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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

"These artists were not making work to get dealers or critics or a curator." Anthony Haden-Guest at NYC's Outsider Art Fair

By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST March 16, 2025

The walkaround of this year's Outsider Art Fair in the Metropolitan Pavilion on East 18th Street was as energizing as ever, filled from aisle to aisle with eye-popping work. And these were as unlike as ever too, ranging from a carved wooden head by Moses Ogden, a Civil War veteran, to the micro-sculptures handcarved from peachstones a bit later in the 19th century by a Pennsylvania barber, AW Gimbi, at Marion Harris to sculptures fabricated from pipecleaners by Montrel Beverly in the Sage Studio space and drawings by Yaniel Agrafojo Sanchez at Cavin Morris, which he made with such finesse that they are indistinguishable from photographs.

Outsider art was first so-called because the artists came from outside the art system, were unschooled, self-taught. In the 1940s Jean Dubuffet, the French artist, introduced another concept, Art Brut, raw art, which included the work of children, individuals in jail and those with mental problems, who he would seek out in asylums and hospitals. He built up a collection of Art Brut and applied the term to his own work.

The pictorial intensity of such work earned it a growing following and in 1993 Sanford L. Smith, who had launched a number of fairs, opened the first [Outsider Art Fair](#) in New York. In 2103 it was bought by Andrew Edlin, a dealer who specialized in the field. This year I went on each of the fair's four days, speaking with several artists and finding that the forces that make for outsiderdom remain constant. As with Cynthia Sparrenberger whose strong white plaster sculptures were in the space of M. David, the Brooklyn gallery.

She began as a dancer. "I danced with the Washington Ballet in Washington DC," she said. She also studied design. "But I always loved sculpture and taught myself how to sculpt when I was about twenty". She then had a traumatic experience, which became known to a design teacher. He made a suggestion. "He said take charcoal and start moving it around on the page and see what happens. I did a drawing of a robot and a rabbit. I realized they were the two sides of my personality, that one was where you just keep going through the motions, not really feeling. And the rabbit is quiet and nervous. observing what you're going through."

Hence the alert bunny, entitled *Nietzsche*. It's a strong piece. Why is she an outsider artist? Why not mainstream?

"Maybe because I've never had the exposure. I just don't know," Sparrenberger said, adding "Some of the people that have collected my work have been through similar things. I think maybe that's why."

I wondered also what effect developments in the culture at large might be having on this world of obsessive loners. Outsider artists of times past seem seldom affected by museum and gallery art or artworld goings on but these days insider artworld stuff is everywhere in media. Two artists at the fair, for instance, referenced PEST CONTROL, the operation set up by Banksy to authenticate his work. The one at the Folk Artwork Collective space by Sara Lee, an Irish nurse working in London, also bears the text *This Could be The End for Us*.

Humor, an extreme rarity in New York art, does sometimes bubble in Outsider art, where even the hard-edged abstractions can look gleeful. It was with all such matters in mind I sat down with Andrew Edlin in his gallery where he had just opened a show of the striking work of a newly surfaced Outsider, Abraham Lincoln Walker.



Abraham Lincoln Walker

Edlin though was not fearful that the swelling wave of media artworld info would infect his world of loners, feeling that they were protected by their own obsessions. “Your idiosyncrasy is in itself an isolating factor,” he said “It’s not the physical isolation, it’s making art that is not in dialog with academic art and art history. That’s what makes the work feel so liberated. because if you go to Basel or Frieze you know all the artists being shown were exposed to more or less the same canon, the same array of techniques, the culture of the art world, the art schools. And they are very much consciously in dialog with one another. Their work is a combination of this influence with that influence, their own commentary on this movement or that movement. With the Outsider Art Fair or field is that’s not really part of the equation.”

Some galleries in the fair also show upon other genres of art, such as Van der Plas who mostly focus upon Street art, graffiti, but Andrew Edlin, who I first met when he was working on a show of the terrific hyperrealist, Joe Coleman, is a militant supporter of not just Outsider art but outsiderish behavior.

“Like so many other aspects of American life and culture the art world has become hyper commercialized,” Edlin says. “Most people just want to talk about money. How much did this sell for, how much did that sell for. Certainly we exist by selling work but none of this work was made with the market in mind. These artists were not making work to get dealers or critics or a curator.”

Or, he observes, even to get attention, Outsider artists not being given to the Here’s my slides, all my slides! routines with which anyone who frequents the artworld will be familiar.

“In the case of almost all these artists their work has been brought to the attention of the market or the public by a third party who deems the work valuable or interesting and is compelled to get it out there” he said. “ Because the artists themselves, that is not why they were making the work.”

Famously like Henry Darger, whose extraordinary drawings and watercolors of the Vivian Sisters and the 15,000 page text that told their story were discovered by his landlord, Nathan Lerner, in 1972 after Darger left for a retirement home. It just so happened that Lerner was himself an artist. He brought in curators and in 1977 Darger had his first show at the Hyde Park Art Center.

Thus also another Outsider great, Martin Ramírez, who was diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia in 1932 and committed to state hospitals, first in Stockton, and then at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn. He began to draw in the 1930s, using unlikely materials culled from hospital supplies. He worked until his death in 1963 making over 300 large-scale, mixed-media drawings, a body of work that would have been long gone but for the efforts of Dr Tarmo Pasto, a psychiatrist, who connected with him De Witt, supported him and showed his work.

And so too, Abraham Lincoln Walker, whose work is now up in the Andrew Edlin Gallery. “In the case of Abraham Lincoln Walker it was his son,” Edlin says. “The works were in a tractor trailer for thirty years. Finally he nearly died of covid and he worried that the work would never get any attention.” **WM**



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