

Outsider Art Preview: Blurred Categories and Fairs Big and Small

by [Edward M. Gómez](#) on May 3, 2014



Mehrdad Rashidi, “Untitled” (circa 2009), ballpoint pen ink on found paper (courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery, London)

Has the outsider art field become a victim of its own success? If so, it is a peculiar “victim,” and its success must be measured by standards that go beyond the money-obsessed art world’s primary criterion for determining aesthetic value — the price tag that any specific work happens to sport at any given time.

“This was the year that outsider art came in from the cold,” the *New York Times* reported last December in a year-end, art-news summary, with late-to-the-party breathlessness. That observation packed a loaded assumption. From exactly which “cold” precincts did outsider art supposedly emerge? As the Times pointed out, offering a rationale for its assertion, outsider

art had been featured “most prominently in the centerpiece exhibition of the [2013] Venice Biennale.”

That big show at the Biennale, which was titled *The Encyclopedic Palace*, placed outsider art right alongside the products of academically trained artists (among them: Bruce Nauman, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman and other big-brand-name contemporaries). In fact, for a long time now, the market for the creations of the best self-taught artists has been hot, hot, hot — increasingly visible in the mainstream media, more and more popular among general-interest audiences, and, yes, ever more costly in gallery, art fair and auction sales.



Albert Oehlen, “Untitled” (2008), mixed media on paper, 10.75 x 8.75 in (courtesy of A-S Contemporary, New York)

Back in the 1940s, when the French modern artist Jean Dubuffet began promoting the work of untrained art-makers — which he called “*art brut*” (“raw art”) — who acted spontaneously, uninfluenced by mainstream culture, he proposed that it was so unique, it should not or perhaps could not be judged by conventional aesthetic criteria. Today, though, the international market for *art brut* or outsider art (also more generally referred to as “self-taught art”) has matured, enjoying the support of a solid institutional infrastructure — its own fairs; high-profile museum exhibitions; specialized galleries, museums and publications — and the increasing attention of scholars.

As this field’s key players descend on New York for the 2014 [Outsider Art Fair](#) (May 8-11), a new, smaller fair, the [Satellite Show](#), is also preparing to make its debut. Running concurrently, the Satellite Show will present works by both self-taught and trained art-makers. Both of these events will coincide with [Frieze New York](#) (May 9-12), the U.S. offshoot of the well-known London fair.

John Maizels, the editor-in-chief of the British magazine [Raw Vision](#), the world's leading publication in the outsider art field, has this to say about the tendency to bring together works by academically trained artists and remarkable autodidacts: "It is definitely happening. Is it because the contemporary-art world has woken up to the fact that outsider art is quite popular now, or is it because outsider art prices have risen, and, therefore, [this kind of work] seems more worthwhile? I think it's a bit of both."

As outsider art purists might put it, whatever self-taught art-makers produce constitutes a category unto itself. If so, does it really need be measured against mainstream art in order to earn its aesthetic validation?

At a panel discussion at the Metro Show fair in New York in January, which included Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the 2013 Venice Biennale and curator of *The Encyclopedic Palace*, the Manhattan-based dealer Randall Morris expressed concern that the apparent urge of some curators to bring together "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" art forms (which can include self-taught/outsider works, tribal art, folk art or other indigenous-culture creations) "could turn out to be bad for self-taught artists' art." He added that if curators are "going to put works by Bill Traylor and Jeff Koons in the same room," they have an obligation to make clear to viewers "the deeper, underlying human connections between" such disparate art forms.

M'onma, "Untitled" (2001) ink on paper, 18.5 x 12.99 in (courtesy of Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York)

Morris and his wife, Shari Cavin, run [Cavin-Morris Gallery](#), whose recent debut presentation of the deeply spiritual Japanese artist M'onma's mysterious, multi-layered drawings in ink and colored pencil on paper was one of the quiet highlights of the current New York exhibition season. They will bring M'onma's work to the Outsider Art Fair.

This year, the OAF will feature 48 exhibitors from the U.S. and overseas, including [Yukiko Koide](#), the director of Japan's leading gallery in the outsider art field. Koide, who is well-known for her work as an independent curator and researcher, recently published a book in Japan about the legendary Chicago outsider Henry Darger (1892-1973). At this year's OAF, she will show blob-like sculptural objects made of fabric and covered in buttons — the creations of her latest discovery, a young female artist, Momoka Imura, from south-central Japan. These curious, compelling works share something of the spirit of the yarn-wrapped bundles of the American self-taught artist Judith Scott (1943-2005).

Christopher Byrne, a writer, curator and co-founder of the Dallas Art Fair, will present a self-contained exhibition within the fair of drawings by the New Zealander Susan Te Kahurangi King, a middle-aged woman who does not speak. King's drawings sometimes unwittingly embody a postmodernist, appropriate-and-rework aesthetic. In King's hands, though, this approach is something fresh and unaffected. In the drawings Byrne will show, the artist takes images of Donald Duck on a fascinating, form-bending ride. Byrne notes, "In Susan's drawings, nothing is lost in translation—her internal world is represented directly. Her images are insightful and funny; in them, Donald Duck may be seen as a surrogate for any one of us."



Other attractions at this year's fair will include several of A.G. Rizzoli's fantasy-architectural drawings, which were on view in last year's Venice Biennale, presented by the Berkeley, California-based Ames Gallery, and ballpoint-ink-on-paper drawings by the Iranian artist Mehrdad Rashidi, who lives in Germany and is represented by the London-based dealer **Henry Boxer** in London and **Andrew Edlin Gallery** in New York. Depicting human and animal figures in thickets of fine lines, Rashidi's images bring to mind those of the notable outsiders Madge Gill and Edmund Monsiel.

In an e-mail interview, Rashidi stated, "My father worked in a coal mine in Iran. He was interested in the history of old Persia and told me about it; you can see it in my drawings, which I began to make in 2006." The artist indicated that, through his pictures, he aims to convey the message that "the universe is big and made up of many small parts — men, women, animals and plants, which all depend on each other."

Boxer will also bring carved wooden sculptures and drawings on paper by the British artist Richard C. Smith, a former jack-of-all-trades (he once worked as a gravedigger) who makes animal-human-vegetal figures out of acacia, mulberry or found wood scraps, which he covers with faces. Those all-over marks make his sculptures look like cloaks made up of shields or large scales. There is a haunting, compelling air of the primordial and the mythical about

these objects, as well as Smith's pencil-on-paper drawings of dense groups of human faces. All of his subjects appear to be yearning to apprehend the world around them — and to share their understanding of its mysteries, which they embody, in a silent, spirit-to-spirit way.

Speaking of the spiritual, Andrew Edlin has just become the U.S. representative of the works of the French artist Marcel Storr (1911-1976), whose images of futuristic fantasy worlds offer ziggurat-like towers and what look like Angkor Wat temples on steroids. Very rarely seen in public, some of Storr's paintings were shown at the Hayward Gallery in London last summer, in the exhibition *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*. The stuff of legend among outsider art collectors, they will be among Edlin's showcase pieces at the fair.

The New York dealer [Luise Ross](#), long a champion of some of the most offbeat work by self-taught artists, will show pieces by the American Gayleen Aiken (1934-2005), a Vermonter who filled countless notebooks with diaristic pencil-and-crayon images and jottings that document a now mostly vanished way of life.

New York's [Ricco/Maresca Gallery](#) will present a batch of works that have never been shown before, including new ink-on-paper abstractions by the Japanese artist Hiroyuki Doi; spare pencil drawings of simplified flowers, trees, cars, and bottles, among other objects, by

the Austrian Günther Schützenhöfer; mixed-media drawings by the autistic savant George Widener; and an enamel-on-Masonite painting, “Last Supper #4” (1986), by the Kentucky-born artist William Hawkins (1895-1990). A onetime truck driver and brothel operator, Hawkins once observed, “You have to do something wonderful, so people know who you are.” Of today’s mainstream-meets-non-mainstream trend, this gallery’s co-director, Frank Maresca, says, “In fact, this is what we’ve been aiming for since we started 34 years ago, a blurring of the lines between the categories. But the market likes and needs labels. Still, over time, use of the term ‘outsider’ helped to marginalize work in that field. We’re interested in works that can truly be described as ‘fine art,’ no matter who makes them.”

Artist-entrepreneur Scott Ogden, one of the organizers of the Satellite Show, which will make its debut next week, says, “There is an increasing amount of crossover within the art world in both directions — self-taught artists are now regularly included in important contemporary exhibitions, and trained artists are more than ever looking at the work of unschooled artists for inspiration. The Satellite Show will highlight these intersections.”



Ike E. Morgan, “Untitled” (date unknown), oil on paper, each piece 12 x 9 in (courtesy of MAKE/Make Skateboards, New York)

The Satellite Show’s other organizers include filmmaker Malcolm Hearn (who, with Ogden, produced and directed the 2011 film, “Make,” about four American self-taught artists), the independent curator Cara Zimmerman and the experienced art fair producer Emily Christensen. Under their guidance, the Satellite Show aims to deliver a dose of fresh attitude. Admission to this new fair will be free; don’t expect elitist categories of VIP “guests” and overpriced flutes of champagne. That the [Webb Gallery](#) of Waxahachie, Texas, near Dallas, will be taking part in the Satellite Show says a lot about its anticipated vibe. Dealers Bruce and Julie Webb are well-known in the folk art and outsider art fields for showing everything from carnival banners and fraternal-lodge paraphernalia to the self-taught painter Ike E. Morgan’s portraits of U.S. presidents, rendered with icing-thick brushstrokes. Worth watching out for at the Satellite Show: works by the New York street artists Shin Shin and Wing; Morgan’s rarely seen erotic images in oil on paper; abstract, mixed-media collages by the contemporary German artist Albert Oehlen; and punk rocker-painter Daniel Higgs’s polymorphic abstractions in watercolor, gouache and ink on paper.

Of the new fair, where participants will not have individual booths, Christensen says, “Installed salon-style, diverse works of art will be in dialog with but not crowded out by one another. The Satellite Show’s exhibitors will be looking forward to having conversations with visitors in a relaxed environment in which art can be seen — and remembered.”

Or, as Hearn puts it, recognizing that, in the art world today, what was once “outside” is now “inside,” and hinting that blurring borders may well entail its own risks (perhaps, for example, that of flattening out some distinctions that really might be worth preserving), “If we’re lucky,

we'll be able to offer something that is increasingly elusive — a surprise.”

[The Outsider Art Fair](#) *will take place at Center 548 (548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) from May 8 through May 11.*

[The Satellite Show](#) *will take place at RePopRoom (527 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) from May 7 through May 11.*