

Saturday, February 2nd, 2013

In From The Cold: The Outsider Art Fair

by David Cohen



Works by John Byam are on view at Andrew Edlin Gallery through March 16 and at the Outsider Art Fair 2013, January 31 to February 3, Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery

After several recent years of rather lethargic instalments in less-than-inspiring surroundings, the [Outsider Art Fair](#) received a double adrenalin shot this year with a new proprietor, in the person of Chelsea dealer Andrew Edlin, and a sparkling new venue, the former Dia Arts building at 548 West 22nd Street.

Founded in 1993, the fair took place for many years in SoHo's Puck Building where aficionados were introduced to the likes of James Castle and Bill Traylor, and a host of novel or familiar images by self-taught and otherwise marginalized individuals. Startlingly inventive, sometimes obsessive-compulsive, sometimes childlike objects and images would conform to art lovers' longings for an art of inner necessity implicitly deemed missing in the work of the mainstream professionals.

The whole discourse of "outsider" is arguably turned around in an art world where academic training has largely dispensed with formal skill sets and where artists are encouraged to dwell upon their obsessions or aspects of their identity that makes them "other." But this doesn't make anyone an outsider. Nor does it seem to rob the genuine outsiders of their authenticity.

Still, the very definition of outsider clearly isn't what it used to be. Take Vahakn Arslanian. His "outsider" status is not, apparently, compromised by his attending SVA, nor by his father being an art collector and his coach, from age 5, being his dad's Hamptons neighbor Julian Schnabel (whose son, Vito, presents Arslanian at the fair.) The childlike, "visionary" intensity of the deaf artists seems to be what defines him as an outsider.



Besides Schnabel, the new line up also now includes galleries like Feature, showing tantric artworks by unnamed artists—gorgeous works for sure, but also likely to open a can of worms as a category that is already problematic within western art is applied to works from a non-western religious culture with such different aesthetic criteria.

Theoretical caveats notwithstanding, the fair bursts with color and expressive energy. Among many exhibits to watch out for are an exhibition of a dozen photographs by Mario Del Curto, curated by art historians Céline Muzelle and Valérie Rousseau, presented on the second floor of the fair; works by African-American painter Winfred Rembert, presented by Peter Tillou and Kinz + Tillou Fine Art; and exquisite woodcarvings by Edlin's own recent discovery, John Byam, sometime gravedigger and trailer park attendant, who continues to make work at an assisted living facility in upstate New York.

The Outsider Art Fair 2013. January 31 to February 3, 2013 at 548 West 22nd Street at the West Side Highway. Continues Saturday, 11 am to 8 pm and Sunday, 11 am to 6 pm.

Winfred Rembert, Candy Soda, 2004. Dye on carved and tooled leather, 35 x 27 inches. Courtesy of Kinz + Tillou Fine