

# The New York Times

## Arts

ART REVIEW

### ART REVIEW; Of Signs and Wonders, Visionaries and Loners

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It is not usually much fun to be an outsider, excluded from what people in the know are thinking and doing. Maybe that's why the romantic fantasy of the heroic outsider has become so popular. Free from the orthodox rules that professional insiders follow to move past the velvet ropes, the outsider seems to possess a more authentic personality, a bigger and more unpredictable imagination. As most people are destined to be outsiders to some extent -- even insiders feel like outsiders much of the time -- it's comforting to think that there are creative and spiritual advantages to living outside the psychic beltway.

The enjoyment of this fantasy is nourished by seeing that some great art has been produced by real Outsiders, as you may discover this weekend at the 12th annual Outsider Art Fair. At the Puck Building in SoHo, 32 dealers are presenting works by artists who for one reason or another have worked in isolation from the educational and professional networks that conventionally form and sustain visual artists.

This year's show is, as usual, a mixed affair. It includes artists who are indisputably great by any standard: Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez and Adolph Wölfli, to name three of the best. And there are lots of interesting artists who have not yet crossed over into the popular consciousness. But it also includes works of dubious authenticity, bordering on kitsch: faux-folk art, pseudo-primitivist pieces, funky illustrations and decorative objects by people who seem to be more eccentric

hobbyists than genuine outsiders. With each passing year the fair does a better job of filtering out such material, but there is still room for improvement.

When it comes to the real thing, we are not talking about thrift-shop art. In Darger's panoramic visions of little girls in landscapes of pastoral beauty and terrible violence -- excellent examples are at Carl Hammer and Galerie St. Etienne -- you recognize the work of an artist who is extraordinarily inventive, daring and accomplished, formally and technically.

There is also the uncanny feeling of being in contact with a whole other psychic planet. The word visionary is overused in writing about this genre, but it is hard to think of a better term to describe the receptivity to intensely experienced and highly coherent intuitions that you sense in the most exciting Outsider Art.

Though the visionary is often realized in flamboyant pictorial terms -- as in the phosphorescently glowing Biblical illustrations by the Rev. McKendree Robbins Long at Luise Ross -- it does not have to be. Note, for example, the small, heavily worked single-color drawings of Melvin Way at Norman Brosterman's booth, which contain hardly any visual images.

Discovered through a New York City art program for the homeless, the self-taught Mr. Way produces congested fields of scientific signs, symbols and words. He carries them around with him and often wraps them in cellophane tape, so they have a well-worn quality, as if they were the working notes of a mathematician or a scientist. It's unlikely that anyone other than Mr. Way could make sense of his diagrams, but you get the feeling that he is not just making stuff up -- it's as if he is taking dictation from some extraterrestrial intelligence.

With some outsiders, it is not necessarily clear that they think that what they are making is art. Take, for example, Emery Blagdon, who is represented by a teasingly small number of works at Cavin-Morris. Working in a small shed in rural Nebraska until he died in 1986 at 78, Blagdon produced what he thought of as healing machinery: complicated wire constructions like bird cages or the skeletons of fanciful hats. He also made colorful paintings that look like abstractions by a Modernist with spiritual inclinations, like Forrest Bess or Alfred Jensen.

The energies exuded by these works may be mainly aesthetic for today's viewers, but knowing that Blagdon intended them as generators of electrical and medicinal forces adds something to their excitement.

But an outsider's concerns do not have to be exotic to be interesting. The subjects of drawings by the reclusive Pennsylvanian Pearl Blauvelt, at K. S. Art, are exceedingly mundane. Working with pencil and a tenderly assiduous touch on lined notebook paper, paper bags or envelopes, Blauvelt made orderly, childlike pictures of clothing, fabric samples, furniture and houses. She also made fanciful pieces of currency, like the \$125 bill displayed here, but most of the things she drew were far from otherworldly. Yet she gave them a poetic mystery that makes it seem as if she lived in an enchanted world.

Not everybody likes the term "outsider"; one reason is that it suggests that the artist is an alienated loner. At least two artists at the fair would seem to be the opposite of socially isolated. One is Lorraine Pettway, a member of the thriving quilt-making community of Gees Bend, Ala., that was featured in a recent popular traveling exhibition. A quilt of blue and black striped blocks by Ms. Pettway at Russell Bowman looks as if it could have been designed by Sol LeWitt.

Another is Sam Doyle, who lived on St. Helena's Island in South Carolina from 1906 to 1985. Doyle, whose works are featured at Ricco/Maresca and several other galleries at the fair, painted on discarded building materials. He made energetically crude pictures of entertainers, sports stars and local residents, like the island's first black dry cleaner, and he displayed his paintings outside his house for public consumption.

Though far removed from the mandarin art worlds of New York and other urban centers, artists like Doyle and Ms. Pettway may be deeply connected within their own communities. They might be better classified as folk artists. Or should all such potentially prejudicial terms be eliminated? In its haphazardly opportunistic way, the Outsider Art Fair throws up for debate all the usual categories for sorting art and artists. In one way or another, we are all both insiders and outsiders.

The Outsider Art Fair remains at the Puck Building, at Houston and Lafayette Streets in SoHo, through Sunday. Hours: today, noon to 8 p.m.; tomorrow, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission: \$15. Information: (212) 777-5218.