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ART REVIEW | OUTSIDER ART FAIR

A Convocation of the Visionary and Disenfranchised

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Now in its 15th round, the robust extravaganza known as the Outsider Art Fair might almost be called Establishment. To be sure, compared with uptown fairs it's still a little short on amenities: no carpets, no-frills booths, a loosey-goosey layout. But this annual event at the Puck Building has longevity and staying power, and its now-classic artists — among them Henry Darger, Bill Traylor, Joseph E. Yoakum, Adolf Wölfli, Scottie Wilson, Howard Finster, James Castle and Elijah Pierce, to name a few — keep returning. (Martín Ramírez, who is starring uptown in a major retrospective at the American Folk Art Museum, appears here, too, at several dealers' booths.)



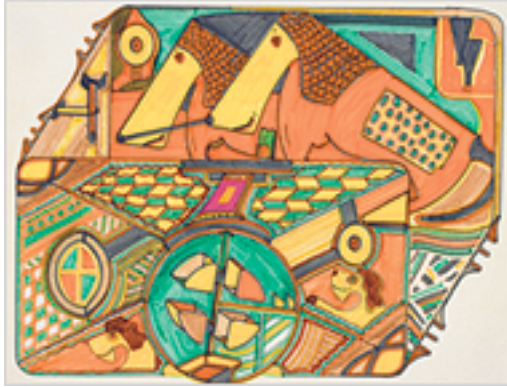
Galerie St.
Etienne

“Untitled (Birds, Fish and Flowers)”

(about 1960), by Scottie Wilson

Yet the fair's content, wayward, eccentric and visionary, remains as anti-Establishment as can be. Organized by Sanford L. Smith & Associates, the fair is devoted to autodidacts discovered in out-of-the-way places or circumstances, often not even aware their work might be called art. This year, they are represented by 33 dealers from the United States, Europe and Asia.

Aside from its stellar sellers, the fair keeps drawing in fresh talents, and this is one of its better years for new discoveries and artists



Luise Ross Gallery

An untitled work by Thomas Burleson, an aircraft parts inspector.

known but not previously shown here. For starters there is Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950), the Russian dancer, whose career was ended in 1919 by schizophrenia. In and out of hospitals for the rest of his life, he created a small body of works on paper during his early years of psychosis, 10 of which are on view at Ricco/Maresca.

Variations on the form of a giant eye or perhaps a celestial body, their intense reds and blacks are sometimes inflected by white, with globe and crescent forms arranged in various configurations. (It has been suggested that they are a sort of dance choreography.)

Like Nijinsky's, much of the work here gives the word obsessive a new dimension, like the embroidered creations and drawings at Galerie St. Etienne by Rosa Zharkikh. A former factory worker in Moscow, she was inspired by visions after a near-death experience. In dense, weblike tangles, with different-colored skeins representing various states of consciousness in Tibetan philosophy, she tries to replicate the flowery costumes she sees in her dreams, and often includes hidden self-portraits and symbolic images.

Working on brown paper bags with colored pencil, Charles Steffen (1927-1995), an artist from Illinois afflicted with schizophrenia, toiled away at home, producing two or three drawings a day. Gnarled but expressive representations of everyday life, they include self-portraits, his bedridden mother, the bank teller who cashed his Social Security checks, flowers from his yard, scenes from a state hospital where he had undergone treatment.

Drawing the same subjects over and over, he experimented from time to time by merging his figures with renderings of plants and tar or tobacco stains he saw on the sidewalk, sometimes combining male and female figures. The works make a poignant showing at Russell Bowman Art Advisory.

Particularly challenging is the art of George Widener (born 1962), who has Asperger's syndrome and is widely known as a savant. He makes art from thousands

of bits of information stored in his memory relating to dates, statistics and census numbers. The Henry Boxer Gallery from Richmond, England, shows his “Megalopolis 123,” in ink on found paper. It is one of his “Magic Time Squares,” a powerful puzzler combining a view of a sprawling city with mysterious calendar dates.

Among its newer artists, Cavin-Morris Gallery displays the wonderful drawings of Timothy Wehrle, a 27-year-old Iowan whose precise, intricate narratives in colored pencil are filled with repetitively patterned detail reflecting both personal and worldly thoughts. His “White Devil Diplomats (the Gift),” for instance, shows 19th-century envoys to Indian tribes bestowing blankets infected with smallpox on Plains Indians.

On the lighter side are the drawings by Karl Vondal, shown at the booth of the Galerie der Künstler, a showcase for people with psychiatric disabilities in Austria that is making its debut at the fair. Mr. Vondal, who lives at the so-called House of Artists there, shows his appreciation of zaftig young women in lively erotic drawings and wordy collages, depicting them alone or, in one case, playing a football match.

At the Phyllis Kind Gallery, the walls are brightened by the colorful work of Mitsuo Yumoto, a Japanese artist Ms. Kind first showed at the fair in 2005. Entranced by buildings of every sort, from far-off palaces to envisioned mansions to rickety huts, he draws them rapidly, then fills them in with brilliantly expressive colors that suggest a psychedelic glow.

Color has a sensuous presence, too, in the far more complex work of Thomas Burleson (1914-1997) at the Luise Ross Gallery. Working as a shipping inspector of aircraft parts, sometimes creating art on the job, he drew on a rich vocabulary of enigmatic forms. Diagrammatically, with resonant repetitions and a touch of humor, he successfully mixes animals and birds with mechanical forms.

Among the more accessible works are those of two semirealist painters, James Allen at the Judy A. Saslow Gallery and Alexander Lobanov at Galerie Susanne Zander. Mr. Allen, 23, who works at Project Onward, an open studio for artists with special needs in Chicago, makes large, finely observed colored-pencil drawings of the movement of trains — elevated cars careering along the New York subway system, a calmer locomotive engine puffing along a track.

Mr. Lobanov (1924-2003), who was deaf and mute and confined in his youth to a Russian psychiatric hospital, was fascinated by guns, pistols and military and Soviet symbols. He paints himself holding a fancy rifle in a duck blind, seemingly agitated as two sportsmen behind him aim at flying birds. For all its naïveté, the painting, like the better works at this irascible hodge-podge of a fair, is genuinely affecting.

The Outsider Art Fair continues through Sunday at the Puck Building, Lafayette and Houston 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. Information: (212) 777-5218.