

## The Outsider Art Fair Is Insider Now

By Brienne Walsh | February 2, 2021



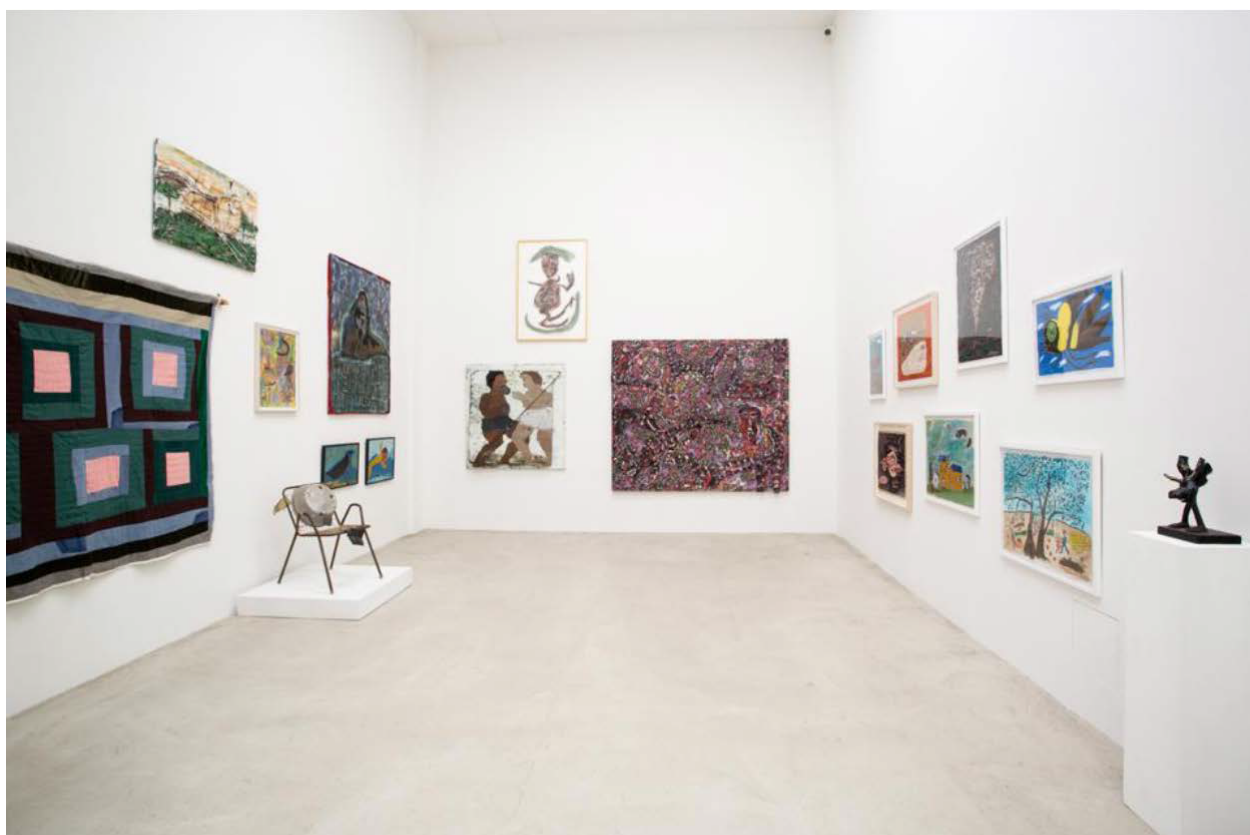
Rosena Finister, "Untitled," 2020, Acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 | Courtesy Creative Growth

After a year of reckoning, in which the art world acknowledged that it has long been dominated by white male narratives — a 2019 survey of 18 major museums found that 85% of artists in the collections were white, and 87% were male — the Outsider Art Fair has more to say than ever. Founded in 1993, and bought by current owner Andrew Edlin in 2012, the fair has always featured self-taught artists, including black and brown artists who have long been excluded from traditional paths to “making it.” (A 2014 analysis of Census data bureau found that 80% of people who receive undergraduate degrees in art are white.) Now, suddenly, in an attempt to rectify the years of exclusion, there is more hunger than ever to see what artists outside of the white mainstream have been doing all of this time.

“We knew this work had soul and meaning long before the mainstream art world did,” says Edlin of the work displayed at the Outsider Art Fair 2021, which opened this past weekend at locations around New York, and will close on Sunday, February 7. “We’re the pioneers, and we’re comfortable with that.”

The fair comes in the midst of a blizzard, with the majority of businesses in New York either shuttered, or only partially open due the pandemic. Even still, the Outsider Art Fair is a hybrid of in-person and online exhibitions, with seven curated shows at Hirschl & Adler, Salon 94 Freemans, Shin Gallery, Andrew Edlin, and Electric Lady Studios, among other locations. The online exhibition, powered by Artlogic, showcases 43 exhibitors from 28 cities around the world. Passes to the physical fair, which cost \$15, gain you access to all—the online viewing rooms are free.

Edlin decided to include in-person exhibitions because he thinks people are hungry to see art in real life. Following a successful hybrid event in Paris this past October, which included an exhibition at the auction house Hôtel Drouot, Edlin decided to plan an event in New York that would bring people out of their homes. “I feel really proud that we took the punches from this awful pandemic, and we didn’t let it stop us,” says Edlin. Normally hosted at the Metropolitan Pavilion, this is the first city-wide Outsider Art Fair. Thus far, over 3,000 people have visited the online fair, and the in-person exhibitions have been consistently busy.



Installation view of "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning" on view at Shin Gallery, curated by Scott Ogden as part of the Outsider Art Fair 2021| Image Olya Vysotskaya

Scott Ogden, the owner of SHRINE, a gallery devoted to outsider and self-taught art, curated “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning,” one of three exhibitions hosted at Shin Gallery on the Lower East Side as part of the fair. The exhibition, which takes its name from a traditional gospel blues song, features African-American artists from the Deep South, including Bill Traylor, Thornton Dial, Mary T. Smith and Hawkins Bolden. Many of the artists have received considerable attention from the art world in recent years — Bill Traylor was given a solo exhibition at David Zwirner in 2019, for example. But what makes them so compelling to viewers, Ogden says, is that the art was created, in most cases, purely for self-fulfillment. Mary T. Smith, for example, populated her garden with her creations, which she made using materials she found at the dump, in an effort to ease her loneliness. And Hawkins Bolden, who was blinded in a series of accidents, created sculptures that functioned as actual scarecrows.



Thornton Dial, "Shedding the Blood," 1991, Mixed Media, 48 x 60

“When you have that kind of passion and necessity to make, it shows,” Ogden says.

Even if you don’t plan on buying anything, or can’t attend the in-person events, there’s a very strong argument that a \$15 pass to the fair is worth the money. Beyond being visually compelling — as well as informative of current trends towards figuration and realism in the art world — the Outsider Art Fair embodies a sense of hope in these times of despair.

“The artists we champion, so many of them made work in poverty, in isolation, and dealt with mental illness,” says Edlin. “Nothing could stop them,” he adds.