

ARTFORUM

Quiet Riot

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Left: Outsider Art Fair director Andrew Edlin and dealer Stuart Parr. Right: The LAND Gallery at the Outsider Art Fair. (All photos: Casey Kelbaugh)

“DID ANYONE TEACH YOU or did you just . . . *know*?”

“Oh, he just knew.”

The subject of this admiring if ultimately rather uncomfortable exchange was artist Kenya Hanley, whose funny and engaging drawings were on display in the LAND Gallery booth at the Outsider Art Fair’s Thursday evening vernissage. Hanley, sat rifling through some papers between his two fans, didn’t seem especially taken aback by being discussed in this way, but nor did he feel the need to chime in. Was this perhaps outsider art’s elusive delimiting factor—not a lack of formal training, a sidestepping of irony and fashion, or a clinically skewed worldview, but just a serene unwillingness to confirm or deny? Either way, Hanley’s restraint felt monumental.

But however one defines outsiderdom just now, the crowd at the Chelsea event—its twenty-fourth annual installment—couldn’t be said to share Hanley’s quietude. By the time I arrived at 6:30 PM, just half an hour in, the Metropolitan Pavilion was already packed with visitors to its sixty-odd exhibiting galleries. Strangely—unless I’ve somehow lost touch with developments in masculine style—a disproportionate number of these were men with unusual facial hair in pork pie hats. (“If I find the guy with no eyebrows,” I overhear, “I’ll point him out to you.”) The rest were pretty much indistinguishable from your usual Manhattan crowd—a little older, perhaps, but no more or less eccentric. Senior scribe Anthony Haden-Guest fitted right in, while noted thrift-store shopper Jerry Saltz drifted past, in heaven.

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Of course, the fair's popularity should come as no surprise, outsider art's stock having been on the rise for some time. Christie's just held its first dedicated sale in over a decade, selling a recently unearthed 1937 sculpture by William Edmondson for a startling (and way over estimate) \$785,000, and White Columns chief Matthew Higgs's ongoing support for organizations such as Long Island City's Healing Arts Initiative has resulted in terrific shows by the likes of Derrick Alexis Coard. That a number of galleries at the event this year, including Louis B James and Morgan Lehman Gallery, aren't known as specialists in the field seems to signal an increasing level of interest from outside the outsiders, and the recognition of a submarket on the rise. At one point I heard a smartly dressed older gentleman boast to his companion: "I have thirty-eight visas, baby, that I bought from your brother!" There was money here for sure.



Left: The Babel-curated booth at the Outsider Art Fair. Right: Art Production Fund's Doreen Remen and Casey Fremont at the Outsider Art Fair.

In terms of the work itself, the joy of outsider art is that—as late great radio deejay John Peel was fond of saying about wayward postpunk icons The Fall—it's always different, always the same. Become an outsider buff and you'll never want for graph paper (Susan Janow at Creative Growth Art Center, say), paperweights (Momoka Imura at Yukiko Koide Presents), or scrap metal (Hawkins Bolden at Shrine). There's always a cadre of apocalyptic visionaries in the house (I particularly appreciated Daniel Martin Diaz's dire warnings at American Primitive Gallery/Aarne Anton), and a goodly amount of colored pencil will have been expended by day's end (too many artists to name). Henry Darger, while no Liam Gillick (there was one banner year when every other booth at the Armory seemed to boast an example of the Brit's work), will be well represented.

But not everyone relied on these rickety templates. Critic Paul Laster and curator Renée Riccardo raved with some justification about Cuban artist and cigar-roller Felipe Jesus Consalvos's large, kaleidoscopic paper collages at Philadelphia's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, while dealer Sean Horton pointed me without hesitation toward Winter Works on Paper. The Brooklyn gallery's most intriguing wares were arguably beyond the realm of art altogether, credited as they were to the likes of "Chicago Police" in the case of some outsize vintage mug shots, and "Sayre & Fisher Brick Co." in the case of some rigorously deadpan photos of walls. Care to step outside?

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Left: Serena Altschul with Siri Von Reis and Craig Knobles at the Outsider Art Fair. Right: Critic Jerry Saltz at the Outsider Art Fair.