

"One of My Artists Is a Witch": New Outsider Art Fair Offers an Enchanting Mix



Will Ragozzino/BFAnyc.com
2013 Outsider Art Fair Preview Reception

by Rachel Corbett
Published: February 1, 2013

If the title of the [Outsider Art Fair](#) seems outdated, rest assured that the actual event has stayed surprisingly fresh. The fair's new owner, Chelsea dealer **Andrew Edlin**, debuted its 20th edition last night at the former **Dia** building at 548 West 22nd Street, also home to the **Independent** and **NADA** art fairs, and a vast improvement on its dreary old 34th Street digs.

"This is a place to show art," said Edlin of the new space, where he has invited 40 exhibitors to display work by artists who in some way operate on the periphery of the New York-centric, M.F.A.-driven art machine. Some are self-taught, work in folk-art traditions, or live in far-flung corners of the globe. Others simply match outsider-y descriptors like "eccentric visionary" or "reclusive savant."

For his booth, Edlin had brought a series of pocket-sized woodcarvings by **John Byam**, an artist whose resume lists stints as a gravedigger, “water boy,” and Korean War soldier. Edlin also had a gleefully creepy watercolor by the posterboy of American outsider art, **Henry Darger**, which had already been placed on hold 30 minutes into the preview.

That’s not surprising given the genre’s move toward the center in recent years. At last year’s **Whitney Biennial**, **Robert Gober** curated a popular mini-exhibition of paintings by poverty-stricken loner **Forrest Bess**, which spurred a sale of the artist’s work at **Christie’s**. And artists like **Bill Traylor** and **Martin Ramirez**, both represented at the fair, have become internationally recognized names, with the prices to match.

At this year’s fair, it’s clear that Edlin has embraced this attention, inviting “insider” dealers like **Vito Schnabel**, **Feature Inc.**, and **Laurel Gitlen** to highlight artists that they wouldn’t normally show. Schnabel brought works constructed from discarded airplane parts by the deaf and autistic artist **Vahakn Arslanian**, while Chelsea dealer **Gary Snyder** showed **Janet Sobel**’s crayon and drip paintings.

“I only show Janet Sobel at this fair,” said Snyder, a longtime participant who rarely exhibits her work at his gallery. “There’s more of an openness for it here.”

Still, Sobel’s work, acclaimed by the likes of **Clement Greenberg** and **Jackson Pollock**, is an easy sell compared to even more obscure, cabinet-of-curiosities-style presentations, like that of **Dallas Art Fair** founder **Chris Byrne**. Together with architecture historian **Julia Reyes Taubman**, Byrne displayed ceramic busts of murder victims sculpted by forensic facial reconstructionist **Frank Bender**, who worked for the FBI and “America’s Most Wanted” before his death in 2011.

Why bring them to an art fair? “This seemed like the right context for it — it’s dark,” said Byrne. “And he’s self-taught so that’s how we got in.” The heads aren’t for sale, but apparently “everyone wants to buy them,” according to Taubman. “Although I don’t know why you’d want them.”

For whatever reason, a few aesthetic threads bind many of the artists in this fair: crudely sketched animals, distorted faces, and obsessively detailed, hallucinatory patterns. Much of the most popular work, like that of Darger, constitutes visual storytelling, pictures that seem to invite a privileged glimpse into these intensely internalized minds.

Hudson, the one-named director of **Feature Inc.**, offered a peek into the truly remote with a series of Twombly-esque drawings done by the secluded Korwa tribe of India. “This seemed like an appropriate time to show them,” he said of the pictures, on sale for about \$4,000 apiece.

When asked why she decided to participate in the fair for the first time this year, Santa Fe dealer **Laura Steward** succinctly explained, “One of my artists is a witch,” referring to sculptor **Erika Wanenmacher**, a.k.a. **Ditch Witch**. “I like this fair because it’s more interested in people, in the artist’s minds.”

That was the logic behind **Kinz + Tillou Fine Art**’s decision to bring not only the beautiful dyed-leather compositions of **Winfred Rembert**, a former cotton-picker and belt maker from Georgia, but to bring Rembert himself. Happy to share his history, the artist explained the origins of his work from the booth: “I used to tell stories around the table at night and one day my wife said, ‘put the stories on the leather so they can be preserved.’” The resulting pictures now sell for tens of thousands. “It’s beyond anything I could ever imagine,” he said.

Personal narratives like this are at the heart of the fair — and are often prominently delineated in the wall texts. As a marketing platform, the tortured-artist mythologizing sometimes inches into sideshow territory (particularly in instances of artists with physical disabilities). But no one really seems to mind. The fair

brings to Chelsea a lot of art that might not otherwise be seen, and it creates a market for a lot of artists who might not otherwise get paid for what, it turns out, is often very deserving work.

by Rachel Corbett