



## ART MARKET

US & Americas

# New York fairs let the Outsiders in

Museums have long recognised people who make art outside the mainstream – now the market is catching up

### OUTSIDER ART

New York. The notoriously insular New York art market is warming up to “outsiders” – the creators of work who operate outside the art world’s traditional structures, a category of artists given an enormous boost by ultra-fashionable curator Massimiliano Gioni in his exhibition “The Encyclopaedic Palace” at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

In New York last month, work by Outsider artists featured prominently in every major fair, from the sophisticated Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA)’s Art Show to the trendier Independent fair and the sprawling Armory Show. While interest in Outsider art has grown steadily since 2000, when the Henry Darger Study Centre opened at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) in New York to promote research in the field, the market is just beginning to catch up. In January, works from the collection of AFAM’s former president Ralph Esmerian made almost \$13m at Sotheby’s, exceeding its pre-sale estimate of \$6.3m to \$9.5m.

**Some question whether collectors have genuinely become more open or are simply looking to cash in**

“There’s a huge opening up of the field [of Outsider art],” says the dealer Andrew Edlin, who runs the Outsider Art Fair in New York (8-11 May). “Until recently, Outsider art was a ghetto,” says Matthew Higgs, the director of White Columns and the joint organiser of Independent. “There’s a fluidity today that wasn’t there ten years ago.”

Prices are on the rise, too. At the Armory Show, Ricco/Maresca Gallery sold a 1952 untitled drawing of a stag listed at \$425,000 by the Mexican artist Martín Ramírez, who spent much of his life in a Californian psychiatric hospital. The price is significantly greater than the artist’s current auction record of €211,621, set last year. At the ADAA

fair, Peter Freeman devoted his booth to the self-taught American artist James Castle. Several works made from found materials and soot sold for prices ranging from \$18,000 to \$65,000, exceeding his current auction record of \$16,730.

The growing interest in this material was initially driven by curators rather than the market: aside from the Venice Biennale, the 2013 Carnegie International, organised by Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers and Tina Kukieliski, and the 2014 Whitney Biennial (until 25 May), organised by Anthony Elms, Michelle Grabner and Stuart Comer, presents the work of self-taught artists alongside those with formal training. “It has arguably become the most significant curatorial narrative of the past few years,” Higgs says.

Since Massimiliano Gioni included the Wisconsin-born baker Eugene Von Bruenchenhein’s apocalyptic paintings in “The Encyclopaedic Palace” last year, prices for his work have nearly doubled, according

to the dealer Carl Hammer. (The artist is the subject of a solo show at Maccarone Gallery in New York, “Bits from First World”, until 12 April.) At the Armory Show, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery sold eight photographs by Von Bruenchenhein – whose massive artistic output was discovered only after his death in 1983 – for \$5,000 each.

Artists are another driving force behind the field’s wider exposure. Ever since Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* (“raw art”) in the 1940s after seeing drawings by psychiatric patients in Switzerland, “academically trained artists have looked for inspiration in the work of self-taught artists”, Hammer says. Some, including Cindy Sherman,



Jasper Johns and Richard Tuttle, have also become devoted collectors.

At Independent, the artist and dealer Gavin Brown bought a collage made from an old calendar by the artist John Hiltunen, who has mental health problems, for \$500 at White Columns. Sherman and the artist Juergen Teller acquired photographs taken by an anonymous German businessman who

obsessively documented an affair he had with his secretary between 1969 and 1970. The prints, presented by Galerie Susanne Zander for the first time in the US, nearly sold out, with prices ranging from €1,800 to €2,000.

Some attribute the growing appetite for Outsider artists to a backlash against the highly finished, shiny work that

has flooded art fairs for years. “There’s a pendulum,” says the dealer Pavel Zoubok, who sold three works by the artist and poet Vanessa German at the ADAA fair for \$12,000 to \$15,000. German’s mother is an artist but she has no formal training herself. She considers her sculptures as protective totems for youth in her Pittsburgh neighbourhood, which has one of the highest rates of gun crime in the country. “In an age where so much is highly fabricated and our lives are mediated by technology, people are hungry for this very personal intimacy,” Zoubok says.

Some question whether collectors have genuinely become more open to artists with non-traditional backgrounds or are simply looking to cash in on the next big thing. “This is still a pre-approved group of trophy artists as far as the market is concerned,” says the art advisor Todd Levin, the director of the Levin Art Group. “It is too soon to tell if collectors are actually curatorially serious about this material or if they are just accessing the safest names to gain street cred by displaying their ‘alternative’ collecting sensibilities.”

Julia Halperin and Pac Pobric

**Untitled, 1970, one of a series of photographs taken by a German businessman to chronicle his affair with his secretary**