

# Blurring Boundaries

AS THE ONCE-OFFBEAT GENRE OF OUTSIDER ART BECOMES EVER MORE POPULAR, WILL IT RETAIN ITS SPECIAL AURA? BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

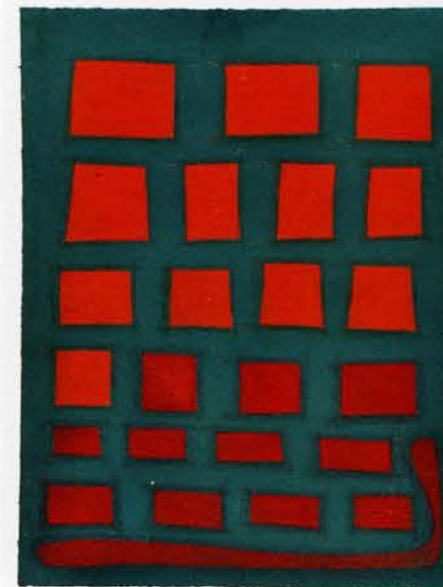


From top: Henry Darger, *Untitled*, drawing; Alan Constable, *Untitled (Blue Digital)*, 2014, ceramic.

IN THE LATE 1940s, when the French artist Jean Dubuffet began promoting what he called “*art brut*” (“raw art”), the creations of untrained art-makers who acted spontaneously, uninfluenced by established culture, he proposed that it could not, or perhaps should not, be judged by conventional aesthetic criteria. Today, though, perhaps defying anything Dubuffet could have foreseen, the international market for *art brut* or outsider art (also called “self-taught art”) has matured. It enjoys the support of a well-developed infrastructure of institutions and events—fairs; high-profile museum exhibitions; specialized galleries, museums and publications—and increasing attention from scholars.

As the field’s key players prepare to gather in New York for the 2014 Outsider Art Fair (May 8–11), a number of hot topics and discoveries will be on their agenda. This year, the fair will bring together 47 exhibitors from the U.S. and overseas, including the dealers Yukiko Koide and Megumi Ogita from Tokyo, who will feature the creations of self-taught artists from Japan, and Hervé Perdrille from Paris, who will show works by Indian autodidacts. Chris Byrne, a writer and curator as well as co-founder of the Dallas Art Fair, will present a self-contained exhibition of drawings by the New Zealander Susan Te Kahurangi King, a relative newcomer on outsider art’s international scene. King’s drawings—some of which take images of Donald Duck on a fascinating, form-bending ride—sometimes unwittingly embody the appropriate-and-rework aesthetic that is dear to many who are guided by a postmodernist point of view.

If King’s art turns out to be a hit at the fair, their success will reflect a trend that has emerged in recent years. It has to do with



From top: Three drawings by Julian Martin, 2013, pastel on paper; Lonnie Holley, *Don't Go Crossing My Fence*, 1994, wood, garden hose, mop, lamp base, other found materials.

ways in which the traditionally strict border between outsider art and that of academically trained artists has become fuzzy or has even dissolved. John Maizels, editor-in-chief of the British magazine *Raw Vision*, the world’s leading publication in the outsider/self-taught art field, says of this tendency, “It is definitely happening. Is it because the contemporary-art world has woken up to the fact that outsider art is quite popular now, or is it because outsider art prices have risen, and, therefore, [this kind of work] seems more worthwhile? I think it’s a bit of both.”

As outsider-art purists might put it, each genuinely self-taught artist’s body of work is unique; what such art-makers produce always constitutes a category in itself. For what it’s worth, such art can be contrasted with “studio art” made by trained “professionals,” but should it ever have to be measured against or in comparison to mainstream art in order to earn its aesthetic validation?

Such questions have been percolating in the outsider art world, most notably since the huge exhibition, “The Encyclopedic Palace,” was presented at the Venice Biennale last year. It took its title from that of a sculpture made by the Italian-American self-taught artist Marino Auriti (1891–1980) in the 1950s in support of a patent application for a building he had designed. That never-erected museum would have housed a collection of humanity’s greatest achievements, from the wheel to satellites. Organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the associate director of the New Museum in New York, the Venice exhibition included works by artists both schooled and self-taught, all of which, ostensibly, addressed the notion of the encyclopedic or the all-encompassing.

However, at a panel discussion at the Metro Show fair in New York in January, in which Gioni took part, the Manhattan-based dealer Randall Morris noted that he was “concerned” about how some



CARL HAMMER GALLERY; FLEISHER OLLMAN GALLERY

FLEISHER OLLMAN GALLERY; AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM



Clockwise from top left: Consuelo (Chelo) González Amézcuca, *In the World*, 1962, ballpoint pen on paper; A.G. Rizzoli, *Alfredo Capobianco and Family Symbolically Sketched/Palazzo del Capobianco*, 1937, ink on rag paper; M'onma, *Untitled*, 2001, ink on paper.

curators' apparent urge to bring together "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" art forms (which can include self-taught/outsider works, so-called tribal art, folk art or other indigenous-culture creations) "could turn out to be bad for self-taught artists' art." He added that if curators are "going to put works by Bill Traylor and Jeff Koons in the same room," they have an obligation to look for and make clear to viewers "the deeper, underlying human connections between" such disparate art forms. Morris and his wife, Shari Cavin, run Cavin-Morris Gallery, whose recent, debut presentation of the Japanese artist M'onma's mysterious, multi-layered drawings in ink and colored pencil on paper was one of the highlights of the current New York exhibition season. They will bring M'onma's work to the Outsider Art Fair.

Other attractions at this year's fair will include, from the Chicago dealer Carl Hammer, some large, mixed-media Henry Darger drawings that have emerged from a private collection and are not well known; several of A.G. Rizzoli's fantasy-architectural drawings, which were on view in last year's Venice Biennale exhibition, from the Berkeley, Calif.-based dealer Bonnie Grossman's Ames Gallery; and ballpoint-pen drawings by the Iranian artist Mehrdad Rashidi, who lives in Germany and is represented by the London-based dealer Henry Boxer and, in the U.S., by Andrew Edlin. Philadel-



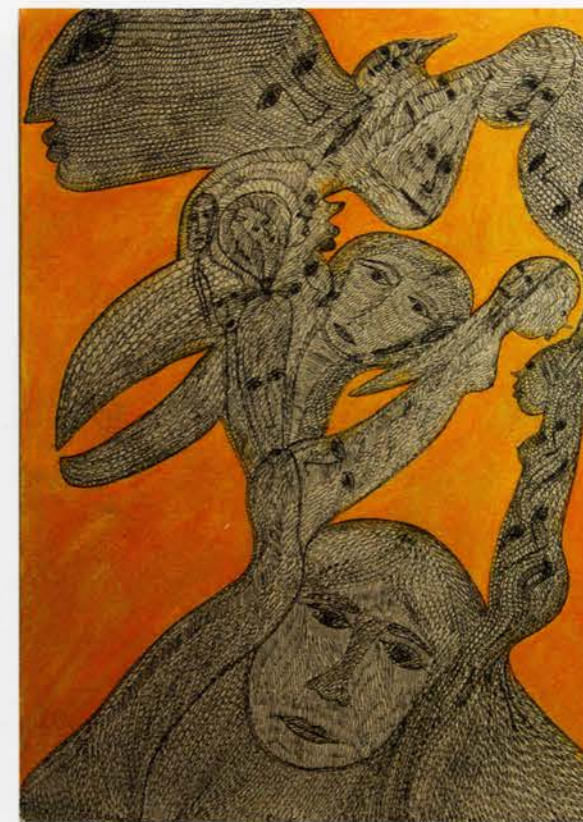
phia's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery will show pastel-on-paper drawings by Julian Martin, marked by bright colors and semi-abstract forms, and camera-shaped ceramic sculptures by Alan Constable. (Both artists are from Australia, and the gallery's director, Alex Baker, discovered their work during a recent stay there.) Along with works by such outsider masters as Martín Ramírez and William Hawkins, the southern-California gallery Just Folk will bring several Bill Traylor drawings to the fair. They come from a hitherto unknown group of Traylor pictures—emblematic images by one of the most respected talents in outsider art's canon—that the gallery obtained from a Swiss collector.

In New York, for many years, the American Folk Art Museum has served as a showcase for the work of numerous artists in the outsider/self-taught field. Valérie Rousseau, the museum's new curator of art of the self-taught and *art brut*, is a Canadian from Quebec whose background includes studies in anthropology and art history. From now on, Rousseau said in a recent interview, she and her colleagues will be using the term "*art brut*" in a more expansive way.

"Museums are constantly evolving," she said, adding that "even the term '*art brut*' is being redefined." What's important, she explained, speaking for curators and museums in general, "is that we have to be responsible for the concept we're

developing—responsible, too, to [different] cultures that might not be based on the same sets of values." Traditionally, Rousseau noted, folk art has been seen as "representing collective values." But what if certain works of folk art were to be regarded as forms of *art brut* and examined accordingly? Rousseau pointed out that this current of thought is one that has played a significant part in AFAM's preparation of a large-scale exhibition, "Self-taught Genius: Treasures from the American Folk Art Museum," which opens on May 13 and will run through August 17. After that, it will travel to six other museums in the U.S. through early 2017. The exhibition will bring together objects from the mid-18th century through the late 20th century—works traditionally viewed as folk art, as well as paintings, sculptures and other objects made by autodidacts who are normally regarded as outsiders. Among them are Henry Darger, A.G. Rizzoli, Sister Gertrude Morgan, and Mary T. Smith.

Beyond May's big fair in New York, there are plenty of other noteworthy events on outsider art's global calendar. At Halle Saint Pierre in Paris, "Raw Vision: 25 Years of Outsider Art," a multi-artist exhibition commemorating the British magazine's silver anniversary, will be on view through August 22. In Lausanne, Switzerland, the Collection de l'Art Brut, a museum whose core holdings came from Dubuffet's collection, will open "Art Brut in the World" on June 6; this show, featuring works by such recently discovered



Mehrdad Rashidi, *Untitled*, 2013, ink and crayon on found card.

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM; AMES GALLERY; CAVIN-MORRIS GALLERY



From top: Susan Te Kahurangi King, *Untitled*, circa 1960s–1970s, graphite pencil, colored pencils, biro, crayon; Bill Traylor, *Bird on Triangular Construction*, circa 1939–42, poster paint and graphite on cardboard.



artists as Germany’s Gustav Mesmer (who makes flying machines) and Bali’s Ni Tanjung (who has painted volcanic rocks and also makes paper cut-out figures), will run through November 2.

In Chicago, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art will show a group of found photos from the mid-20th century that have been traced back to “Harry and Edna,” believed to be a midwestern couple who documented their travels in Kodachrome slides. In displaying these images in “Lost and Found: The Search for Harry and Edna” (May 9–August 30), Intuit will explore the “vernacular photography” field, whose self-taught-artistry aspect brushes up against outsider-art aesthetics in interesting ways.

*Raw Vision’s* Maizels observes, “Personally, I don’t like seeing contemporary art alongside outsider art, as I think contemporary art devalues it. Dubuffet forbade any works from the Collection de l’Art Brut to be shown next to contemporary art, as he felt it would contaminate it. The situation could get very blurred, especially with some contemporary artists appropriating an outsider-art aesthetic into their work. Will outsider art be able to maintain its unique power if it is constantly copied and mixed with contemporary art?” That is a good question, of course, the answer to which only time—and an unpredictable confluence of market forces—will be able to tell. 