

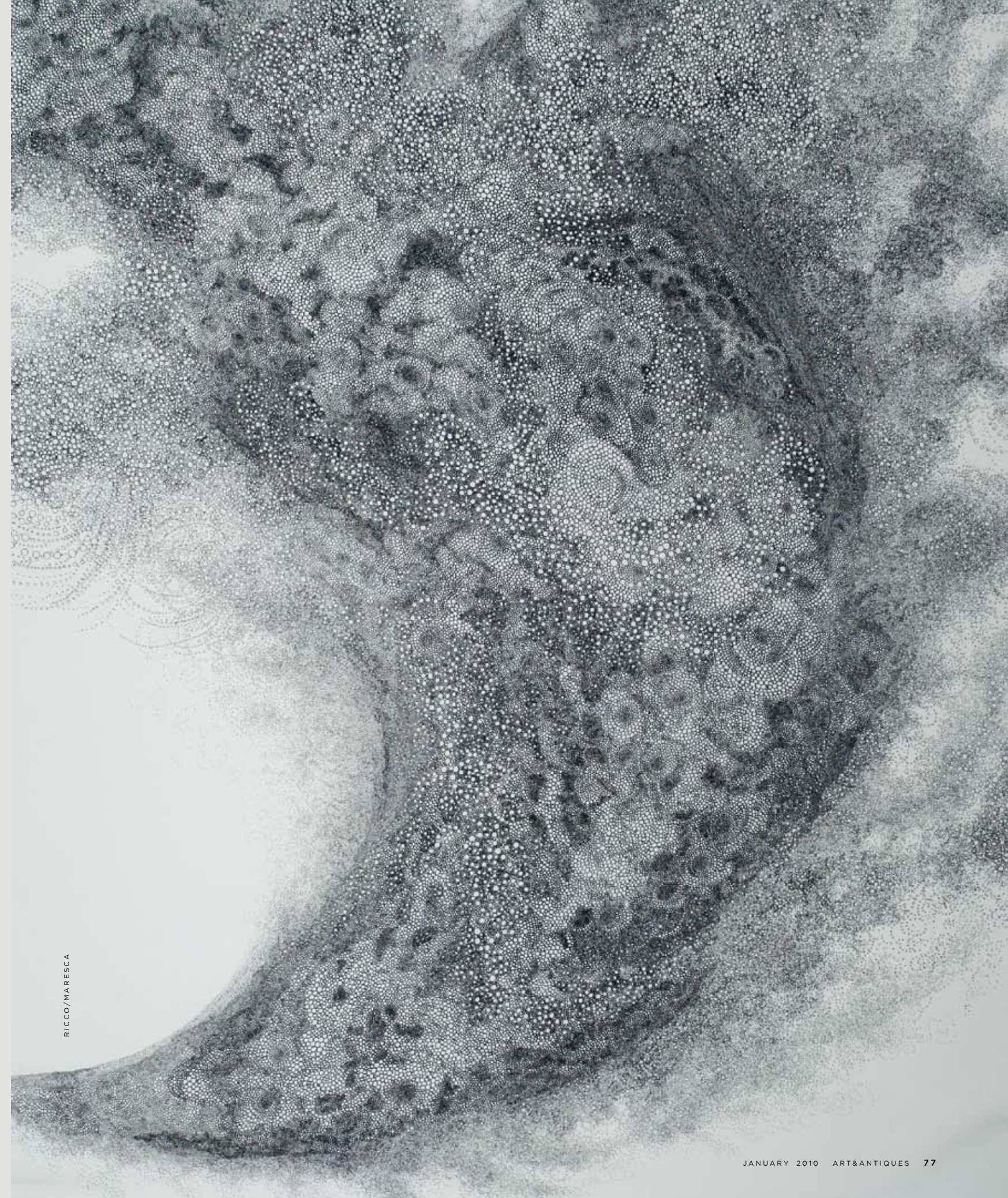
# THE NEW OUTSIDERS

**WITH DISCOVERIES FROM AFAR  
AND NEW WAYS OF LOOKING AT  
THE WORK OF SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS,  
THE OUTSIDER FIELD IS EVOLVING.**

**T**he late 1940s saw the first rumblings of appreciation for what is now called “Outsider” art—works created by nonacademically trained artists who operate apart from the cultural mainstream and its art-historical canon. In France, the artist Jean Dubuffet, the Surrealist leader André Breton and the art critic Michel Tapié celebrated visionary autodidacts, whose work they labeled “*art brut*,” or “raw art.” Ever since then, Europe and North America have been the main territories in which research in this field has been carried out and important talents have been discovered and promoted by curators and dealers.

In recent years, though, specialists in Europe and the U.S. have looked farther afield for the works of noteworthy self-taught artists. At the same time, some new ways of thinking about and looking at what these art makers

**BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ**



RICCO/MARESCA





ANDREW BLYTHE: THE AMES GALLERY

produce have come into focus. These two trends have played out against the backdrop of a third tendency: the blurring of the borderline that once strictly separated works made by academically trained, “professional” artists and those of their self-taught counterparts. (However, some experts on Outsider art dispute that this tendency is really all that new.)

In the early 2000s, the New York dealer Phyllis Kind began showing works by self-taught artists from Japan, including the talented draftsmen Katsuhiko Terao and Tomoyuki Shinki. Kind also showed the works of the Tokyo-based master chef and autodidact Hiroyuki Doi, whose voluminous, emotionally expressive, abstract compositions are made up of masses of tiny circles drawn with fine-point pens. Kind was a pioneering force in the Outsider art field who helped create an international market for the work of self-taught artists; this past summer, after a career that spanned four decades, she closed her New York venue.

Ricco/Maresca, another Manhattan gallery that has long shown work by both self-taught and trained art makers, has brought Doi into its stable. The gallery will feature his newest works at the annual Outsider Art Fair in New York (Feb. 5–7) and at the

Armory Show (March 4–7). Lately, Cavin-Morris, a New York gallery that also handles contemporary trained and self-taught artists’ works, as well as finely crafted objects from traditional cultures—dance wands from New Guinea, festival masks from Mexico—also has been looking to Japan. The gallery’s principals, Shari Cavin and Randall Morris, traveled there last summer and discovered unusual fired-clay works made by self-taught ceramicists.

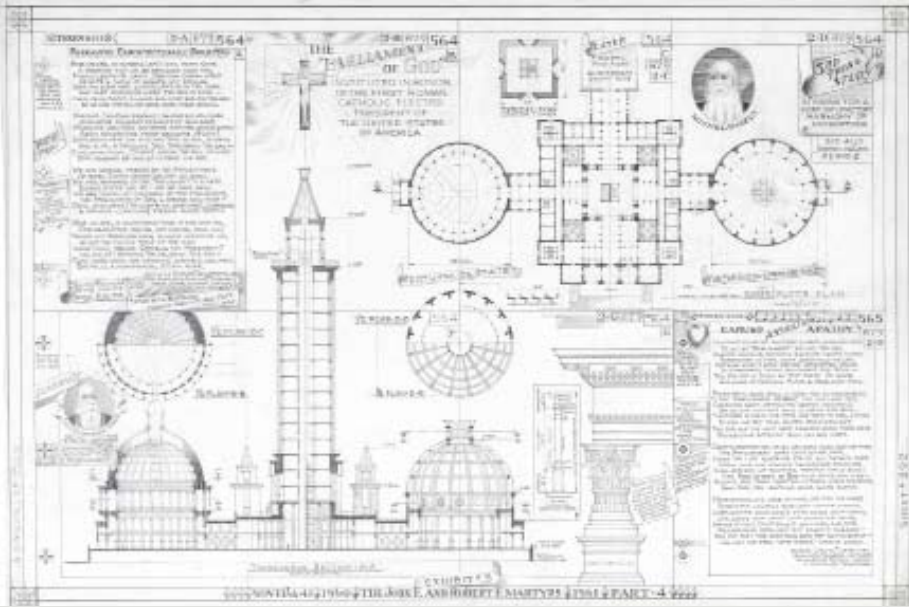
“We met talented artists near Shigaraki whose hand-sculpted ceramics are full of expression and unlike anything we had ever seen,” recalls Cavin, referring to a town in south-central Japan that has been a center of pottery production since ancient times. At the Outsider Art Fair, Cavin and Morris will show these abstract forms, along with the abstract paper-and-fiber creations of an artist from Japan whose identity is unknown; these works look like big, thin sheets of fried tempura batter shot through with lumps of vibrant colors.

Through Sept. 5, American viewers who are interested in Outsider art from Asia will find a revealing retrospective of decorative latticeworks and painted-clay animals made by the Indian self-taught artist Sonabai Rajawar on view at San Diego’s Mingei



International Museum. Sonabai’s obsessively protective husband kept her in enforced isolation for many years, during which time she used clay, bamboo and homemade dyes to make her sculptures. Born around 1928 (even the artist did not know her exact birth date), Sonabai died in 2007.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific Rim region, the New Zealand-based researcher and art promoter Stuart Shepherd has been calling attention to the work of his homeland’s most imaginative self-taught artists, including Martin Thompson, a maker of mathematically oriented designs on graph paper; Andrew Blythe, “a very original mark-maker,” as Shepherd notes, who makes primordial-looking, black-and-white abstractions on paper; and Susan Te Kahurangi King, who uses ballpoint pens, felt-tip markers and colored pencils to make abstractions or fantasy images on envelopes or plain, found paper. The daughter of a linguist who championed New Zealand’s indigenous Maori language, King, 58, stopped speaking at an early age. Her brother Stephen says, “Susan’s inspiration came from nature and Walt Disney comics during a childhood without television. Drawing became her means of expression, although she has never attempted to use it as a practical means of communication; she simply expresses her creative self.”



PREVIOUS SPREAD: HIROYUKI DOI, *HD 0307*, 2007, INK ON JAPANESE PAPER. THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ANDREW BLYTHE, *UNTITLED*, 2008, ACRYLIC ON PAPER; A. G. RIZZOLI, *FROM THE A.C.E.*,

*SHEET #292 OF 350*, PENCIL ON VELLUM SHEETS; RIZZOLI, *MR. AND MRS. HAROLD HEALY SYMBOLICALLY SKETCHED/ FIRST PRIZE, FIRST ANNIVERSARY*, 1936, INK ON RAG PAPER.





Works from New Zealand and Australia form the core of the Peter Fay Collection of Outsider art, part of which was shown last year at the University of Sydney (as was an exhibition of King's drawings). Fay, a pioneering, Sydney-based collector in the field who has amassed some 2,000 works, says, "There is a real passion coming from people who want to know more about this art." In Australia, he notes, other aficionados share his interest in Outsider art's "raw honesty, bravado and take-no-prisoners purity that all artists aspire to but seldom reach."

With the establishment, in 2008, of the Self-Taught and Outsider Art Research Collection within the University of Sydney's

arts college, the serious study of work by noteworthy autodidacts in the region acquired a high-profile base. Fay seeded STOARC's holdings with a gift of 150 sculptures, human figurines in wood and fabric by the Portuguese artist José dos Santos. Colin Rhodes, a well-known British specialist in the Outsider field, heads the STOARC research and study program. Meanwhile, through a research-oriented website that Shepherd maintains, some New Zealand artists' works have become available for sale. As the rush continues for high-quality material from such newly active regions, which American dealers will be the first to introduce important Outsider art from the

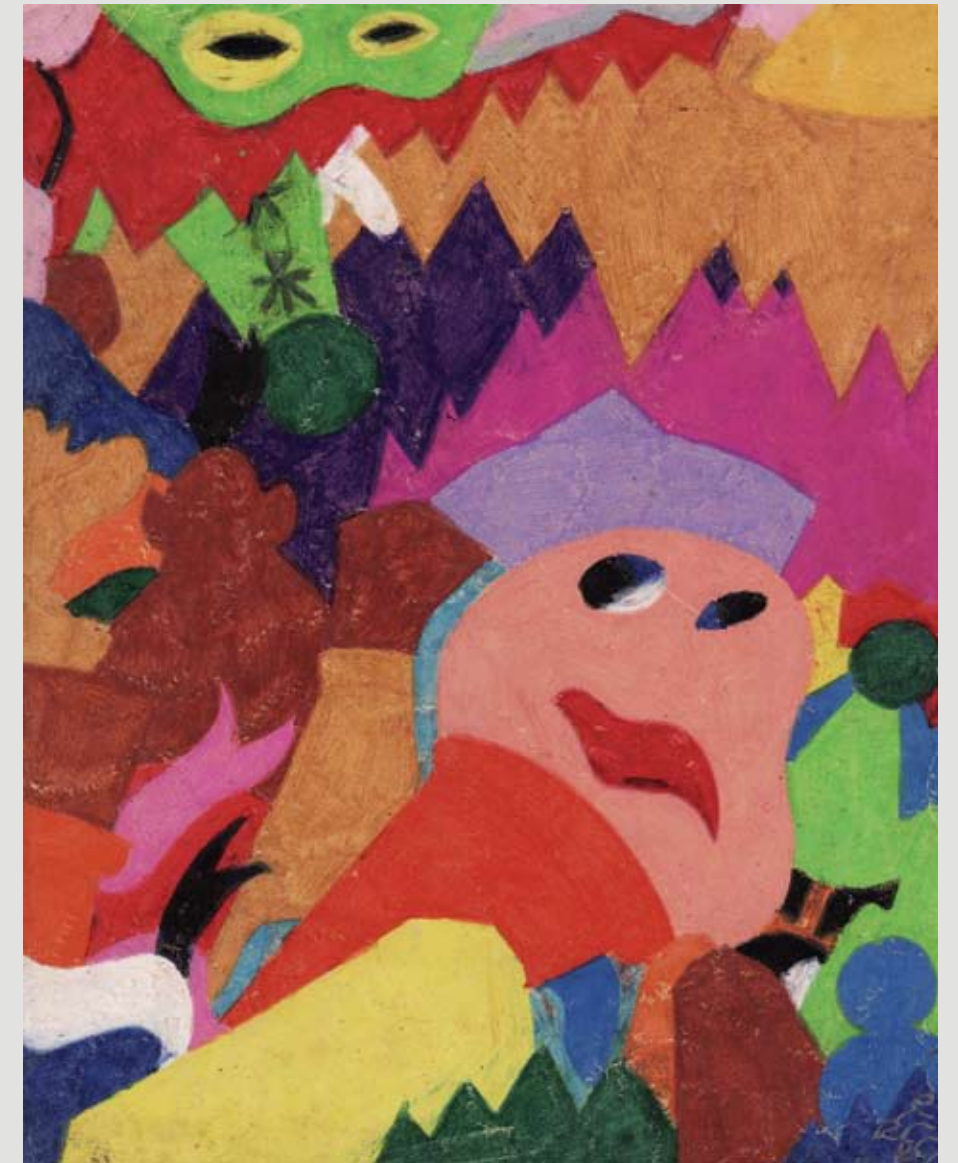
South Pacific to the U.S. market?

Although many extraordinary bodies of work have emerged in the field of Outsider art, and highly original artists are still alive and producing—for example, the Alabama-based assemblage-art maker Thornton Dial and the North Carolina-based autistic savant George Widener, who makes drawings packed with complex future-date calculations—some dealers and researchers continue to make discoveries. In addition to work by living artists, some remarkable bodies of work created in the past are only now coming to light. In *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*, an exhibition at the American Visionary Art Museum in Balti-

more (on view through Sept. 5), independent curator Roger Manley has included detailed pen-and-ink drawings and watercolors by Renaldo Kuhler, a former illustrator on the staff of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh. They depict "Rocaterrania," a Victorian-style, imaginary world that Kuhler developed over five decades in a highly personal oeuvre. "It's the coolest self-taught artist's work since Henry Darger's," Manley observes, referring to the legendary Chicago recluse who died in 1973 after authoring a strange illustrated epic, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, which pitted the cherubic Vivian Girls (with their cute Mary Janes and male genitalia) against various forces of evil.

Based in Berkeley, Calif., dealer Bonnie Grossman has long handled the work of Achilles G. Rizzoli, a draftsman in a San Francisco architecture firm who made ink-on-rag-paper drawings of his own ornate, Beaux-Arts building designs—fantasy monuments to his beloved mother that were never erected. At the Outsider Art Fair, for the first time ever, Grossman will show a batch of similar drawings Rizzoli made on plain vellum. "They reveal aspects of his thought process in relation to the more elaborate, better-known works," the veteran dealer says. Also emerging from the shadows are the strange, psychedelic-feeling drawings in ballpoint or colored inks on paper of the Texas-born artist Thomas Burleson. Depicting elaborate contraptions with thickets of pipes and with densely packed abstract compositions, Burleson's art gave expression to an emotionally troubled soul. "Like the most authentic, definitive Outsider artists," says the New York dealer Luise Ross, who handles Burleson's work, "he was compelled to make his art; it was therapeutic for him and reflects a very singular vision."

So do the paintings of female nudes and landscapes of the Italian immigrant artist Anthony De Bernardin, who settled in the Pittsburgh area and ran a variety store. Smitten by a local girl, he depicted her again and again. Although she never knew she was the artist's muse, he left her his life savings when he died. De Bernar-



din's works are marked by quirky details that should appeal to postmodern ironists, like hand-drawn phrases that label certain parts of each image. (Inscribed on a ribbon of water in one landscape: "Up the deep blue river is no work for the beaver.") David T. Owsley, a former curator of decorative art at the Carnegie Museum of Art, who discovered De Bernardin's works at a flea market near Pittsburgh in the 1970s, says, "We may never know exactly what his purposes were in making these pictures."

Ron Jagger Fine Arts will show De Bernardin at the Outsider Art Fair, where

Jagger, Kind's longtime collaborator, will launch the exhibition program of the new Manhattan gallery that bears his name. Also at the fair, the New York dealer Andrew Edlin will present the work of Pennsylvania-based Brent Green, a 31-year-old self-taught mixed-media artist, musician and filmmaker whose handcrafted sculptures and related props, which appear in his stop-motion animated films, are sold as separate works of art. With their rough-hewn yet knowing air, Green's works easily jump the border between the contemporary and Outsider categories.

FROM LEFT: RENALDO KUHLER, *ROCATERANIA*, CIRCA 1950, INK AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER;

SUSAN TE KAHURANGI KING, *UNTITLED*, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.





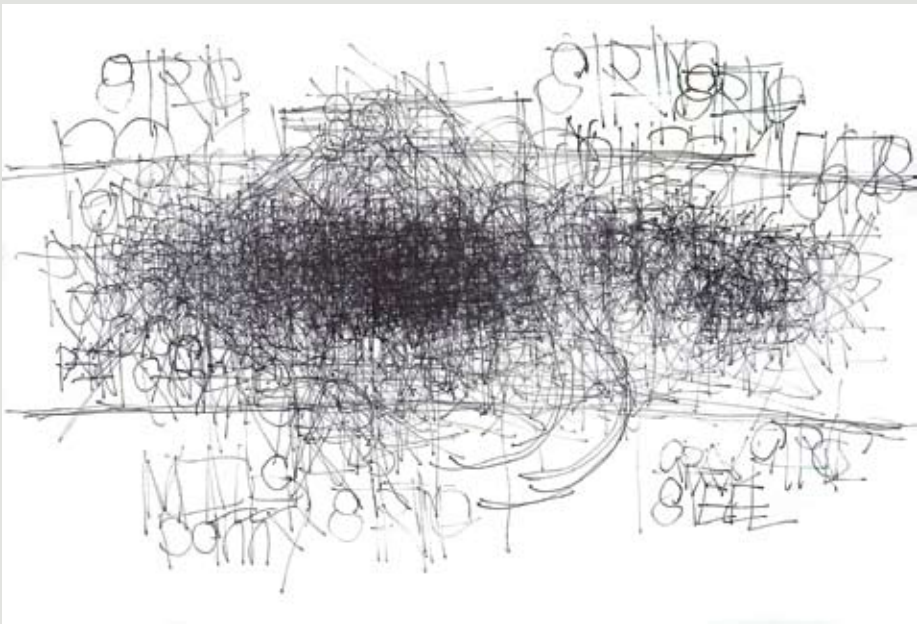
ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY; CREATIVE GROWTH ART CENTER

Such works have emerged at a time when the long-held dream of many Outsider art proponents has finally come true: This art is now appreciated by many contemporary collectors and even hangs in mainstream museums. In London last October, collector James Brett opened his new Museum of Everything, which presents the work of self-taught artists with a sensibility that appeals to the hip attitudes of pop-culture mavens. Contributors who provided commentaries in the new museum’s inaugural exhibition of some 200 works by Outsiders included such arbiters of cool as David Byrne, Ed Ruscha and the French artist Annette Messager.


Still, even as this art has won mainstream praise, Kind herself has reminded us in recent years to “remember that this work is special and not throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Another researcher in the field, who prefers to remain anonymous, says: “Could Outsider art as we’ve known it actually be on the way out? I believe it’s being diluted by the poor-quality output of art-therapy programs that’s coming to market and by the fact that the best Outsider work is being absorbed into the contemporary art sector. This will lead to the greatest Outsiders, like Darger or Adolf Wölfli, being fully incorporated into the mainstream.”

Brooke Davis Anderson, director and curator of the Contemporary Center at the American Folk Art Museum in New York, disagrees. She points out that “this field often seems to have a sense of amnesia about its own history,” and says, “That a contemporary artist like Maurizio Cattelan should be interested in Martín Ramírez or that other contemporary artists should be inspired by Darger—this is just a continuation of the appreciation of gifted self-taught artists’ work that Dubuffet and Breton expressed decades ago.” What is novel, though, is the focus that an exhibition Anderson has organized at AFAM has placed on the formal qualities and overall expressive character of the works themselves—instead of the anecdotal emphasis on artists’ biographies that is usual in the Outsider field.

The show, titled *Approaching Abstraction* (on view through Sept. 6), examines the visual languages many self-taught artists employ, which include random patterns, private codes and symbols and exuberantly exaggerated or distorted forms. It convinc-



ingly suggests that such powerful works can hold their own alongside modern art’s more familiar abstract icons. “Some of the most interesting work by self-taught artists is full of shapes, letters, numbers or lines that are so densely packed, they almost disappear,” says Lorri Berenberg, an Outsider art dealer in the Boston area. Works like those by Dan Miller, which she will show at the Outsider Art Fair, fit that description. Berenberg adds, “The strongest abstract work by self-taught artists easily crosses the old Outsider-contemporary art divide.”

While Cavin does not completely ignore self-taught artists’ interesting life stories or the intentions they might have had in creating their works, she believes that “looking at this art from a formalist perspective is one of the best things we can do.” Therein, she hints, lies the impulse for new waves of excitement about Outsider art and for the market that supports it, whose latest discoveries promise rewarding surprises. 

FROM LEFT: BRENT GREEN, *WEIRD CAROLERS*, 2009, STOP-MOTION FILM; *WATTS AND VOLTS ACROSS A FIELD*,

2009, INSTALLATION SHOTS; DAN MILLER, *UNTITLED (DM#8)*, 2005, PEN ON PAPER.

**Ames Gallery, Berkeley, Calif.**  
510.845.4949 [amesgallery.com](http://amesgallery.com)

**Berenberg Gallery, Boston**  
339.368.6699 [berenberggallery.com](http://berenberggallery.com)

**Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York**  
212.226.2768 [cavinmorris.com](http://cavinmorris.com)

**Edlin Gallery, New York**  
212.206.9723 [edlingallery.com](http://edlingallery.com)

**Luise Ross Gallery, New York**  
212.343.2161 [luiserossgallery.com](http://luiserossgallery.com)

**Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York**  
212.627.4819 [riccomaresca.com](http://riccomaresca.com)

**Ron Jagger Fine Arts, New York**  
212.925.1200

**Stuart Shepherd, New Zealand**  
[selftaughtart.org.nz](http://selftaughtart.org.nz)