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Worlds Apart

By Fred Camper

Outsider Art: An Exploration of Chicago Collections at the Chicago Cultural Center, through February 23

I'm looking at a painting by Uncle Jack Dey, one of about 400 works by "outsiders" now at the Chicago Cultural Center. In front of a roughly depicted forest, five spear-carrying nude women with large breasts and large red nipples, their hair blown back almost horizontally, chase four bears that are already bleeding from spear wounds. I take in this undated, untitled scene and wonder, What was he thinking?

Nearby is an untitled piece from 1985 by Mamie Deschilie: a piece of cardboard cut in the shape of a goat. Its simple outline and large painted eyes have a peculiar charm characteristic of many of the works here--the shape has a bit more verve than the average child's drawing, an outline just surprising enough to seem original. Deschilie adds a few tiny elements that take her image over the top: real cotton forms a tiny beard on the animal's chin, and from its ears and neck hang three tiny necklaces of white beads. What was she thinking?

Much of the best outsider art causes one to ask that question. Mostly self-taught, working in no definable tradition, these artists invent their own iconography, create their own worlds. Not coincidentally, one of the first people interested in such work was the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, who in the 1920s studied, and collected, the art of the insane. Chicago collectors, long interested in surrealism and removed from the art-world politics of New York, have collected outsider work since at least the 1940s; this exhibit includes works from the collections of Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt and Roger Brown, themselves artists who figure prominently in the Museum of Contemporary Art's current "Art in Chicago, 1945-1995" exhibit. One would guess that a fine outsider show could be mounted from Chicago collections--and this one is wonderful, one of the very best art shows of the past year, inspiring and startling and visionary and loads of fun all at once. Curator Kenneth C. Burkhardt has done a superb job: those artists whose work I've seen before are represented by some of their strongest pieces, and many of the pieces by artists I haven't heard of are revelations.

The range of subject matter is as vast as that of materials used. There are landscapes actual and mythical, abstractions, battle scenes from history and fantasy, cityscapes, architectural fantasies, portraits, and animals. There are Adams and Eves and plenty of Christs; there are painted-over Superman comics and a portrait of Karen Carpenter treated with more reverence than most of the Christs. They're done in everything from oil on canvas to crayon on paper to marker on bedsheet, from carved stone to tree branches to scrap wood and metal, electronic parts, and the ever reliable bottle caps. These artists are from lower levels of the economic pyramid, which accounts in part for the modesty of the materials; African-Americans and Latinos are far better represented here than in the galleries of River North and SoHo. This is art made out of inner passion: most of the artists began working with no thought of recognition or exhibition, a welcome change for anyone who has ever observed a well-dressed art-

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school undergraduate marching into a gallery with his slides. And for every story of the discovery of a relatively major artist--Henry Darger's landlord finds a treasure trove of drawings after the ailing Darger moves out--there always seems to be one better, like the tale of the pile of junk found dumped in the street that contained the small sculptures of the otherwise unknown Philadelphia Wireman.

A key aspect of the best outsider art is the directness with which it is made--what these artists may lack in technique, they more than make up for in sincerity. *These are works not of doubt but of belief. This is no small matter when contrasted with an art world whose twin obsessions with innovation and appropriation often produce works that seem most concerned with new ways to be ironic--new intellectual filters through which to present old ideas. Outsider art eschews, rather than comments on, classical composition and traditional ideas of "refinement."* The gown on the woman in Maurice Sullins's undated *Mrs. 'Arris Wears Dior Gown* is decorated with brightly colored circles that don't look like any design that ever graced a piece of couture, but then the whole composition is similarly cluttered, with flowers and dots and a colored grid and more circles. Among the stories the painting tells is one of an artist who, in love with colored designs, just kept adding them.

These artists are not afraid of making works that seem distorted or unbalanced. The figures in John Tigner's undated painted wood carving Adam and Eve stand, unconventionally, at right angles to each other. They're greatly elongated, which adds dramatic power to the rough carving; Adam also has a partial hard-on, which draws attention to him. Unashamed eroticism is common in outsider work, but here there's a point being made, whether consciously or not. Classical Adam and Eve imagery--Albrecht Dürer's engraving is one of the most famous--portrays the two figures with more compositional balance, while hinting that the temptress Eve is the evil one. Here Adam is the potential aggressor--truer to human nature, if not to the Bible. These are artists unashamed of our original animal nature. As in non-Western and "tribal" art, animals are represented with near-human attributes, while humans are often depicted as creatures of nature. In an untitled work from 1989, Ralph Griffin paints human figures onto two tree trunks, a fork in the wood representing the legs of one, the painted faces combining with the wood's rough surface to suggest a forest coming to life. I thought of Max Ernst's paintings of tree-like figures, but Griffin's works have greater directness and force: they're actual objects. The artist seems to believe his creatures are real in a way that a sophisticate such as Ernst, well aware of his place in art history and of the particular acts of imagination he was engaging in, never could.

It is out of a similar belief that the best outsider artists freely cross between, and combine, various levels and modes of representation. *Dear Hearts and Gentle People*, a 1991 painting by Minnie Adkins, is mostly an arcadian scene of limited technical sophistication: there's a barn, a home, a forest, a pond. But as the eye descends from background to foreground with the downward sloping land, the painted farm animals at the bottom of the picture seem to spill out onto a shelf on which there are painted sculptures of similar animals, lined up in a row. In Bruno Sowa's *Slaughter of Polish Officers at Forest of Katyn* (1981), carved wood reliefs of three Soviet soldiers killing two Poles emerge from a painted surface. This depiction of an infamous 1940 massacre--the Soviets slaughtered thousands of Polish officers--has an oddly placid feel, the two Poles' faces displaying only mild discontent. But the emergence of Sowa's figures from the painted backdrop gives his presentation of this event, still of great emotional import for

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Poles, a vivid physicality that a pure painting--or a pure sculpture--could likely never attain.

Working first and foremost for themselves, outsider artists constantly try to create beauty (even Sowa's horrific scene has a certain charm); working outside of tradition, each decides for himself what beauty is. Otis Yates's two mixed-media paintings from 1970, *Queen of Sheba* and *King Solomon*, include huge quantities of costume jewelry and similar objects to make the garments and thrones of these simply painted figures seem like carefully designed, medal-covered symbols of authority. In the dark space around their heads he has also placed pregummed colored stars. The stars are affecting not as irony or kitsch but as part of a sincere depiction of a magical world of royalty and splendor very different from the present day (it should also be noted that both king and queen are depicted as black Africans). Drossos Skyllas's undated *Sunrise (Dianna) Reflection*, on the other hand, first struck me as cliched. A woman in a long white gown sits at a table with the sea spread out behind her; the sky is filled with the glowing orange clouds of sunset, which is also reflected in the water. I've seen similar colors on more than one place mat. But closer inspection reveals that Skyllas has painted this scene with obsessive care, in a technique that borrows from pointillism, giving the surface a radiance and depth that contrast with the typical flatness of kitsch.

Jaded viewers, and television-bred art students who sometimes have trouble creating a single image that doesn't also parody itself, would be well advised to consider whether Skyllas's painting is interesting more for the obvious commitment to an idea of beauty with which it was painted or for its excessiveness. A few of the brightly colored, vaguely floral curved shapes in Minnie Evans's untitled collage would not command nearly as much interest as the densely detailed whole, which fascinates partly because the design is almost, but not precisely, symmetrical. Excess becomes an expression of sincerity: Howard Finster's untitled tower consists of wood carved to mimic brick, with dual mirrors on each face representing the windows of each story. Simple figures in various poses are painted on each mirror. Conceptually, it's beguiling, with the reflective mirrors standing for the reflective glass that sheathes modern office buildings while oxymoronically offering us a view inside. But by giving his tower 24 stories--making it about ten feet tall--Finster takes it, literally and figuratively, to another level entirely. As with other works in this show that repeat a motif, whether an owl or an airplane, it's apparent that this is not decorative art, even though in many pieces repeated patterns call to mind decorative traditions. Repetition equals belief. It is almost as if the artist feels that the more is shown, the more real the depicted world will become.

For this is also an art of wish fulfillment. Impoverished or disenfranchised in the present, the outsider artist creates a fantasy world, an imagined paradise or an embodiment of dreams and fears, in which to live. It is no accident that the work of male outsiders includes a whole lot of women, many of them nude. The carved wooden figure of Carl McKenzie's *Ruthie* (1989) is bare breasted, her colorful "dress" of red, yellow, and blue dots consistent with the lively colors of much outsider work. And she carries a serving tray, bearing sandwiches and drinks--McKenzie's ideal companion, perhaps, always ready, never complaining. In an untitled 1995 piece, Pearl Marshall places an old, torn, faded photograph of herself from the 1950s in a frame more encrusted with costume jewelry than King Solomon's crown, suggesting a desire to see her youthful image as an icon. For some, religion is part of this search for an ideal world; in fact paintings that include (or are only) text espousing unique religious beliefs are among the

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most familiar of outsider works. (But I've never seen anything quite like Norbert Kox's huge, nutty 1996 collage, whose paragraph-long title begins "Made in America: U.S. Upperman, the man of steal..." If anyone can figure out exactly what these painted-over images of Superman and several of Jesus are saying about the relationship between that duo and Satan, please let me know.)

Outsider work is not, for the most part, best seen with the same eyes with which one looks at "fine" art. It tends to be in the overall conception, the total form--all 24 of Finster's stories together--rather than in the individual details, the single figures in the windows, that one finds meaning and beauty. There are exceptions: Charles H. Beyer's *Anger; the End of the World Will Come by Fire. The Lord Gives the Warning Sign* (1964), with its erupting volcanoes and bright reds and yellows and greens and superimposed Christ has extraordinarily resonant colors and a powerfully inward-looking figure. One can look at each small area of the picture with pleasure; it reminded me of paintings by Emil Nolde. Jimmy Lee Sudduth's undated, untitled tiger cat painting is roughly and unrealistically outlined, but its equally rough pink-and-gray stripes rather mysteriously animate and add depth to the figure. And the six small works by the Philadelphia Wireman, who bound found pieces of junk in wire, have an extraordinary, almost kinetic power. Each tiny area of each piece seems ready to burst, or explode. But even in these works, the interest lies as much in the uniqueness and audacity of the conception as in the relatively refined technique.

While interest in outsider art goes back a long way, its current vogue seems to have evolved from the attack on all forms of cultural hegemony that began in the 60s. Artists have turned to it for inspiration rather than continuing to work in well-established traditions they found stultifying. This expansion of the idea of what art is and who can make it is one of the major art accomplishments of our century. But in some other areas of culture the pendulum has swung even farther--maybe too far--toward antielitism. Many major universities no longer require English majors to read a single work of Shakespeare; what does a degree in English mean when its holder knows nothing of the foundations of the language, and especially when one can be sure that this same student will have taken courses in current romance fiction, Madonna's videos, or poetry by the artist formerly known as Prince?

As great, as original, as moving as outsider art can be, it should be viewed in addition to, not instead of, "fine" art. The Cultural Center show is perhaps the second-best exhibit now on view in Chicago, but what is likely the best is the show of old master prints and drawings at R.S. Johnson. If the visionary madness of Henry Darger's drawings offers something not found at Johnson's gallery, well, the fine lines of Rembrandt's etchings offer a music and poetry of light unlike anything found in Darger. Which is not to say that the old masters were never odd or surprising. Piranesi's prints, large images of Roman buildings and ruins, offer an almost frightening vision of mass. His famous fantasy prison interiors, such as *Carceri VI* (1750), with its multiple levels and vast interior space, confirm that he was perhaps a little mad. But whereas in outsider work contorted and distorted figures are presented simply as the artist's authentic vision, the contorted face of the beggar in Goya's *Mejor es holgar* (1799) represents a value judgment. For worse and for better, the old master tradition is one of balance and proportion, in which the violation of same signifies a person, or a world, gone wrong. Dürer's *Adam and Eve* is here, its symmetry setting the stage for the fall to come; one can also compare excitingly unbalanced outsider landscapes with Nicolaes

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de Bruyn's *Landscape With Pair on Wooden Bridge* (1602), an almost perfectly ordered symphony of light and dark trees and curved lines of plants, trees, pathways and rooftops.

What is most exquisite, and most profound, in these works is the way these very physical images achieve a kind of silence. Outsider work is often brash, loud, proud, and assertive; these prints of Dürer and Rembrandt cause the viewer to come to them. These images are so refined that a single square inch of parallel and perpendicular lines evokes the musicality of the whole. In Dürer's engraving *Virgin and Child With Pear* (1511), the curves on the lower portion of the Virgin's outer garment are continued, with some change in direction, on the tree trunk to the right and on the sleeve on her arm to the left. In Dürer's engraving *Saint Christopher Facing Right* (1521), lines radiating to the left and right from the child atop the saint's head are echoed in lines in the landscape and the stream. The direction of the stream's current is matched in Saint Christopher's gaze and the pointing fingers of the child, whose eyes are closed as if he were guided by an inner light. At the same time, figures and landscape are depicted with a breathtaking physical realism, giving them an almost inexplicable solidity. The balance between inner and outer vision, between faith and the physical world, that Dürer achieves comes from a very different aesthetic--and ethos--than the work of most outsiders, who follow only their own light.