating and arranging objects and figures (surrogate bits and pieces of herself?) that have escaped the censure of language and that appear like an impulsive procession, tumbling off the tip of her pencil.

Susan's circus knows no "right way up." Despite using silhouettes as part of her repertoire, her drawing seems to come from a holographic vision rather than from a flat one. It does not know, or care, which objects "should" be prioritized or which topics "should" be avoided. As a child Susan would giggle as she drew and would become upset when called for dinner and the spell was broken. So thoroughly was she absorbed in that magic moment of making.

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<sup>1</sup> Swingley, David, "Cognitive Development in Language Acquisition," 2012

<sup>2</sup> Price, Patrick, "The Joys and Terrors of an Outsider Artist," *Hyperallergic*, July 1, 2017  
<https://hyperallergic.com/387915/the-joys-and-terrors-of-an-outsider-artist>

The renown critic Jerry Saltz was smitten when he first witnessed Susan's work in New York in 2014, titling his review "All Hail Susan Te Kahurangi King" and writing of the works' "finely composed fields of cartoony characters ... [and] slopping abstract spaces that pour from one side of the paper into piles of figures that turn into strange landscapes of the mind."<sup>3</sup> I share Saltz's enthusiasm. As a longtime drawer myself I take heart and pleasure in Susan's work and believe that these are some of the most wonderful and original drawings to appear anywhere on, or in response to, our crazy mixed-up planet.

Bravo! Susan take a bow.

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<sup>3</sup> Saltz, Jerry, "All Hail Susan Te Kahurangi King," *Vulture*, November 21, 2014  
<http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/all-hail-susan-te-kahurangi-king.html>

## **A Violent Reform**

### **By Louise Rutledge**

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.<sup>4</sup>

In 1976 author Joan Didion published the seminal article *Why I Write*, quoted in part above. Her prose introduced writing, firstly, as an act of violence, an intrusion; a gesture that foregrounds the position of the author above the character of the reader. Forcing its way past the physicalities outlined by the curve of a letterform, the height of a line or the structure of a sentence, Didion holds writing accountable for its ambitious aspirations.

In many ways, the work of Susan Te Kahurangi King predisposes a similar condition. Despite the economy of size, medium and materials, King's drawings can be construed as violent acts. This is said not as a way to indulge in violence as a harmful condition or to suggest its presence as a reflection of grievance, but to foreground the ability of King's work to disrupt, fracture and make anew. While one can't presume to understand why King chooses to draw, the sensibilities of her work are no less of an imposition on the viewer. For, as Alex Gartenfeld states, these are drawings that "complicate [our] fundamental understanding of the function of a work of art, undermining our assumption of art as a fixed object and commodity, or even as communication."<sup>5</sup>

Dated c. 1960, the earliest works in this exhibition were drafted when King was just nine years old. Here we witness the introduction of figures that maintain a foothold throughout King's subsequent work: the 1960s soda pop icon Fanta Jester and a cohort of Disney and Looney Tunes characters in varying states of disarray. These characters, far from the unsteady renderings expected from that age, offer a wealth of contradictions arising from King's ability to dismantle form and reconsider the structure of a body with almost surrealist delight. Donald Duck becomes a forlorn echo, a lethargic and heavy eyed caricature. Tweety Bird and Sylvester skip entangled across the page, shadowed by the caress of a few blue fingers. The Fanta Jester, a recurring motif in the works exhibited, is depicted in far more detail than the

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<sup>4</sup> Didion, Joan, "Why I Write," *New York Times*, December 5, 1976, p.270  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/05/archives/why-i-write-why-i-write.html>

<sup>5</sup> Gartenfeld, Alex, "Foreword," in *The Drawing of Susan Te Kahurangi King*, Miami: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016, p.7.

original flat and static illustration. In drawings from c. 1967, King entangles the jester in crowd of its own depiction, adding tongues that snake along to the edge of the page and, most strikingly, offering an unseen view of the mascot as imagined from above. Forget the dense, shrouded anthropomorphism of Bill Hammond – King’s figures thrive on audacity. Any sense of nostalgia is quickly subsumed in the onslaught; there is nothing tentative in what King sets to paper.

Conjuring the violence of both amputation and addition, King often reduces her anthropomorphised characters to a sprinkling of detached and re-adjoined limbs. Other figures are rendered as darkened shadows, crushed and subsumed by their twisting gestures. These gestures resonate more broadly throughout King’s approach to both space and composition. Unconfined by the boundaries of left and right, up and down, foreground and background, King instead folds incompatible perspectives together on a single page. How we orient the page is then determined by our own measure of a figure, and even this feels like a reluctant constraint. Elsewhere, King works within frames of her own making, responding to curved lines, grids and window-like shapes. In the case of the drawings centred within three printed columns, King made use of the formatting templates used by her father, an editor and self-taught Te Reo scholar. In one such triptych, the dark and tumbling scenes of anguished figures are surrounded by a border of letterforms. Though painfully familiar, the symbols offer no respite. Instead, they present themselves as archetypes of King’s visual vocabulary—a reflected, inverted, disruptive and beautifully rhythmic array of forms that triumph in their irreverence.

These are works that not only depict a part of the world, but create new landscapes for us to navigate. How we do so raises difficult questions, bringing to light our expectations of both artists themselves and their work, and the relation between the two. Do we consider, as is so often foregrounded in the public narrative around King’s work, the conditions of her life and personhood? Or should her work be primarily discussed in relation to other societal and artistic histories, drawing in formal associations for an artist who works in geographic and psychological isolation? Or do we look for something else entirely? Yet again, violence represents itself here in the ability to fashion meaning on another's behalf, to fill the gaps presented on and off the page. Perhaps, instead of imposing our own subjectivity as a way to interpret or understand, we should accept the possibilities and pleasures of unknown offers. While there is little doubt drawing plays a pivotal role in the way King experiences the world, what King’s drawings ultimately gift us is the chance to look outward through the spaces that remain and, in their most violent act, let the world be reframed.

## **Susan Te Kahurangi King**

Born 1951, Te Aroha, New Zealand

### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

#### **2017**

Susan Te Kahurangi King: Drawings 1960–1970, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

Susan Te Kahurangi King, Marlborough Contemporary, London

#### **2016**

*Drawings 1975–1989*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Susan Te Kahurangi King, ICA Miami

#### **2015**

*From the One I Call My Own* (with Shannon Te Ao), City Gallery, Wellington

Susan Te Kahurangi King, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

Outsider Art Fair New York (with Peter Saul) w/ Chris Byrne, New York

#### **2014**

*Susan Te Kahurangi King: Drawings From Many Worlds* (curated by Chris Byrne), Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Outsider Art Fair New York w/ Chris Byrne + Marquand Books, New York

#### **2013**

Outsider Art Fair Paris w/ Chris Byrne + Marquand Books, Paris

#### **2010**

*Introducing Susan Te Kahurangi King* (curated by Sophie Oiseau and Aaron King-Cole), The High Seas, Auckland

#### **2009**

Susan Te Kahurangi King (curated by Peter Fay), Callan Park Gallery, University of Sydney

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

#### **2017**

*Looking Back / The 11th White Columns Annual*, White Columns, New York

*All Lines Converge*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

#### **2015**

*World Builders*, The Dowse, Lower Hutt

*We will begin by drawing, we shall continue to draw, and then we shall draw some more,* Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

*dRAW*, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago

*Moving Pictures: Early Animation and Its Influence*, Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Ketchum

*Interfaces: Outsider Art and the Mainstream*, Philadelphia Museum of Art

## **2014**

*The Outsider Art Fair*, Auckland

*Shit Like Hair*, White Flag Projects, Missouri

*Promenades*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

*PURPLE STATES* (curated by Sam Gordon), Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

## **2012**

*Secret Garden*, Hastings City Art Gallery, Hastings

*Local Knowledge* (curated by Stuart Shepherd), MADmusée, Liège, Belgium

*Look, Know*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

## **Public Collections**

Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, New Zealand

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James Wallace Arts Trust, New Zealand

Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA, USA

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- Paraphilia Magazine*, Issue Twelve, 25 April, 2011 (page works)
- Paraphilia Magazine*, Issue Thirteen, 4 December, 2011 (page works)
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- Saltz, Jerry, "The 19 Best Art Shows of 2014," *Vulture*, 10 December, 2014
- "Susan Te Kahurangi King at Andrew Edlin," *Art in America*, November 2014

### **Filmography**

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