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ARTNEWS

October 2015

THE ERROR OF MARGINS: VERNACULAR ARTISTS AND THE MAINSTREAM ART WORLD

BY Brendan Greaves



Marlon Mullen, *Untitled*, 2014.

CHARLES BENTON/COURTESY THE ARTIST; JTT, NEW YORK; AND NIAD ART CENTER, RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Earlier this year Jasmin Tsou, proprietor of the downtown Manhattan gallery JTT, bought an *Artforum* magazine subscription for Marlon Mullen, an artist

who had recently joined her stable. The magazine would be used as source material: Mullen's acrylic paintings on canvas or board are based on pages and covers of art and cultural magazines (including *ARTnews*). Using straight-out-of-the-tube color, he transforms these appropriated images and headlines into boldly graphic abstractions reminiscent of Clyfford Still or Forrest Bess.

Mullen, born in 1963, makes his paintings and drawings at the Nurturing Independence through Artistic Development (NIAD) Art Center in Richmond, California, the nonprofit organization for artists with disabilities that initially encouraged and exhibited his work. He is autistic and does not communicate verbally, so Tsou is reluctant to project her perceptions onto his art, though she recognizes its "high level of sophistication and humor." More than with her other artists, most of whom hold art degrees from places like UCLA and New York University, she wonders about the ethics of influencing Mullen's process, intentionally or otherwise. At one point she considered introducing different types of printed matter for him to use, but noticing that most of the issues of *Artforum* available at NIAD were from the 1990s or earlier, she ultimately simply bought him a fresh subscription.

Though the art world may not yet have a satisfactory way of referring to artists like Mullen, who are variously described by such leaky terms as self-taught, outsider, and vernacular, it has, over the past few years, shown more interest in them and is gradually growing the existing market for their work. When this issue of *ARTnews* went to press, Christie's was preparing a September sale of what it deems "outsider and folk art," including work by such acknowledged masters as Chicago narrative artist Henry Darger, Tennessee stone carver William Edmondson, Swiss Art Brut exemplar Adolf Wölfli, and rural Idahoan James Castle, who made paper constructions and delicate drawings with soot and spit.

The anticipated sales prices of the vernacular works at the auction—ranging from \$2,000 to \$4,000 for small pieces by Clementine Hunter, a painter of life on the Louisiana plantation on which she lived, to \$400,000 to \$600,000 for a large double-sided Darger drawing—illustrate the highly variable nature of this still-developing market. As Cara Zimmerman, Christie's newly hired specialist in the field, told me over the summer, "While some well-known artists like Darger and Edmondson have already achieved auction prices commensurate with post-war and contemporary artists, this is still a new venture for us."

Nevertheless, the Christie's sale, the most significant auction of this material in a decade, is telling in that it throws the weight of a large company behind what is, in auction-house terminology, a budding category. It would seem to lend ballast to the theory that, despite similar cycles of interest in the past, vernacular work is finally enjoying a more impactful period of visibility and mainstream acceptance. "Christie's thought it was time to have someone who is a specialist in this type of art," said Zimmerman, "which speaks to a belief that this work is not going away anytime soon."

Scholar Lynne Cooke, senior curator of special projects in modern art at the National Gallery of Art, attributes the surge in interest to artists.

“Very often the lead comes from artists,” she said. “Artists are often the people who identify and champion and advocate, and then the market moves into the slipstream.” Cooke has been working on an exhibition for the National Gallery that, she said, “looks back over the last century within the United States and identifies moments where [the] interchange between professional and self-taught has been most dynamic and fertile, offering revision and explanation of those moments.”

John Ollman, owner of Philadelphia’s Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, identifies Jasper Johns, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, Maurizio Cattelan, Dan Colen, and Ricky Swallow as influenced by, or collectors of, vernacular art. “About ten years ago people started to become aware of the fact that many of the major contemporary artists were themselves paying attention to non-academic art, non-professionalized art, self-taught art, whatever you want to call it,” Ollman said. “You can’t ignore it anymore. When artists buy, that’s a barometer, because they’re not speculators.”

Ollman has noticed that “people are definitely reevaluating forms and materials in the art world, including this self-taught material that has been so strangely marginalized. I was going to describe it as a new wave, but waves come crashing down quickly, so maybe I won’t use that metaphor.”

American galleries like Fleisher/Ollman, Andrew Edlin, Ricco/Maresca, Carl

Hammer, and Karen Lennox have been promoting this material for decades with evangelical zeal, steadily growing a collector base. (This list excludes dealers and curators in Europe, particularly France, where the field has always seen more widespread support due to the legacy of Jean Dubuffet, founding guru of Art Brut.) Now some of the artists and estates they represent have made unforeseen inroads into market ecosystems not known for their openness to vernacular or fringe practices.

Earlier this year “System and Vision” at David Zwirner, in cooperation with Berlin’s Galerie Susanne Zander, examined the obsessive work of vernacular artists such as Morton Bartlett, a doll maker who photographed his creepy creations; Prophet Royal Robertson, an artist of brimstone-burnt apocalyptic fervor; and George Widener, a living artist whose mixed-media pieces entail complex mathematical and calendrical calculations. And Matthew Marks Gallery has exhibited certain vernacular artists over the years, including the anonymous Philadelphia Wireman.

One of Marks’s summer 2015 exhibitions examined the Hairy Who, a faction of Chicago Imagists whose work drew directly from vernacular art, comics, and ecstatic pop culture, and who, in the 1960s, helped introduce Darger, Martín Ramírez, whose drawings appeared this year on a series of U.S. postage stamps, and Joseph Yoakum, a creator of fantastical landscapes, to the mainstream art world. Michele Maccarone has shown Wisconsin polymath Eugene von Bruenchenhein’s paintings,

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“The Medicine Bag,” which featured Cuban American collagist Felipe Jesus Consalvos, the Philadelphia Wireman, and Chicago street portraitist Lee Godie, as well as trained artists like John Chamberlain, Sheila Hicks, and Carol Bove.

Younger gallerists like Tsou, Brendan Dugan of Karma Gallery, and James Fuentes have also demonstrated an interest in vernacular material as well as a willingness to erode binary insider/outsider distinctions. Fuentes represents such contemporary artists as Lizzi Bougatsos of experimental Brooklyn band Gang Gang Dance, but also Lonnie Holley, a vernacular artist from Alabama whose assemblages and music have received increasing attention in the last few years. Tsou observed that self-taught art appears to be “going through the machine of spectacle in order to be normalized, which we also see happening currently with sexual orientation and identity, both in mainstream culture and in art.” To her, dealers like Ollman laid the groundwork for a younger generation less anxious about difference and more attuned to postmodern politics of multivalent identity.

To a more limited extent, art fairs have also become a driving force. In 2012 Edlin, the dealer, bought and overhauled the flagging Outsider Art Fair, which takes place annually in New York in late January; in 2013 he launched a Paris edition. And so-called outsider art has also been turning up at non-specialist fairs, such as the Armory Show. Exhibitors in the 2015 Armory Show’s modern section included Fleisher/Ollman, Carl Hammer, Ricco/Maresca, and Edlin.

Unlike commercial galleries, “museums with permanent collections and big infrastructures are less nimble and move more slowly,” Cooke said. But smaller organizations have made significant contributions. Since Matthew Higgs took over as director in 2004, the New York alternative space White Columns has shown disabled, non-disabled, vernacular, and trained artists within the same contexts. (Higgs also co-curated last year’s U.S. survey of fiber artist Judith Scott’s work at the Brooklyn Museum’s Sackler Center for Feminist Art.)

For his 2011 exhibition “Create,” Lawrence Rinder, director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, collaborated with organizations that support disabled artists, such as San Francisco’s Creativity Explored, Oakland’s Creative Growth Art Center, and Richmond’s NAID Art Center, home base for JTT artist Mullen. Curated by Jonathan Berger of NYU’s 80WSE gallery, this summer’s well-received show of powerfully spooky clay sculptures by Mississippi blues musician James “Son Ford” Thomas revived the reputation of a fascinating artist whose work Ollman once felt “you could hardly give away.”

The field is expanding into the realm of international biennials as well.

Vernacular artists Yoakum and Guo Fengyi, whose oracular drawings are inspired by

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Chinese mystical practices, were featured in the 2013 Carnegie International. Brooke Davis Anderson, previously of the American Folk Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has included self-taught artists like Holley and wood-relief carver Herbert Singleton in Prospect New Orleans, which she directs.

Many observers point to New Museum artistic director Massimiliano Gioni's 2013 iteration of the Venice Biennale as a benchmark. Entitled "The Encyclopedic Palace" after a sculpture by vernacular artist and auto mechanic Marino Auriti, the exhibition featured a century's worth of divergent work by the likes of Castle, Carl Jung, Aleister Crowley, and Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint alongside Biennale veterans such as Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman, and Steve McQueen. Gallerist and writer William Pym set the scene: "It made every single New York art dealer wake up and broaden their horizons, no question. I was there during the opening watching them shoot wall labels on their smartphones." Gioni explained to me his vision of polyphonous modernism: "It's not about the establishment of a new canon, but rather a more complicated, less one-dimensional canon."

Bigger museums are starting to catch up, with some U.S. institutions challenging entrenched attitudes from within with exhibitions and staff appointments. At the vanguard of the major encyclopedic museums is the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which organized a Castle retrospective in 2008 and a show of work by untrained artists from the collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz in 2013. "America Is Hard to See," the Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition in its new building, showcased art by Castle, Bill Traylor (who was born into slavery in Alabama and began making art at age 85), and Horace Pippin (one of the first self-taught African American painters to attract the attention of major museums like the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney), but was also, in Edlin's view, "something of a missed opportunity," considering the overall ratio of those few works to the entire installation. Prescient (and controversial) collector Bill Arnett's Souls Grown Deep Foundation has donated 57 works, including pieces by quilters from Gee's Bend, Alabama, and Alabaman assemblage artist Thornton Dial, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is planning an exhibition of the material for 2016.

Thomas J. Lax curated "When the Stars Begin to Fall," a 2014 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem exploring African American vernacular art in the South, and MoMA promptly hired him. The High Museum in Atlanta recently appointed Duke University scholar Katie Jentleson as curator of folk and self-taught art. And Leslie Umberger, formerly of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, is the new curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Cooke's forthcoming exhibition, which aims to historicize moments of dialogue and interpenetration between trained and self-taught artists, promises to be a formative development in a field in which "academic support and writing are just beginning to become rigorous in art-historical terms." Among the periods she intends to highlight are the years 1924 to 1943, when the notion of a distinct American folk art came into public consciousness through the efforts of the Whitney Studio Club and MoMA director Alfred Barr; the long decade from the late 1960s through the early 1980s that saw both the publication of Roger Cardinal's 1972 book *Outsider Art* and Jane

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Livingston and James Beardsley's groundbreaking 1982 show "Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980" at the Corcoran Gallery; and the near present, with its ongoing conversation about how to contextualize vernacular art.

As Cooke's thesis makes evident, this isn't the first time the mainstream art world has performed a celebratory rediscovery dance with vernacular artists, so the current climate of tentative self-congratulation and hopefulness comes with some serious caveats. The interest of the privileged, urban, predominantly European American classes in the expressive cultural production of those who look and live differently, whether earnest and benign or voyeuristic and exploitative, is nothing new. It's hardwired into Western culture, and the form it takes today can be traced back hundreds of years to the misty beginnings of the condition we call modernity. We have an entire category of dichotomous language for it—high/low, fine/folk, insider/outsider, academic/self-taught—about which skeins of torturous prose have been written, but little untangled.

While the historical landmarks that Cooke aims to contextualize with her exhibition remain significant, they beg an investigation into why they didn't endure. When will we finally be ready? As Umberger opined, "We seem to celebrate difference up to a point and then feel the need to distance ourselves from it."

One limiting factor appears to be the lack of an academic and institutional infrastructure that can anchor and sustain the ephemeral appetites of the marketplace. Institutionally speaking, the elephant in the room is the lamentable decline of New York's American Folk Art Museum. In 2011 the museum was forced to abandon its ten-year-old, purpose-built Tod Williams Billie Tsien building and retreat to its lobby gallery on Lincoln Square (though it does have a research facility in Long Island City). Without its former prominence, the field lacks a respectable, dedicated, nominal institutional cathedral.

In the context of academia, with a few notable exceptions this material is still not regularly taught in any sort of systematic or curricular way in either undergraduate or graduate university programs. Much research to date has been the result of intrepid students stumbling onto the work and taking initiative. Even folklore departments (the few that remain) have often eschewed debates about "outsiders" because the artists in question may not belong demonstrably to a community-oriented tradition of expressive culture.

More fundamentally, there still is no adequate shared language to talk about these issues. (Sociologist Gary Alan Fine has called the condition "term warfare.") As Umberger asked, "Why would we hang onto coded terms that primarily function to dismiss the identity of the individual artist and devalue the art? Those terms say far

more about their user than they do about the art.” Indeed, the discourse that orbits these non-professional, non-academic artists has always relied on language that, unlike the “-isms” of the normative art world, primarily describes the artists’ otherness—in terms of race, class, psychology, education level, geography, or faith—rather than the actual art they create. In that sense, the dialogue, arising as it does from within the mainstream art world, is sloppily perverse, in turn fetishizing and pathologizing difference and diversity.

The term “outsider” was dubious from the moment Cardinal coined it to describe the isolated artist “without precedent or tradition”—except in the most exceptional circumstances of cruelty and deprivation of human contact, no one has ever existed in a cultural vacuum. Aesthetic precedents and traditions may not align with self-referential precedents and traditions of the normative art world, but that does not mean that they are absent.

Much of the most exciting vernacular work draws on appropriations and rearticulations of cultural forms to which we are, every one of us, subject (albeit in sometimes radically different ways and to different degrees). That includes the obliquely Pop-inflected vernacular modernist collages of Consalvos as well as the works of more recently recognized artists like Mullen and Susan Te Kahurangi King (a New Zealand native represented by Edlin who depicts menageries of metamorphosed and psychedelically elided Looney Tunes characters). Unfortunately, the entrenched language isn’t likely to change any time soon, because there aren’t any great alternatives.

Language problems aside, perhaps there is an innate difference to this artwork, and these artists, that should not be fully effaced. As Edlin remarked, presuming that gallery and museum integration of vernacular artwork establishes parity is “a false construct, as it conflates the exhibition setting with the conditions in which the art was created. Judith Scott is not suddenly an insider artist because she had a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum.” Moreover, as Cooke reflected, “If we get rid of the terms and establish a level playing field, there’s a lot to be said for that. But what has been lost? Reading work through biography is reductive and simplistic. But it will require a kind of nuance and attentiveness to the context to avoid flattening out our reading and potentially losing levels of understanding that are important.”

It is not clear whether this increased attention will last in a vicissitudinous art world driven by finance capitalism. Do artists like Traylor, Minnie Evans, and Holley (all working-class African American Southerners) simply constitute, in Pym’s words, an easy shorthand for supposed authenticity? Or does this seeming change in perception suggest “a bellwether of permanent change in the art world and, with dewier eyes, an early indication of real societal change related to otherness”?

More importantly, to what extent do this new market and these reprised conversations materially benefit living artists or their families? How can vernacular

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estates assume agency or control within the existing power structures? The answers are unfortunately not always easy to discern. However, it is encouraging that curators, dealers, and collectors are increasingly embracing living artists instead of predominantly trafficking in the legacies of the safely deceased.

Although Mullen's fruitful affiliation with NIAD continues, Tsou is now his exclusive commercial representative. She is well aware that her choices, such as a careful decision to increase his prices from a modest \$1,500 to \$3,000, might adversely impact Mullen's career: "If I didn't make a commitment to Marlon in that price bump, I could theoretically go in, raise prices, sell a few paintings, and then leave him and NIAD in a situation that they might or might not be able to sustain."

Umberger seemed circumspectly optimistic about the broader implications of this growing receptiveness to vernacular art: "[The] more often public audiences encounter powerful art made by minority demographics, the more lopsided old narratives appear, and the mandate for inclusion continues to grow." Pym assessed the situation more cynically: "Right now soul is in fashion."

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