

BEYOND CATEGORY

Collectors eager for the unconventional and affordable pack the Outsider Art Fair

BY ALANNA MARTINEZ

THE OUTSIDER ART FAIR IS NOT MOST ART FAIRS. Its featured artists, mostly self-taught, are far from media darlings, the galleries are not quite Gagosian-size behemoths—although the fair does now have an annual Parisian counterpart—and generally speaking, prices remain well within the reach of aspiring collectors. Twenty-three years in, it remains an event primarily for discerning eyes, not just padded wallets.

“Every other mainstream fair treads on the same ground—the contemporary dialogue,” maintained dealer Andrew Edlin, whose company Wide Open Arts runs the OAF. “You see most of the same kind of art and artists in all of them. At OAF, you see things you simply can’t see at any other fair.”

That said, Outsider art—which has a rather broad definition—is definitely having a bit of a moment in the “mainstream” fine art world. The OAF opened its doors last week at its new home, Metropolitan Pavilion in the Flatiron District, and while the one-floor layout is easier to navigate than its previous home in Chelsea’s Center548, the Observer still had to throw a few elbows as we made our way through the show floor.

Adding to the buzz was speculation that William Edmondson’s 1936 stone sculpture *Boxer* might break a record at Christie’s, and sure enough on Friday it fetched \$785,000 at the house’s first dedicated Outsider auction in a decade. Long revered in the Outsider art world, Edmondson was the first African-American to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1937.

Meanwhile, back at the Pavilion, more than 60 international exhibitors—from well-known returning galleries such as New York’s Hirsch & Adler to newcomers like Paris’ Galerie Anne De Villepoix—packed their booths with delightfully unclassifiable painting, sculpture, ceramics, woven textiles, drawing, and artwork.

And the crowd—organizers counted twice as many attendees than at its preview as in 2015—seemed eager to discover the next Edmondson. One candidate was Tizzie Mills, whose comic book-inspired work could be found at New Haven’s Fred Giampietro gallery. Mr. Mills is a homeless New Haven local who visits the gallery daily, owner Fred Giampietro told the Observer. He paints superheroes and villains—from Deadpool to Batman and the Joker—softly creating shadow and edging with feathered strokes and thickly building up texture on the

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CASEY KELBAUGH



ALANNA MARTINEZ/NEW YORK OBSERVER

Top: Visitors check out the offerings at the Outsider Art Fair. Above: Tizzie Mills’ painting *RedHood* (2015).

surfaces of walls and buildings. He also uses text, in the form of riffs on comic-strip dialogue. Because Mr. Mills’ works are so new, they’re also relatively affordable (\$650 each).

Tokyo dealer Yukiko Koide showed work by Japanese artist Yasuyuki Ueno, an autistic man whose colored-pencil drawings are inspired by women in fashion magazines. Mr. Ueno’s compositions, priced \$1,500 to \$1,800, are arranged similarly to a comic-book grid, with panels of varying sizes, decorative borders and patterns.

Another booth housed Los Angeles’ Good Luck Gallery, which attracted contemporary dealers like Bill Powers (Half Gallery) and Jeanne Greenberg-Rohatyn (Salon 94), who swung by to check out the debut of Southern

sculptor Willard Hill. The octogenarian Manchester, Tenn., native crafts delicate figurines and playful tableaux made from painted masking tape and other found household items, such as foil or pieces of his wife’s wig. Mr. Hill works so quickly, according to gallery owner Paige Wery, that his creations completely fill the tiny studio behind his home.

He clearly won some fans. “For me to be a new gallery, and for people to come over and check out my stuff—other dealers came over and bought work—that’s unusual,” said Ms. Wery.

Like many Outsider artists, many of whom toil in obscurity, Mr. Hill lives a simple life, noted Good Luck’s Winter Jessen. “He fishes and he makes art. That’s all he does.” ■