OUTSIDE IN:
SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS MAKE THE SCENE

In the spring of 1999, that yellow, dumb-and-proud-of-it cartoon example of poor parenting, Homer Simpson, started making art to vent his rage. If it was already known that outsider art was a genre that nearly anyone could embrace, Homer certainly drove the point home in the episode "Mom and Pop Art," featuring Homer's crude yet highly touted sculpture of his exploded barbecue pit.

The Simpsons' foray into junk aesthetics offered a sly comment on a larger cultural trend. Visionary, self-taught and outsider art has become its own category in the past few decades, providing a refuge for those who don't want to contend with the mind-bending critical challenges presented by much contemporary art. The ideal model of the outsider artist is of a backwoods prodigy, an unschooled yet artistic soul pursuing a solitary, obsessive aesthetic quest far from the madding crowds of dealers and collectors. The marketing comes later, after the work is discovered in the old shack next to the swamp, and the grizzled old artist is trotted out as a living fossil to mainstream acclaim.

At a time in which we are assaulted by a complicated visual culture in which a hunk of dead cow in a glass case can be proclaimed a masterpiece

while a well-rendered landscape can be dismissed as kitsch, outsider art allows easy engagement. The self-taught masters of the genre generally use a simple, yet poignant, visual vocabulary: Drawings of figures in crayon, sculptures made of bedsprings, bottlecaps and car tires give large audiences an entrée into an art world separate from the more rarified sphere of threatening conceptual pieces and inaccessible video installations. After all, if Homer Simpson can do it, who can't?

Dealers and scholars of the work of self-taught, visionary and outsider artists agree that the field owes its success to the fact that many people find the work easy to comprehend. "They feel it's accessible," said Frank Maresca, director of the Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York, a successful venue which has fed the outsider frenzy. After all, many well-known outsider artists, the Reverend Howard Finster and Henry Darger among them, work in a clear language of figuration that calls to mind children's book illustrations or cartoons. "They know when they go to a show they're not going to be made to feel stupid," says Maresca, a dealer, scholar and co-author of "American Primitive: Discoveries in Folk Sculpture."

Roger Manley, a North Carolina writer, researcher and curator in the self-taught and outsider field, notes that the art serves as "an antidote to what seemed to me to be the increasing homogenization of the country." For Manley, the work provides "a way to grab a frustrating world by the tail and give it a good, hard yank."

"This art is not surrounded by eight pages of intellectual backing up," said Sheri Cavin, director of New York's Cavin-Morris Gallery, which has been selling work by self-taught artists for 20 years. But outsider art has quickly become part of the larger commercial and museum art world, calling into question the meaning of its own labels. When the prices for outsider art begin to reach the prices for pieces in contemporary galleries, when the work is showcased in museums across the country, it seems clear that the world of self-taught and visionary art is on the verge of being absorbed into the larger art system. Even in New York, that bastion of cutting-edge contemporary art,

the annual Outsider Art Fair, held each winter in Manhattan since 1988, continues to grow in popularity. It attracted more than 7,500 people this year.

Once a backwater refuge from the high-speed frenzy of the visual culture, self-taught and visionary art has become as much a part of the craziness of the contemporary art world as any other form. Each artist is touted as a master with a unique view. The prices rise. The search goes on for the next Sam Doyle, Howard Finster or Thornton Dial. When they are "discovered," a great celebration goes up, as do prices, and it's on to the never-ending search for the next one. One imagines fleets of slick New York dealers and agents setting out in mud-splattered Bruno Magli loafers to comb the edges of southern swamps and barren polar regions in search of the next obsessive creator of eccentric, commodifiable artifacts.

Ironically, in New York and elsewhere, outsider art has become an insider game. These eccentric artifacts, whether from the backyards of the South or the ghetto garrets of various dilapidated urban centers, perfectly fit into the big-time commercial art trade. They are certainly perceived as more pertinent than anything that happens at the National Academy of Art or the

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shows that circulate around the national and state watercolor organizations.

What justifies the increasing interest in outsider and visionary art is the work's emotional power and its perceived high quality. But the genre also has real weaknesses. It is no coincidence that the focus on the outsider developed at a time in which the general public and even many connoisseurs were frankly fed up and confused by the direction that contemporary art had chosen to follow. By comparison, the genre of self-taught work seemed a breath of fresh air, a liberation from doctrines and stale formulas. At the same time, much of what is highly praised in elite contemporary art circles increasingly resembles outsider art—painter Sean Landers, for instance, makes works that

would look appropriate on any thrift-store wall. Artist Jim Shaw raids thrift stores around the country looking for peculiar paintings to exhibit. The highly rated English artist Tracey Moffat scrawls raw figures and enraged feminist slogans across her paintings in ways that call to mind the work of the obsessive, unschooled, or downright insane.

While contemporary artists poach their territory, the actual work of outsiders and self-taught artists remains a minefield of misunderstandings and oversimplifications. When people look at the work, they often take it at face value, assuming it is an "authentic" representation of the mind of its maker. This is nearly impossible to do with contemporary art, which usually comes prepackaged with art-historical references. But the fans of outsider art often fail to notice that some self-taught artists may also be playing with concepts and subjects in a sophisticated and sly way. "The work is appealing and accessible, but that doesn't mean that it's not incredibly complex and profound," said Lee Kogan, director of the Folk Art Institute at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York.

The referential nature of most contemporary art—the way a young artist may "quote" from Pop Art or Minimalism in her work, by adding a soup can (Andy Warhol) or a brick (Carl Andre), for example—means that the art only achieves its purpose when it is parsed by a sophisticated audience. The best outsider artists in contrast, create a whole aesthetic universe that revolves around itself. The art of a Howard Finster, Henry Darger or Bill Traylor is remarkably self-referential. One could argue that this stamp of a unique consciousness is what gives the work its power, and its popularity. The eccentricities of outsider art can not be translated into our normal, linear style of Western empiricism. Instead, the appeal of the work is based on a sense of wonder, in facing something one cannot ultimately understand or label.

But while outsider advocates and commercial dealers like Maresca are quick to promote the idea that outsider art "can be appreciated on an instinctual level," such statements obscure the complexity of such work.

Self-taught artists often use elements from the oral history and folklore of their region, transforming these legends into evocative scenes. They do not just present history anew, but comment upon it as myth and story and social process. Sam Doyle, for instance, reconstructs a historical event that never happened: the visit of Abraham Lincoln to Frogmore, South Carolina.

The Chicago artist Henry Darger created a 15,000-page illustrated novel, including hundreds of huge paintings based on a fantastical war between the Christian nation of Abbiennia and the child-enslaving kingdom of the Glandeliana.

"Just because it's accessible doesn't mean that it doesn't have resonance," said Cavin. "The work is complex. In academic terms it may look simple, but the artists have an art heritage of their own. Most of them are fairly self-critical."

Too often, the artist's life history is given enormous prominence in outsider art. Their backwater struggles, flophouse sojourns, or sexual neuroses are used as convenient tools to explain away the mysterious pull of the work. In the art of the self-taught, the biography can get in the way of the viewer's ability to appreciate the work for what it is.

"People love stories and I always try to play down the stories," said Maresca. The art "would be truly remarkable even without the story," he added.

"Sometimes the story is the hook," admits Cavin. "People will call and ask for information on the artist. I send a resume and they call again and ask for 'the story.' They collect the story and not the art. I feel uncomfortable riding on that."

The mass media bears some responsibility for this reductionism. Lee Kogan, curator of the Nellie Mae Rowe exhibit at the Museum of American Folk Art in 1999, notes that some reporters complained that the exhibit didn't give enough of "the story." "The critics do not approach it with the same scholarship as they would in writing about contemporary art," said Cavin. "I wish they had more information."

But that is beginning to change, says Kogan. With the rise in interest in the art, the scholarship has become more thorough and the museum world's

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increasing involvement has helped to validate the work. Before last year's Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan, most of the major press focused on accusations of pedophilia aimed at Henry Darger. "Someone said to me, 'You guys make it so serious. Make it a freak show; that's what brings the crowds in,'" Cavin recalled.

"The kinkier the better," agreed Kogan. "But there will always be that component. You cannot separate the art from the artist, but the life story doesn't make the artworks better."

Ultimately, the appeal of the best outsider art is almost instinctual. "There is an incredible directness, honesty and accessibility to the work," Cavin said. "Younger collectors respond to it emotionally, intellectually and economically."

How outside are these outsider artists? Although many of them work in isolation, in the late 20th century it is nearly impossible to escape from the mass media.

Many artists, including Howard Finster, Bill Traylor and William Hawkins, use pop imagery in their work. Finster, who has painted covers of book jackets and musicians such as the Talking Heads, is known to keep a television constantly blaring in his studio. Nellie Mae Rowe, subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of American Folk Art this year, lived in Vinings, Ga.—but by the time of her death in 1982, the once-bucolic Georgia town was effectively a suburb of Atlanta. One of her drawings shows a pig waddling along the highway—a metaphor for the changes taking place in her environment in the late '70s. Interstate 75, Kogan said, was two or three blocks from her home.

The book "Flying Free: 20th-Century Self-Taught Art from the Collection of Ellin and Daron Gordon" notes that once-isolated artists are increasingly in touch with the world through television and improved transportation. "Can the Internet be far behind?" the book asks. "The effect of the electronic age on their art. . .will be an interesting phenomenon to watch in the 21st century." Some outsider artists have web sites. Few are using computers or tapping into the Internet to create artwork, but that is bound to follow.

What may come into question is the entire category of the "outsider artist." As the world becomes ever more knitted together into one electronic community, can such a genre make sense? Or will it still be necessary to make a distinction between the heartfelt striving of untutored artists and the knowing winks of the critical avant-garde? Perhaps, in the end, the field of outsider art will become less a way of categorizing and packaging new discoveries for a marketplace hungry for novelty, but a category that allows artists to distance themselves from the critical orthodoxies of the moment.

Some dealers think that it is okay if outsider art offers aesthetics without pain, if it doesn't force the viewer to struggle to understand. "I like to think that art in general is a refuge or an escape," said Maresca. "You're challenged all day. You don't want to be challenged when you go home. People need that relief."

"'Heart' and 'spirit' are not groovy words to use in New York," said Cavin. "For many of us, this art is the religion we don't have anymore."