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Bits, Pieces and a Drive To Turn Them Into Art

by Michael Kimmelman
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THE paradoxical vogue for outsider art makes you wonder what outsider means, anyway. Outside what? Especially in an art scene as fragmented as it is? The term has become a catchall for the art of the academically untrained, the insane and children, as if the work of a preternaturally gifted black artist like Thornton Dial were related to the crayon scribbles of a 3-year-old.

"Vernacular art" is more specific, at least as it's used in the subtitle for a survey at the Schomburg Center, "Bearing Witness: African-American Vernacular Art of the South." Of course, "vernacular" may not catch on because it lacks the ring of avant-garde rebellion that "outsider" has, avant-gardism being the siren song for art collectors and promoters in the 20th century. This may partly explain the allure of outsiders now, when there is no avant-garde to speak of. Besides, there's an element of piety involved: 90's outsiderism, linked to the socially underrewarded, as a purgative for the excesses of the 80's.

But this, perhaps, puts too negative a spin on what also has plain visual appeal. The Schomburg show, an expanded version of an exhibition organized last year by Sandra Kraskin for the Sidney Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College, includes 80 works by 25 artists. It's interesting that half of them address religious subjects, the most glaring difference from the modern art of museums, which, when religious, mostly opts for irony, camp or body fluids.

I don't mean that the visual appeal of vernacular art is its spirituality, although for some people that may be. I'm thinking about its lack of irony: so much contemporary art, by contrast, seems coy, pinched, obsessed with the priorities of the art scene and leery if not contemptuous of esthetic pleasure as bourgeois and escapist. Vernacular art is easier to love because its esthetic jolts come straight.

That's clear at Schomburg. What's there, from the collection of Ronald and June Shelp, Southerners transplanted to New York, is a sampler of works by familiar figures like Mr. Dial and Bessie Harvey and also by others, unfamiliar, who have clearly made the most of the little they had at hand. One of them, Mary T. Smith, was a Mississippi tenant farmer who took up painting in her 70's, decorating her backyard with her art. Her portraits resemble sunflowers, bold and dizzyingly colored, with dot-and-dash patterns that make the images buzz. Another, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, the son of a medicine woman, mixes berry juice with house paint to concoct dreamy pictures of improbable chalky luminosity and understated bliss. Not all the works on view approach that level of seduction, and one naturally gravitates to what is familiar. Mr. Dial, well represented here, looks dumbfoundingly adept to some of us because his energy and fluent line, abstracted in maelstroms of color, easily call to mind Pollock and de Kooning. Something of the same is true of Lonnie Holley's raspy sculptures made of rusted metal, wood scraps, discarded electronic components and old shoes: at their best, fervid but playful abstractions whose serendipity recalls Calder or Jean Tinguely, despite the heavy religious symbolism.

How are we now to regard a much-seen artist like Mr. Dial, who, having had his own museum shows, has passed into mainstream consciousness? As outsider or not? It's crucial to the drama of vernacular or outsider art, whatever it's called, that it involve discovery: the cliche of the neglected artist found making masterpieces in the backyard (schoolroom, asylum, et cetera). Yet outsiderism is now a business, buoyed by popular interest -- some of it dubious interest in the exotic -- which means the luster of discovery has been dulled by routine.

Actually, the interest in outsiders is as old as modernism, which periodically refreshes itself by cannibalizing them: artists from Gauguin to Picasso to Dubuffet to David Hammons, Nancy Rubins and others now, borrowing from outsider sources to counter modernism's tendency toward navel-gazing. To let air in, basically.

It's wrong to think of this as a one-way street. Outsiders need insiders, too, and you don't have to read Ernst Gombrich to realize that the conventions of representation, and also of abstraction, that you find in works by
vernacular artists like Mr. Dial or Mr. Holley or Mary Smith must be learned somewhere -- not necessarily in school, but through an inevitable absorption of visual culture.

What ultimately separates insider from outsider art is something else: that outsiders don’t conceive their works in terms of the mainstream tradition; they’re not making them to stack up against Jasper Johns. So the essential difference between the two involves intent, not form.

It’s insiders who call them outsiders: they’re outside only from an insider’s perspective. Context is everything. Duchamp’s ready-mades, stripped of the backdrop of mainstream art they are meant to comment upon, become junk, while Lonnie Holley clearly turns junk into art, but the comparison sounds far-fetched because you can’t ignore their different contexts. This explains why the perennial question of vernacular art’s status in relation to Picasso & Company is inevitably vexing.

Art comes in many varieties, and only people with the most crabbed sensibilities won’t acknowledge this fact. Better to ask whether vernacular art, on its own terms, provides what we want from art: to be moved and made to think. The best of what’s at Schomburg proves that it does.

“Bearing Witness: African-American Vernacular Art of the South” remains on view at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 515 Lenox Avenue, at 135th Street, Harlem, through March 29.