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Outsider Art Fair Review: Treasures Beyond the Mainstream

This fair is a shot across the bow of contemporary-art hierarchies, proving that great work can be made even without an MFA.

By Brian P. Kelly
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Fleisher/Ollman's booth at the Outsider Art Fair PHOTO: FLEISHER/OLLMAN

For all its talk about inclusivity, the contemporary-art world can be exclusionary. When was the last time you've seen a big show from a new artist without a fancy MFA? This adherence to the religion of credentialing is odd for an arena that claims to embrace the edgy and outré. But it provides a certain cloak against critics who are willing to call out mediocre work and dare to point out the emperor's lack of clothes: "If they were good enough for the Yale School of Art, who are you to say their art isn't good?"

While art schools have a place in the broader arts ecosystem, they aren't a prerequisite to creativity and talent, as is abundantly clear at the Outsider Art Fair. The 32nd edition of this exhibition, which includes displays from some 60 U.S. and international spaces, celebrates those who work outside the establishment—those without formal training, folk artists, and the art brut movement first categorized by Jean Dubuffet.



An untitled 1949 work by Robert St. Brice. PHOTO: PULP HOLYOKE

When most people think of “outsider art” certain names and traditions come to mind: nonprofessionals like hospital custodian Henry Darger, the naïf folk stylings of Grandma Moses, the surprising creations of the mentally ill such as Adolf Wölfli. And here there are plenty of examples of this gold-standard view of the movement. At PULP Holyoke, a fuzzy spirit animal seems to float in the middle of a board created in 1949 by Robert St. Brice, an illiterate Haitian Vodou priest. Fleisher/Ollman has an impressive display of some familiar names: The stone sculpture of a woman by William Edmondson and wooden crucifixion scene by Elijah Pierce (both of whom were the children of former slaves) are evocative despite their intimate scales. The carved wood sculptures of Albert Hoffman, the son of immigrants, whose education extended only to the eighth grade, have an Americana flair. At Andrew Edlin Gallery’s booth, Hoffman’s sign carved in relief features a head-dressed Indian; a boat is piloted among swelling waves by a man going clamming; and an oversize hand lifts a rocket ship from the Earth to the moon in a totem celebrating the 1972 Apollo 17 mission.

But while this art from the past has an air of unrefined folksiness about it, more recent creations show that contemporary outsiders are making work as strong as that of their accredited counterparts. Self-taught, Montreal-based artist Allie Gattor crafts morbidly funny narratives, some of the most humorous pieces I’ve ever seen. Shown by Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, “Good Boy” (2023) has a figure standing beside a population sign with placards that read “0 0 2”; at their feet sits the number 3 and a mischievous-looking dog chewing on a bone. Her autodidactic background might class her as an outsider, but these polished works on paper would be right at home in any contemporary-art fair—or mainstream museum, for that matter.



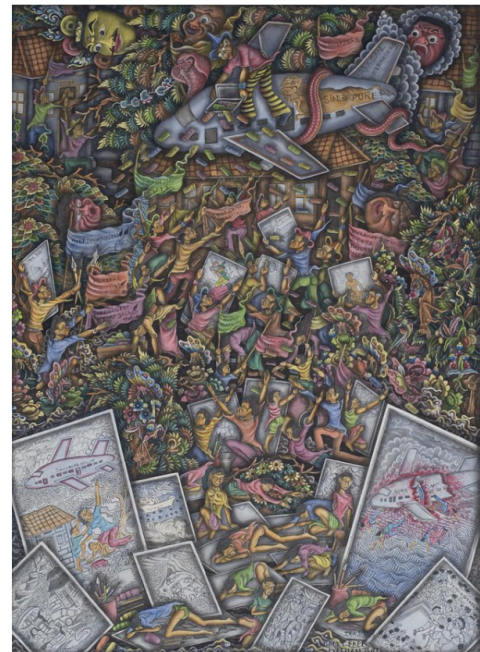
Allie Gattor's 'Good Boy' (2023). PHOTO: GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU

Center for Creative Works, a Pennsylvania-based organization and studio that nurtures intellectually disabled artists, is exhibiting a collection of Allen Yu's vibrant drawings. His packed compositions catalog food, animals and public transit—each polar bear, can of soda, or metro line distinct from the many others in the composition, their slight variations revealing the beauty and individuality that still exist in mass-produced society. "Coca Cola and Variants From Around the World" (2023), a tight grid of cans and bottles, seems to pulse with an electro beat thanks to its bright magenta background, its subject—in a variety of languages and styles yet all cohering to a similar design—a reminder that globalization and regionalism needn't always be at odds.

Balinese artist Cekeg, shown by Alexander DiJulio, has updated the tradition of Batuan painting—an intricate, labor-intensive, multistep process—to comment on the region's recent history and the growth of tourism in the area. Especially pointed is "Finally It Has Arrived" (2008), a crowded scene where a foreign collector drops money out of an airplane as a mob of artists reach skyward. While the international cash infusion is welcomed by some, Indonesian iconography gets lost amid the masses and poverty still persists.

At Hashimoto Contemporary, the tiny sculptures by Abigail Goldman are bloody fun. An investigator at the Public Defender's office in Bellingham, Wash., she creates murder scenes in miniature under plastic bubbles—what she calls "die-o-ramas." An echo of Frances Glessner Lee's dollhouse scenes that were used to train forensic investigators, but even more gruesome, these vignettes carry their darkness wryly. A pair of frustrated golfers take out their anger on an unfortunate individual, viscera coat a yoga studio, and grocery shoppers discover an unsettling answer to the age-old question, "Where's the beef?"

Other highlights include Yuichiro Ukai's anime- and Japanese print-filled-triptych at Yukiko Koide Presents; Shinichi Sawada's otherworldly stoneware creatures at Jennifer Lauren Gallery; and Della Wells's energetic collages at Portrait Society Gallery of Contemporary Art.



Cekeg's 'Finally It Has Arrived' (2008) PHOTO: OAF

While some outsiders have broken into more traditional spaces—Edmondson was the first African-American folk sculptor to receive a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art and Judith Scott exhibited at the Venice Biennale, LACMA and the Brooklyn Museum—the mainstream art world needs to more fully embrace the idea of these creators as artists without any qualifiers. Until then, enforcing existing hierarchies means that we miss out on adventurous, engaging work—an unfortunate omission that the Outsider Art Fair is doing its best to remedy.

Outsider Art Fair
Metropolitan Pavilion, through March 3