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Art Review

Inside, Outside, All Around the Aesthetics

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

Folk, outsider and other self-taught artists are popularly viewed as exotics, and not without reason. They tend to produce weird, wacky and eccentric objects, and many of them seem to operate on a mental frequency to which few conventional people have access.

In recent years, however, this view of the self-taught has provoked something of a backlash, as some proponents have argued that the virtues of self-taught art that matter — the aesthetic ones — are not significantly different from those of insider art. Good art is good art, whether it is made by a delusional psychiatric patient or a high achiever with an M.F.A., and we should not ghettoize artists who work outside the professional art box any more than we would isolate African or Chinese artists.

An example of the trend in mainstreaming self-taught art is “Approaching Abstraction,” a thought-provoking exhibition at the [American Folk Art Museum](#). Brooke Davis Anderson, the museum’s curator of contemporary art, has selected from the permanent collection some 60 works in which formal, material and procedural elements are asserted with particular vigor.

Taken only as a collection of remarkable paintings and sculptures, it is a high-quality, entertainingly diverse show. From the galactic cluster of countless little bubbles neatly drawn by Hiroyuki Doi to the big, expressionistic paintings of tigers by Thornton Dial Sr. and the weathered tree trunks transformed into comical demons by Bessie Harvey, it covers a lot of technical and stylistic ground.

But the exhibition urges us to focus on these and other works in a particular way: not on the representational imagery and symbolic or narrative subject matter that self-taught art is commonly noted for. We are invited, rather, to attend to the nonrepresentational dimension: how things are made, how paint is applied, how various elements are organized and so on. This is what the formalist critic Clement Greenberg declared to be the correct way of seeing all art. In theory, it puts outsider and insider art on the same playing field. But what is gained and what is lost by such a partial way of seeing?

Going along with the show’s thesis, you mainly notice the engagement with materials. Any good artist finds inspiration in the raw stuff out of which he or she makes art, whether it is paint, wood, feathers or lint from a clothes dryer. Judith Scott got heavily involved with yarn, wrapping yards and yards of it into impressive, bulbous bundles resembling the works of a professional Post-Minimalist. An unknown artist — possibly Desire Parker of Connecticut — was captivated enough by Wonder bread plastic bags to slice them up and weave them into a large, circular rug five feet in diameter; and Gregory Warmack, known as Mr. Imagination, nailed and wired countless buttons to a tree branch to create a fantastic arboreal sculpture.

Numerous artists are clearly excited by paint and color. Mose Tolliver’s subtly hued, comically simplified portraits; J. B. Murry’s small paintings on paper, made of rough daubs of watercolor; and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein’s square picture of what looks like an explosion in outer space made with a finger-painting-like technique all evince a keenly sensuous responsiveness to pigmented liquids and pastes.

But here’s the rub: It is very difficult — practically impossible — to separate the formal, nonrepresentational aspect from less tangible qualities. The cosmic vision in Mr. Von Bruenchenhein’s painting is indivisible from the painterly abstraction. There is not a single artist in the exhibition who tried to make something strictly nonrepresentational.

There are some works that come close. Eugene Andolsek's intricate compositions of circles and wavy stripes rendered with maniacal precision in colored inks certainly are formally arresting. But there is something numinous about them, as well; they are like stained-glass windows for a Neo-Platonic church. A wall label notes that Mr. Andolsek made them in trance states and would sometimes not even remember making them. What they may have meant to him is impossible to determine, but you feel as if he were channeling some ethereal vibe.

Biographical information about the artist usually enhances the experience. Knowing that Adolf Wölfli was a convicted child molester who spent most of his adult life in a Swiss psychiatric hospital contributes to the effect of his beautiful drawings diagramming esoteric systems of his own invention.

Knowing that James Castle was virtually mute and maybe autistic, lived with his family in a small town in Idaho and drew haunting pictures — of rooms, furniture, buildings and people — with sharpened sticks and stove soot mixed with saliva gives his small drawing of a man in a wide-brimmed hat bisected by a vertical band a powerfully affecting poignancy.

In a modern world that supposedly runs on rational principles, the convergence of artistic creativity and madness is thrilling; it promises escape from overly supervised consciousness and contact with otherwise repressed psychic forces.

But what if you know nothing about the artist, as is true of the so-called Philadelphia Wireman, whose approximately 1,500 small, gnarly assemblages of wire and found detritus were discovered in garbage bags in a Philadelphia alley in 1982? If we learned that they were the works of a frustrated professional who decided to abandon his art career, would we view the seven examples here differently from the way we would look at them if we knew they were made by a homeless wanderer who thought of them as magical talismans?

From a formal point of view, it should not matter which was the case. But if you look at such works holistically, it does. And not knowing who made them and why affects our experience of them, too; it makes them seem all the more miraculous.

So, while attending to the abstraction in self-taught art is a useful exercise, trying to make it seem more like "normal" art discounts much of what makes it most fascinating: the wild, unpredictable imagination that produces both its abstract and representational modes of expression. Fortunately, the best self-taught art resists the domesticating imperatives of academic and politically correct thinking.

"Approaching Abstraction" remains on view through Sept. 5 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.