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HYPERALLERGIC

When Artists Move from the Margins to the Center

The most powerful outsider artworks in *Outliers* and *American Vanguard Art* at the National Gallery of Art evoke ideals about all artists: the belief, for example, that they are distinct from non-artists.

James Gibbons | February 10, 2018



William Edmondson, "Angel" (c. 1931), limestone, 22 x 16 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches,
Robert M. Greenberg Collection (all images courtesy The National Gallery, Washington, DC)

It's been quite a while since "outsider art" — the not wholly satisfactory term coined by the British art historian Roger Cardinal in 1972 — has occupied the art world's peripheries, far from the insiders' world of top-tier galleries, museums, and the market. Outsider art's abiding allure is evident in the

extensive infrastructure now supporting its display and dissemination, encompassing museum collections, art fairs, and foundations devoted to important figures. It's inconceivable the significance of outsider art will ever recede from view. We can even speak of "canonical" outsider artists (Henry Darger, James Castle, Martín Ramírez) whose prominence within this art-historical rubric seems as secure as Pollock's and De Kooning's within Abstract Expressionism. The rise and entrenchment of outsider art and its tributaries (most notably, though most uneasily, folk art) signal that this kind of work stirs up (without necessarily satisfying) some of the fundamental desires that inform our experience of art more broadly. Clearly we want something from outsider art. But what is it?

I asked myself this question as I went through *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, a capacious exhibition centered on outsider art, currently on view at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. As this show demonstrates, the rawness and tactility of the most powerful outsider artworks offer a sense of bedrock presence, of stubborn conviction and irrepressible need. The artworks' authority asserts itself even as it is cloaked in gestures or an overall angle of vision that is off-kilter and eccentric, often due to mental states that most of us will never inhabit. The most powerful outsider artworks in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* evoke certain cherished ideals about *all* artists: the belief, for example, that they should be seers, uncompromised and uncompromising, and are somehow mysteriously distinct from non-artists. Or that they should use their difference to channel a larger group's energies into expressive forms that, their social origins notwithstanding, bear a strongly individualized cast. Such assumptions about the artist's personality and role in society can and should be scrutinized and nuanced, and some may reject them outright. But it's undeniable that to engage with outsider art — works that prompt comparisons in equal measure with modernist masterpieces and paleolithic cave painting — is to return to first principles, to reflect on the very DNA of art, expression, and creativity.

Outliers and American Vanguard Art is intended not as a survey of American outsider or self-taught art (with "outliers" the preferred term of its curator Lynne Cooke), but rather as a staging of three distinct eras of encounter with this material by artists, curators, and the public. Works by unschooled artists mingle freely with those by art-world luminaries like Charles Sheeler, Cindy Sherman, and Kara Walker and suggest plausible affinities among them, if not direct influence. One of the exhibition's strengths, then, is to acknowledge in its premise the kinds of desire elicited by outsider art and the uses it has afforded over the last hundred years.

The show's opening section, devoted to the interwar years in the United States, focuses on folk and so-called primitive painting and sculpture. On the institutional side, the advocacy of crucial enthusiasts,

such as the dealer Sidney Janis and, above all, MOMA director Alfred Barr, drew attention to works that, to prior generations, would not have been considered art or would have been taken for granted as utilitarian crafts. Barr's admiration for the tombstone carving of the Tennessee sculptor William Edmonson led to a small solo exhibition at MOMA in 1937, the museum's first for an African American and the first for an artist who lacked formal training. Edmonson's sudden visibility follows the template that has governed so many self-taught artists who meet with renown — the sculptor, whose career making tombstones had begun only in his fifties, was “discovered” by an influential tastemaker, whose validation catapulted him from the margins to the center.

One can regard this now-venerable process as the manifestation of a lopsided power dynamic, and, in this case, even as paternalism on the part of Barr and MOMA. But, as the show's catalog points out, Barr came to know of Edmonson only after *Harper's Bazaar* refused to publish Louise Dahl-Wolfe's photographs of him and his sculptures because he was black. Barr's advocacy was not expressed in a social vacuum and he was not solely concerned with disinterested appreciation of Edmonson as an artist. In any case, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* provides a wider view, presenting Edmonson's work in dialogue with sculptors of his era — John B. Flannagan and the Harlem Renaissance artist Henry Bannarn, and, by extension, Brancusi and his European peers — regarding the essence of their medium and its expressive possibilities.



Horace Pippin, “Interior” (1944), oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 30 3/16 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

For the trained artists featured in the show, their unschooled counterparts exerted an irresistible pull as exemplars of vitality, ingenuity, sincerity, and a bracing lack of polish. Among the moderns, avid collectors of folk or “primitive” art such as Elie Nadelman and Yasuo Kuniyoshi created works that were indebted to the untutored artists they cherished; Louis Eilshemius and Florine Stettheimer renounced their formal training and embraced a naive idiom, though to a mixed reception (Stettheimer was devastated by the response to her lone gallery exhibition during her lifetime). Marsden Hartley’s admiration for the folk paintings he encountered in the American Southwest comes across in portraits that pay homage to their style, but the unvarnished directness and formal flatness of these late-career works also reflect artists he may not have been aware of, such as Horace Pippin and the immigrant John Kane, born in Scotland to Irish parents. The latter’s bare-chested self-portrait greets the viewer with arresting assurance and verve.



Joseph Yoakum, “Briar Head Mtn of National Park Range of Bryce Canyon National Park near Hatch, Utah U.S.A.” (c. 1969), blue-black and black ballpoint pen and colored pencil on paper, 20 x 24 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, gift of the Collectors Committee and the Donald and Nancy de Laski Fund

Jumping ahead a few decades to the ferment of 1960s counterculture, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* traces the entanglement of schooled and unschooled artists at a time of momentous cultural upheaval. A signal example is the work of the Chicago Imagists, a group that included Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, and Barbara Rossi. Their attraction to raw, self-taught mavericks is encapsulated in Nutt's praise of autodidact artist Joseph Yoakum and other outsiders: "Yoakum's work for me is fantastic, true fantasy, and I came to learn that I had a right to my own when I realized I was willing to accept his. When you see someone like [Martín] Ramírez or [Simon] Rodia [creator of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles] or Yoakum striding out on their own, it makes you feel more comfortable with doing that yourself." Nutt's remarks cast these figures not only as spirit guides but as rugged individualists in the grand American line ("striding out on their own") who serve to underwrite the wildness of Nutt's own works, which traffic in psychosexual tumult and fantastical exuberance. Starting in the late 1960s, concurrent with the Imagists, many African American artists sought out invigorating encounters to push their art in fresh directions. However, they tended to look not to striding loners but to more collective expressions of homegrown genius: textile traditions, for example, embraced by Al Loving and others in their abstractions, or assemblage practices with deep roots in vernacular African American expression.

In the show's concluding section, which extends into the 21st century, the boundaries between insider and outsider, self-taught and impeccably schooled are so porous that they seem barely to exist. There are certain continuities with the earlier material: the advocacy of Barr and Nutt is echoed by Robert Gober's presentation of Forrest Bess's work for the 2012 Whitney Biennial; Gober's commentary on Bess for that show is also included here. But an emphasis on photography and its uses in staging gender narratives indicate that new cohorts of outliers have been invited to the outsider party. Here we find Eugene von Bruenchenhein's copious photographs of his often topless and apparently game wife; the rather creepier ballerina-doll pictures made by Morton Bartlett, after devoting laborious attention to crafting the dolls themselves; the insouciant intensities of Greer Lankton, revolving around gender reassignment and the refashioning of icons, both cultural (Jackie O.) and subcultural (Candy Darling) through dolls and photographs; and selections from the inscrutable archive of Polaroids taken of actresses on television by the anonymous photographer known as Type 42. Perhaps meant to anchor these works to an important art-historical moment are several of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), but at least in this context I found Sherman's photographs drained of their usual power and fascination, oddly staid in the presence of such offbeat visionary company. (I wondered, too, why the show did not include images by the photographer Francesca Woodman or, for that matter, the self-portrait photographs of Vivian Maier.)



Florine Stettheimer, "Father Hoff" (1928), oil on canvas, 28-1/8 x 18-1/8 inches, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer

Such occasional misfires notwithstanding, *Outliers and American Vanguard Artists* is nearly overwhelming in the works it gathers and the pleasures it affords. One such pleasure is purely intellectual and lingers well beyond the experience of the show. By encouraging a conversation between outsiders and their mainstream comrades-in-arms, the exhibition leaves you pondering the sorts of fruitful, unresolvable questions that anyone who takes art seriously does well to consider. How do artists access the wellsprings of aesthetic power? Can such power be taught? What is the purpose of artistic training, and what are its limits? Given the late starts and difficult circumstances (i.e., poverty, institutionalization) that often affect outsider artists, what sorts of normative expectations — fair or not — do we bring to our notions of a proper artistic career? At the same time, the exhibition produces enough sensory overload that one readily ignores such calls to cogitation. The rare and unlikely marvels among the show's objects — a Ramírez Madonna; the word "place" as communicated visually by the illiterate James Castle; a monumental quilt by Mary Lee Bendolph — assert their own reasons for being. The mind pauses. Sometimes it's sufficient just to look.