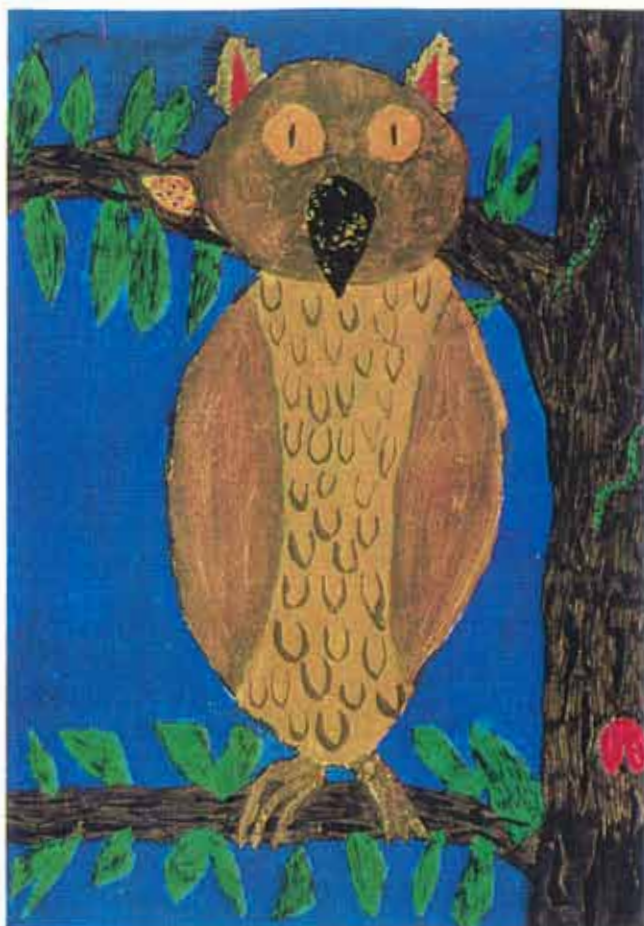


A museum of children's art in Oslo is currently exhibiting pictures of disasters seen through the eyes of kids.

BY TONY SAMSTAG

VISIONS OF YOUNG MASTERS

Owl, by Peter
Supthut, 10
years old,
Germany.



Innocent People
(previous page),
by Maria
Chriseri, 18,
Zimbabwe.
Back from the
Market
(opposite), by
Aura Gondy, 15,
Guatemala.



Swans on a Pond,
by Sylke Fedler, 9,
Germany.

Speaking to the man from the Smithsonian just last year, Rafael Goldin, founder of Oslo's unique International Museum of Children's Art, said of his collection: "Ninety percent of the works show the beauties of nature, and only ten percent show crisis and problems." His new exhibition, succinctly entitled "Disasters," redresses that imbalance.

That the learned American institution had come calling in the first place, in order to collect material for a 12-page rave review in its high-brow magazine of Goldin's "Louvre of children's art," believed to be the only museum of its kind in the world, was a tribute to the proprietor's persistence and flair for publicity. Another fine example is the "Disasters" exhibition itself, which will run for at least the rest of this year and is neatly timed to coincide with the fifth anniversaries of the museum and the Chernobyl disaster.

In an age of satellite television, when dreadful images of suffering and devastation flash across the globe and into our living rooms along with the weather and traffic reports, using the child-artist in this way was a clever idea—if only because such an exhibition neatly subverts, even as it throws into stark relief, the stereotyped image so beloved of charity fund-raisers: the suffering child-victim. But, above all, the "Disasters" exhibition has generated images that are not only thought-provoking but often, despite the macabre subject matter, quite beautiful in their own right.

A sprightly septuagenarian, Goldin is one of the legions of Soviet Jews in exile. Inevitably, given his strong ties to the Soviet Union, images of Chernobyl are heavily represented in the "Disasters" exhibition. Here, in possibly the most striking image of the exhibition, a teddy bear sits abandoned at a window in which Apocalypse is framed; there, forlorn humanoid figures in gas masks and protective clothing skulk wretchedly in a blasted wood. One spectacular

Floods in Indonesia and political repression in China

semi-abstract composition appears to show a flock of birds spiralling downwards to incandescent meltdown—or is it upwards, in flight, fleeing?

But Chernobyl is only the beginning. Thousands of entries from nearly 100 countries have been winnowed down to 500, commemorating a wide range of tragedies with appropriate gravity and style.

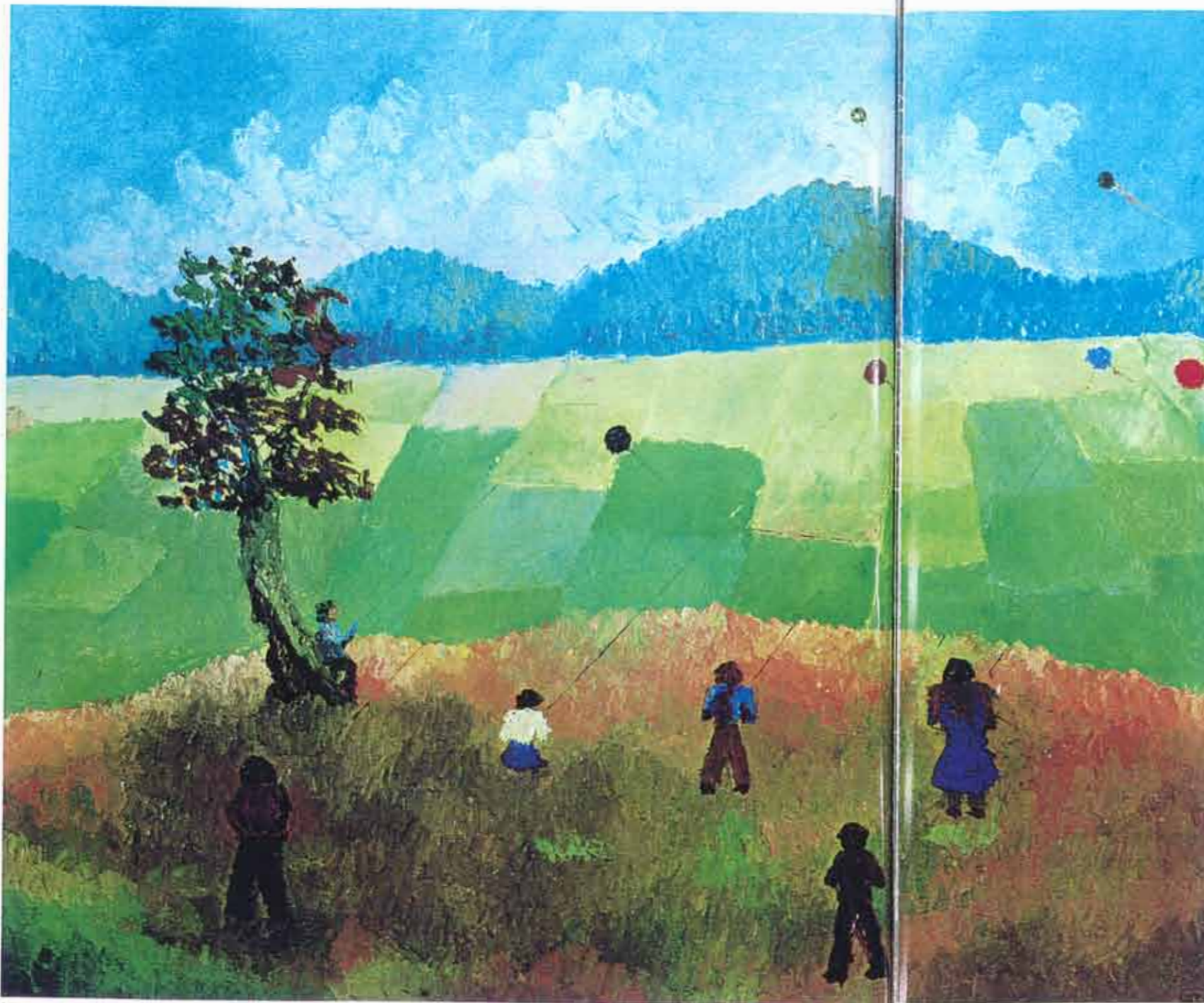
There are floods in Indonesia and political repression in China; a building on fire in an Indian city and an earthquake in Armenia; a haunting group portrait by an 18-year-old from Zimbabwe, entitled cryptically *Innocent People*; and a multi-storey *House of Catastrophe* painted by a Chilean collective of eight-year-olds, portraying a different disaster on every floor. And almost everywhere, it seems, there is war.

Making the selection was hard work, Goldin says, because at least 50 percent of the works rejected for

reasons of space could, as he puts it, "have gone straight on to the wall." There has been a lot of travel involved: during the past year or two he and his wife Alla have visited, in addition to the USSR and the former Eastern Europe; India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Mexico, Peru, Brazil and half a dozen African countries. Almost everywhere, however appalling the conditions they were enduring or the misery they were recording, the children managed to respond creatively. The few chilling exceptions were areas of total famine, where, past a certain point, the artistic impulse was apparently extinguished.

Curiously, the overall impact of

Pastoral, by Sergio Gomez, 15, Guatemala.



Sensible Ecology, by Diana Lechter, 15, U.S.S.R.

It's Raining,
by Simo H., 9,
Finland.



The power, variety and quality of the works are powerful eye-openers

"Disasters" is not so different from that of the permanent collection. The power, variety and quality of the works on display add up, as intended, to a powerful eye-opener. Adult visitors to the museum tend to carry away a sense of awe at the technical accomplishment of these child-artists, and at the "mature" emotional content of much of their work, more than 100,000 items from 150 countries altogether. Many of us have tasted this sort of thing on Unicef greeting cards; in fact, the United Nations children's agency has chosen many of its recent designs from the mu-

seum. But even the most superficial browse suggests that Unicef is not the last word in children's art.

Logically enough, the museum is heavily involved in elementary educational pursuits of one kind or another. Local school parties make up a large proportion of the tens of thousands of visitors annually.

Some pictures, such as those from Guatemala, offer instructive insights even for adults: the children there, apparently instinctively, have developed a surrealistic style worthy of the adult masters of Surrealism earlier this century. One of the several enthusiastic young staff members explained that their Mayan heritage means the Guatemalan children see and portray time as a dimension of its own, which is why motorcars, for example, are made to float in the sky over a "timeless" primitive landscape, and why these children's use of perspective is almost

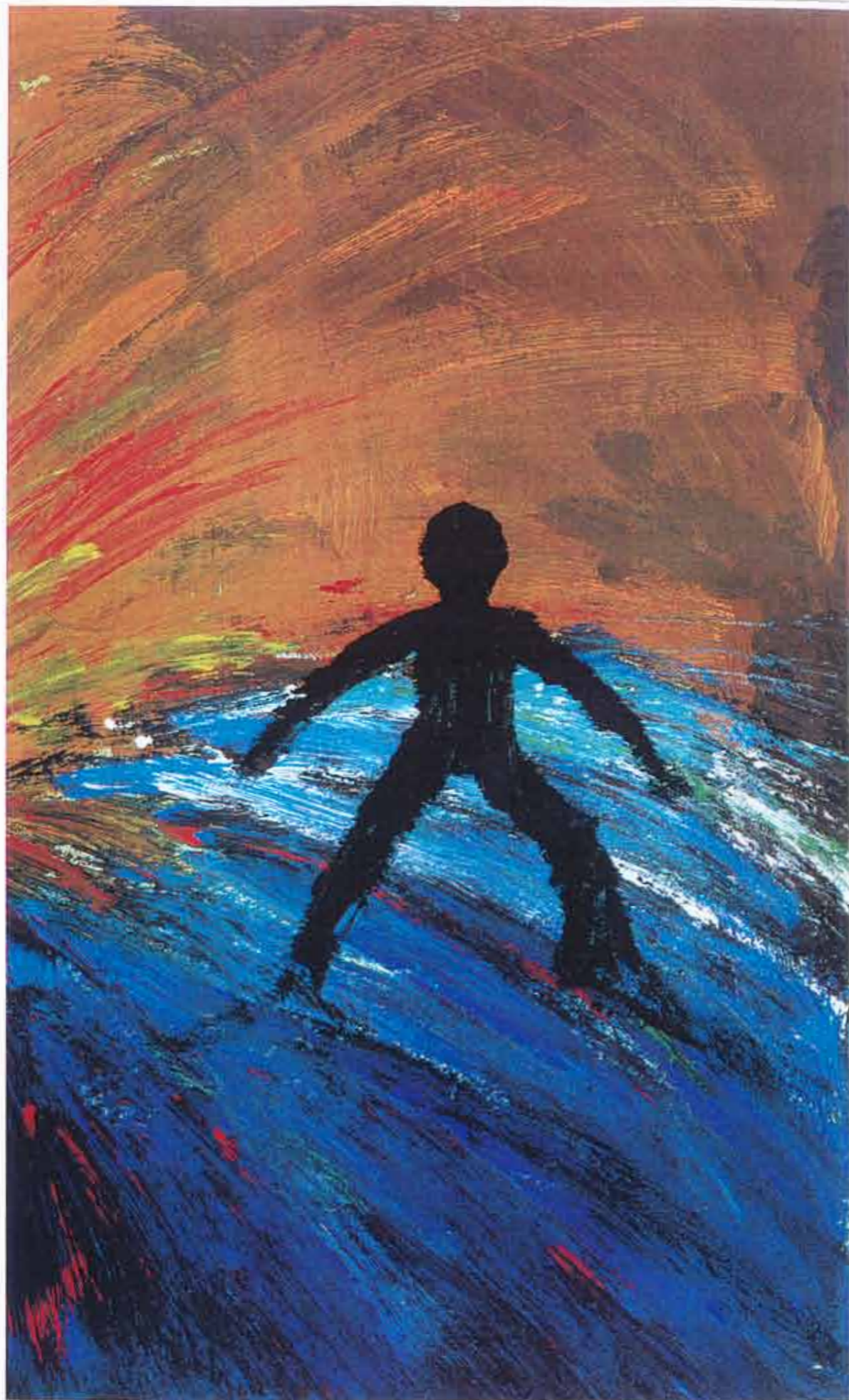
always disturbing to the European eye.

There can be, by definition, no such thing as an "old master" in such a collection, although there is at least one reasonably famous name represented by a landscape painted when the artist was 14. He is Kjetil Harket, younger brother of Morten, the leader of "A-ha," Norway's popular music group. At the other extreme, there is a portrait by a three-year-old Chinese girl, whose technical proficiency is enough to make you wonder what we really mean by "art."

Children's art is naturally a multi-media event in which unexpected combinations of the animal, vegetable and mineral tend to jump off the walls (or wherever) and hit you right between the eyes. In Goldin's museum, possibly the only one in the world where visitors are not forbidden to touch the exhibits, paintings and graphics may predomi-

At the
Crossroads, by
Lars Mannsåker,
15, Norway.





On the Way,
by Heidi, 14,
Norway.

There are fears that there soon could be an international market

nate; but there are also ceramics, bas-reliefs, sculptures, textiles, collages, stuffed animals, puppets and dolls, often sprawled in inviting heaps here and there throughout the rambling wooden building. All these works are attractive, and many of them are astonishing.

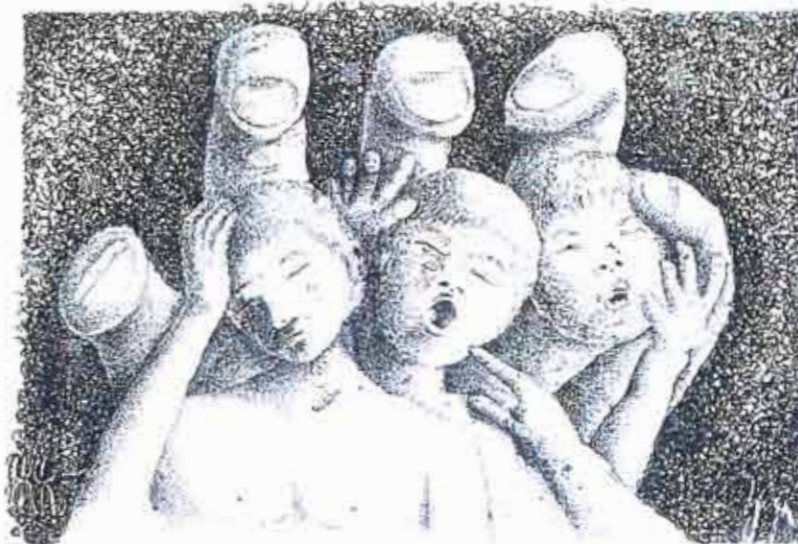
Neither Goldin nor any of the staff are keen to discuss children's art in terms of monetary or investment value. There appears to be no international market as yet, although all concerned fear there might be soon. Meanwhile, Goldin concedes reluctantly that the pictures are insured for about \$1.5 million. If he could afford the premiums, he insists, we would be talking billions.

The International Museum of Children's Art

Lille Frøens vei 4, 0369 Oslo 3, Norway. Tel. 46 8573. Opening hours vary according to the time of year; the museum is always closed on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays, and from August 16 to September 9.



Family, by
E. Hogset, 14,
Norway.



A Cry for
Freedom, Lin
Yuyu, 17, U.S.A.

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