

Art Fairs

How the Outsider Art Fair, New York’s First IRL Fair in Nearly a Year, Managed to Draw the Crowds Despite a Pandemic and a Blizzard

The fair's owner, Andrew Edlin, has found that a few live venues, buttressed by a website, may prove an adaptable combo—even after the pandemic.

Brian Boucher, February 3, 2021



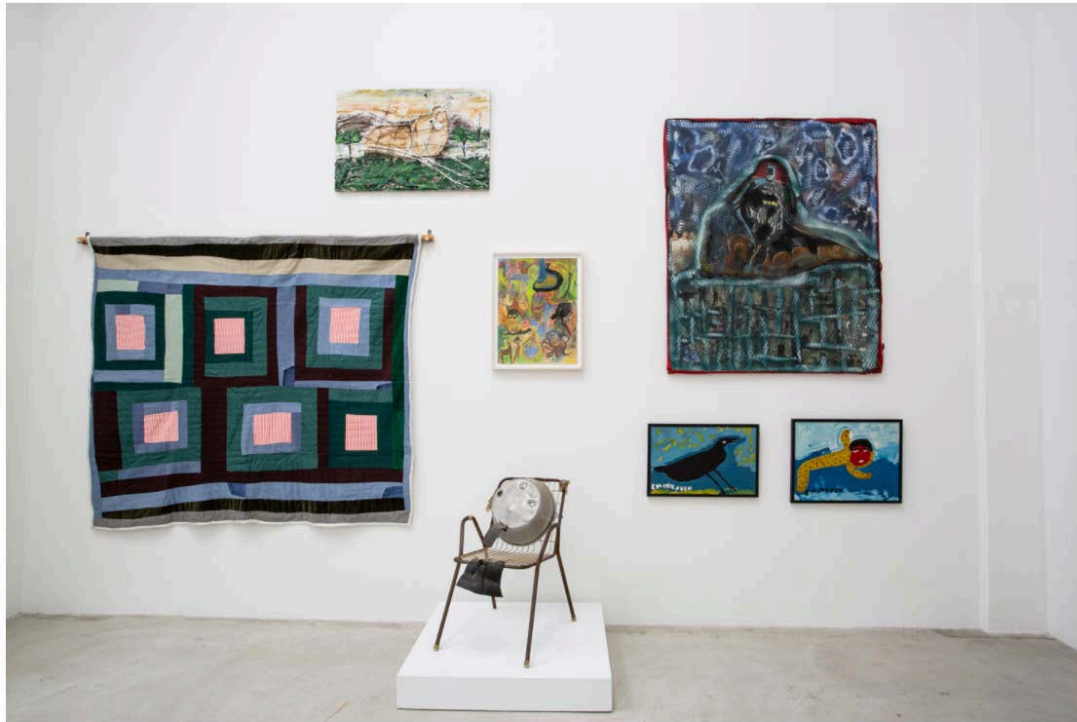
Minnie Evans, untitled, no date. Courtesy of Shin Gallery and the Daniel Collection.

When the crew of five that organizes the Outsider Art Fair (OAF) wrapped the eighth Paris edition on October 30, they found themselves with just three months to organize the New York iteration of the event.

The Paris show, which fair owner Andrew Edlin managed to organize as a small exhibition at the Hotel Drouot, was quite a feat: it went on despite not only the pandemic, but also the cancellation of FIAC, the main Paris fair to which OAF is a so-called “satellite.”

“The Outsider Art Fair is not going out with a whimper,” Edlin said. “To just do a digital fair would hurt our street cred.”

So when it came time to arrange the 29th edition of the fair in New York, a city with hundreds of galleries, Edlin thought to do the same thing on a larger scale.



“Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning,” on view at Shin Gallery, curated by Scott Ogden as part of the Outsider Art Fair 2021. Photo: Olya Vysotskaya.

The result is a hybrid in-person and online fair featuring 45 exhibitors from around the world, stretching across three Manhattan neighborhoods, with galleries hosting show on themes broad enough (figuration, abstraction, small-scale works) to allow contributions from numerous participating dealers.

The fair is open for a lengthy 10 days (through February 7), which is fortunate: after the opening weekend, Monday brought a whopping snowstorm down onto the city. It landed on top of new virus strains that may already have made people wary of congregating in galleries, much less getting on a subway.

Yet fair devotees came out in numbers on the opening weekend. And online offerings are accessible, allowing shoppers to sort works by medium, price, and size. In some cases, you can even see the work hung on a wall, with a chair for scale.

Once the city digs out from under the snow, if you’ve got a hunger for seeing work in person, the fair takes place at four galleries: three on the Lower East Side (Salon 94 Freemans, Andrew Edlin, and Shin Gallery), plus Hirschl & Adler in Midtown.

Then—an unusual treat—there’s Electric Lady Studios, the Jimi Hendrix-founded recording facility in Greenwich Village, where artist Gary Panter has curated a show of the works by beloved musician-artist Daniel Johnston.

“That venue was fully booked up on opening weekend, Edlin says, with folks waiting outside to see the spot that bills itself as the oldest working recording studio in the city, recently hosting artists like Lana Del Rey, Beck, and Adele. When one overnight recording session went late, Edlin says, the studio had to delay opening the fair to visitors the next morning. You gotta look after your core business,” he says.



“Daniel Johnston: Psychedelic Drawings” on view at Electric Lady Studios, curated by Gary Panter as part of the Outsider Art Fair 2021. Photo: Olya Vysotskaya.

If you want to spend big and you have a taste for the icons, you could easily part with hundreds of thousands of dollars for works on offer from industry stalwarts.

Thornton Dial’s *Shedding the Blood* is on view at Shin Gallery (courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery) for \$200,000; Martín Ramírez’s *Untitled (Arches)* is at Ricco/Maresca, for \$110,000; and a two-sided Henry Darger with a lengthy title (*At Jennie Richie the Truck Got Troublesome...*) can be yours for \$375,000 through Carl Hammer Gallery. But there are pages and pages of works priced in just the three digits.

At least one of the hosting galleries has had great success so far, a few days in to the fair’s run.

Hirschl & Adler associate director Thomas B. Parker says that in addition to making some sales, his gallery has had up to 75 visitors a day—much higher than in recent months. Being away from a crowded, loud convention center, he says, allowed for relaxed conversations.

This might not be the perfect replacement for what art fairs were in the Before Times, but “it’s headed in the right direction, which is toward the galleries,” Parker said. “Fairs need galleries and galleries need fairs.”

Morteza Zahedi, by contrast, faces a very different challenge as the owner of Tehran's Outsider Inn: after four years in business, he's still the only outsider art dealer in his region, he says.

"Introducing and selling the works of Iranian artists, both in the domestic and the foreign market, is not an easy task at all," he says. These artists aren't seen as a good investment in Iran, and he's trying to sell unfamiliar Iranian artists to foreign buyers.

For new dealers like Zahedi, OAF offers a crucial lifeline by way of cooperating with European and American galleries, which helps to cultivate a domestic market. Zahedi is offering works ranging in price from \$3,650 for small drawing/collage works by Salim Karami down to as little as \$850 for charming small wood sculptures by Abolfazl Amin.

As for Edlin, he's encouraged enough by the success of pandemic-era fairs in Paris and New York that he thinks his fair model may be easily spread even further.

"What's to stop us," he asks, "from doing an Outsider Art Fair L.A.?"

