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Fair Report: The Outsider Art Fair

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NEW YORK—

The **Outsider Art Fair**, now in its 15th year, is unlike any other fair in the New York arts calendar. First, there is its focus, on what is variously called "self taught, visionary and outsider art." Then there is its location, sprawling in an appropriately undisciplined manner through the Puck Building's first-floor galleries. (And exteriors, where street artists who evidently regard themselves as "outside of Outside" set up displays in the walkways.)

Over the years the fair has attracted a huge public audience, and this year was no different. On Friday, gallery owners were buzzing about coverage in *The New York Times*—and a stellar early turnout. **Carl Hammer**, owner of the **Carl Hammer Gallery** (Chicago) said that his booth was "jam-packed" for most of the day—surprising for what is typically a slow fair day.

Grey Carter and **Linda Ortega**, owners of **Grey Carter Objects of Art** (McLean, Va.) said that, despite the brutal weather, "Friday was fabulous for us!" They were particularly pleased with sales of the young artist **J.J. Cromer**, whose work had been going fast at prices between \$350 and \$3,500 (for a large diptych entitled *They aim and they fire, as it were*). They were also showing a couple of lovely painted metal pieces by Louisiana artist **David Butler** that had originally been made as decorations for his home.

A fair stalwart, **Henry Boxer**, proprietor of England's **Henry Boxer Gallery**, reported that business was "slightly up on last year," and added he was particularly pleased with sales of the celebrated autistic savant **George Widener**, a lightning calendar calculator and creator of futuristic urban images crowded with notations and inventories of physical information. These had been moving quickly for between \$5,000 and \$8,000.

We were also happy to also see **Galerie St. Etienne** (New York) doing brisk business. Amongst her stable of artists, gallery director **Jane Kallir** was enthusiastic about the work of **Josef Karl Rädler** (1844-1917), who was selling for \$5,500 to \$8,500. His stunning watercolors had been forgotten for many years in the mental institution in which he had been a resident, and eventually were rescued from a trash bin.

Kallir, who has shown at every Outsider Art Fair since the first, observed that the whole fair appeared revitalized after an extended low period of a few years. In particular, she was encouraged by the fair's diverse selection of "good work at all price points."

Changing Face of Outsider Art

The consensus throughout the aisles seemed to be that outsider art is gaining popularity with a more diverse audience. "There's been kind of a broadening of knowledge," explained **Roger Ricco** of **Ricco/Maresca Gallery** (New York). "You don't have explain [outsider art] to everyone anymore; they don't have to know what it is—they know it just is, and they're turned on by it."

Ricco's booth was showcasing the work of one artist **William Hawkins**—who has actually become quite well known in arts communities; his paintings are represented in the **Museum of American Folk Art** and the **High Museum of Art**. (He also has a strong market. By midday Friday, Ricco had already sold several of the enamel paintings, priced on the higher end, at \$30,000 to \$60,000).

While the term "outsider artist" is generally thought to reference artists with psychological afflictions, it also includes those who died before gaining recognition in the art world. Hawkins, for instance, is one of the latter, as is **Thomas Burleson**, whose ink-on-paper drawings were on display at the **Luise Ross Gallery** (New York).

Brian Overland at Luise Ross explained that Burleson was a shipping inspector working night shifts at Lockheed, and it wasn't until he died about a decade ago that his mechanical, architectural, vibrantly colored drawings were discovered. "No two are alike," Overland said. (At least one of the artworks, listed at \$2,500, had sold by Friday afternoon).

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The Ames Gallery (Berkeley, Calif.), showing Jim Bauer's electronic mixed-media sculptures made from household items (such as coffee pots, irons and sprinklers), might've snared the youngest collector at the fair. "A 6-year-old spent a good 20 minutes picking out his favorite robot, and his dad bought it for him," said gallery director Erik Waters. He settled on a model with moveable "claws and a knot on its head," added gallery director Bonnie Grossman. Each piece was going for \$795 to \$1,295.

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