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ART REVIEW

No More on the Outside Looking In 'Great and Mighty Things,' at the Philadelphia Museum of Art



Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

Great and Mighty Things Works by Howard Finster at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. [More Photos »](#)

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

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PHILADELPHIA — Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz are doing a great thing for the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and for the rest of us too. They are planning to bestow upon it their beloved, finely calibrated collection of 20th-century American outsider art.

The museum is celebrating its good fortune with “**Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art From the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection**,” an exhilarating exhibition accompanied by an exceptional catalog. Both have been assembled by Ann Percy, the museum’s curator of drawings, in collaboration with Cara Zimmerman, executive director of the Foundation for Self-Taught Artists in Philadelphia.

The Bonovitz collection, formed over 30 years by Mr. Bonovitz, a lawyer in Philadelphia, and his wife, a ceramic artist, is widely acknowledged as outstanding in outsider circles. It will add to the museum’s already substantial holdings in this area with around 200 generally superb paintings, sculptures, drawings and assemblages, made mostly from the 1930s to the 1980s by 27 of the self-taught, often socially marginalized artists typically massed beneath the outsider banner.

It includes clusters of works by giants like Martin Ramirez, Bill Traylor, James Castle, Joseph Yoakum and William Edmondson, as well as more obscure figures like Consuelo González Amezcua, Bruno Del Favero and Miles B. Carpenter. In between are familiar artists whose stature grows in light of the selections here, one being Felipe Benito Archuleta, the New Mexican sculptor of animals. His carved and painted half-size mule and donkey, especially, achieve some kind of four-legged sublime of sensitively modulated form, color and expression.

Other American museums have received caches of outsider art, among them the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington and the Milwaukee Art Museum, albeit usually folded into donations of folk art. But the Bonovitz gift, whose focus is entirely on 20th-century American outsiders, is especially high-profile because it is going to a major encyclopedic museum, and an East Coast one at that. This prominence could have a ripple effect at other institutions of its scale. Time will tell.

Still, the show itself belongs to a breakout moment for outsider art, and its increasing infiltration, or dissolution, of the mainstream. In January the 20-year-old Outsider Art Fair, so crucial in bringing this work to wider attention, moved to Chelsea in revitalized form, as if challenging insider art on its own turf. An unprecedented number of outsider artists will appear at this year's Venice Biennale, featured in "The Encyclopedic Palace," the central exhibition being organized by the biennale's commissioner, Massimiliano Gioni, chief curator of the New Museum in New York.

And Mr. Gioni is only the youngest among the museum curators and directors who have persistently advocated for outsider art's importance in monographic and group shows large and small. They include Matthew Higgs of White Columns, the New York alternative space; Lawrence Rinder of the Berkeley Art Museum; and Ralph Rugoff of the Hayward Gallery in London, whose own exhibition of insiders and outsiders, "The Alternative Guide to the Universe," will open the week after Venice.

But exhibitions are only part of it. When the collection comes permanently to the museum, a big test will be how it is integrated with insider art, although, with any luck, the very distinction will have atrophied. As if anticipating the probability, the overall look of the show is classic, white-cube elegant. The works of each artist are grouped together, often in separate alcoves or galleries. A series of square enclosures built through the center of the museum's big temporary-exhibition space creates the effect of a traditional enfilade of doorways. It's faux-magisterial, a challenge that seems to say: "See? This stuff belongs in your vaunted halls of culture as much as anything else. Make way."

To a man, and a woman, the artists in the Bonovitz collection all made some form of magic whose power and urgency throw down a gauntlet, especially considering much of what passes for contemporary art these days. Sometimes they responded to their everyday surroundings. That's the case with the shadowy drawings and angular constructions fashioned from soot, spit, string and cardboard with which Castle, who could neither hear nor speak, recorded the rough life on his family's farm in rural Idaho. It's also true of the sharp, prancing silhouettes with which Traylor expressed his amusement at the human comedy of African-American life in the South.

Sometimes they were driven to make some form of religious fervor visually manifest, as with the paintings and illustrated Scriptures of Sister Gertrude Morgan of New Orleans, or the extravagant glossolalia of the Rev. Howard Finster of Pennville, Ga., who seems never to have met an art medium or a Bible passage that he did not like.

Some artists achieved greatness simply by being artisans, like Edmondson, whose carved limestone graveyard memorials and headstones have turned out to be among the best sculpture — and certainly the best religious sculpture — of the 20th century. However their creations came into being, they confirm that the call to art is everywhere, widespread almost beyond comprehension, certainly beyond the borders of even the most elastic notion of an art world.

Despite the drivenness of the artworks here, there's an unhurried, organic tone to the collection itself, a confident individuality unusual at a time when so many collectors, at least of contemporary art, seem to use the same shopping list of acceptable brands and trophies.

Canonical artists — Traylor, Ramirez, Edmondson and Castle — are present, and look formidable, but another Olympian, the Chicago recluse Henry Darger, is missing. Apparently Darger's art left the Bonovitzes cold. Instead the underappreciated California desert eccentric Jon Serl is represented by seven boisterous paintings of rubbery dancers, musicians, birds and other beings, and a room is reserved for the often reticent images of Lee Godie, another Chicagoan, who depicted birds and flowers on old window shades with ballpoint pens and touches of color.

The obsessive polymath Eugene Von Bruenchenhein is known for photographing his wife in scanty tropical pinup attire and for fiery little abstract paintings. But the Bonovitzes responded only to his quirky sculptural genius, as attested by a large group of his delicate ceramic chalices, crowns and flowers and some startling little thrones made of chicken bones.

The collectors had no qualms about representing an artist by one or two outstanding works. A notable example is Simon Sparrow, born in West Africa and partly raised on an American Indian reservation. His lifelong determination to be an artist suffered numerous interruptions but culminated in large, opulent reliefs densely layered with glass beads, found objects and trinkets, arranged in faces and religious symbols. There are two to marvel at here, operating in the gap between Byzantine mosaics and voodoo banners.

Helpful wall texts encapsulate each artist's circumstances and inspirations, the onset of art making and the path to discovery by the larger world. And the label for each work meticulously lists each discernible material that is part of its makeup, the outcome of seemingly microscopic scrutiny and analysis by the museum's conservators. This creates an increasingly dizzying sense of physical resourcefulness, inspired repurposing and gritty determination. (And it's not only informative to read, for example, the list of the elements in Sparrow's reliefs, it also helps you see them.)

Such attention is paralleled by the catalog's beautiful reproductions, which picture every work in the show, nearly all of them newly taken by Will Brown, the Philadelphia photographer. When I first walked into the show, I thought the artworks seemed slightly denatured by the whiteness and formality of their setting, but the longer I looked and read and looked again, the more alive and turbulent they became. Soon it seemed that the Bonovitz collection had not so much been bestowed upon the Philadelphia Museum of Art as unleashed.

"Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art From the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection" is on view through June 9 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia; (215) 763-8100, philamuseum.org.