

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

At White Columns Annual, Outsiders Mix With Insiders

“Looking Back,” the nonprofit gallery’s group show, brings together self-taught and highly trained artists. It isn’t obvious who’s who.

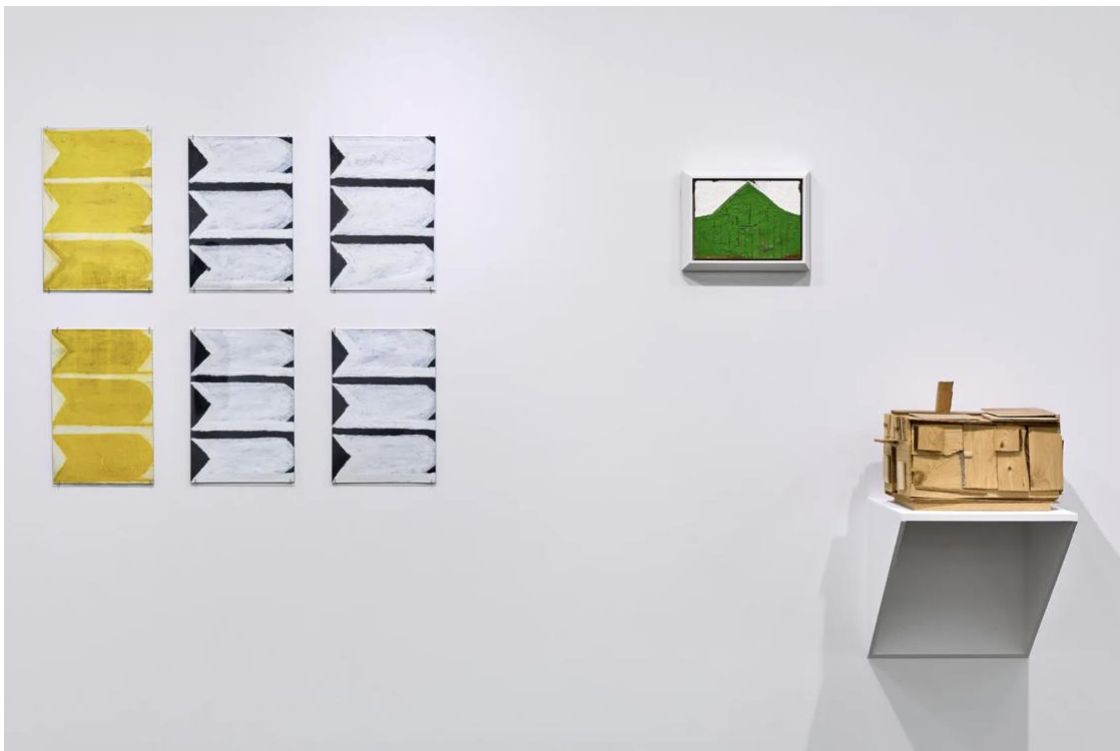


Foreground, Jennifer Bolande's sculpture "Drift 4" (2023); at back Robert Hawkins's painting "Entrance to Hell" (2005) in the show "Looking Back / The 14th White Columns Annual — Selected by Randy Kennedy." Marc Tatti/White Columns

By Travis Diehl

Jan. 24, 2024

It's pleasantly disorienting to enter the White Columns Annual in New York in 2024 and see so much work that could have been, and was, made any time in the last half century. There's not a screen, QR code or 3-D print in sight. But since its inauguration in 2006, the nonprofit gallery's "Looking Back" series has made an old-school proposition: to curate a group show around one person's (or collective's) taste, shorn of commercial or institutional impulses to either move product or capture a zeitgeist. The Annual has one constraint. The curator must have seen the included work in New York City in the previous year. In this grass-roots way, the show offers a (very subjective, and therefore narrow) group portrait of an increasingly unwieldy scene. Those who see a lot of art might recognize a few pieces. But not everything.



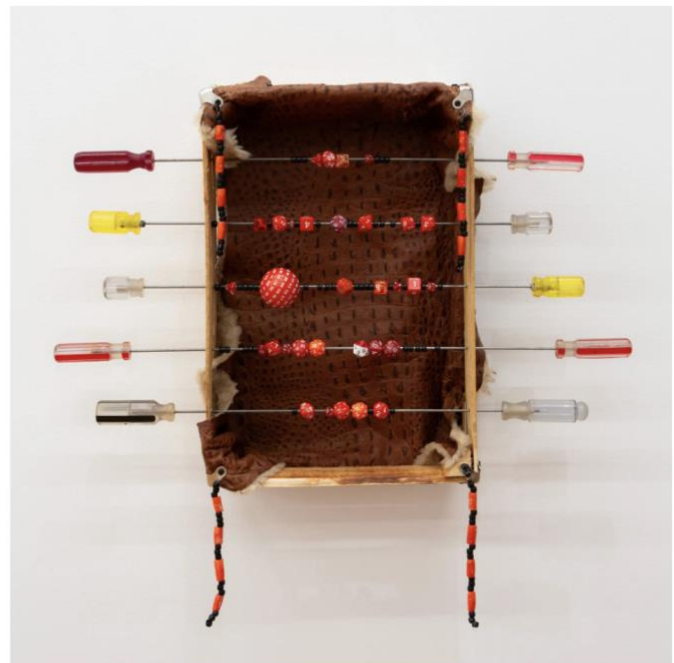
From left, Evelyn Reyes's "White and Yellow Carrots" (2006-2009); William Christenberry's "Green Form" (2001); and Beverly Buchanan's "Beverly's Studio" (2010). Marc Tatti/White Columns

The curator tapped for the 14th edition is Randy Kennedy, the director of special projects for the international art gallery Hauser & Wirth, and a former staff reporter at The New York Times who occasionally contributes to the obituaries desk. The pieces he picked here, by 35 artists, tend toward so-called outsider art, particularly abstract painting and assemblage that appears more felt than thought.

There are outsider staples, like two seductively muted paintings on board from the 1980s by the prolific Alabaman folk artist Mose Tolliver; and contemporary discoveries, particularly the self-taught Moroccan-American sculptor Manal Kara, whose “Unidentified Mathematical Objects (lottery picker 2),” a random-number generator made from a fur-lined fruit crate, screwdriver handles and multisided dice, debuted at Deli Gallery in TriBeCa in 2023. Its deft scrappy aesthetic, applied to a modern symptom like the Powerball, winks at the stereotype of the outsider artist as visionary naïf.



Mose Tolliver's "Untitled (Interior)," late 1980s, paint on wood panel. via March, New York



Manal Kara's "Unidentified Mathematical Objects (lottery picker 2)" (2023), fruit crate, steel rods, screwdriver handles and beads. via Manal Kara and Deli Gallery, New York

Sharing space with diamonds-in-the-rough are accomplished figures known for rough-hewed work, such as an undated wall-mounted junk assemblage by Noah Purifoy and one of Beverly Buchanan's chunky scrap wood maquettes of her shacklike studio. Kennedy's Annual muddies the already murky boundary between inside and outside. Whatever superficial cues might distinguish one from the other don't hold here. They shouldn't elsewhere, either — curators and critics have worked against this hierarchy for decades. These approachable works are an encouraging sign of a leveling playing field for artists, who may or may not have lived in a big city, gone to art school, had a gallery, or shared their art with a soul. Yet the ongoing interest in deskilled, intuitive artmaking also speaks to the present sense of stagnation,



Richard E. Treubel's "Egg In Reverse," circa 1965, oil on masonite. via White Columns



Harold Granucci's "Color Whorl Medium," 10/1/92, Rapidograph pen on Strathmore board. via Art Sales and Research, New York

even conservatism, as anxious artists and dealers retread safe ground, no matter how “meta” they’re being. When the world feels chaotic, culture takes an inward turn.

Kennedy made several selections from last year’s Outsider Art Fair, including the jaunty, arrowlike rows of “White and Yellow Carrots,” by the self-taught artist Evelyn Reyes, who worked in a studio for adults with disabilities until 2017. A composition by an unknown painter named Richard E. Treubel titled “Egg in Reverse,” from around 1965 — squidges of golden impasto in a sea of yolk-yellow, cradling a white blob — cuts its cosmic symbolism with a gonzo sense of humor.

One wall features several swirling mandalas pristinely plotted with a rainbow of ballpoint pens. They could be dazzling examples of process-based conceptual drawings from the 1970s — but in fact were the retirement pastime of Harold Granucci, an accountant and furniture salesman, circa 1992. If the outsider can be meticulous, the insider can let loose: a gloopy white sculpture based on a ready Kleenex is the latest from Jennifer Bolande, a postmodern artist known for crisp and heady photographs and installations. Some artists revel in the art world’s margins. “Smoker Choice,” a strip of wooden siding painted with bands of red, white and tan, resembles a glowing cigarette. It’s a playful 2023 piece by Tyree Guyton, the artist behind the Heidelberg Project in Detroit, a junkyard fantasia of weathered toys, scrap metal and household discards assembled in a string of once-vacant lots. Guyton started Heidelberg in 1986, and gradually gained acceptance — first from his neighbors, then from the art world. This work, which appeared at Martos Gallery in New York last year, would be funny anywhere, but in the context of a proper gallery in Manhattan shows Guyton



From the top, Tyree Guyton's "Smoker Choice," (2023); left, Betty Parsons's "Il Oglala," (1979); and right, "Untitled," an undated mixed media work by Noah Purifoy. Marc Tatti/White Columns

gleefully mixing highbrow and lowbrow aesthetics, hard-edge abstraction from the Neo-Geo movement, with the beret-and-palette caricature of the chain-smoking artist, all through his signature urban materials.

Another demi-outsider, Sarah Rapson, attended the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1989, then worked for the blue-chip artist Richard Prince. About 20 years ago — like Purifoy relocating to Joshua Tree, Calif.; or Buchanan to Macon, Ga. — she moved to coastal England and abandoned the mainstream. But she kept tabs on it. Her collages made from what look like old gallery advertisements, wrapped around the ends of long sticks, are among the first works in the show, setting the scene for artists with a foot in both worlds.

A few pieces feel like the curator's inside jokes. A sequined tapestry by Larry Krone, Kennedy's brother-in-law, shares a wall with a pulsing, flame-colored abstraction drawn by Rhoda Kellogg, an early-childhood educator, from Kennedy's own collection. And one incongruous assemblage, a wooden cane



Will Boone's "A Peckerwood's Progress" (2023), wood cane, rifle scope and postcard. Will Boone; via Karma and David Kordansky, New York and Los Angeles

fitted with a rifle scope hung above a postcard of the city hall in Cisco, Texas, is by the artist Will Boone — which makes sense if you know that Kennedy and Boone, who are both from Texas, are writing a play about a dramatic 1927 bank robbery in that same town. It was an outside job.

Looking Back / The 14th White Columns Annual

Through March 2 at White Columns, 91 Horatio, Street, Manhattan; 212-924-4212, whitecolumns.org.
