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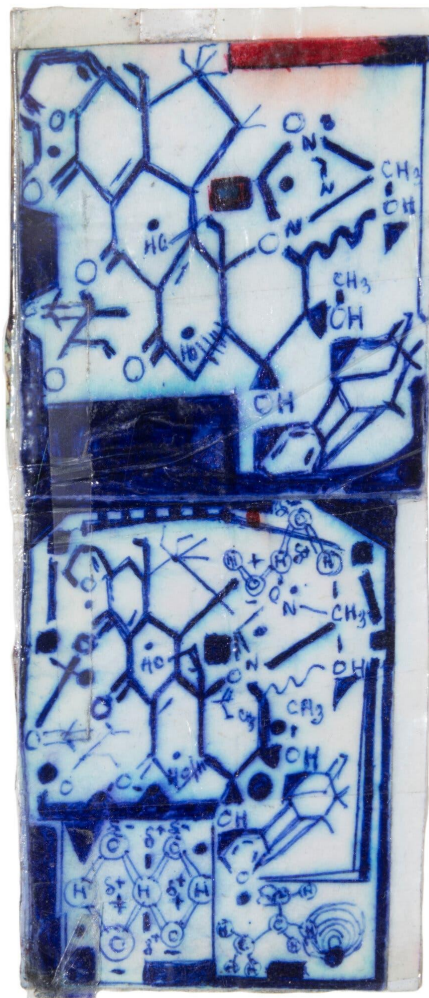
ART REVIEW

The Outsider Art Fair Returns, in Top Form

On the fair's 30th anniversary, a question hangs in the air: Has this genre been absorbed by the mainstream? What is 'outsider' when its greatest talents are in the canon?

By Roberta Smith

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Melvin Way's "Untitled (Woop)," 2014, mixed media, ballpoint pen on paper, Scotch tape. Melvin Way and BULLET SPACE/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

It has been two years since the Outsider Art Fair last gathered, over 60 galleries strong, at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Manhattan. But now it's back and the atmosphere is, not surprisingly, celebratory.

Dealers are happy to see each other again. Many participants are showing new material, works that are not well known or completely unknown. Ask them. And the more familiar works by anointed masters look fantastic in the bigger booths near the entrance: James Castle, Joseph Yoakum, William Hawkins, Martín Ramírez. These booths belong to veteran galleries like **Fleisher/Ollman (Booth A5)**, **Carl Hammer (B6)**, **Hirschl & Adler Modern (B8)** and **Ricco-Maresca (A11)** that are responsible for building the field, and part of outsider history too.

Yet at the same time, as with so many things post-Covid, the fair feels different, maybe a little tense. Where is all this going? This is the fair's 30th anniversary; it has been a tremendous success and all things concerning outsider art seem to be in motion, but is it simply going to be absorbed by the mainstream?

Its very definition has become more and more elastic, its separation from the "insider" art world blurred. What exactly is an outsider artist — who typically works in isolation without training and very little exposure to art — when the phenomenon is increasingly embraced by major galleries and museums and its greatest talents have entered the canon? It has become de rigueur for even non-major contemporary art galleries to represent at least one or two outsiders, as do relative newcomers to the fair like **Nicelle Beauchene (B10)**, **James Fuentes (D12)**, **Fierman (A9)** and **Situations (A10)**.

Outsider art could not be stopped. Once its greatness — and its market potential — was understood, the insider art world opened the flood gates and here we are. You could say that the outsider fair is fighting back by going a bit elastic itself in ways that will probably be debated — at least until 2023.

BOOTH A6

Bullet Space

The art of Melvin Way was discovered by Andrew Castrucci, the founder of Bullet Space, and introduced to the public at the first Outsider Art Fair. Way is a great artist undeterred by mental illness and his insistence on remaining homeless. His small ink drawings — nearly 30 of which are on view — are at once mysterious and highly suggestive. Their pulsing lines and numbers resemble a merger of mathematical equations, molecular models and computer circuitry as well as atomic structures — they also seem to chart the energy of thought itself.