

# The New York Times

## Arts

### ART IN REVIEW; Visionaries Who Observe Reality From the Outside In

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The usual suspects -- Henry Darger, Bill Traylor, Martin Ramirez, Adolf Wolfli, Anonymous, Nellie Mae Rowe, Howard Finster, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Minnie Evans and the aging gang known as Gugging, artists confined to an Austrian psychiatric hospital -- are back in full force at the eighth annual Outsider Art Fair, the contentiously named folk art jamboree that opens today at the Puck Building in SoHo.

But while the work of these stars can be spotted at more than one dealer's booth, there are also some interesting new -- or at least less-exposed -- talents at the show, which has attracted 34 dealers from the United States and Europe. Two regular exhibitors, Cavin-Morris of New York and Fleisher-Ollman of Philadelphia, have dropped out this year, publicly expressing disagreement with some of the fair's policies, and have mounted separate shows nearby.

Among exhibits not in evidence at previous fairs, the Ricco/Maresca Gallery has come up with two intriguing finds in the medium of collage. One is a contemporary artist, Sindi Lutz; the other is an anonymous group of 10 small black-and-white treasures recently found in Pennsylvania, dating back to 1915.

The renderings made by Ms. Lutz, who was severely burned in a fire as a child, are extraordinary. Combining drawing and painting with magazine cutouts of limbs, faces and other body parts, they depict sexy young women in jaunty poses that nevertheless convey a wistful, touching sense of loss. In its intensity, the work evokes that of Egon Schiele.

The Pennsylvania collages, reminiscent of Victorian scrapbooks, juxtapose odd bits of printed photographs, cutouts, even a snatch or two of song. In one, an image of a little girl dressed in a starched, oversize man's shirt has a bar of music under it; next to her are photographs of a rollicking baby in a tub and a chick coming out of its egg. These surreal juxtapositions seem to make no formal or psychological sense but are accomplished with such artistry that they could put you in mind of Joseph Cornell.

At the Aron Packer Gallery of Chicago, a group of weird, fierce wax masks, crowns and mysterious fetishes, carved with arcane symbols and paved with junk jewelry stones and dolls' eyes, is the strong suit. They were discovered in a closed-off room in quarters occupied by a man known only as "Uncle Joe," a Polish-born amusement park worker who lived from the turn of the century to 1943. The work echoes the carnival imagery that surrounded him and the dark coloring and deft modeling of the wax enhances its impact.

Freddie Brice, an 80-year-old laborer and onetime ship painter whose bouts of schizophrenia brought him long periods of institutionalization, is having his first solo exposure, at K. S. Art. His simple but vigorously painted subjects, mostly dogs, bulls, fish and inanimate objects, are obsessively patterned with dots and have a humorous anthropomorphism, as in the case of his feral, black-spotted white dog, "Buster."

At the American Primitive Gallery, several large works on paper by Charles Benefiel take possession of the eye. Obsessed with dolls from a grandmother's collection, and with numbers as a symbol of oppressive governmental practices, Mr. Benefiel combines the two. He builds his images by means of tiny Ben Day-like dots, portraying parts of dolls and sometimes embellishing them with found photographs.

Legions of numbers are laid down as background. One haunting result melds a 19th-century doll's body with the head of what looks like a dead man.

An ethereal architecture dominates the work of Frank Jones (1900-1969) at the Carl Hammer Gallery of Chicago. Confined to prison for much of his life, Jones hints at his incarceration in cagelike, schematic drawings of houses, which often contain a clock. All the lines of these structures are embellished with colored projections that suggest sharp-toothed leaves, and each room contains one or several fanciful "captured" demons or spirits, whose malevolence was controlled, the artist makes clear, by their confinement.

Among artists more familiar to folk art audiences here and abroad, several displays stand out. A suite of small but particularly fine drawings done around 1915-16 by the Swiss "outsider" Adolf Wolfli (1865-1930) is on view at Phyllis Kind's booth. Confined to a mental institution for 40 years, Wolfli did intricate colored-pencil renditions accompanied by grandiose texts, involving fantastical figures, goggled faces, interlacing birds, shoes and enigmatic emblems. In this group of 13 jubilant drawings, he saw himself -- no doubt represented by the face with goggles -- as St. Adolf.

A show of larger but more familiar works by Wolfli is at the Jennifer Pinto Safian booth.

The crude but powerful drawings and constructions of James Castle (1900-1977), the Idaho autodidact who was born deaf, made a big hit at last year's fair, and they appear again in force at the J. Crist Gallery of Boise. Using soot and spit as his medium for drawing the farmhouse interiors he knew, and found cardboard for his rigidly frontal (and dorsal) constructions of stitched clothing that stood for human presences, Castle turned out work that plays on the emotions in unexpected ways.

Henry Darger (1892-1973), a Chicago recluse whose mural-size narrative work deals with fierce battles waged by small girls against the forces of evil, is a mainstay of the Galerie St. Etienne display.

It's easy to see why his watercolors, some skirting the edge of perversity, attract a mainstream audience: despite their ambiguity, there is an aura of charming innocence to them.

A fine spread of Bill Traylor's witty, silhouetted images of people and animals holds a wall at the Luise Ross Gallery, and at the Galerie Lange of Siegburg, Germany, there is an expansive display of the cartoony, Pop-style work of Josef Wittlich (1903-82), a onetime worker in a German ceramics factory. Much-prized in Europe, though not too well known here, Wittlich's work is preoccupied with celebrities, particularly royalty, soldiers, battle scenes, costumes, social events and women. He found inspiration in magazines and books, transposing photographs into vividly drawn, garishly colored extravaganzas.

Not far from the Puck Building the two dealers who have dropped out of the fair present their own exhibitions. At Cavin-Morris there is "Self-Taught Artists for the 21st Century," a group of big and smaller names in the field. Among them is a new "visionary discovery," a medium named Helen Butler Wells who claimed her drawings and essays were dictated by otherworldly sources.

Made between 1915 and 1922, the Wells drawings are small, expressive black-and-white renderings of floral and vegetative themes done with many an Art Nouveau-ish squiggle. In producing them, the artist's hand, by her own account, was automatically guided by an artist from the court of Louis XIV named Eswald, to whom she gives full credit. The drawings are decorative in effect, and their charm lies in their thematic repetition.

Other noteworthies in the group include Keith Goodhart, whose fetishistic wood and wire sculptures combine human and occult to eerie effect, and Sanford Darling, whose tropical scenes of boats, huts, palm trees and snow-topped mountains rising out of the sea are painted in enamel on board and ingratiate with their childlike simplicity,

A smaller show, "New Year in TransAmerica," is devoted to the work of Chris Hipkiss, an Englishman whose black-and-white drawings obsessively delineate a battle between technology and nature. (See Art in Review, Page 37.)

"New Century, New Venue, New York," the Fleisher-Ollman Gallery's show housed at the John McEnroe Gallery, covers a lot of territory, from 18th- and 19th-century Pennsylvania Dutch fraktur drawings and anonymous turn-of-the-century tattoo designs to the work of well-known talents like Ramirez, Traylor and Castle.

One striking exhibit is a group of small assemblages of found objects bound up in heavy wire by an artist known simply as the Philadelphia Wireman. His unsigned

works were found in 1982, presumably after his death, in trash set out for collection at curbside.

The two dealers' decision to defect from the fair touches on issues raised by others in the expanding folk art field. In a letter circulated last spring to members of the art press, the two challenged the concept of what they call "Eurocentric" outsider art covering what they regard as unwarranted categories like art made by "the insane and underprivileged." Outsider art is not an entity that can be separated from art in general, the letter argued.

The term outsider art was coined more than 25 years ago by the British critic Roger Cardinal, who was trying to find an English equivalent for "art brut," a designation the artist Jean Dubuffet applied to work done by mental patients. In this country its boundaries have become more elastic, generally covering work by self-taught artists including the mentally disabled, prisoners, visionaries, ethnic artists and old-time rural imagists like Grandma Moses and Horace Pippin.

Fleisher-Ollman and Cavin-Morris also complained about the lack of vetting by an outside board with a "cohesive philosophy" and about the image of "abnormality and weirdness" in the fair's publicity. The fair, the letter said, "seeks to present this work as a cheap alternative to 'regular' art that will increase in value."

"It was a hard decision for us to make because we have always done well at the fair," said Randall Morris, co-owner of Cavin-Morris, . But John Ollman, owner of Fleisher-Ollman, said that in addition to his disagreements, he was "never really wild about doing the fair" for other reasons, like "crowds and security problems."

"I like to sit down and talk with people about what I'm showing," he said "and it doesn't offer much chance to do that."

Their withdrawal letter drew a response from the fair's directors, Caroline Kerrigan and Colin Lynch Smith of Sanford L. Smith and Associates, which produces and manages the three-day event.

"One of the strengths of the Outsider Art Fair," they wrote in their response, "has always been its survey nature." They pointed out that other art fairs, including the Art Show and the Print Fair in New York, both also managed by the Smith organization, did not have vetting committees.

While no one agreed on the definition of outsider art, they said, the fair had always used the additional definitions "self-taught, visionary, intuitive and art brut" to describe what it showed. And they chided the two dealers for "riding on the coattails" of the fair, benefiting from its publicity by mounting exhibitions at the same time.

Other dealers take a different view. One, Jane Kallir, director of the long-established Galerie St. Etienne, said: "Outsider is a lousy term. I don't think there's anyone serious about this field who'd dispute it. But it happens to be a popular term and we all know what it means, so until something better comes along I guess we'll use it.

"And I don't think anyone would argue with the fact that the fair contains a huge mishmash of stuff, some of which isn't very good," Ms. Kallir continued. "But it takes a while for a field like this to mature, and to set yourself above it is a kind of elitist action that denies what the fair is all about."

Gerard C. Wertkin, director of the Museum of American Folk Art, which is a beneficiary of the fair, added: "The field is still growing and grappling with ideas, and there is a healthy sense of difference about issues of quality, inclusivity and marketplace. Is the Outsider Art Fair perfect? No. Is it interesting? Yes."

"The Outsider Art Fair 2000" is at the Puck Building, Lafayette Street at East Houston Street, SoHo. Hours: Today, noon to 8 p.m.; tomorrow, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission: \$12, or \$25 for a three-day pass. Information: (212) 777-5218. "New Year in TransAmerica" and "Self-Taught Artists for the 21st Century" are at Cavin-Morris, 560 Broadway, near Prince Street, SoHo, (212) 226-3768, through Feb. 26. "New Century, New Venue, New York," from the Fleisher-Ollman Gallery of Philadelphia, will be at the John McEnroe Gallery, 41 Greene Street, SoHo, (212) 219-0395, through Feb. 4.