

The New York Times

Art & Design

ART REVIEW

Opening the Folkways of Perception: Outsider Art's Wide World of Inclusion

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Published: February 11, 2011

I once asked an art dealer how he determined whether someone was an outsider artist, and he offered this criterion: anyone who called up and said he or she was an outsider artist was immediately disqualified. In his view, outsider artists don't self-identify and they don't operate telephones.



Harris Diamant

"Drawings 197" by the Electric Pencil, at the Outsider fair.

Standing inside the 19th annual Outsider Art Fair at 7 West 34th Street in Manhattan on Thursday evening, Colin Rhodes, an Australian art historian who's written a book on the subject, disagreed. "Pathology is not the defining criterion," he said. For him, an outsider artist is not an amateur, just someone working outside the regular art world structures.

In any case, the mentally ill, the developmentally disabled and the self-taught generally rule the field — the dearth of art by prisoners at these fairs is a continual surprise; they're an extremely creative, productive and expanding population — and their stories haunt wall labels throughout the 33 exhibitors' booths. But this is a strong fair whose work begs to be considered along other lines.

There are, for instance, pieces characterized by striking or unusual materials, like Jim Work's drawings of farms and rural roads done in crayon on opened-up paper

grocery bags, at the Pardee Collection; or George Paterson's carved skateboards, which look like tribal objects, at Cavin-Morris. David Butler's cut-and-pounded-tin birds and creatures, on view at Gilley's Gallery and Ricco/Maresca, were made to decorate his yard in New Orleans or hang in his windows, casting distinctive shadows into the interior of his home.

Outsider art also accommodates the late bloomer. Aaron Birnbaum, a retired New York tailor, started painting at 65. His lovely "Two Peacocks in Tree" from 1985 at Maxwell Projects is framed by painted pieces of a wooden crib found in the street. Giorgos Rigas began painting scenes of the Greek countryside from memory at 56. His Grandma Moses-like canvases are hung salon-style at C. Grimaldis.

Religious visionaries are a perennial presence. Nikifor at Wasserwerk Galerie Lange created small, beautifully colored images, including a self-portrait as a Greek Orthodox bishop. The legendary Howard Finster offers an urgent pronouncement at Ames Gallery — "Warning! Take Heed or Fail!" — from 1984.

And pathology can't always be ruled out. Some of the best works in the show were made by artists afflicted with something — although institutional records often prohibit us from knowing what. William Rice Rode, a patient in an Illinois mental hospital around the turn of the last century, made extraordinary drawings of flying machines, people and text written in a self-invented language, on bed sheets; examples are on view at the Carl Hammer Gallery.

At Ricco/Maresca, George Widener's large ink-on-paper drawing "Untitled (4421)" from 2010 doubles as a "robot teaching game" for future generations of intelligent machines. The systematic structure, numbering and pattern are credited by his dealer largely to Mr. Widener's being an autistic savant.

Some of the most widely admired work here is by the Electric Pencil, an anonymous patient at State Lunatic Asylum No. 3 in Nevada, Mo., whose drawings from the early 20th century were discovered in a trash can in 1970. Assembled and displayed by the New York artist Harris Diamant — who also provided the "electric" moniker — the Pencil's drawings of animals and specter-eyed figures often appear on hospital stationery.

Established masters hang alongside newer discoveries. The old guard includes Bill Traylor, Martin Ramirez, Henry Darger, Mr. Butler, Sam Doyle, Mr. Finster, James Castle and Adolf Wolfli. Mr. Rode and the Electric Pencil are among the new.

And then there is the catchall category of general weirdness: illustrations made to accompany Dr. Carrie F. Young's 1875 lectures on the effects of alcohol on the human stomach at Ames; Haitian voodoo objects at Bourbon-Lally, made to please spirits or protect households; the virtuoso ink drawings of Leonard L. St. Clair (a.k.a. Stoney), a dwarf tattoo artist who lived in Columbus, Ohio, at Maxwell Projects.

Written next to the images in Mr. St. Clair's drawings — which were made as tattoo samples — are numbers designating prices for the real things. He might be surprised to learn, 31 years after his death, that the drawings themselves have acquired financial value as art objects.

Perhaps more than any other factor, this is what binds together the work in the Outsider Art Fair: Much of it wasn't created to sell, or to achieve, acclaim, but for other purposes — often merely to satisfy a raw creative impulse. For those of us caught up in the art world, it offers a corrective, or at least a temporary window into another world.

The Outsider Art Fair continues through Sunday at 7 West 34th Street, Manhattan; sanfordsmith.com.