

Art Weekend

Outsider Art Fair Preview: Discoveries, Surprises, and an Expanded Vision

by Edward M. Gómez
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(excerpts)

The 24th annual Outsider Art Fair opens in New York on January 21, and never before has the scope of what might qualify as — or, more precisely, of what is being *called* — outsider art seemed so diverse or vast.

For those in need of a brief primer: Outsider art, which refers to works made by self-taught art-makers situated geographically or conceptually outside the social-cultural mainstream, producing their creations mainly for themselves, evolved out of *art brut*. That earlier designation, meaning “raw art,” was coined by the French modern artist Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and came to refer primarily to the singular, technically innovative visions of talented European autodidacts, works that could not easily be classified according to existing labels.

Later, the term “outsider art” became more common in the United Kingdom and the United States; it was applied to an array of visionaries on the margins of mainstream society who were not academically trained, “professional” artists. If, in Europe, such art-makers were often discovered by trained artists or by psychiatrists with an interest in what was once called “psychotic art” or even “the art of the insane,” in the U.S., many a notable collector of outsider art came to it from a background in or passion for folk art.

This year’s Outsider Art Fair is the fourth to be presented by Wide Open Arts, a company spearheaded by the New York dealer Andrew Edlin, which has rebranded the fair, moved it to Chelsea and given it a facelift with up-to-date graphics and more of a contemporary-art vibe. That formula has helped boost attendance and attract a more diverse and often younger audience.

Becca Hoffman, the fair's director, said, "It is growing and becoming more involved in the broader art-world dialog." She cites a Christie's sale in New York last September, in which numerous outsider art works were offered, observing, "Now, with auction sales like these, record-establishing prices will serve as benchmarks in a field in which, until now, final sale prices have been known primarily by dealers and collectors." As for the scope of the fair itself, Hoffman added, "Eventually, we hope we'll begin to see more exhibitors from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world that traditionally have not been well-represented."



Daniel Swanigan Snow, "Totem III" (2010), mixed media, variable dimensions (photo courtesy of Cathouse FUNeral)

Speaking of Bowie, among first-timers at and relative newcomers to the Outsider Art Fair is Brooklyn's Life on Mars (whose name echoes the title of one of the rock legend's early songs), which will feature drawings by the Alabama-based, master assemblage maker and draftsman, Thornton Dial; watercolors by Agatha Wojciechowsky (1896-1986), a German-born spiritualist medium; and mixed-media, abstract paintings by Karen Schwartz, in which human figures sometimes drowsily appear. Also from Brooklyn, Cathouse FUNeral will show mixed-media works by Daniel Swanigan Snow, a former actor in B movies and Shakespeare plays who is in his mid-sixties and began making art a decade ago. A Christmas-tree stand, a baby's photo, metal grilles — they're all raw materials for his psychologically charged concoctions.

The 2016 Outsider Art Fair will take place at the Metropolitan Pavilion (125 West 18th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan), from January 21 through January 24.