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No Means Yes

Getting into outsider art

By Melissa Stern

In the No, a thought-provoking exhibition at Edlin Gallery, challenges some of our basic assumptions about outsider artists. The mythology is that outsider artists exist in a state of “not knowing.” They live in a kind of innocent ignorance about the mainstream art scene and often about the world at large. The question becomes how much does our fascination with the artist’s own back-story affect our response to the work.



The six artists featured are all in one way or another “outsiders,” but to varying degrees. The question nags as one looks at the work: Is this work somehow more worthy because the artist is untrained, but naturally savvy? Or is that piece more or less “outsider” because the artist is art-school trained but mentally ill? The exhibition demands a self-reflective response from the viewer—do these things really matter when faced with a work of art that packs an immediate and emotional punch? Maybe.

The gallery does not offer answers to these questions, but it presents a brave and intriguing exhibition for a venue where such notions of authenticity are its stock in trade. It also presents an opportunity to see the work of five diverse but equally interesting artists, none of whom I had ever seen before.

The work of Thomas Chapman faces this issue straight on. Easily the most compelling and interesting work in the show, it is also the work of someone with an extensive art-school background. I’m not sure that I buy the argument that he is attempting to “unlearn” his art-school training, but the work is terrific. Crazy-shaped canvases covered in debris, old carpet, paint and signs, they are a cacophony of modern urban life. A bombardment of images and color can be found all around the sides of the canvases. I find the abstracted pieces more interesting than the ones that address narrative. A modern-day Madonna and child appears contrived, especially when placed next to the abstract pieces that jump off the wall.

George Widener seems to fit the more typical profile of outsider artist. An autodidact living in rural North Carolina, he draws on stained napkins with a fine pen. Exquisitely intricate pen-and-ink drawings portray a world of infinite order and detail. In mapping a world of the mind, they are as elegant and sophisticated as the previous work is raw. These pieces certainly don’t need the title of “outsider art” to be valid statements. But then again, does being “outsider” make them more valuable?

Charles Steffan began art school in 1949, but he was forced to leave due to the onset of mental illness. He continued to make art until his death in 1995. The drawings on huge sheets of brown wrapping paper are both a verbal diary of day-to-day life and a visual window into the artist’s interior life. A mundane description of shoveling snow is juxtaposed with a gargantuan Cyclops figure whose deeply creased and reptilian skin (as well as his sharpened teeth) belie the gentle description of a snowy day.

Strolling through Chelsea or the Lower East Side you can encounter dozens of highly trained and over-intellectualized artists who work with forced and pretentious naiveté. It is a startling contrast to enjoy the work of those who not only walk the walk but also talk the talk.

Through June 20, Edlin Gallery, 529 W. 20th St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 212-206-9723. Call for gallery hours.