

ARTE FUSE

Believe the Hype! Outsider Art Fair 2016

The “Outsider Art” Fair 2016 opened last night at the Metropolitan Pavilion on West 18th Street, with 64 dealers hailing from 33 cities and 7 countries. Now in its 24th year, it continues to grow. After the first day, attendance is reportedly already up an impressive 50% over last year.

With the recent Christie’s exhibition “Liberation Through Expression: Outsider and Vernacular Art” where some “Outsiders” like artists Bill Traylor and Henry Darger are selling in the six figures, as well as curator Massimiliano Gioni’s inclusion of Outsider Art in the 2013 Venice Biennale – it’s a good time to take a closer look. True, there has been a buzz about “Outsider Art” for a long time, since art historian Roger Cardinal coined the phrase in 1972 and before that, in 1940’s when artist Jean Debuffet embraced it as “art brut” but this year it seems there is a good chance, all the hype really may be true.

All in all, the Outsider Art Fair is pretty a fun fair. The prices are relatively affordable and the dealers, often “Outsiders” themselves are friendly and willing to talk about how they got started and share great stories about the artists they represent. There is something for everyone here. If you want paintings of good ol’ down home Americana, sexually provocative drawings and enlarged penises, collages made out of everything under sun, meticulously drawn dreamscapes or just a sculpture made out of a garden hoe or a doll head on a stick, it’s here. And while it may at times have the feel of a curiosity shop filled with whimsical and at times creepy memorabilia (and I mean that in a good way), the truth is, in all of this, there is also some really fine art.

A shout out should be given to those dauntless NYC pioneers who chartered this territory – [American Primitive](#), [Cavin-Morris](#), and [Ricco Maresca](#) galleries who were still out there at the 2016 Fair, and a welcome to the 24 first-time exhibitors venturing from Boise to St Louis and a surprising number beyond the US, including Paris and Tokyo and Turin. This year the Fair dedicated a memorial exhibition to artist Ionel Talpazan, who died this year – famed for his UFO paintings. Arne Anton, owner of American Primitive, I recall back in the 1990’s was one of the first to show Talpazan, in a popular group show with other UFO painting artists, at the time allowing the artist to make enough money to pay his rent on his Harlem apartment and keep from being evicted.

There is a lot to see at the Fair, and each time you round a corner you might see something you missed the first time around so it pays to spend a little time exploring. A few of the highlights for me, and examples which only give evidence of the diversity of what is on display include:

[Fleisher/ Ollman Gallery](#) (Philadelphia) represent some of the more well-known artists including American Martin Ramirez (1895–1963), who lived the last years of his life in DeWitt State Hospital in northern California and have on display Felipe Jesus Consalvos from Cuba (1891 – c. 1960) a cigar roller by trade, whose detailed and complex collages using cigar bands, stamps, liquor labels, text and images cut from magazines against an anatomical human body backdrop or covering actual guitars are not only impressive in detail but in scale.

Keep an eye out for [Grey Carter](#) – Objects of Art Gallery (McLean, Virginia), run by a retired air force pilot and his wife who started collecting art in 1964. They have a really nice, diverse collection. On view for example, was French artist Stephanie Lucas (b.1975) who makes amazing detailed surreal acrylic paintings, as well as Cuban born artist Joaquín Pomés Figueredo (b.1967) whose wonderful figurative and biomorphic ink drawings provide sensitive and spiritual insights into life inside our island neighbor.

[Y Gallery](#)'s entire corner booth showcases the diverse and nuanced work of NJ police lieutenant and visual and performance artist – Charles Sabba. Proving to be one of the most popular exhibits in the Fair the gallery shows the diversity of his talent, including a series of drawings based on a performance piece he does as his alter ego, the mythological Actaeon, on one wall, and opposite that is “The Wall of Resistance,” finger print cards with drawings all associated with “stolen art” – some recognizable images of artists and some of the criminals who stole art from museums. In between, there is a large tree sculpture swarming with bees, which on closer look- are bullets.

Sabba explains that in his daily work he has to maintain such a “high level of discipline,” his life on the job is “regimented” and “conformed,” but in his art he can “live outside the restrictive rules and boundaries of society.” He takes the materials “of authority” and “transforms them into works of art that speak directly of human need for freedom.” It’s really a beautiful proposition and it certainly challenges anyone who forgets that behind the badge, behind the uniform, lies a real human being with a complex emotional and intellectual life – speaking for any one of us for that matter in our public and private lives.

Also of note, [YOD Gallery](#) of Japan is showing Japanese artist Hembime (b. 1982) who makes great abstract acrylic works and Hidehito Matsubara (b.1973) who’s painstakingly detailed yet delicate monochromatic and metallic works are sublime.

A few others I would recommend are – Noah Erenberg and Helen Rae at [The Good Luck Gallery \(Los Angeles\)](#), Shen Shaomin at Klein Sun (NY) and Jill Gallieni and Marie Rose Lortet at Marie Finaz Gallery (Paris) to name a few.

So, whether it’s Naif, Expressionist, Primitive, Folk, Visionary, Vernacular, Outsider – call it what you will – if you like the art and if the artists have a good story to tell, then it’s a win-win for the art collector. For the academics, bring your Foucault, Freud, Laing, and visually explore beyond the academy, what it means to be on the margins. Either way, it’s worth it, get in on the conversation and who knows what you might discover.