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SPEAKEASY

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David Byrne on His Outsider Art Collection

By ELLEN GAMERMAN



David Byrne — Getty Images

Outsider art often comes from obscurity. The same cannot be said for its admirers.

Collectors of this work by self-taught artists—pieces known for their blunt expressiveness and raw power—include film directors, artists, athletes and actors. Among the most devoted: musician David Byrne.

With the Outsider Art Fair kicking off in New York this week, the former Talking Heads frontman answered by email five questions about his trove of works:

Related article: [An Inside Guide to Outside Art](#)

How long have you been collecting outsider art, and what draws you to this genre?

I bought some [Henry] Dargers, [Joseph] Yoakums and [Howard] Finsters—I think it was very early 80s. I had read the existing books on Outsider art or Art Brut. I found the work hugely inspiring—straight from the dark twisted heart that we all share. By the mid-80s I commissioned Howard Finster to do a record cover for Talking Heads.

About Speakeasy

Speakeasy is a blog covering media, entertainment, celebrity and the arts. The publication is produced by [Barbara Chai](#) and Jonathan Welsh with contributions from the Wall Street Journal staff and others. Write to us at speakeasy@wsj.com or follow us on Twitter at [@WSJSpeakeasy](#) or individually [@barbarachai](#).

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Is there an outsider artist whose personal story has stayed with you?

All artists have stories, but this opens up the question: "Is biography relevant to enjoying or understanding an artist's work?" Tricky issue. Many times I think not—at least for me—I am drawn to the work first, and then, as one would with any artist, I want to know more about who made the stuff. But it is the power of the work that usually draws me in.

Do you seek out local galleries that sell outsider art while you're traveling?

Oh yeah. I've picked up things in New Orleans, Oakland, Waxahachie, Texas, and even on the streets of N.Y.—a man in front of a halfway house on my block was selling some amazing drawings.

Is it getting harder to collect in this area—more competition for a great work?

Oh yeah. Some of the stuff I have I couldn't afford now. My house is pretty full, and I'm not about art as investment, so with a full house I've slowed down a bit. The more well-known names are the same price as many contemporary artists, which is as it should be. They're not at the level of the blue-chip contemporary artists—so the investment vultures haven't swooped in yet—it still mostly feels like it's about the art.

What other art do you collect?

My house is like an insane wunderkammer—good for inspiration but bad for dusting.



Ben Fritz



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