

Visionaries in a Bubble, Safe From Convention

By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 25, 2008

Some people think the label “outsider artist” should be retired. Why does it matter whether an artist is self-taught, mentally impaired or deranged? The best outsider art is good for the same reasons that art by professional insiders is good: because it is formally eye-catching, inventively made, unpredictably imaginative and passionately driven.

Yet it’s hard to deny that the most intriguing outsider art often looks like the product of an alternative type of consciousness — one far less beholden to prevailing social and intellectual conventions and more attuned to intuitive, emotional and visionary impulses. As you peruse this year’s Outsider Art Fair, a fascinating international gathering of 34 dealers in outsider art at the Puck Building in SoHo, you may often find yourself pausing not only to admire this or that artwork for its captivating visual qualities but also to wonder what kind of person would make something so hair-raisingly unusual.

Answers to that question can vary widely. There are artists like Martín Ramírez and Adolf Wölfli, who spent years in psychiatric hospitals. Others, like Henry Darger, were eccentric and reclusive but capable of living and working on their own in the real world. Grandma Moses was a hard-working farm woman in upstate New York. (Works by

all four are in the exhibition.) Judith Scott, who makes sculptures by wrapping objects in layers of colored yarn (she has a piece at the Creative Growth Art Center's booth) and Katsuhiko Terao, who draws and paints percussive, architecturally suggestive patterns (at Phyllis Kind), work in studios for the developmentally disabled.

One thing that the best outsiders have in common is that each has stayed stubbornly true to his or her own creative project, oblivious to conventional artistic standards. You could call them bubble artists, because they are somehow protected within their own psychological spheres from influences that might otherwise discourage their improbable pursuits.

For an idea of just how various outsiders can be, consider three Americans who were almost exact contemporaries, Emery Blagdon (1907-1986), Morton Bartlett (1909-1992) and Lee Godie (1908-1994). Blagdon grew up on a Nebraska farm and hoboed around the West for a couple of years in his youth before returning home and devoting the second half of his life to constructing what he claimed was a great electromagnetic healing machine out of wire, cans, bottles, pieces of wood and other bits of salvaged junk. He viewed himself as an inventor, not an artist, but examples of his constructions resembling bird cages, radio antennas and decorative mobiles at Cavin-Morris look like the works of a half-mad Modernist sculptor.

The adopted son of a well-to-do Massachusetts family, Bartlett dropped out of Harvard during the Depression and thereafter led an apparently ordinary life as a graphic designer and commercial photographer. Only his closest friends knew that in his spare time he was creating extraordinarily realistic, half-life-size sculptures of pubescent girls for whom he sewed and knitted beautiful, fashionable clothes. Two of Bartlett's dolls are on view at Marion Harris's booth along with a selection of small, hauntingly noirish, black-and-white photographs he took of them. There's also a set of large, lush color prints made from

recently discovered slides.

One of the dolls sits and points with a mock-angry expression as though admonishing a naughty pet. The other, a girl of perhaps 10 or 12 in a red shirt and red print skirt, seems to be dancing. With her open bare legs and a tousled hair, she exudes a fierce Lolita-esque energy.

Godie was a well-known Chicago homeless woman who, from the late 1960s into the '90s, sold her vigorous childlike paintings and drawings of elegant women and other subjects on the street. She was delusional but so aggressively shrewd as a saleswoman that she became known as Chicago's most collected artist and was the subject of articles in *Art in America*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *People* magazine. (Examples of her works are at Carl Hammer.)

However different Blagdon, Bartlett and Godie were, all three were artists who would do whatever it took to realize their deeply idiosyncratic fantasies. There's something inspirational about that.

For another type of outsider, it seems that making art is less about achieving a personal vision than it is a distraction from painful realities or a way to regulate an unruly mental life. This too can yield visually gripping works.

Eugene Andolsek, whose luminous, vividly colored abstract drawings are on view at *American Primitive*, was an office worker plagued by fear that he was about to be fired, although he never was. Only when he began spending his free time making enthralling kaleidoscopic mandalas in colored ink on graph paper did he find relief from his anxieties.

His works don't look like the products of a troubled mind. Their symmetry, ordered complexity and beauty suggest quite the opposite. They're transfixing, and hypnotically soothing, which is undoubtedly part of why they proved therapeutic for Mr. Andolsek. Translated into

stained glass, they'd make great windows in a modern church.

You see a lot of compulsive repetition in outsider art. There is so much of it at the Outsider fair that you can easily tire of it. Among the more interesting instances is the work of Harald Stoffers, who works in a studio for disabled adults in Germany. His small pieces on paper at Yukiko Koide are actually letters that he writes every day to his mother in a curiously blocky, cursive script on wobbly lines. In each he tells her what he will wear on that day. The visual attraction is in how he toys with the writing, creating compositions that stand on their own as spidery abstractions resembling a kind of musical notation.

Some works in the exhibition blur the line between outsider and insider. If you saw the amazing constructions by a French artist who goes by the initials A. M. C. in another context, you would not necessarily take them for outsider art. (They're at J. P. Ritsch-Fisch.) Made from parts of computers, typewriters and other mechanical devices and populated by tiny, semi-abstract Dr. Seuss-like figures, A. M. C.'s miniature architectural fantasies might be mistaken for the works of an ingenious Brooklynite with a master of fine arts degree.

On the other hand, the dreamy, magic realist paintings of a Pennsylvania postal worker named Robert Sholties at Ricco Maresca look more like the painstaking efforts of a dedicated hobbyist.

Perhaps there should be an independent agency to certify artists as authentic outsiders.

And then there's the so-called Philadelphia Wireman, the unidentified creator of gnarly, palm-size sculptures consisting of pieces of paper, plastic and metal detritus bundled up in wire. Dean Jensen is showing 2 of more than 1,000 pieces that were discovered by an art student in bags and boxes on a Philadelphia sidewalk in 1982. One can only imagine who made these works or why. Partly because they are anonymous, they are among the fair's most provocatively mysterious

objects.

Outsider Art Fair 2008 continues through Sunday at the Puck Building,
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