

# The New York Times

## Art & Design

ART REVIEW

### Where Outsiders Come in From the Cold

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A review of one of the first art fairs of 2009 should begin with pronouncements about the plunging art market, the weakening dollar, skittish dealers and the sins of the recent past. Let's pretend it did, and move on. There's a fresh fair to be seen, and a new location to adjust to.



Clementine Hunter/Gilley's Gallery

"Abstract Face" by Clementine Hunter is among the works at 7 West 34th Street in Manhattan.

The Outsider Art Fair, now in its 17th year, has forsaken the Puck Building — the only home it has ever known — at the epicenter of downtown, for the blander environs of midtown. Fifth Avenue and 34th Street to be exact, on the 11th floor of an undistinguished, recently minted structure opposite the Empire State Building.

There are losses and gains. The ground floor convenience, downtown allure and outsiderish rusticity of the Puck will be missed. But not its drafts, paper walls and comfort-challenged amenities. Word has it that the space is scheduled to become a large restaurant, which befits its locale, size, charm and hourglass, bottlenecking layout. (The hintermost space of the Puck ground floor is a potential Siberia worthy of being sighted from Sarah Palin's kitchen.)

The Outsider Art Fair's new setting is art-fair generic in style. It feels, as one dealer put it, "grown up." There are carpets, relatively sturdy, anonymous white walls; openness and improved visibility.



Amos Ferguson/Galerie Bonheur

"White House Media," by Amos Ferguson.



Elisabeth Aldwell/Maxwell Projects

Elisabeth Aldwell's "Acid Trancescape," acrylic on canvas, at the Maxwell Projects gallery.



Ted Ludwiczak/American Primitive Gallery

"Banded Granite Head" by Ted Ludwiczak

Some dealers are using the added space to give the art some breathing room and to make their selections look more considered. Others are just using it for more art, homing to a customary thrift-store density, but on a grander, slightly more ordered scale. That outsider art dealers can abhor vacuums every bit as energetically as outsider artists is perhaps best illustrated by the fabulous *mélange* of Haitian and American works at Galerie Bourbon-Lally.

But at every turn this fair has a new clarity. The art rises to the occasion of the more refined environment. Each stand contains at least one example of excellence and sometimes several.

By now the term outsider has become close to meaningless in its elasticity. It implies self-taught, which many insider artists are; it also means isolated, although these days younger outsiders are being influenced by previous generations. One of several new names at the fair is Timothy Wehrle, a 30-year-old artist from Iowa at the Cavin-Morris stand. It is impossible to imagine the teeming emphatically patterned compositions and hazy tones of his colored-pencil and graphite drawings without the antecedent of Adolf Wölfli's rhythmic orchestrations. But Mr. Wehrle has given them a strongly figurative pulse and contemporary themes — the daily mayhem of the supermarket for example.

The time may be past when outsider geniuses are discovered, or rediscovered with astounding regularity — from Joseph Yoakum, Martín Ramírez, Henry Darger and Bill Traylor in the late 1960s and '70s to Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Morton Bartlett and James Castle in the 1990s. While less dominant than in past fairs, these artists are all present, mostly in stands



Stephen Palmer/Ricco Maresca Gallery

"Untitled," around 1950-65, by Stephen Palmer, a Wisconsin farmer who created shrinelike portraits of religious figures.



Violetta C. Raditz/Luise Ross Gallery

"VR 7 Untitled" (1920), in pencil and crayon on paper, by Violetta C. Raditz, who was an artist from Philadelphia

on the first aisle. At Phyllis Kind, Ricco/Maresca, Carl Hammer, Maxwell Projects and Marion Harris you'll find a kind of outsider art Hall of Fame. Other old guards in the vicinity include Grandma Moses, represented by paintings and an embroidery at St. Etienne; at Gilley's Gallery, Clementine Hunter (1887-1988) is represented by two walls of paintings (including some strange Cubist heads from around 1970), and a quilt that gives her pictorial language a new complexity.

But the fair harbors new talents of all kinds, which bodes well for modest prices, and other artists who aren't yet household names among outsider fans. Maxwell Projects has vividly detailed paintings of painters at work in a studio (the same one every time) by Elisabeth Aldwell.

Ricco/Maresca has tiny symbol-laden landscapes by Ben Hotchkiss. Andrew Edlin is introducing the work of Frank Calloway, an Alabaman whose images of houses, cars and animals executed in saturated colors on large rolls of paper, approach billboard scale. Keep a special eye out for Stephen Palmer (1882-1965), a Wisconsin farmer who, after becoming bedridden, turned out shrinelike portraits of Jesus and other religious figures framed in bright curvilinear plant patterns that suggest fancy, demonic playing cards. His work, recently discovered in the estate sale of his caretaker, is making a double debut at the Carl Hammer and Ricco/Maresca stands. He stands a good chance of joining the outsider pantheon.

Other firsts include the mesmerizing childhood crayon drawings of a Philadelphia artist named Violetta Raditz (1912-1998) at Luise Ross. They were all made around 1920, and their suave lines and rich, subtle palette reflect a precocious talent fed by an early exposure to the Ballet Russe, Japanese art and possibly Aubrey Beardsley.

The Ames Gallery is introducing the large, lusciously colored canvases of Ursula Barnes (1872-1958), whose experience as a dancer on the New York stage may have encouraged a penchant for blond Mae West-like damsels and turn-of-the-century dress.

Across the aisle the related, but contemporary paintings of Y. G. Casey (1923-2002) stand out at Rising Fawn Folk Art. Ms. Casey stippled obsessively with tester paints on plastic, achieving large enamel-like scenes best described as Neo-Victorian with a sexual slant. Nearby, Virginia Green, a dealer of modern and contemporary art, has devoted her stand to the work of Douglas Desjardins. This 31-year-old artist usually sells his exuberant, often tropical paintings, executed on found scraps of plywood, on the streets of SoHo. Ms. Green bought one last spring, was struck by its staying power and there you have it: both artist and dealer are making their Outsider Art Fair debuts.

Gary Snyder's stand is all about Janet Sobel (1894-1968), the canny outsider credited with developing a version of drip painting that influenced Jackson Pollock. The selection here traces the development of her figurative work during the 1940s and early '50s, from conventional folk art to increasingly wild, colorful and all-over compositions. They establish a telling call-and-response with the wild women of the great Swiss outsider Aloïse Corbaz (1886-1964) at Safian.

What else? Plenty. Not to be missed are the hallucinatory abstract patterns of Eugene Andolsek at American Primitive; the heated-up Ecuadoran tourist paintings of Luis Millingalli at Grey Carter; the intimate painted and annotated collages, made from cereal boxes, by Jerry Wagner, a former handyman, Yeshiva student and folk singer from Rhode Island at George Jacobs Self-Taught Art; the billowing images of Amos Ferguson, the 88-year-old Bahamian artist at Bonheur known as the Picasso of Nassau; and the wall of African salon signs at Pardee. Did I mention the hypnotic portrait of André Breton, the autocratic pope of Surrealism, by Miguel Hernandez (1893-1957) at Ritsch-Fisch? It does full justice to the pontiff's famously capricious charm.

*The Outsider Art Fair is at 7 West 34th Street, 11th floor, near Fifth Avenue, until Sunday. (212) 777-5218, sanfordsmith.com.*