

The New York Times

At the Outsider Art
Fair, the Creative Impulse
Is in Its Raw Glory

By **KEN JOHNSON** JAN. 21, 2016
Is outsider art going mainstream?



Work by Annette Barcelo at Gallerie Anne de Villepoix, part of the Outsider Art Fair. Credit Linda Rosier for The New York Times

It is a big weekend for outsider art. On Friday, Christie's is offering the first major New York auction of self-taught art in many a year, calling it "[Liberation Through Expression: Outsider and Vernacular Art.](#)" It includes works by many of the most revered names in the field, including Bill Traylor, Martín Ramírez, William Hawkins and James Castle. And on Thursday, the [Outsider Art Fair](#) opened in the Metropolitan Pavilion on West 18th Street, a gathering of 64 dealers, including folk and vernacular art.

Is outsider art [going mainstream](#), as some observers think — and as many others believe it should? Certainly it's been receiving a lot of attention in

recent years. The Massimiliano Gioni's inclusion of outsider art in the [2013 Venice Biennale](#) was widely read as an indicator of the category's rise in prestige, an evolution that's been going on since the early 20th century, when artists like Max Ernst took an interest.

The persistence of the Outsider Art Fair, in its 24th year, reflects a certain paradox that has defined the field. On the one hand, it's based on artists who are not only self-taught but also wired differently than most people and, in their creative expressions, are freer of certain social expectations and inhibitions than conventionally trained professionals. On the other hand, some advocates think outsider art should be judged more by the aesthetic qualities of the work than by the biography and supposed psychic makeup of the artist. If this latter, formalist view were to prevail, then the field of outsider art would dissolve into the mainstream, becoming just another dimension of modern art history.

For now, while it is better organized and curated than ever, the fair retains its original identity and its considerable appeal as a showcase for offbeat, sometimes hair-raisingly weird art. Great, previously undiscovered outsiders don't come along very often, so there is not as much turnover as there is in contemporary art fairs. This year, as every year, works by perennials like Henry Darger are in many booths. But viewers also are bound to happen upon wonderful works by artists not so well known. Here are some:

American Primitive

With its satanic serpent in the form of a human female with a snake's tail coiling around the central Tree of Knowledge, this marble triptych envisioning the Garden of Eden was created in 1937 by an American sculptor unknown except for the initials HD carved in the left slab's lower left corner.



Garden of Eden carving by an artist known as HD. Credit American Primitive

Carl Hammer

Another rendering of the biblical Paradise, this one was carved in wood by the folk sculptor [Edgar Tolson](#) in 1976. With its chunky, doll-like representations of Adam and Eve and its black snake in a neatly constructed tree, it gives the story of the original sin a delightful, comical spin



Another Eden work, by Edgar Tolson. Credit Carl Hammer

Andrew Edlin

The proprietor of a New Jersey junkyard, [Albert Hoffman](#) was also a prolific wood sculptor. A scaly, winged “Dragon,” carved in 1976 from a piece of spruce more than four feet long, looks as though it’s about to leap off its pedestal.



Albert Hoffman’s “Dragon.” Credit Andrew Edlin Gallery

Fleisher Ollman

Born in Cuba and a cigar roller by trade, [Felipe Jesus Consalvos](#) produced extraordinarily complex collages using cigar bands, liquor bottle labels, anatomical illustrations and cut-up paper money between the 1920s and 1950s while living in Miami, New York and Philadelphia. Nearly five feet high, “You Can’t Forget” is typical of his mystically suggestive profusion of imagery and pattern



Felipe Jesus Consalvos, “You Can’t Forget.” Credit Fleisher Ollman

Ricco Maresca

A [calendrical savant](#), George Widener makes complex grid-based compositions involving numerical systems that probably only he fully understands. “Cipher A-Z” (2015) has something to do with artificial intelligence. Also on view is a painting about the genome editing technology known as [CRISPR](#).



George Widener's "Cipher A-Z" (2015). Credit Ricco Maresca Gallery

James Fuentes

A musician as well as a sculptor, [Lonnie Holley](#) creates assemblages out of found materials that symbolize his life experiences in viscerally concrete terms. In “Mama and Papa’s Blood” (2007), a red-stained rag that is draped over a bent metal grid alludes to a history of familial violence.

Lonnie Holley, “Mama and Papa’s Blood.” Credit Souls Grown Deep Foundation and James Fuentes, NY



Shrine

Despite being blinded in a childhood

accident, [Hawkins](#)

[Bolden](#) (1914-2005) was a prolific maker of items like toys and kites for young

relatives. For his garden, he created hundreds of scarecrows — totemlike assemblages made of found junk that have a haunting vitality.

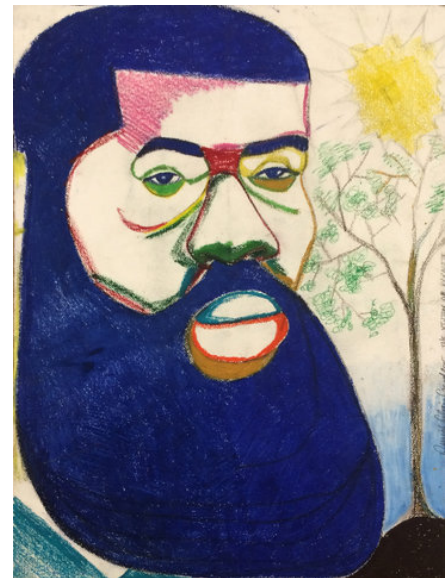


Constructions by Hawkins Bolden at the Outsider Art Fair. Credit Linda Rosier for The New York Times

The Gallery at HAI

Intriguing artists regularly emerge from art therapy programs like those operated at the [Healing Arts Initiative's gallery and studio](#) in Long Island City, Queens. [Derrick Alexis Coard](#) is a notable example. He specializes in drawing heads of men with full

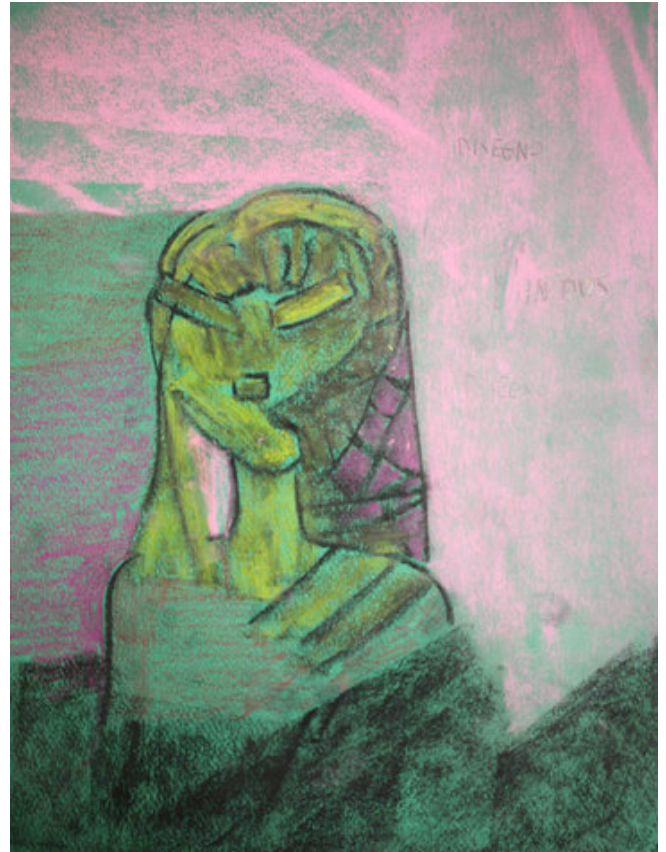
beards who resemble Old Testament-style prophets. With its red flame burning over its subject's head, "The Raptures in the Mind" could be a psychological self-portrait.



"Visions of Paradise" by Derrick Alexis Coard. Credit The Gallery at HAI

Chris Byrne

[Alessandra Michelangelo](#) (1961-2009) found her artistic calling at a workshop in Livorno, Italy. During her last decade, she created works on paper of remarkable visual sophistication with a deft touch. With its slightly dissonant colors of green, pink and black, a chalk drawing of a woman's head from 2008 is a marvel of formal and psychological concentration.



A drawing by Alessandra Michelangelo. CreditChris Byrne

Ionel Talpazan

A noncommercial booth at the fair presents a memorial show of works by [Ionel Talpazan](#), an artist obsessed with flying saucers who died last year. “U.F.O. Diagram” (1997) depicts the inner architecture of an extraterrestrial spaceship with terrific verve.



Ionel Talpazan's “UFO Diagram” (1997).
CreditStan Schnier, American Primitive