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ART REVIEW; Untamed Art From the Fringes Is a Gust of Bracing Air

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If your ability to respond to art sometimes flags in the frozen depths of January, not to worry. A cure is close at hand: the Outsider Art Fair, packed into the ground floor of the majestic Puck Building in SoHo through Sunday. This small, no-frills fair is unvetted, uncarpeted and unspacious, but it gives the New York art world an annual dose of smelling salts. It seems timed to jolt back to full alertness your appreciation of the visual arts and their central role in the life of the spirit.


The 2005 fair is especially bracing, mostly for demonstrating that despite its rising popularity, outsider art is not going quietly into the mainstream. Yes, outsider masters from both sides of the Atlantic are being lauded and collected and are also influencing and inspiring younger artists by the score. It is impossible to imagine the art of the last 20 years without the outsider artists' disregard for distinctions between mediums and disciplines, their full-on involvement with materials, their penchant for idiosyncratic techniques.

But the field is still unruly and full of surprises, with a past that feels as expansive as its present. This year's fair is a shipping container full of Pandora's boxes: nearly all its 33 booths harbor an artwork or cluster of them that will surge out and grab your attention. Sometimes this art is by a familiar figure, which means that the fair once more provides a sampling of outsider art's greatest achievements that no American museum has mustered. But chances are equally strong that the aggressor will be a work by someone obscure, living or dead, and the effect is exhilarating.


Certain presentations heighten awareness of an entire field, like the display of four African-American quilts at Ricco/Maresca. These elegant, subtly colored geometries are accompanied by shelves holding 20 more quilts in archival boxes labeled with color photographs that are themselves almost worth the price of admission.

Next door, J.P. Ritsch-Fisch, a Paris gallery, is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a superb presentation of Art Brut classics by artists like Alo? and Auguste Augustin Lesage, but also the less known Giovanni Battista Podesta, a maker of ceramic masks admired by Jean Tinguely and Nikki de Saint-Phalle. Also notable is a younger obsessive from France who calls himself A.C.M. and works with found materials, fashioning a translucent castlelike structure out of tiny machine parts dipped in acid, and cataloging what appear to be chicken bones but are actually bits of chalk, carved with a pin and tinted with color. The chalk work is a feat of trompe l'oeil akin to the work of Tom Friedman.

At Luise Ross, Jean-Pierre Nadau (born 1963), another obsessive French artist, is impressively represented by "Grand Canal de Versailles," an imposing, tapestrylike ink drawing on canvas whose constantly permutating, seemingly uncorrected field of pattern, diagram and cartoon figures may depict the digestive system. Also good, if somewhat in the vein of Jean Dubuffet, is Jerome Pomp's red-and-blue portrait of his grandfather. Phyllis Kind, who has organized a country-by-country tour of outsider art, is introducing four young Japanese artists from Incurve, a community center in Osaka. The best is Shinki Tomoyuki, who uses a computer to render tussling malformed figures, reminiscent of the Hairy Who artists of Chicago.

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One of the fair's two most significant discoveries is at Carl Hammer, tucked among works by Joseph Yoakum, Eugene von Bruenchenhein and Henry Darger (a rare map of battle positions pertaining to Darger's epic "In the Realms of the Unreal"). These are fanciful architectural renderings, in pencil and colored pencil, by an Indiana recluse known as Jacques de D?ass (1931-2001) that Mr. Hammer found at a flea market last summer. In an effortless array of contrasting styles and details, they tenderly record the buildings of an imaginary town, Lynxbourg, Ind.

At Pure Vision Arts, take a first New York look at the small, subtly antic carved figures of Charlie Burleson, a retired Westinghouse salesman from Morganton, N.C., and the busy yet carefully ordered paintings by Brooks Yeomans, a developmentally disabled adult, also from Morganton, who depicts crowded public gatherings (an outsider art fair and a three-ring circus). These add credibly to a folk tradition dating to Grandma Moses, whose work can be seen nearby, at St. Etienne. Also good at Pure Vision are the painters William Britt and Harold Crowell. And across the aisle at American Primitive is another talented sculptor, Ted Ludwiczak, who retired from the contact-lens business about 15 years ago and, while building a retaining wall, began carving the stones with faces imbued with an otherworldly medieval grace.

This year's show stays good right to the final wall, where you will find Luis Millingalli's radiant intensifications of Ecuadorean tourist paintings at Grey Carter, and, nearby, clusters of work by such inimitables as David Butler (at Gilley's), Melvin Way (Norman Brosterman) and Bill Woolf (Aaron Packer). Andrew Edlin has the leading candidate for best in show. This is "Keleti Station" (1980-90), possibly the first painting to be exhibited in this country by Willem van Genk, a Dutch outsider (born 1927). Mr. van Genk's consuming fascination with transportation is powerfully represented here by this densely worked multi-tiered amalgam of above- and below-ground panoramas; depicted are subways and train stations from around the world, New York included.

And at Henry Boxer, on a par with the work of D?ass, by which I mean high, are the drawings of George Widener, a British mathematical savant in his 40's, who covers surfaces made of tea-stained paper napkins with profusions of numbers and words. The most magnificent of these reviews the sinking of the Titanic in considerable detail.

The Outsider Art Fair continues through Sunday at the Puck Building, Houston and Lafayette Streets, SoHo. Hours: today, noon to 8 p.m.; tomorrow, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission: \$15. Information: (212)777-5218.