On the Margins, but Moving Toward the Center

Outsider Art Fair Evolves, but Holds Fast to Its Roots

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By Martha Schwendener

Outsider art has changed significantly over the last decade. Where it used to come with a story and a diagnosis (the work was found in an attic or a Dumpster and made by a person with schizophrenia), it has now been included in the 2013 Venice Biennale, Rosemarie Trockel’s 2012 retrospective at the New Museum and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. Quibbles over whether it should be called outsider, folk or self-taught are less prominent, and there has been somewhat of a shift to supporting living artists.

For instance, the current Outsider Art Fair includes five art therapy centers among its 50 exhibitors. The best-known, Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, Calif., is showing a sculpture by Judith Scott (who died in 2005, and made work at the Center). Her cocoonlike pieces are on view at the Brooklyn Museum, too. The fair is also showing several skeinlike drawings by Dan Miller, whose art was acquired by MoMA. Both use an abstract idiom, demonstrating how so-called outsider trends often echo “insider” ones.

Henry Darger, one of the best-known American outsider artists, created collages in a Pop Art vein, cutting images out of coloring books, which resonated with viewers when they were discovered after his death in the 1970s. His works are on view via the Chicago gallery Carl Hammer.

The other therapy centers are Fountain Gallery, which is exhibiting bold geometric and erotic pen drawings by Anthony Ballard; the Gallery at HAI (Healing Arts Initiative) in Long Island City, Queens; Een Nieuwe Wind in Goes in the Netherlands; and Pure Vision of Manhattan.

Beyond this is a vivid range of work by self-taught artists from around the world, more plentiful than in prior years. One of the most amazing displays is of seven Czech artists at Cavin-Morris. They work mostly on paper, drawing abstract, mystical and botanically inspired designs. (Art by one of them, Anna Zemankova, was in the 2013 Venice Biennale.) Abstract pen drawings by Yuichi Saito are at Yukiko Koide. Manuel Lanca Bonifacio, a Portuguese artist in Britain who won an Outside In award in England in 2012 (yes, now there are outsider art awards), makes floating, figurative works, at Henry Boxer.
Some of the Haitian art collection of Jonathan Demme, the filmmaker, is on view at Arte del Pueblo. Andrew Edlin, the fair’s organizer, is showing the architectural works of Marcel Storr, a French street sweeper, at his gallery’s space. The Parisian dealer Hervé Perdriolle has works from India, and Galeria Estação from São Paulo has more standouts: Minimalist paintings of trucks by Alcides Pereira dos Santos, who was also a shoemaker, barber and stonemason.

Artists from the American South continue to play a prominent role. The Metropolitan Museum is adding 57 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is devoted to self-taught African-American artists, to its collection, and exhibiting them next year. From rural northern Mississippi, Will Branch and Emitte Hych are represented by bright figurative paintings at Pardee. At Shrine are sheet-metal and wood sculptures by the Rev. George Kornegay, an Alabama artist who makes outdoor environments. Arte del Pueblo is showing Minnie Evans’s crayon and graphite works from the 1940s. Ms. Evans lived in Wilmington, N.C., and was inspired partly by Airlie Gardens, where she worked as a gatekeeper.

Mary Whitfield, based in Birmingham, Ala., has paintings at Galerie Bonheur that depict violent scenes of lynchings and one of women, “Fleeing Darfur” (2006). Bruce Davenport Jr. is a New Orleans artist who draws marching bands in formation; his work is at Louis B. James. The art of T. A. Hay, a farmer from Kentucky who painted paper and gourds with brown shoe polish, is on view at Tanner-Hill. And from farther west is the work of Daniel Martin Diaz of Arizona, whose alchemic, cartoonlike drawings reveal his Mexican-American and Roman Catholic upbringing, at American Primitive Gallery.

This year’s fair includes a mini-exhibition, organized by Anne Doran and Jay Gorney, titled after the blues song “If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day,” by Robert Johnson. It displays pieces by a mysterious unknown, the Philadelphia Wireman — believed to be deceased — who made little sculptures, not unlike Ms. Scott’s, from wrapped, found materials; they were discovered abandoned in an alley. There are also entertaining oddities, like the vernacular photographs — police lineups, circus freaks, dental close-ups — at Winter Works on Paper of Brooklyn.

Despite many changes in the outsider world, diagnosis still reigns. You’re often told, when you inquire about artists, that they were autistic, schizophrenic or developmentally disabled. It makes you wonder what it would be like to be given the same information at other art fairs: about the artist’s depression, alcoholism or obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Perhaps as outsider and insider worlds continue to merge, we will see more nuance on that front: a Spectrum Fair, for those not flagrantly anything, but on the spectrum.