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Arts

Art in Review

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'Outsider Art Fair' Puck Building Houston Street and Lafayette Street, SoHo Today through Sunday

Unburdened by the complex rules professional artists have developed to represent solid objects, "outsider" artists tend to depict bodies and objects as flat shapes with occasional bulges: a nose here, a breast there. Or they turn them into simple three-dimensional forms -- cylinders and boxes -- with more complex features drawn rather than sculptured on the surfaces. Made by, among others, prisoners or retirees or the mentally disturbed, outsider art often bears witness to the fantasies of sex and violence that throb below the surface of civilized discourse. Needless to say, all these qualities take the work remarkably close to the avant-garde art of the last 100 years.

This year's Outsider Art Fair -- the fourth to be organized by Sanford L. Smith -- offers a nice balance of new and familiar work. The classics -- Grandma Moses, Horace Pippin, Morris Hirshfield -- are on view at the Galerie St. Etienne, while Bill Traylor's poignant black silhouettes are scattered at booths throughout the show. The rhythmic, hypnotic landscape drawings of Martin Ramirez, a Mexican immigrant confined to a California asylum, can be seen at Janet Fleisher and Phyllis Kind. Thornton Dial's twisting, wraithlike personages are on view at three galleries: Archer/Locke, Ricco/Maresca and Luise Ross.

There seem to be several hot discoveries this year. Phyllis Kind offers Nek Chand, a self-taught sculptor (enormously famous in his native India) whose simplified, robotic figures are covered with pottery shards. Carl Hammer and Ricco/Maresca are showing Henry Darger's "Vivian Girls," a series of colored drawings that look like illustrations from 19th-century children's books, until you notice that the girls are equipped with guns and miniature male genitalia.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, a baker by day, took surreal pinup photos of his wife and then painted swirling, colorful abstractions with brushes made from her hair; his pictures can be seen at Carl Hammer, Ricco/ Maresca and Aaron Packer.

But my favorite is Gedewon, an Ethiopian artist at Cavin-Morris, who makes "healing drawings" that look like Victorian wrought iron run amok. If he can keep his intricately interlaced patterns in order, you can probably straighten out your life, to