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Unorthodox, Maybe, but Scarcely on the Fringe

The Outsider Art Fair Features a Global Vision

By KAREN ROSENBERG MAY 8, 2014

The Outsider Art Fair has officially outgrown its name. Once held in a Midtown office building during the doldrums of January, it relocated last year to the far more visible Center 548 in Chelsea, the former home of Dia Art Foundation, and also started a Paris edition. And this year, the show occupies a plum spot on the calendar, participating in the glut of early-May events known as Frieze Week — “a high holiday for the New York art world,” as Andrew Edlin, the art dealer and organizer of Outsider Art, writes in his introduction to the catalog.

Another factor in the robust health of this fair, perhaps, is the heightened presence of self-taught, folk and visionary artists in typically “insider” precincts of the art world: major surveys like the Venice Biennale and Documenta, as well as smaller group shows like the Hayward Gallery’s “Alternative Guide to the Universe” in London and the Studio Museum in Harlem’s current exhibition “When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South.”

Not surprisingly, the number of booths at the fair has jumped to 47 from 40, 10 of which belong to first-time exhibitors. And the global reach of the big contemporary art fairs is mirrored here more than in previous years; artists from Brazil, Iran, India, Japan and various African countries accompany relatively well-known Americans like Henry Darger and Bill Traylor.

At the booth of Yukiko Koide Presents, from Tokyo, the abstract drawings of the developmentally disabled artist Yuichi Saito mesmerize with their cloudlike accumulations of calligraphic marks. At Galeria Estação, a São Paulo gallery, the paintings of the farmer turned artist Alcides present trucks, speedboats and other conveyances in a vivid, streamlined style that seems conversant with Brazil’s history of Neo-Concrete abstraction.

Galerie Hervé Perdriolle, from Paris, has an eye-catching display of

Indian scroll paintings, made and used by traveling storytellers whose names are not known to us. And another French exhibitor, Galerie Degbomey, has packed its small booth to the gills with frenetic drawings and sculptures by Rahim Issaka from Niger, Jeancy Nsumbu from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other contemporary African artists. Mr. Nsumbu's brightly hued cardboard and paper sculptures, in particular, dazzle with techno-futuristic touches and references to Congolese fashion subcultures such as the "Sapeurs of Kinshasa."

Also new to this fair is the "curated space" of Baumann & Muksian, organized by Daniel Baumann, the curator of the 2013 Carnegie International, and the San Francisco artist Aram Muksian. Drawings of muscular female wrestlers by the Ohio recluse Lewis Smith on brown paper bags, ink and scrapings on vintage magazines from the Mexican tattoo artist Dr. Lakra, and collages that abound with formulas and pentagrams by the Californian metaphysical researcher John Urho Kemp have been installed on wallpaper by Sarah Lucas.

The wallpaper shows cigarettes arranged in breastlike shapes and brings out the erotic humor of some of the drawings. And the installation asks us to reject our criteria for "outsider" and "insider" status; what, for instance, should we make of Ms. Lucas, who first emerged as a Young British Artist alongside other art-school graduates and will represent Britain next year at the Venice Biennale, but who has a tendency to take shots at her macho peers? The booth of Galerie St. Etienne poses similarly questions, with works by the father and son duo Ilija and Dimitrije Basicovic (who made art under the names Ilija Bosilj and Mangelos).

The father, a peasant who worked in the remote Serbian village of Shid, was the putative outsider. His Ph.D.-holding son, meanwhile, was an art critic typically seen in an international, conceptual-art context. The display at St. Etienne eschews generational and educational distinctions, calling attention to shared traits of contrarianism and experiences of war. (A more extensive exhibition, "Ilija/Mangelos: Father and Son, Inside and Out," is at its gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan, through July 3.)

Other, subtler outsider-insider connections arise in the work of well-known artists like Martin Ramirez, whose drawings of madonnas and caballeros surrounded by topsy-turvy architecture are at Ricco/Maresca; Joseph Yoakum, whose landscapes at two Chicago galleries, Carl Hammer and Karen Lennox, should appeal to Chicago Imagist and George R. R. Martin fans

alike; and William Hawkins, whose enamel paintings appear at multiple booths. (An especially bold depiction of a motor house in his home base of Columbus, Ohio, enhanced by a relief element of a smokestack, is at the Just Folk booth.)

In cases where the artists are relatively unknown, as with the quietly revelatory drawings on hospital stationery of the mid-20th-century mental patient James Edward Deeds (at Hirschl & Adler Modern) or the inspired re-workings of Donald Duck and other Disney figures by the New Zealand contemporary artist Susan Te Kahurangi King (at Chris Byrne & Marquand Books), the exhibitors have provided detailed biographies. Documentaries and videos of the artists at work can be seen at a few of the booths; that's something you won't often find at the big contemporary fairs, where familiarity with the artists and their processes is too often assumed.

Another assumption questioned at this edition of the Outsider Art Fair is that the word "outsider" must be retained for branding purposes. The fair's website helpfully traces this word back to the Art Brut champion and author Roger Cardinal around 1972, acknowledging that it was most often applied to art by "psychotics, mediums and eccentrics." So the next logical step for this increasingly high-profile fair might be to coin a term for the kind of resourceful, sometimes untutored, always unfettered creativity that is now recognized by art lovers everywhere.

The Outsider Art Fair continues through Sunday at Center 548, 548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; 212-337-3338; outsiderartfair.com.

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