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## Art & Design

ART REVIEW | OUTSIDER ART FAIR

### A Survey of a Field Hard to Define



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Drawings by Bill Traylor at the Just Folk gallery in the Outsider Art Fair at 7 West 34th Street.

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The Outsider Art Fair is running this weekend, which makes this as good a time as any to ask, what exactly is an outsider artist? Judging by those represented by the fair's 38 dealers, the answer isn't simple. They are an exceedingly diverse bunch.

For one thing, not all outsiders are uneducated. Morton Bartlett (1902-1992), who created amazingly lifelike, anatomically correct mannequins of teenage and younger girls in the 1950s, attended Harvard. Eerie black-and-white photographs of some of his inappropriately sexualized dolls, made from negatives of his own photographs, can be seen at Marion Harris's booth. And another onetime Harvard student, also with erotic interests, was Malcolm McKesson (1909-1999), who majored in art

history. His mysterious, Seurat-like ink drawings of ghostly figures don't seem particularly perverse, but he made them to illustrate a semiautobiographical, pornographic novel about a young man who submits himself to a dominatrix. It is called "Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage," and Henry Boxer has copies you can look at, as well as several drawings.

Sometimes, though, outsidersness does imply some kind of deficit: many outsiders, for example, have spent time in psychiatric hospitals. Martin Ramirez, whose elegantly patterned, linear drawings of cowboys, trains, tunnels and mountain landscapes can be found at several booths, was hospitalized for most of his adult life.

Others suffer from some form of autism or lack average intellectual abilities; Judith Scott, whose widely admired bulbous yarn sculptures are on display in more than one booth, had Down syndrome. But of course there are plenty of people with those problems who are not artists, so clearly there is something more going on here, and perhaps some more positive feature that all the outsiders share.

The term visionary applies to some, but not all outsiders who depict wildly imaginative visions. Bill Traylor (1854?-1949), represented by a display of 11 drawings at Just Folk, made wonderfully stylish, simplified watercolors representing animals and people, but nothing about the drawings suggests that he was inspired by anything more than ordinary, real-world observations or memories.

The work of some outsiders is close enough to mainstream art that you may wonder what qualifies them. Holly Farrell (born in 1961), a self-taught Canadian artist at Berenberg Gallery, makes exacting, realist paintings of objects like bow ties, little girl's dresses and a green armchair. With their glassy surfaces, they seem mildly idiosyncratic, but if you saw them in a Chelsea gallery, you would not necessarily peg their creator as an outsider.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-83) is another borderline case. A resident of Milwaukee, he was eccentric but far from unsophisticated. Visitors familiar with his semiabstract, cosmic-apocalyptic paintings and erotic photographs of his wife may be surprised to discover his delicate ceramic vases at Cavin-Morris. Made of leaflike pats of clay and glazed in visceral pinks and aqua blue, they might be cousins of vessels by the great maverick potter George Ohr.

Many works in the show exhibit that quality of focused industry commonly but usually inaccurately called obsessive. The gorgeous colored-ink drawings of Eugene Andolsek (1921-2008) at American Primitive, for instance, might be so described. Andolsek said drawing his centered mandalas of wondrous complexity and luminosity was a way to relieve unbearable anxiety — a kind of self-hypnosis. But making art can serve that purpose for professionals too. So while Andolsek was isolated from mainstream art culture, his work does not suggest anything like the strangeness of mind animating the art of, for example, Henry Darger, who populated his violent narrative pictures with naked little girls with penises.

For something else truly weird, have a look at the formal portrait of a woman in a long white dress by Drossos P. Skyllas (1912-1973) at Ricco/Maresca. It is painted in a quasi-academic, classical style, but the more you study it, the more bizarre it seems. The zaftig woman stands next to a voluptuous bouquet of roses in a vase on a mantelpiece, and in front of a portrait of another woman — or, perhaps, herself — hanging on the wall. Yet the woman in the painting within the painting seems as alive as the woman in front. It is as if she were looking in from a window. Magritte would be envious.

Pearl Blauvelt was an outsider in the most complete sense of the word. In the small Pennsylvania town where she lived reclusively in a house without central heating or running water until the 1950s, she was known as the village witch. But the hundreds of drawings on notebook paper discovered in the house long after she died are more childlike than occult. Her carefully made pictures of clothes, furniture, buildings and invented pieces of paper money on view at Maxwell have a sweet, playful charm.

It seems that Blauvelt lived happily in a world of her own, blessedly oblivious to the rules of professional and academic fine art. Whether she really was content with her hermetic existence, no one will ever know, but her drawings make outsidership seem a state of grace.

*The Outsider Art Fair continues through Sunday at 7 West 34th Street; sanfordsmith.com.*