

## At New York's Outsider Art Fair, Under-Recognized Figures Come in from the Margins

BY ANGELICA VILLA  March 1, 2024 4:52pm



Members of Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, 1983.

COURTESY CREATIVE GROWTH CENTER.

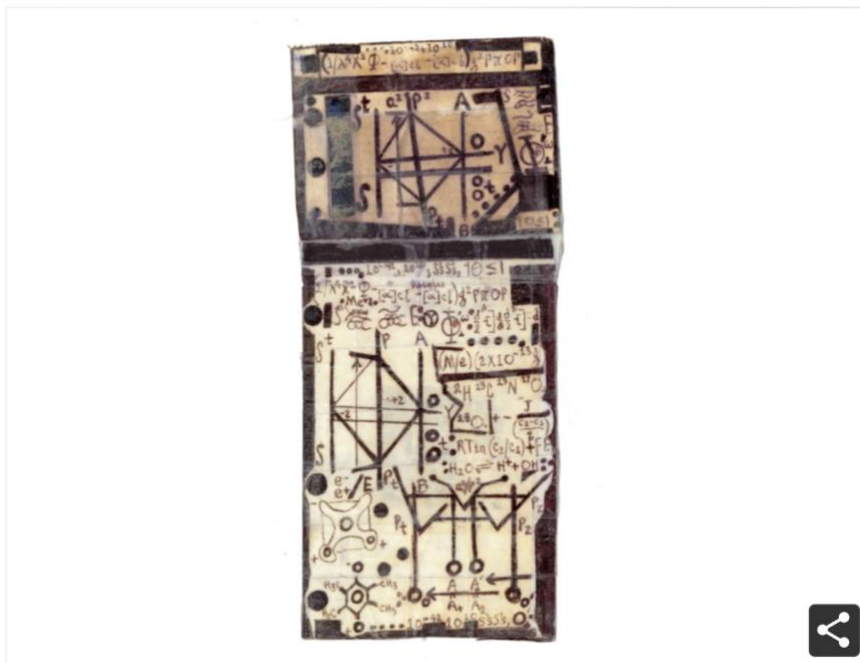
This year's edition of the Outsider Art Fair, held at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Chelsea, brought back to New York a group of dealers whose artists sometimes find themselves on the margins of the commercial art world.

These artists don't typically have the MFA degrees that are required for representation at blue-chip galleries. They are more likely to have members of the clergy, or to have been firefighters or houseless. But as this fair shows, these artists who are just worthy of study as the ones that pass through the nation's top art schools.

Those who show at this fair have spent decades working to bring to light these artists, who historically have not made into museums. Their work is now paying off.

During the fair's VIP preview day on Thursday, ARTnews spoke with several exhibitors about the artists they brought to the fair this year.

## 1 Melvin Way at Andrew Edlin Gallery



Melvin Way, *Institu*, n.d.

Photo : Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery.

Last month, Melvin Way, a self-taught artist who battled schizophrenia for most of his life, died at the age of 70. Since the mid-1980s, Way had produced detailed ballpoint pen drawings that combined musical notation, chemical formulas, and phrases that are often difficult to parse. Working on found pieces of paper, he often layered these drawings with Scotch tape. The drawings were kept guarded in Way's pockets as he moved between shelters in New York in the 1980s.

Born in South Carolina in 1954, he lived with relatives in Brooklyn, eventually leaving a technical school in Midtown before developing symptoms of mental illness in his 20s. He returned to South Carolina before his death, leaving behind a small cult following in New York.

Alongside Way, whose death brings a closer eye to his largely under-known story, Edlin brought another relatively obscure artist to the fair for the first time, a former firefighter named Dennis Gordon. Based in Upstate New York, Gordon builds meticulous models of desolate industrial landscapes. Asked how Edlin found about him, the dealer said it was the filmmaker Jim Jarmusch who made the introduction.

#### **4 Judith Scott at Creative Growth Center**



Judith Scott, *Untitled*, n.d.

Photo : Courtesy Creative Growth Center

Established by psychologist Elias Katz and educator Florence Ludins-Katz, the Creative Growth Center was founded in 1974 in Oakland, California. The idea behind it was to give disabled adults a place to produce art, and for some—like Judith Scott, a sculptor known for her objects cocooned in fibers—it became the starting point for them to flourish in unexpected ways. Scott was deaf and had Down syndrome, and as she was mostly non-verbal, she communicated through gestures. After coming to the center in the 1970s, she would go on to produce an impressive arrange of sculptures, binding and wrapping found objects in yarn. Ever since a Brooklyn Museum retrospective in 2014, Scott’s art has received acclaim in New York; her work continues to look great at this fair.