

The Wonders of the Outsider Art Fair

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By Marie Plantin (English Translation by Sylvie Briand)

This is the time of art fairs in Paris. Simultaneously to the famous FIAC, the great contemporary art exhibition held under the glass roof of the Grand Palais, another event is happening under another glass roof: the Outsider Art Fair at the Atelier Richelieu, and will be showcasing Art Brut in all its wonderful diversity.



Bouteilles d'agonie, Florence Thomassin, © Marie Plantin / Pariscope

One cannot be more at the heart of Paris than in the Rue de Richelieu, halfway between the Palais de la Bourse and the Palais Royal. Yet it is in this central area of the French capital that is organized this flagship event dedicated to the art of the fringe, the so-called Outsider Art or Art Brut. Over two floors covered by a superb glass roof, many galleries from around the world are showcasing their protégés: deceased or living artists practicing their art away from the official mainstream networks and outside institutions and well-trodden paths, and even between the walls of psychiatric hospitals where they are sometimes discovered.

A watercolor by Henry Darger opens the show at the entrance. The piece is representative of the work of the artist who was obsessed with images of girls, often naked, in a bucolic environment. The tone is set. Everything here is possible, and the exploration of our dark side should not be taken lightly; childhood and death are lying side by side without a curtain to separate them, some artworks give a chilling impression while others, brighter, evoke a form of spirituality in the artistic practice. We sail in a kind of permanent spell in this profusion of paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, experimenting a diversity of astounding techniques. Fabric, wood, ceramic, mosaic, canvas, paper... plenty of supports are used, and the creativity involved is colossal. The display of artworks is dense, from the floor to the ceiling, forcing the visitor to watch carefully in order not to miss anything.

In the first room, the space occupied by the Andrew Edlin Gallery strikes us with the cheeky photographs of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, known to have spent years photographing his wife. As his exclusive model, she often appears naked, in suggestive poses, like in a pin-up magazine. But we are far from the glossy clichés and these staged scenes between husband and wife have something that is fascinating and touching. Next to these photographs are the imaginary cathedrals of Marcel Storr. Made of varnished colored ink and graphite, the artworks amaze us just like the assortment of wooden miniature chairs made by John Byam. In the corridor that goes along the central staircase on the right, Mina Mond's pieces painted in tempera are worth the detour, especially her pagan retables with carved and pyrographed wooden doors and handles made with horsehair. Her work is extraordinarily meticulous. A little further, one is conquered by Florence Thomassin's wrenching ceramics that are pleading in silence for the rights of children and animals, too often the victims of human cruelty. Her "peacetolet," a firearm from which springs a blood-red flower, gets its strength through its symbolic minimalism, just like her "bottles of agony," full of guilty and shameful blood. Just above are the miniature theaters made in Toile de Jouy by Sophie Duf. Her artworks revisit with humor and irreverence the quiet pastoral scenes of our grandmothers' wallpaper. Well done. And then there is Hélène Blanc and her series of watercolors, hanging vertically, in small fluorescent boxes, representing characters enlightened by the diluted color of their mood and inner state. In the same room are showcased the poetic and scientific riddles of Melvin Way, laureate of last year's Art Absolument Award.

We could mention many others among all these gems, full of surprising approaches and astonishing personalities. Of course, the artworks are for sale, it's the point of holding an art fair. Yet as you walk out on the Atelier's terrace, you feel that this fair is not just about art but about life in all its infinite expressions, its uneven dents, its strength and fragility.

Next to the fair, Michèle Lamy, alter ego of the designer Rick Owens, and who has been developing her own artistic events for years under the title of "Lamyland," was invited to offer performances of her latest works (Friday evening and Sunday). Panel discussions are scheduled to be held on Saturday at the Hotel Drouot and Atelier Richelieu. To find out more about the program, please visit the website (www.outsiderartfair.com).

Outsider Art Fair Paris
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Atelier Richelieu
60 Rue de Richelieu
75002 Paris