

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Feeling Right at Home on the Fringe

By Roberta Smith - Jan. 31, 2013



Outsider Art Fair “26 Raimbilli Cousins” (1980-1994), mixed mediums on cardboard, by Gayleen Aiken, at the Luise Ross booth at 548 West 22nd Street. Linda Rosier for The New York Times

The Outsider Art Fair, a wonderfully eccentric jewel in the crown of New York art fairs, has a renewed radiance. For the first time in its 20-year history, it occupies a building retrofitted for art: the clean, well-lit spaces of the former Dia Art Foundation. This places it in the western reaches of Chelsea, once again confronting the world of contemporary insider art with irrefutable proof that the most lasting work comes from unstoppable emotional necessity, an especially useful lesson for the moment.

Since its inception, the fair has been pivotal in establishing the importance and richness of 20th-, and now 21st-century, folk, outsider and self-taught art and for virtually introducing greats like James Castle, Morton Bartlett, George Widener and others to the public. But it has had some ups and downs. Founded by Sanford Smith in 1993, it was first held on the ground floor of the venerable Puck Building on Houston Street, close by SoHo, then still heavy with art galleries. The Puck’s quirky, irregular spaces seemed made for the oddities of outsider art, but in 2008 the building became unavailable. For the next five years, the

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fair was held on — or exiled to — an upper floor of a generic office building on 34th Street, where it did not flourish.

Last year the 34th Street space shut down, and Andrew Edlin, an art dealer and fair participant since 2004, urged Mr. Smith to move the fair to Chelsea. Shortly thereafter Mr. Edlin offered to buy it, and a deal was struck. With Mr. Smith staying on as a consultant, some new exhibitors were attracted, and others weeded out. Voilà: the 2013 Outsider Art Fair, transformed.

With its generous booths and wide aisles, the 21st incarnation has a big-fair feeling. But with 40 participants, it does not exhaust. Art, dealers and visitors all can breathe. The rooftop is kitted out with a large heated tent where snacks are available and panel discussions staged. (The program, which looks interesting, has been organized by Valérie Rousseau, an art historian and curator who is married to Mr. Edlin and has recently joined the staff of the American Folk Art Museum.)

This year's fair offers a dizzying array of outstanding things to see and some impressive new names. Established artists — Bill Traylor, Martín Ramírez, Adolf Wölfli, Joseph Yoakum, John Kane, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Sam Doyle and Mr. Widener — dominate the booths of Ricco/Maresca, Dean Jensen, St. Etienne and Carl Hammer, which also has five canes with expressively carved and inlaid handles made by an artist known only as Stick Dog Bob for members of a Black Power group in Chicago during the 1960s. St. Etienne has papered the upper tiers of its walls with a fascinating timeline about the emergence of outsider art and self-taught art and their European counterpart, Art Brut.

Du Marche, a newcomer from Lausanne, Switzerland, has devoted most of its space to Alöise Corbaz (1886-1964), the great Swiss outsider, known for her nearly fluorescent colors and voluptuous figures. You can immerse yourself in the art of Haiti, Jamaica and other Caribbean locales at Pan American Art Projects, Bonheur and Bourbon-Lally, where bright sequined voodoo banners are piled high on tables.

It adds to the show's clarity that nearly a quarter of the booths feature just one artist. Gary Snyder is surveying the work of the painter Janet Sobel (1894-1968), who worked in several modes of peasant-art-flavored figuration and also made dripped abstractions before Jackson Pollock. Luise Ross has the colorful, carefully captioned crayon drawings of Gayleen Aiken (1934-2005), a Vermont outsider, and a cluster of 26 nearly life-size bucktoothed people in painted cutout cardboard called the Raimbilli Cousins, that Aiken made to keep her company. Kinz-Tillou has devoted its space to the work of Winfred Rembert, a self-taught artist born in 1945, who creates vivid family portraits and scenes of chain gangs working in cotton fields by applying dye to large sheets of carved and tooled leather. C. Grimaldis, a Baltimore dealer, has returned for the third year with the wonderful paintings of Giorgos Rigas, 92, whose populous scenes of life in the Greek mountain village of his childhood are every bit as good as Grandma Moses' work.