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Art in Review

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'The Outsider Art Fair' The Puck Building Lafayette and Houston Streets SoHo Through Sunday

Outsider art is a somewhat vague, catchall term for self-taught artists of any kind. Its exact borders are frequently debated, but generally it includes art made by patients in mental hospitals, by recluses, naives and visionaries, by rural laborers saying they receive instructions from God, by suddenly creative retirees. In the near future, it may come to include art made by people in prisons. It has its share of true geniuses, like Adolf Wolfli, Martin Ramirez, Henry Darger and Bill Traylor. It has its own history, which stretches back to the late 19th century and regularly intersects with the development of modern art. In addition, as one of the fastest-growing areas of the art world in terms of interest, knowledge and (of course) marketing, outsider art also has its own fledgling art fair.

The second incarnation of this event, on view through the weekend at the Puck Building in SoHo, is higher in quality than last year's effort. It is an excellent place to immerse oneself in the formal exuberance, the fierce emotion, the technical inventiveness and the sheer, unmanageable variety of outsider art, and to learn something of its past, its present and possibly its future.

A sense of history is especially strong at the Phyllis Kind Gallery's booth, where an excellent selection of American and European outsider art includes several works by Gaston Chassaic of France, whose harlequinesque figures influenced Jean Dubuffet, as well as work by Wolfli, Ramirez, Darger and the visionary landscapist P. M. Wentworth. For more Darger, visit the impressive display of the Carl Hammer Gallery, and two more Wentworths can be seen at Janet Fleisher's booth. Galerie St.-Etienne's wide-ranging selection includes three unusually small, charming paintings

by Anna Mary Robertson (Grandma) Moses, as well as a rare example of the embroidered images she made before arthritis forced her to lay down needle and thread and pick up a paintbrush.

At Cavin-Morris, there is an outstanding drawing of a mule by Traylor, whose work is especially plentiful throughout the fair, as well as drawings and paintings by Thornton Dial and Sam Doyle, Southern black outsiders of considerable repute. Other Southern outsiders, whose work appears in several booths, are Jimmie Sudduth, Purvis Young, David Butler and Lonnie Holley. The painter Jon Serl, a recluse who lived in Southern California, also crops up several times, most impressively at the Jamison/Thomas booth, which has a beautiful nocturne by the artist.

European outsiders to keep an eye out for are Johann Hauser at Galerie Heike Curtze, and Christiane Alanore at Galerie Susi Bonner of Zurich. Henry Boxer, a dealer from London, has several haunting little ink drawings of women by the English outsider Madge Gill.

This account merely scratches the surface of a vast and appealing trove of artworks, where there is something to fall in love with around nearly every corner.