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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Outsider Art Fair

By KEN JOHNSON

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The Outsider Art Fair, now in its 11th year, looks better than ever this year, with the percentage of phony and kitschy material way down from a few years ago. If you feel a mystic thrill when in the presence of something that appears to have come from another dimension of psychic time and space, you should drop in.

As usual, most of the stars of this still young firmament are represented -- Martin Ramirez, Adolf Wolfli, Howard Finster, Bill Traylor, to mention a few -- as well as some intriguing newcomers. It is interesting to note, however, that while the show's overall quality is up, few of the big names are represented by major works. Maybe dealers are waiting to see how the auction of Robert M. Greenberg's outsider art collection, scheduled for Monday at Christie's, will affect prices.

One artist who is impressively represented, at Carl Hammer and Galerie St. Etienne, is Henry Darger, the famous Chicago recluse and visionary storyteller. Looking at his panoramic landscapes populated by naked, sexually ambiguous children, one becomes convinced that Darger belongs in a league of his own. Outsiders tend to be captured by limited kinds of technique, ideas and imagery, which they push to unusual extremes. Darger, by contrast, not only had an epic tale to tell but was also

an extraordinarily resourceful and articulate constructor of pictorial space. Forget the pedophilia, sadomasochism and apocalyptic violence; look at the way he worked with shifts of scale and relations between foreground, background and middle distances; how he played with repetition and structured his episodic events across scroll-like bands of paper. Formally, even the most compelling outsiders can look monotonous by comparison.

One of the things that keeps the Outsider Fair from getting old is the always tantalizing possibility of discovering someone previously unknown. The autistic Midwesterner James Castle was introduced to the greater art world here a few years ago, and his work became a crossover hit. The most arresting find this year is Pearl Blauvelt at K. S. Art. A box of drawings by this reclusive Pennsylvania woman was recently discovered by artists who moved into her house years after she had gone to a nursing home. In the 1940's and 50's, on sheets of blue-lined loose-leaf notebook paper, Blauvelt copied objects from catalogs, drew furniture, rooms and houses and made pictures of stocky doll-like people.

Superficially her drawing is primitive, but it has rich, densely hatched and smoothly burnished surfaces and subtly muted colors. Most remarkable is her X-ray vision. In many drawings are elements that would normally be invisible, like interior parts of buildings and people's underclothes and tubular limbs. Blauvelt was not as formally and technically adventurous as Castle, but her art seems similarly driven by an urgent need to make sense of reality, and its effect is deeply touching.

The Outsider Fair is open today, noon to 8 p.m.; tomorrow, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is \$15. Information: (917) 237-1495. KEN JOHNSON