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Arts

ART REVIEW

By ROBERTA SMITH
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The Outsider Art Fair

Puck Building

Lafayette Street at Houston Street

SoHo

Through Sunday

Lately, little seems more "in" than outsider art, and this thriving fair, now in its fifth year, deserves some of the credit, or blame, depending on one's point of view. Either way, it delivers substantial amounts of visual information -- and pleasure -- and its latest incarnation seems especially strong.

Including 35 dealers from across the country and overseas, this year's fair charts some of the complexities of the expanding outsider field, which is simultaneously being enriched by new material from the past and by younger contemporary artists, some of them homeless, who work at the margins of society.

The greats of outsider art are abundant. The long scroll-like fantasy drawings of Henry Darger, whose retrospective had just opened at the Museum of American Folk Art (review, page C27), are given pride of place by several dealers. The sprightly silhouettes of Bill Traylor are visible at Luise Ross and Fleisher-Ollman, where there are also two marvelous drawings by P. M. Wentworth, one of which resembles an early Rothko.

Phyllis Kind is featuring an impressive array of historic European and American outsiders, including the incomparable Martin Ramirez, represented by 10 of his spatially complex cowboy drawings. Galerie St. Etienne weighs in with such

American folk artists as John Kane, Morris Hirshfield and Grandma Moses, who has a number of imitators, good and bad, this year.

These include, at Galerie Bonheur, an artist named Kristin Helberg, who contributes a Moses-ish portrait of Grandma Moses herself, paintbrush at the ready. If that's not post-modern enough, there are Morton Bartlett's quirky photographs of dolls, which he made starting in the 1930's (at Marion Harris), and Eileen Doman's paintings based on family snapshots (at Ann Nathan).

This show is strong on introductions, especially of historical material. Ricco-Maresca has work by two outstanding artists rarely seen anywhere and never before in New York: Samuel Collings, who channeled his obsession with the human circulatory system into spidery, incipiently Surrealistic drawings while farming in upstate New York in the 1850's, and Charles A. A. Dellschau (1830-1923), a butcher from Texas whose obsession with flight yielded notebooks of double-sided watercolors that have the luminosity of stained glass. Also unknown here is James Castle (1900-1977), whose work fills the entire booth of Jacqueline Crist. Castle was a deaf artist from Boise, Idaho, who recorded farm life and created imaginary friends in ingeniously made drawings and sewn-cardboard sculptures, and his work is wonderful.

But outsider art is also shown to be alive and well in the hands of the living, specifically in the intense mosaiclike collages of Anne Grgich (at Mia Gallery); the radiant spaceship drawings of Ionel Talpazon and the cut metal reliefs of Clyde Angel (both at American Primitive), and the sexually charged figurative paintings of Don DeNarie (at Nancy and Lenny Kislin). "Poetry must be made by all," Lautreamont said, and sometimes it is.