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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; A Spiritual Energy in Fanciful Realms

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The outsider art phenomenon is like a gold rush. Driven by an irrationally enthusiastic market, speculators have been feverishly scouring the world for self-taught geniuses, looking in mental hospitals, prisons, the backwoods and flea markets for anything marked by folksy vigor if not visionary originality. Accordingly, the Seventh Annual Outsider Art Fair has the feel of a frontier boomtown. A gathering of 35 dealers from the United States and Europe, it's crowded and chaotic but lively and, at certain moments, inspirational. Plenty of fool's gold is on display, but you'll find the real thing, too.

The most compelling booth, in part because it's dedicated to one artist, is that of J. Crist, where the works of James Castle are on view. Castle was born in 1900 and lived in Idaho. Deaf and mute, he never learned to speak, read or write, sign or finger spell. But he made art of remarkable subtlety using all sorts of nontraditional materials. His works range from smudgy, carefully observed drawings of interior rooms or outbuildings of the farm where he lived to rough cardboard constructions held together by string representing people or animals. Some of his collages verge on total abstraction.

Looking at Castle's work, you feel not so much his social deviance as his innate visual intelligence and technical inventiveness. This is true as well of such universally acknowledged masters as Martin Ramirez or Henry Darger. Ramirez, whose

delightful "Rabbit" is on view at Fleisher/Ollman (other works are at Phyllis Kind), spent most of his life in a mental hospital, and Darger (at Galerie St. Etienne and Carl Hammer) was a recluse obsessively absorbed by fantasies of the persecution, torture and killing of little girls. Yet what convinces you about their work is not their weirdness but their formal elegance.

That said, what is still fascinating about some of the best outsider art is the feeling you have that fantasy has become so powerful as to eclipse what most people take for reality. Charles A. A. Dellschau (at Ricco/ Maresca), a butcher in Texas, created thousands of wonderfully fanciful pictures of Jules Verne-style flying machines.

Malcolm McKesson, a failed businessman, produced during the course of an unconsummated 40-year marriage reams of luminous, feathery drawings to illustrate his sadomasochistic obsessions (at Henry Boxer, Luise Ross and others). Morton Bartlett, a Harvard dropout, created in total secrecy exquisite, anatomically accurate, near life-size adolescent girl dolls, clothes and all (drawings and photographs of which are on view at Marion Harris).

For them art was a kind of bizarre religion, and their works exude hair-raising transcendental energies. You can understand why outsider art has so captivated our spiritually diminished modern imagination.

The Outsider Art Fair remains on view at the Puck Building at the corner of Houston and Lafayette Streets in SoHo through Sunday. Hours: today, noon to 8 P.M.; tomorrow, 11 A.M. to 7 P.M.; Sunday, noon to 7 P.M. Admission: \$12 per day; \$25 for a three-day pass