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ENTERTAINMENT

Sunday, February 4, 2007

Entering the Mainstream

Fair shows that art once categorized as outsider has graduated to a seat at the big table

By Tom Patterson
JOURNAL COLUMNIST

NEW YORK - So-called outsider art, originally defined in opposition to the work of university-trained artists, has taken a prominent place in the contemporary art world. The aesthetic and cultural lines separating outsider and insider art have become so blurred that the distinction has been rendered almost meaningless.

Nonetheless, outsider art - or folk, self-taught, vernacular and/or visionary art - continues to be a separate field of study, commerce and commentary. And the field is thriving, judged by this year's Outsider Art Fair, which took place in New York the last week of January.

The fair's 15th installment, like those before it, brought a select group of art galleries from around the world to the Puck Building in SoHo. At their fair booths, these galleries offered works by the field's

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most widely known artists to several thousand collectors, at prices ranging from \$50 into the high five figures.

As always, internationally famous outsiders such as Adolf Wolfli and Henry Darger were represented by several galleries. Also prominently featured were works by more widely known artists from the South, such as Minnie Evans, Howard Finster and Mose Tolliver, who died recently.

Two Winston-Salem artists - William Fields and Mark Casey Milestone - were well represented this year. New York's Luise Ross Gallery showed two of Fields' striking, panoramic drawings of multi-faceted spirit beings in otherworldly landscapes. Three of Milestone's paintings and four smaller drawings - all depicting female figures in fanciful settings suggesting fables or fairy tales - were on view at the booth of Grey Carter, a dealer from McLean, Va., who also exhibited one of Fields' drawings.

This year's fair also featured a substantial number of miniature works or works that incorporated miniaturized details. Examples included Ray Materson's embroidered narrative scenes at New York's American Primitive Gallery; and Domenico Zindato's richly colored figure drawings and Hiroyuki Doi's monochromatic abstract drawings, represented by New York's Phyllis Kind Gallery.

Other noteworthy pieces with miniaturized details included the dense abstract drawings of Nick Blinko at Britain's Henry Boxer Gallery and the quirky, compact assemblages of an artist who bills himself as "2-A.C.M.," on view courtesy of Ritsch-Fisch Galerie, Strasbourg, France. Made of corroded-looking computer circuitry and other electronic components augmented with brightly colored paint, the latter works incorporate lots of tiny forms resembling birds and small animals.

Some of the fair's most intriguing and challenging art was at the booth of New York's Cavin-Morris Gallery. Highlights included Kevin Blythe Sampson's memorial assemblage in the form of a sailing ship; claustrophobically composed, anatomically based drawings by Lubos Piny; densely crowded narrative drawings by Timothy Wehrle and dystopian cityscapes by Chris Hipkiss.

Highlights at other galleries included Charles Steffen's figure drawings on butcher



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paper (Russell Bowman Gallery, Chicago) and Joel Lorand's drawings intermingling plant and humanoid forms (Henry Boxer Gallery, Richmond Hill, United Kingdom). Also noteworthy were drawings by Abdella RamRam (Berenberg Gallery, Boston) and J.J. Cromer (Grey Carter, McLean, Va.). Although RamRam is from Morocco and Cromer from Virginia, their work has much in common, including a strong graphic line and predominantly black-and-white color schemes.

The prevailing mood at this year's fair was upbeat. All the dealers I talked with reported healthy sales, and collectors seemed pleased with the array of offerings, as well as the prices, which increase each year. And everyone seemed happy with the high standard of artistic quality. That can be tricky to manage in a field where art is often marketed on the basis of its "back story" and the alleged social marginality of its creators, rather than its own artistic merits.

About 12 subway stops uptown from the Puck Building, the American Folk Art Museum presented a series of programs in connection with the fair. Some of them were also thematically connected to the museum's current Martin Ramirez retrospective. Ramirez (1895-1963), a Mexican immigrant who spent his last 30 years in a California mental institution, has been long recognized as one of the outsider-art field's most important artists. This groundbreaking show sheds much new light on his work and is on view through April 29. The show was organized by Brooke Davis Anderson, the director-curator of the museum's Contemporary Center (also a former director of Winston-Salem State University's Diggs Gallery). The museum is at 45 W. 53rd St. For more information, call (212) 265-1040.

The museum's annual "Uncommon Artists" symposium has been a highlight of Outsider Art Fair weekend since the beginning. This year's symposium featured an informative and insightful talk on Ramirez by Victor Espinosa, a Mexican sociologist specializing in immigration history and a co-author of the exhibition catalog with Anderson.

Outsider-art aficionados who missed this year's fair but who will be traveling to New York before the Ramirez show closes will definitely want to see it.

Also of interest will be the art on view at any of the New York galleries that specialize in outsider art, including Andrew Edlin Gallery, Galerie St. Etienne and Ricco Maresca - all represented at the fair.

- To request advance information on next year's Outsider Art Fair, call the fair's sponsor, Sanford L. Smith & Associates, at (212) 777-5218.

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