ART ALONG THE BOUNDARIES:

Strongly expressive works by liminal artists expand the field and challenge the Outsider/Insider dichotomy

Over the last ten years or so, an array of sumptuously illustrated books and blockbuster museum exhibitions devoted to the work of self-taught artists have signaled what is apparently a growing consensus about the "master" status of perhaps fifty to 100 artists--individuals whose work is widely deemed worthy of special attention and honor in the field, not to mention handsome prices on the market.

Applying special criteria and dispensing aesthetic validation is, of course, simply what an art system does. But in the still relatively small world of institutionalized outsider-art connoisseurship and scholarship, those charged with advancing this process sometimes seem to be wearing blinders that prevent them from seeing beyond what has been obvious and accepted within the field for thirty years.

In the latter respect the field's current position can be likened to the one in which its American folk art subset found itself in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when folk art connoisseurship and scholarship in the United States was still largely focused on antique objects produced by anonymous artists and craftspeople. It took more than twenty years of effort on the part of pioneering scholar-collectors like Herbert Hemphill and Michael and Julie Hall (not to mention a few key dealers) to gain widespread acceptance for the work of 20th-century vernacular artists, many of whom were still living when Hemphill and Julia Weismann co-authored their seminal book, *20th Century American Folk Art and Artists*, published in 1974. That path-breaking volume,

subsequent books including Jane Livingston's and John Beardsley's *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980*, and related exhibitions at the Museum of American Folk Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and elsewhere laid the groundwork for widespread acceptance of the artists whose names make up the current list of masters. In a field that has expanded and acquired the perennially controversial appellation outsider art, works by artists named on that list now occupy a position analogous to the one that anonymously handcrafted antiques held in the folk art field until the 1970s. In this equation, the collective role of the then-contemporary artists whom Hemphill et al were championing thirty years ago is parallel to that of a number of generally younger, emerging artists who have yet to gain the recognition they deserve for work that promises to ensure the continuing vitality and healthy evolution of the field. Some of these artists have been taken quite seriously in influential sectors, having been profiled in *Raw Vision* and represented in some important gallery exhibitions or at the annual Outsider Art Fairs in New York. But with the exception of the relatively new and unusually adventurous American Visionary Art Museum, where these artists have been represented alongside the masters in annual, thematically curated "mega-exhibitions," the museums and other more established institutions that have a stake in the field have largely ignored them.

I suspect that these artists haven't gained broader acceptance because their work, by its nature or by virtue of the circumstances it emerged from, challenges some of the field's prevailing conventions and assumptions, not to mention, in some cases, the very insider-outsider dichotomy by which the field has historically been defined. True to the classic outsider mode, some of these artists lack any academic art experience, while others have had some measure of art training or sustained exposure to visual art

and its history. Their respective bodies of work mark singular sites along the field's boundaries and indicate something of how porous those boundaries actually are. Because I think they also point a way toward the field's future, I'll use the remaining space to introduce and discuss the work of five such artists and mention others who have lately been producing particularly vital art at a prolific rate. Most of them were born after 1950, and each has relentlessly followed his or her own personal, idiosyncratic vision. While some create imagery that is highly refined and others work more loosely, their creations are characterized by a sense of expressive urgency that they share with the best work routinely discussed under the rubrics of outsider and visionary art. Their singular sensibilities, stylistic innovations, and substantial bodies of work mark them as artists to watch closely as the field evolves and continues to negotiate its historically uneasy relationship with the so-called mainstream art world.

The distinctively overwrought ink-and-watercolor drawings of **Melissa Polhamus** (b. 1957) often suggest labyrinthine networks of interconnected chambers, corridors, and stairways. These convoluted environments are typically inhabited by cartoonish figures wearing anguished or menacing facial expressions and incongruously clownish, brightly patterned clothing as they carry out activities that are alternately mundane, mysterious, or sinister. Her drawings often include peculiar wheeled vehicles, archaic or futuristic weaponry, odd musical instruments, angularly stylized vegetation, and jaggedly bristling, geometric patterns that contribute to an overall sense of foreboding and restless anxiety. Polhamus has said that she approaches the drawing process intuitively and generally without any pre-planned subject matter--"I just start drawing and see what happens."

Polhamus' work has the edgy intensity and the aura of psychological disturbance that viewers have come to associate with European Art Brut, and it's interesting to note in this connection that she was born in Germany, although she was adopted as an infant into a U.S. military serviceman's family and raised in the United States. She earned a bachelor's degree in history at Virginia Polytechnic University, where her lone experience with art instruction was a life-drawing class that she dropped after a few sessions. She didn't begin drawing regularly until almost a decade later, in 1989, while recuperating from an automobile accident that left her without any physical injuries but seriously depressed. Shortly thereafter, upon being laid off from a salaried job, she began to immerse herself in her art. By then, although only in her early thirties, she had accumulated a broad range of experience in her personal and professional life, including several years during which she lived in New York and a variety of previous jobs there and elsewhere--librarian, waitress, secretary for a Wall Street investment advisory firm, and information analyst for a U.S. government defense contractor. I mention this career background only because it sets her well apart from the standard outsider profile or profiles (rural illiterate, urban recluse, mental-institution inmate, etc.). In the latter respect she has much in common with the other artists whose work I'll discuss here.

Although the figures in Polhamus' drawings are often depicted in the midst of carrying out mundane (if seemingly mindless) activities, the world she evokes appears only peripherally related to ordinary experience. Instead, it seems to represent a dreadful, claustrophobic, interior architecture from which there is no exit.

While even more alien than the world of Polhamus' edgy, tightly configured compositions, the landscapes and life forms that **William Fields** (b. 1940) conjures in his lush, mysterious, figural-abstract drawings and paintings represent a more mystical, spiritually potent realm that he has accessed through a range of time-honored shamanistic and religious practices, from consuming hallucinogenic plants to practicing Buddhist meditation techniques to the Ayurvedic mantra practice that he has more recently come to prefer. These endeavors have opened him to profound visionary experiences that he can describe in persuasively vivid detail. He talks almost routinely of traveling outside his body to distant locations where he has encountered and learned from high-level spiritual teachers and ancient deities. Since 1997 his efforts have been largely focused on an ongoing series of 30-by-22-inch drawings titled "Illuminations," after Arthur Rimbaud's poetry collection of the same title.

Raised in a conservative, southern Baptist family, Fields was introduced to European art and art history and the broader possibilties of a visual-art career at nineteen, while stationed in France with the U.S. Army. After his military discharge in 1961, he spent a year at Wingate College in his native North Carolina, but he left and went back to Europe, settling for a year in Zurich, which he used as a base for further art investigations. After returning to the United States in 1964, he began medical-illustration training at Duke University but dropped out after a year. Despite having had little formal training, he has taught drawing and painting at the North Carolina School of the Arts and at what is now the Gibbes Museum of Art in South Carolina. For more than a decade he has devoted most of his time to making art and studying the esoteric spiritual and philosophical traditions that have long fascinated him, including pagan

goddess cults, ancient Egyptian mythology, the I Ching, the Tarot, Theosophy, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. He is currently immersed in self-guided studies of the Hermetic sciences, Gnostic Christianity, and the Kabbalah, and he is a formal student of Hinduism, specifically its Shiva Tantra branch. All of these studies inform his highly sophisticated, idiosyncratic, and curiously compelling art.

Comparisons have been made between Fields' drawings and the Imagist works of Chicago's Hairy Who group, particularly those of Jim Nutt, but Fields insists that he had no knowledge of those artists until he recently heard of them in that comparative context. In fact, any similarities between Fields' work and theirs is superficial, having mainly to do with the sureness of his line, the eccentricity of his figures, his wide-ranging palette, and the sexual allusions to be found in many of his drawings. The esoteric thematic context for his work, the visionary inspiration that drives it, and the spiritual issues it addresses set it considerably apart from that of the Imagists.

Sharing with Polhamus an ability to evoke an emotionally or psychologically disturbed state of mind, and sharing with both her and Fields a strong tendency toward compositional density, is **Michael Madore** (b. 1954), whose luridly colored drawings and paintings virtually swarm from edge to edge with fragmentary, strongly outlined images and shapes that suggest bits and pieces of disembodied blood vessels, viscera, neural networks, or shredded tendons. Within the creepily smothered atmosphere created by this all-over scattering of tissue, a variety of character types including doctors, nurses, and private detectives act out ominous scenarios associated with Madore's own experiences, often in hospital environments.

Madore's earliest drawings were highly detailed maps and urban planning schemes that he began making as a child with an affinity for geography and cartography. As an undergraduate English and art history major at Trinity College in Connecticut, he began making what he describes as "somewhat precious 'literary' illustrations." He later went on to earn a master's degree in painting from Yale University in 1990.

If he holds an MFA from Yale, what in the world is Madore's art doing in galleries devoted largely to "outsider" art, not to mention at the Outsider Art Fair?

Without having asked that question of dealers who have represented him, I would suggest that it's the aura of acute psychological agitation that pervades his work--a characteristic in common with much of Art Brut. This is no conceit on Madore's part, because--his high-level art training and his record of art-critical and art-theoretical writings aside--he shares with many Art Brut practicioners a profile of fairly extreme psychological instability. For much of his life he has suffered from problems that have been variously diagnosed as incipient schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit disorder. The most recent diagnosis indicates that he suffers from Asperger's Syndrome (AS), a recently recognized neurological disorder on the "high end" of the autistic spectrum, typically manifesting itself in the form of social and communication deficiencies, obsessive and repetitive routines, and intense preoccupations with particular subjects. Madore feels that it's the only diagnosis he's received that adequately explains the depth and persistence of his problems.

Madore's recent work is autobiographical and represents a mapping of his own neurocircuitry and the neural "re-routing" that he now believes he was forced to

accomplish as a result of AS. He has said that the art-making process is a kind of substitute for the heroin to which he was addicted for several years before kicking the habit in 1993, because “like heroin, it helps to modulate sensory and social overload, while maintaing a ‘no-flight’ zone.”

As in Madore’s art, the imagery found in the paintings and drawings of **Chris Mars** (b. 1961) is inspired in part by experiences involving mental disorders and the institutions that treat them. In his case, though, it was an older brother, rather than himself, who was diagnosed as schizophrenic and repeatedly institutionalized from the time Mars was a young child. His experiences of visiting his brother in mental institutions disturbed him deeply, and memories of the sights, sounds, and smells of those oppressive environments have haunted him into adulthood. His distress at his brother’s plight stimulated his sympathy early on for all forms of outsiders, and especially the monster protagonists of horror films in the *Frankenstein* genre--those misshapen and misunderstood creatures pursued and tormented by angry, ignorant, torch-wielding mobs. In more recent years, such figures have played leading roles in his disturbingly imaginative narrative art.

As an adolescent, Mars began playing drums, dropped out of school (never to return), and co-founded the Replacements, one of the most influential punk-rock bands of the late 1970s and ‘80s. The band remained together for ten years, after which Mars began applying himself more seriously to the drawing and painting he had long pursued in his spare time.

Mars’ technique is highly refined, informed by his own self-guided research into the rudiments of illusionistic painting, but like the surrealists, he uses his technical bag

of tricks to present an alternate universe--in his case consisting of bleak, forbidding landscapes and shadowy architectural interiors populated by grotesque, malformed, sickly-hued individuals interacting with each other or taking flight from nightmare scenarios. Many of his works depict hospital scenes in which demented-looking medical professionals seem to be performing lobotomies or other cruel experiments on their drugged and disoriented patients. He has acknowledged taking a dim view of the medical profession, and particularly of mental-health professionals.

In addition to his two-dimensional artwork, Mars has been involved in a number of other projects in his post-Replacements years, providing impressive evidence of his creative versatility. He has recorded four critically acclaimed solo albums, published prose, acted in videos, designed and constructed movie sets, and produced claymation and computer-animated short films.

Mars has much in common with **Liz McGrath** (b. 1971), a likewise versatile artist and former punk-rocker. Before she began exhibiting her paintings and sculptures in the late 1990s, she studied fashion (the extent of her art training), published a fanzine, and co-founded Tongue, a punk-rock band in which she remained active as lead singer until the group disbanded in 2001. From those bases her career began to take shape, leading ultimately to work in her native Hollywood as an art director for animated films, TV programs, fashion shows, and music videos. (She has also painted signs, designed catalogs, and worked as a party-environment decorator and costume-accessory designer catering to strippers, porn stars, and mainstream Hollywood actors.)

McGrath's most impressive work as a painter and sculptor is represented by her richly detailed, meticulously crafted, theatrical-format dioramas, which combine the

shrine and reliquary traditions of Roman Catholicism (the religion of her childhood) with the craft traditions of dollmaking, dollhouses, and shadowbox displays. The texts painted on them, meanwhile, recall circus sideshow banners and enhance their connection with old-fashioned circus freak shows. Sometimes the texts are in Sanskrit, lending them an added sense of mystery.

Because of their punk sensibilities, their shared affinity for the grotesque, and the highly crafted nature of the works that both of them create, Mars and McGrath have become well-known in the so-called "lowbrow" art field, a diverse, loosely defined contemporary art ghetto that's basically right nextdoor to the outsider-art ghetto. The terrain where these two subsets of the art world meet and spill over into one another is an area of particular interest for the case I'm making here and its implications for so-called mainstream contemporary art. In addition to Mars and McGrath, there are others whose work is highly relevant to the discussion and who have been previously profiled in both *Raw Vision* and *Juxtapoz*, the San-Francisco-based quarterly magazine that tracks the lowbrow field.

Also among the artists who inhabit this liminal terrain is **Joe Coleman** (see *RVi#*11, pp. 50-57), whose works have been controversially banned from the 2003 and 2004 installments of the Outsider Art Fair. Coleman's narrative portraits of serial killers and his other outrageously elaborate drawings and paintings--as relentlessly disturbing as they are highly compelling--had been regularly exhibited and well-received at the latter annual event since 1996, but in response to criticisms of lax standards at previous installments of the fair, its organizer, Sanford Smith and Associates, decided that Coleman's two-and-a-half-year stint at the School of Visual Arts in New York (from which

he was expelled) and his "unusual, and unacceptable, level of awareness in the sales and marketing of his work" (to quote the standards committee's memo to the artist) disqualified him as an outsider.

Coleman's rhetorical comeback to the decision is worth quoting in part here, because it raises important questions for this discussion: "...I find it extremely ironic that after a lifetime of being excluded from the mainstream art world because my work did not conform to recent trends and polite tastes, ...I am now being excluded from an Outsider event.... Are we to assume that [the fair's organizers] would prefer to deal with someone who is intellectually, physically, or emotionally incapable of protecting themselves from being exploited, manipulated, hoodwinked, and/or robbed?"

Aside from the challenging question he raises about exploitation, an issue tangential to this discussion, Coleman's comments sharply and rightfully question the emphasis on biography over art in the outsider field. I've lost count of the number of times I've been perusing the works at an outsider gallery or a booth at an outsider event and commented on a piece that I found particularly outstanding, only to have the proprietor respond, "Oh, he's autistic," or "She's been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder," or some other comment to foreground the artist's social marginality rather than engage in discussing the art. Such moments always make me wonder just what it is that's really being marketed and collected at these venues.

There are many other artists whose work is pertinent to this discussion, but space limitations impinge at this point. I wrote about the work of three such artists--**Curtis Cuffie**, **Anthony Dominguez**, and **Kevin Blythe Sampson**--in a recent article for *Folk Art* magazine ("Street Savvy," Fall 2002, pp. 46-53). Others previously profiled

in *Raw Vision* include **Charles Benefiel** (*RVi*#30, pp. 30-34), **Alex Grey** (*RV* #26, pp. 34-39), **Anne Grgich**(*RVi*#22, 48-53), **Norbert Kox** (*RV* #14, pp. 30-35), **Paul Lafolley** (see *RVi*#14, pp. 50-55), **Ray Materson** (see *RVi*#17, pp. 46-49), and **Valton Tyler** (*RV* #35, pp. 34-39). Among others in a league with those named above are **Wiliam Allen**, **Daniel Belardinelli**, **Paul Gasoi**, **Maura Holden**, **Linda St. John**, **John K. Lawson**, **Gregory Van Maanen**, **Mark Casey Milestone**, **Bernard G. Schatz** (a.k.a. **L-15**), and the late **David Wojnarowicz**, that outsider infiltrator of New York's '80s Soho scene.

It took the American folk art field a few decades to get used to the idea of folk art made by artists who remain alive and approachable. At this point in the history of the outsider art field, it's about time for all of us to grow up and grasp the notion that important outsider art--or at least something very closely and significantly akin to it--is being created by literate, socio-politically informed, intellectually sophisticated individuals who are quite capable of speaking for themselves, despite their aesthetic and cultural distance from theory-driven art and any aspects of their personal lives that might carry the stigma of educational deficiency or social marginality.

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