

"I Myself Am Strange and Unusual": An exhibition review of "The World of Tim Burton"

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(Photography by Khadeejah Masud)

Spooky month is over, but as the Ghost of Halloween Past haunts our gloomy November nights, it's the perfect time to immerse yourself in the unique exhibition *The World of Tim Burton* on now at the Design Museum. Displaying over 600 items throughout his personal collection and his beloved fan favourites, *The World of Tim Burton* is an exceptional send-off to a decade-long world tour of memorabilia. It's both a debut and a swansong for Burton's UK fans, offering an intimate look into his evolution—from a suburban free-thinker to a visionary artist who has left a permanent mark of ingenuity on the creative world.

Central to Tim Burton's filmography is the unifying of the macabre and gothic with the mundane suburban landscape. This trademark aesthetic is seen in works like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Frankenweenie* (2012), and *Vincent* (1982). The exhibition begins by exploring where this signature style originates from, with overcast displays made of pastel-coloured acrylic panels showcasing some of the earliest moments of his artistic journey. It invites viewers to explore the "why" behind Burton's unique creative vision, starting with pieces from his childhood and early career. .

One of the most intriguing items in this section is '*The Giant Zlig*' , a children's book he'd created at the age of eighteen, and submitted to Disney. It's a fully illustrated, handwritten book that went unpublished, with characters in a much more whimsical, refined style that feels more akin to Dr Seuss or The Simpsons than Burton's usual loose, linear and creepy trademark. Among the items displayed is the handwritten letter Burton sent to Disney requesting publication. This piece captures the raw vulnerability of a young artist with an affinity to share stories, even if it took years for his underlying darker tone to be accepted by mainstream media.

Burton's early work reflects his beginnings as a junior animator, a period he later described as repetitive and creatively stifling — like “being strapped to a table all day.” The influence of 80s animation trends is evident in his early professional sketches, with their block colours and bold black outlines. However, his personal doodles retained the quirky, scrawling wit that defines his style today. Despite criticism from peers who called his work “unmarketable,” the exhibition reveals how Burton's confidence in his vision grew, even as he navigated challenges in this overwhelming industry.

The second phase of the exhibition plunges viewers into a darker labyrinth of displays, better reflecting the eerie nature of Burton's work. His ideas explode at you, with sketches, concept art and ideas, that seem so fleeting but often resurface to stimulate other projects. For instance, his “Blue Woman” sketch, a pin-up esque figure of a woman with blue skin and bright hair, becomes a recurring motif through characters like Emily (*Corpse Bride*) and Sally (*Nightmare Before Christmas*). What's especially moving is the lens of childhood that imbues his work. Burton draws on his memories with a balance of innocence and darkness, transforming them into monsters and macabre worlds with a softness many appreciate. The display speaks to the journey of an ‘Artist’ - how one's childhood experiences and imagination directly informs later works, like Burton's iconic Jack Skellington, whose inspiration came from a Halloween costume. Much of his avant-garde appeal comes from this dynamic relationship of the past, to creating something for the present moment.

This section of the exhibition also showcases the iconic puppets from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Corpse Bride* (2005), and *Frankenweenie* (2012). I noticed how visitors really flocked to these displays (me being one of them), just captivated by the intricate craftsmanship of stop-motion filmmaking. As someone who admires his work so much – the holistic vision of stop-motion; including set props, storyboards, and music sheets; I was really impressed by how this exhibition is as revealing of the process, the mechanics, behind the whimsy of his dark genius. It emphasises that this style is, in fact, calculated, and accomplished through collaborative efforts (as is all good work), with highlights from other artists like costume designer Colleen Atwood.

Without giving too much away, I was stunned to see some of these costumes in all their glory; it is a must-see for all fans curious about the overlap between art and technical craft.

As the exhibition nears its end, we see a more informal side to Burton, including large-scale oil paintings, poems, and quirky dioramas. One particularly fascinating section is an entire wall of random doodles on napkins, showing how the man's creative impulse knows no bounds. This part of the exhibition explores themes of alienation and dark humour, exemplified by characters like *Stainboy* and *Oyster Boy*. As an artist myself, I felt that the relationship of viewer to artist is more intimate here, because we see his art in a mass of volumes; wave after wave is teeming with sketchbooks and entire projects that were never released. They connect with people who have begun something and don't quite know where to take it – it provides hope to the aimless creative, and inspiration to the one who is dedicated to their craft.

This exhibition is a compelling testament to one man's journey, highlighting that redirection is always possible – it's not a linear exhibit, indicating that there is simply no straightforward path to achieving what you want. It showcases multiple things in this rather episodic way,

providing a rare glimpse into those early, unseen efforts as well as the final masterpieces. What makes *this* exhibition resonate deeply is its relatability—the long, uneven path of setbacks and breakthroughs that many face in pursuing their passions, especially in the creative field. There's an overwhelming sense of persistence that can be felt as you're walking through each room, something that drove Tim Burton's achievement of a rare and remarkable success. For Gen Z - a generation of young creatives, the exhibition is a timely reminder that success requires patience, resilience, and a commitment to personal vision. *The World of Tim Burton* is not just a homage to an extraordinary artist, but a call to those navigating their own creative paths.