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ART REVIEW

Creating Artworks Without a Net

The 20th Anniversary of the Outsider Art Fair

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Let's all agree that "outsider artist" is a term of convenience, encompassing the self-taught, the visionary, the geographically isolated, the mentally ill or developmentally disabled, and (in one memorable episode) Homer Simpson. And in that spirit, we must judge the Outsider Art Fair, now celebrating its 20th anniversary, not by its title but by the vitality and variety of works on offer.



James Estrin/The New York Times

Aldo Piacenza's church of wood and metal at the Dean Jensen Gallery's booth at the Outsider Art Fair.

The thread linking the fair's 36 booths is a personal compulsion to make art, without a rulebook and with whatever materials happen to be at hand. At Marion Harris, for instance, are tiny peach-stone carvings by A. W. Gimbi, a 19th-century barber from McAdoo, Pa. They make up a none-too-practical tool kit of hammers, corkscrews, fishing hooks and other utilitarian objects — each no more than an inch in height.

At Lindsay Gallery, charts drawn on rolls of oilcloth by a Pentecostal minister, the Rev. Samuel David Phillips (1890-1973), illustrate sermons in a naïve hand but with plenty of preacherly imperative. You imagine the members of his flock sitting bolt upright in their pews after gazing at "Rome," which depicts a bloody crucifixion, the flaying of

St. Bartholomew and a pack of lions feasting on martyrs in the Colosseum.

The nightmarish scenarios in Penny Rockwell's solo presentation at Pavel Zoubok tell a very particular story of mental illness. During a psychotic episode three decades

ago, Ms. Rockwell had visions of electrical plugs bursting into flame; she eventually checked herself into Bellevue. After treatment, she started to confront her fear in black-and-white drawings and collages. In the most gripping of these works, the plug is a dragon-like creature that breathes flame from fraying wires.

If Ms. Rockwell's drawings stoke anxiety, a group of drawings by Jim Work, at the Pardee Collection, seem meant to soothe it. Mr. Work, a developmentally disabled artist born in 1944, renders neat ribbons of highway and tidy brick houses in cheerful pink and green crayon on paper grocery bags. He seems to be guided by an inner GPS, drawing arrows on the roads to indicate the direction of traffic.

Some outsider artists have achieved celebrity on par with so-called "insiders"; Martín Ramírez and Henry Darger are examples. Drawings by both men are on view, but the energy of this fair has much to do with the spotlight it shines on many lesser-known figures. C. Grimaldis Gallery has a survey of Giorgos Rigas, a sort of Greek Grandma Moses who lives in Athens but paints the small mountain village of his birth from memory. And Packer Schopf has a focused presentation on Lee Groban (1947-2011), a self-taught Chicago artist whose intense oeuvre includes comic-psychedelic drawings and a 5,000-page epic poem, "A Cure for Insomnia."

In some cases, familiar names are presented in new ways. The proprietor of MAKE Skateboards, Scott Ogden, is selling limited-edition skateboard decks that feature authorized reproductions of art by Adolf Wölfl and Royal Robertson. With Robertson, a Louisiana sign painter who believed in space aliens and the apocalypse, Mr. Ogden found an artist who easily crosses over from outsider to street art.

Also new to the fair are some high-profile institutional collaborators. One is the Collection de l'Art Brut, the Lausanne, Switzerland, museum of outsider art that houses some 5,000 works amassed by Jean Dubuffet, here showcasing its series of DVDs and monographs on outsider artists. Another is El Museo del Barrio, which is timing the opening of its show of "nontraditionally trained" artists, "Testimonios: 100 Years of Popular Expression," to coincide with the fair. And as in previous years, the American Folk Art Museum is holding a series of talks.

Then there is an exhibitor called the Museum of Everything, which isn't really a museum but rather a series of exhibitions of outsider art organized, and lovingly preserved in book form, by James Brett, a London curator.

For this fair, Mr. Brett has designed an attractive bookshop in which real shelves emerge from a trompe l'oeil wall drawing. Leafing through the four volumes of the Museum of Everything's limited-edition catalog, you can read musings on outsider art by consummate contemporary-art insiders (Maurizio Cattelan and Carsten Höller among them).

At the Museum of Everything, and at the fair as a whole, enthusiasm for unorthodox creative expression meets disdain for the old-fashioned term that commonly describes it. As the Museum's Web site proclaims, "Death to outsider art! Long live the outsiders!"

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