



Cunningham Dax Collection

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By Mark Holsworth

There are several galleries devoted to the work of outsider artists, most notably the *Art Brut Gallery* in Switzerland and Melbourne's *Cunningham Dax Collection*. I hadn't been to the *Cunningham Dax Collection* before but it is one of the few galleries that are open in the first week of 2010. Most of Melbourne's galleries are closed for a couple of weeks over the New Year period; except for some big public galleries, like the National Gallery of Victoria. The collection is named after its founder Dr Eric Cunningham Dax who in 1946 pioneered the place of art therapy in mainstream psychiatric treatment.

Above the purple entrance doors, there is the gallery sign and slogan: "art, creativity and education in mental health". Inside the *Cunningham Dax Collection* there are two large gallery rooms, a small side gallery, a video lounge and a large room containing a library, research area and office. The collection itself consists of over 12,000 works, held in a climate controlled storage room.

I didn't see the main collection, just the current temporary exhibition. *Out of the Dark: the Emotional Legacy of the Holocaust* is an exhibition of artwork by survivors, child survivors and the children of survivors of the Holocaust. The *Cunningham Dax Collections* proposes a multi-dimensional approach to their collection as a clinical record, art, historical artefact and education material as opposed to "objects of curiosity and amusement". This is not outsider art as it is traditionally defined but creative work of people who have experienced mental illness and trauma. There are some quality works of art in the exhibition along with others were better viewed as clinical records or historical artefacts, but regardless of the quality of the work in the exhibition there was a unity of shared of trauma. Trauma shared across generations is the well documented by this exhibition.

Some of the works on exhibition are by trained artists. There is a great surreal photograph by Hedy Ritterman, who was the winner of the Linden Gallery's 2003 Hocking Stuart Award. And the central work by Michelle Fox, "People I should have known or should have known more" 2009, a mixed media installation, was a playful, child-like response to trauma. Fox's installation reminds the viewer of play is a thoughtful system that creates a magical substitute world. Fox has created a substitute extended family of dolls on a field of playing cards; small guidebooks provides details to the figures in this substitute world but the striking feature of these substitute people is that they are almost featureless and unknown.

There are plans to relocate the *Cunningham Dax Collection* to a purpose built gallery space in the Department of Neuroscience at Melbourne University's main campus in lat 2011.