

At the Art Fair Where Outsiders Are Always In

By PIA CATTON

Free from the weight of academic study and art history, so-called "outsider artists" operate with a certain cachet: they create in whatever form and with whatever method that moves them. Trained artists may claim to do the same, but they can become jet-setting sensations by breaking rules. When outsiders break rules, they do it without knowing that rules exist.



Andrew Edlin Gallery

Andrew Edlin, the new owner of the Outsider Art Fair.

"Part of contemporary art is always questioning the idea of insider status, personal politics and the significance of authorship," said Laurel Gitlen, owner of the eponymous gallery on Norfolk Street. This week, Ms. Gitlen, who focuses on emerging, contemporary art, will host her first booth at the annual Outsider Art Fair, which begins with a Thursday preview and runs through Sunday.

Founded in 1993 by Sanford L. Smith, the fair was purchased last year by art dealer Andrew Edlin, who specializes in outsider art and who has exhibited at the fair for about 10 years.

Though definitions vary, "outsider art" (or "art brut" in the original French) is generally that created by people without formal training. Work in the genre tends

to project a raw sincerity and originates far outside the mainstream.

"Generally, they are works made by marginalized people," said art historian Valérie Rousseau, who organized the fair's panel discussions. "They are in hospitals or on the streets or outsiders in their communities."

In his first year at the helm of the Outsider Art Fair, Mr. Edlin intends to erase boundaries between contemporary art and outsider art. "More and more contemporary art dealers are adding outsider artists to their rosters," he said. He has brought the fair closer to the art-world hub of Chelsea by moving it from Midtown to 548 West 22nd St., the former home of the Dia Art Foundation. A program of panel discussions features one devoted directly to contemporary art, "A Bridge Between Art Worlds," with Massimiliano Gioni, the associate director and head of exhibitions at the New Museum.

Ms. Rousseau said interest in outsider art from the contemporary world is cyclical, and often driven by established artists who find outsider artwork compelling. "Sometimes we don't hear about it for 10 years. Then these artists are included in major shows," she said.

Of the fair's 40 dealers, 10 are showing for the first time, including Ms. Gitlen, who is bringing the protest drawings of the self-taught artist Michael Patterson-Carver. Some are simple ink-on-cardboard signs that he holds in public. "He thinks of himself as an activist," she said. "Sometimes the work is about historical protest. He is an optimist. The protestor is always right, so they're always smiling."

Also at the fair for the first time is contemporary-art dealer Vito Schnabel, who is showing the work of Vahakn Arslanian, a largely self-taught artist who was born deaf.

"One way he dealt with that was making art. He was making art at a very young age," said the dealer, whose father, Julian Schnabel, encouraged Mr. Arslanian's career.

Windows, broken glass and unconventional materials are often a part of his pieces. "Vahakn is an interesting bridge between contemporary and outsider art," Vito Schnabel said. "There are no lies in his art."

One former contemporary-art-world denizen, Laura Steward, who from 2005 to 2010 ran SITE Santa Fe, a contemporary exhibition space in New Mexico, recently switched from curating to selling art. By bringing two artists' work to the Outsider Art Fair, she's also reconnecting with a field she felt was bogged down with theory and overly cerebral efforts: "I love conceptual art as much as the next person," she said, "but at a certain point, the concepts lose their resonance if you have to spend all the time reading the wall label."

One of the artists with whom she's now working, Thomas Ashcraft, is a self-taught astronomer who makes coins for currency in the "interzone"—which you may need if you are shifting between multiple layers of reality. The market for imaginary currency may take some nurturing, but when buyers are open to off-kilter ideas, Ms. Steward said, responses tend to be open and interested, "[Mr. Ashcraft's] work is bizarre by any measure," she said, "but it's sincere."