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The Outsider Fair Once More Confirms That Art Is Everywhere

By **ROBERTA SMITH** JAN. 18, 2018

The 2018 Outsider Art Fair arrives this weekend at a time when the very concept of outsider art — work made by self-taught or developmentally impaired artists — has never seemed more capacious or in flux. At the moment, “The Beautiful Mind: The Drawings of Santiago Ramón y Cajal,” at Grey Art Gallery presents renderings by a Spanish neuroanatomist that revolutionized understanding of the brain but increasingly hold their own as modernist drawings. And “Murder Is Her Hobby: Frances Glessner Lee and the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death,” at the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, contains tiny dioramas originally used as forensic aids by police, that also presage setup photography of the 1970s and ’80s.



Installation view of Mose Tolliver's work at Shrine's booth at the Outsider Art Fair.

2018 Mose Tolliver/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Adam Reich



Thornton Dial's “A Bird Will Always Try To Fly” (1991), oil, enamel, burlap, rope carpet and industrial sealing compound on wood.

2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Fred Giampietro Gallery

Other changes include the increasing presence of outsider artists in galleries where you’d least expect them. David Lewis, who oversees a large, pristine and hip gallery on the Lower East Side, is working with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation on a show of the work of Thornton Dial, a towering figure among outsiders of the South, known for his startlingly rough-hewn paintings whose surfaces can include basically anything: rugs, tree branches and wire. On Jan. 25 Mr. Lewis’s gallery will inaugurate its representation of the artist with a show intriguingly titled “Mr. Dial’s America.” Until Sunday, there’s a big Dial front and center at the fair: “A Bird Will Always Try to Fly” (1991), an avian creature with the markings of a tiger pursued by two figures, at Fred Giampietro.

Two major museum exhibitions signal greater inclusion in the art historical scheme. On Jan. 28, the National Gallery of Art in Washington will unveil “Outliers and American Vanguard Art,” an exhibition of some 300 works by about 90 artists trained and self-taught. It will examine how attention to folk and outsider art — from artists, collectors and museums — has ebbed and flowed through the 20th century. And in May the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has a large collection of mostly 19th-century American folk art will take the plunge with a show centering on the 57 works by black Southern outsiders — including Dial — it recently received from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. It’s inspiring title: “History Refused to Die.” That refusal rings loud and clear in this year’s Outsider Art Fair. Some of the supporting evidence:



Martín Ramírez's "Untitled (Abstracted Landscape With Tree)," from 1953. RiccoMaresca Gallery

RICCO/MARESCA If you want to start with some masterpieces, go for a drawing here by the great and prolific Martín Ramírez that is unlike any I've ever seen. In it, his radiating architectural motifs frame an uncharacteristically soft Edenic landscape that includes several trees, one spouting a rainbow of leaves.

FLEISHER/OLLMAN Also in the masterpiece range: two extremely rare drawings by P. M. Wentworth, a contemporary of Ramírez. His "Imagination: Jupiter=Planet" from around 1953 provides a typically Wentworthian worldview. We see the Earth curve: God in her kingdom and varied landscapes alive with meandering stone walls.



"Stand on you, by you" (2016), an over-painted found tapestry by Hans Langner, known as Birdman.
Carl Hammer

CARL HAMMER GALLERY Hans Langner, known as Birdman, is a German artist and a resident at the Gugging House of Artists near Vienna, an assisted-living home for outsider artists. He depicts birds by selectively painting out parts of ersatz patterned rugs — in this case with red — ingeniously finding figures in the carpet and giving them volume and vitality.



"Ledger Drawing" attributed to Oliver Good Shield (aka Oliver Newton), around 1890. Donald Ellis Gallery

DONALD ELLIS GALLERY From the dean of dealers in Native American material, an unusually impressive array of Ledger drawings features several attributed to Oliver Good Shield (aka Oliver Newton), a Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. They were made around 1890 and are notable for their inventive use of areas of bracing white.

SHRINE Scott Ogden, the young owner of this small Lower East Side gallery, is unusual these days for his all-outsider program. For the fair, he has recreated from photographs the chaotic studio-bedroom of the painter Mose Tolliver, another southern outsider, but the main event are two walls covered by Tolliver's canvases and the slightly pneumatic figures and creatures that inhabit them.



“Untitled” by Susan Te Kahurangi King, 1967, graphite on paper. She communicated through her drawings, a mashup of cartoon and pop culture characters.
Andrew Edlin Gallery

CHRIS BYRNE This booth features numerous drawings — the most impressive without color — by Susan Te Kahurangi King, an autistic artist from New Zealand known for her turbulent mash-ups of pop-culture (toys, cartoon characters, labels). They are accompanied by a vitrine holding a sampling of an archive about Ms. King, started by her grandmother and continued by her sister Petita Cole, a project perhaps unprecedented in the history of outsider art that Mr. Byrne calls Boswellian.

PHYLLIS STIGLIANO ART PROJECTS The small, often harrowing paintings on paper of Mary F. Whitfield are history refusing to die. Many depict lynchings that the artist, who was born in 1947, heard about while growing up black in the South. Works like “Oh Momma Oh Poppa” from 2002 are studies in grief, shock and unmitigated viciousness, softened yet emotionally intensified by their extraordinary play of dark colors splintered by singing hues.



Pauline Simon's "Farmers," circa 1970, a heated-up version of Grant Wood's "American Gothic." Karen Lennox Gallery

KAREN LENNOX GALLERY The Hairy Who artists of Chicago are well known for discovering outsider artists. The least known of these may be Pauline Simon (1884-1976), who ran her husband's dental office until his death, at which point she took up painting. "The Farmers," from around 1970s might be seen as a heated-up version of Grant Wood's "American Gothic." Simon sought guidance from Don Baum, director of the Hyde Park Art Center, where the Hairy Who first exhibited. He is reported to have said, "Don't teach her anything."

ZQ Here you'll find a seductive introduction to the varied activities of Anne Grgich (born 1961) in the form of paintings, embroideries, collages and assembled books. Faces are the primary subject; the main look is updated, slightly raunchy Byzantine.

NORMAN BROSTERMAN Every Outside Art Fair contains something you've never dreamed existed, a humbling revelation that art is everywhere. In 2018 it is a jaw-dropping display of baskets made of rattan and wire by Native American inmates at the Iowa State Penitentiary at Anamosa in the 1930s. With their mix of styles — indigenous, Art Deco, Classical Greek — they indicate the relentless flux of visual culture. Wonders, truly, never cease.

Correction: January 19, 2018

An earlier version of this article misstated the David Lewis Gallery's involvement with the estate of the outsider artist Thornton Dial. While the gallery is showing Dial's work, it does not represent the estate. The article, using information from the Fleisher/Ollman gallery, also incorrectly stated that P.M. Wentworth and Martín Ramírez were in a mental hospital in Northern California at the same time. Ramírez was a patient at the hospital, not Wentworth. The article also misspelled the surname of an artist at the ZQ gallery. She is Anne Grgich, not Grgich.

The Outsider Art Fair

Jan. 18-21, Metropolitan Pavilion, Manhattan, outsiderartfair.com

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