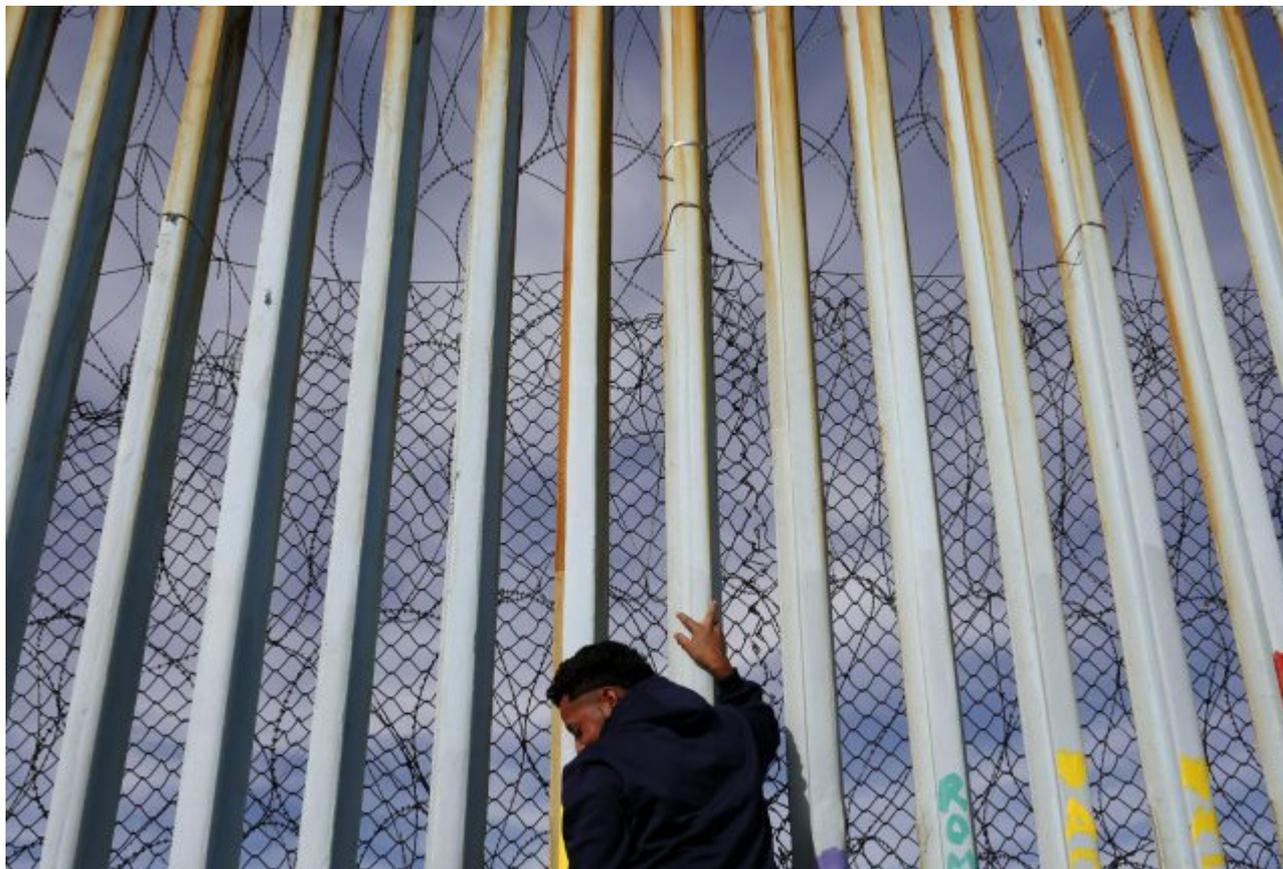


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The Ins and Outs of Insiders and Outsiders



A man holds on to the border wall along the beach in Tijuana, Mexico. AP Photo/Gregory Bull

By  Allan Schwartzman

co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby's Global Fine Arts

Published 24 January 2019 in [Allan's Intro](#)

Cultures have, throughout history, created stability by uniting around commonalities of kinship, values or possessions. Gathering around a shared identity reinforces that which binds them and is a form of protection against outsiders, who are often cast as enemies (whether real or imagined). Walls are built to fortify unity; to safeguard and perpetuate the idea of the common good.

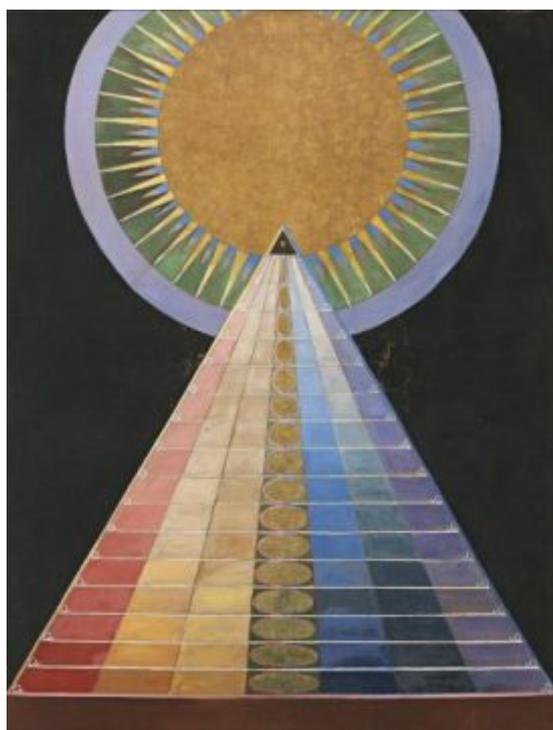
In modern times, where prosperity occurs through secure trade between nations, the outsider became a hero; a safe renegade rejecting conformity for the sake of the self. This outsider had a voice that might eventually lead others. In art, outsiders often conveyed marks or insights into new, brilliant and lasting form.

The outsider has occupied a uniquely venerated position in modern art because it embodies a kind of authenticity in which voice trumps style. The outsider keeps insiders honest. There has hardly been a 20th-century movement that did not look outside itself for content, inspiration and validation. Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism: each looked to artists and image-makers beyond Western conventions (maybe that, simply, is what defines the outsider) for imagery, spirit and kindred souls.

Sometimes artists (like Gauguin) check out of the bourgeoisie, because outsiders tend to become absorbed once they have been inside. Often, artists of renegade spirit become revered insiders—whom each subsequent generation of alienated outsiders both emulates and tries to vanquish.

Even in popular culture, the outsider is often the greatest innovator. Could rock and roll even exist without the black “outsiders” whose music (like their lives) embodied the blues—and was emulated by alienated white youth?

Artists’ and collectors’ embrace of the art of outsiders can be seen as ennobling or racist—what once appeared inspirational can also feel cannibalistic. I guess this comes down to the difference between curiosity and grandiosity; explorers and conquerors; exotica and spoils; missions and massacres, and whether those differentiations aren’t so much lines as porous membranes.



Hilma af Klint, *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece (Grupp X, nr 1, Altarbild)*, (1915). The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm. Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm

I don’t think the outsider exists in art anymore. [The Guggenheim Museum’s Hilma af Klint retrospective](#) (until 23 April) and the [National Gallery’s “Outliers and American Vanguard Art”](#) exhibition make clear that the difference between outside and inside is just a matter of time. Today, art is an insider’s game.

Where the margins were once the uncharted realms of visionaries, they are becoming the darkening alleys of hasty enshrinement and investment. The art market has gained so much momentum because of broad buy-in.

But art collecting is at its best when it has a hefty dose of the outsider’s view. Otherwise, all you would see is the same thing everywhere; and many of us are not ready to accept the possibility that art has become so well tamed that it is little more than a parody of its own domestication.

Part of the crisis in art today, if one sees contemporary art as in crisis, is its dependability. Markets like such steadiness but art needs space to be messy and unsettling, to fail and smell.

There’s not much that remains outside to refuel the engines of invention and to challenge conventions of taste. Or maybe art is ready to rest behind a wall, in a deep hibernation which might be broken only by a groundswell of indignation—which walls eventually stir in individuals, who need to be unconfined to breathe.

From Bill Traylor to Jim Carrey: Who's an Outsider, Anyway?

An Analysis of “Outliers” in Museums and the Market



James “Son Ford” Thomas, *Untitled* (1988) Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta, from the William S Arnett Collection

By  Jonathan Griffin

writer and critic

Published 24 January 2019 in [Analysis](#)

“The walls are coming down! The outsiders are coming in!” proclaimed *New York* magazine’s art critic [Jerry Saltz](#) in a recent [In Other Words](#) podcast. Arguments about walls—both their symbolic demolition and, in the midst of the current US government shutdown, their actual physical construction—dominate political and cultural discourse. Is Saltz’s excitement warranted, or is it just wishful thinking?

While critics and curators have for decades wrung their hands over the aesthetic, theoretical and economic exclusion of self-trained makers, the segregation of “outsider art” from the mainstream is now being reframed as an issue of fundamental cultural inclusivity. As two major museum exhibitions show—“[Outliers and American Vanguard Art](#)” (LACMA, until 17 March) and “[Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor](#)” (Smithsonian American Art Museum, until 17 March)— the term outsider artist has, historically in the United States, often been a euphemism for artists of color.



Jim Carrey, *Exorcist* (2018), shown at the 2019 Outsider Art Fair in New York. Courtesy of Maccarone (Los Angeles and New York)

Indeed, museum exhibitions and major biennials are “adding horsepower” to artists on the outside, says gallerist Andrew Edlin, who also owns the [Outsider Art Fair](#), which staged its 27th edition last week. He says that there has been gathering interest in the field over the past 15 or 20 years, with especial momentum after the watershed year of 2013, when self-taught artists were included in several major institutional shows including [Massimiliano Gioni’s “Encyclopedic Palace”](#) at the Venice Biennale, [Ralph Rugoff’s “Alternative Guide to the Universe”](#) at the Hayward Gallery in London, and the 2013 Carnegie International.

That watershed did not come out of the blue, however. Curators like Gioni and Lynne Cooke (who curated “Outliers and American Vanguard Art” when it was first shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC in 2018) had been working consistently with self-taught and trained artists alike, while museums had gradually deepened their expertise in the field. Edlin believes “we’re past the point of it being cyclical, I feel like it’s beyond that now”. He has recently made sales of work by self-trained artists to museums including MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum, amongst others.

“Outsider has always been a disparaging way of grouping individuals by difference”

He has also witnessed the arrival of a number of new, highly active collectors of outsider art. “In a field like ours, which is exponentially smaller than the contemporary market, when a few collectors step in the ripples are felt keenly by the dealer community,” he says.

Prices for self-taught artists at auction (or outliers, the term proposed by Cooke) have been rising, and Christie’s now holds an annual sale of “vernacular and outsider art”. Last October, at the auction of the collection of Marsha and Robin Williams at Sotheby’s, the limelight was stolen by the Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli, a major figure of Art Brut, whose drawing *Der San Salvathor* (1927) sold for \$795,000 (est. \$150,000-\$200,000).

While outsider art dealers have historically remained somewhat separate from the contemporary art world, with very few blue-chip galleries featuring self-taught artists on their rosters, this may be slowly changing. Late last year, [Gladstone](#)

[Gallery](#) announced its representation of Chinese artist Guo Fengyi, who died in 2010. The gallery opened an exhibition of her work last week at its Brussels gallery, with prices between \$20,000 and \$90,000.

I prefer the term artist. The rest of it is biography

Guo drew hallucinatory figures and portraits on paper scrolls while practicing qigong, a technique connected to tai chi that helped her manage pain from arthritis. Her work was included in all three of the 2013 exhibitions mentioned above.

In 2017, [Frith Street Gallery in London](#) began representing James Castle (1899-1977) an American artist who created an extraordinarily sophisticated body of drawings, mainly in soot and spit, despite being deaf and mute from birth.



Lonnie Holley, *The Boneheaded Serpent at the Cross (It Wasn't Luck)* (1996). Courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, William S. Arnett Collection © Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photo by Stephen Pitkin

Despite the marketing power of the outsider label, (“Everybody knows what you’re talking about,” Edlin says), gallerists operating in the contemporary market often avoid it. Gladstone director Paula Tsai says: “It’s problematic when an artist is identified or contained by one defining word.” Guo, for example, received attention from museums and biennials during her lifetime. “It would be misleading to identify Guo as an outsider, having all these strong connections to the greater art world,” Tsai adds.

John Ollman, whose gallery [Fleisher Ollman](#) in Philadelphia has worked with both self-taught and academically credentialed artists since the 1970s, and which regularly shows at the Outsider Art Fair, tries not to use the term outsider: “I use it because people expect us to use it. I prefer the term artist. The rest of it is biography.” He points out that many so-called outsider African American artists, such as Traylor, “were not outside of their culture, they were just outside of mainstream western art culture. It’s pejorative to look at them that way. It’s as if to be an insider you have to have studied Western art

history.”

Ollman—who has long sold Castle’s work—recalls arguing in the strongest terms that the title of the artist’s 2008 retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art omit the term outsider. He triumphed, against the wishes of the catalog’s publishers, and the show was simply titled “[James Castle: A Retrospective](#)”. “That was really a big deal,” he says, “and that was only ten years ago.”

Non-conformity is great in art

Leslie Umberger, curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and curator of “Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor”, believes that “sweeping labels do more harm than good”. As she has written: “To call an artist an outsider is to note difference as the foremost framework. The term describes the artist, not the art, and ultimately functions as a euphemism for race, class, or social agency. Marketers often grab encompassing terms because they are easy, but outsider has always been a disparaging way of grouping individuals by difference.”



Edgar Tolson, *Cain Going into the World from the series the Fall of Man* (1970). Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum, The Michael and Julie Hall Collection of American Folk Art

Edlin would counter that difference is not necessarily a bad thing, and the work one sees at the Outsider Art Fair is self-evidently different from that at fairs like Frieze or Art Basel. “For me, outsider always had a positive connotation,” he says. “It brings to mind non-conformity. To me, non-conformity is great in art.”

At the heart of these debates is the question of agency: who applies the label outsider (not to mention alternatives like “folk”, “naïve”, “vernacular”, “visionary” or “primitive”), and what power does the artist have to resist or reject it? Is non-conformity a self-conscious choice, or an insuperable fate? Almost all of the artists most highly valued in the outsider market—including Traylor, Castle, Wölfli, Henry Darger, William Edmondson and Martín Ramírez—are no longer alive, their estates now in the control of family members or foundations. Many were “discovered” by outsider art collectors—such as, in Traylor’s case, the artist and teacher Charles Shannon—who acquired their work en masse and had unparalleled control over its interpretation and contextualization.

The situation is different for living self-taught artists, many of whom are growing adept at working within these fields and exhibition contexts. Cooke points to the artist and musician Lonnie Holley, who features in “Outliers and American Vanguard Art”. Holley, she says, identifies neither as a folk artist nor an outsider, but takes each opportunity as it comes, sometimes appearing in exhibitions of self-taught artists and at other times showing in biennials or performing as a musician. “He’s a

very astute, savvy, engaged maker. He's seen it as a priority to understand the systems in which his work might circulate. And how to work those systems to his benefit, as does any well informed artist," she says.

For some, the outsider label may be demeaning or limiting, but for others it is a badge of honor or a prized marketing tool. Eyebrows were raised recently when it was announced that [Maccarone gallery](#) would show the drawings of actor Jim Carrey at the 2019 Outsider Art Fair. Can a Hollywood star be legitimately claimed as an outsider artist? The disintegration of the separation between inside and outside can cut both ways, it seems.

“Bill Traylor has always been the property of a white collecting class”



Bill Traylor, *Men Drinking, Boys Tormenting, Dogs Barking* (c.1939-42) Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz, promised gift to the Philadelphia Art Museum

At the other extreme is Traylor, an artist born into slavery in 1854 who lived until 1947. His work is in the collections of museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum and MoMA, with the Smithsonian American Art Museum holding 17 pieces.

To many, it would appear that he has been wholly accepted into the mainstream Western art historical canon. Yet, in a brilliant, searing introduction to the impressive catalog for Traylor's retrospective, the artist Kerry James Marshall warns us not to get ahead of ourselves:

“The way I see it, Bill Traylor has always been the property of a white collecting class. He, himself, was passed down as inheritance before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Now, long after Traylor's death, his creative labor is traded at high prices in markets beyond the reach of and rarely visited by black art patrons. Substantial holdings of his art are now in public museums, but not a single institution focused on African American culture is a significant repository of Traylor's art, or, moreover, has contributed a work to this exhibition. The latter fact is perhaps a troubling truth if it matters, ultimately, for a people to choose their own heroes and tell their own stories.”

As Marshall notes, for self-taught artists like Traylor, growing museum representation and escalating market values are not enough, on their own, to truly make those walls come tumbling down.

It's 'Rocky' With An Easel

Outsiders on the Silver Screen



An untitled piece on recycled material by outsider artist Lois Wilson. Courtesy Branyon Productions, Ltd.

By  Christian House

freelance arts and books writer for the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph

Published 24 January 2019 in [Films](#)

Capra, Spielberg or Kubrick could have come up with the concept of the outsider artist. It's the classic tale of the talented interloper struggling against the odds—just played out in the art world. It's *Rocky* with an easel.

Numerous dramas and documentaries have captured their tortured stories. Perhaps, the most famous film about an outsider artist is Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, about an artificial man who lives in the rafters of a ruined mansion and has blades for fingers (which he uses to great effect on the local shrubbery). This Michelangelo of the box hedge—a pasty-faced Johnny Depp—finds love while snipping away at his surreal privets. He's so haunted and hounded. But oh, what topiary!

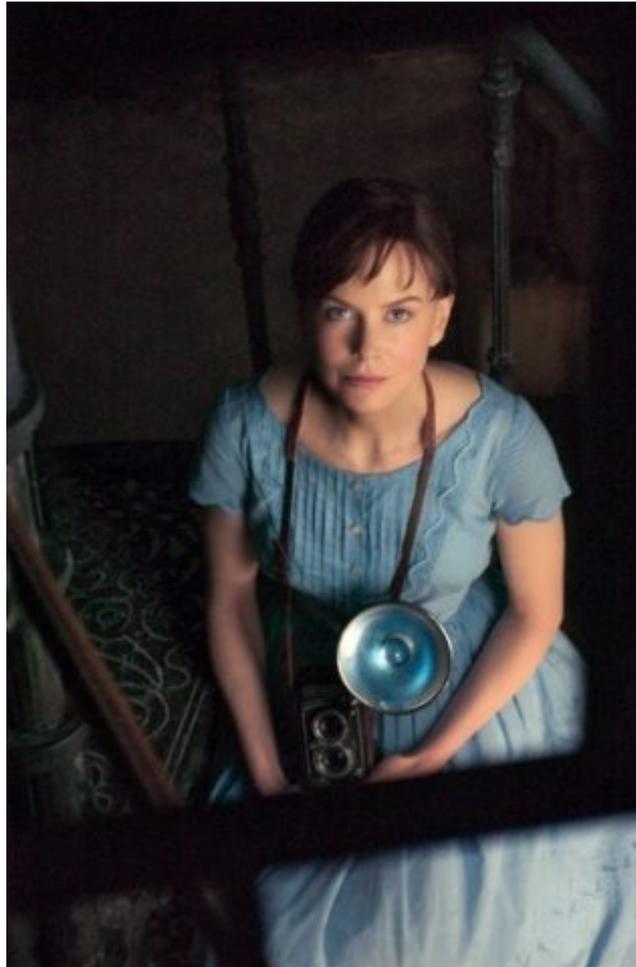


Steve Carrell as Mark Hogancamp in *Welcome to Marwen* (2018). Image © Universal Pictures and DreamWorks Pictures

Caroline Thompson, the writer of *Edward Scissorhands*, also scripted Robert Zemeckis's *Welcome to Marwen* (2018), which blends outsider art with toys and is based on a true story. Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and memory loss after being attacked by a gang of men who beat him up after he revealed he liked cross-dressing, New Yorker Mark Hogancamp (played by Steve Carell) created a 1:6 scale model wartime-era Belgian village in his yard as therapy. He colonized it with gun-toting Barbie dolls—altered to look like people he knew.

Hogancamp's photographs of this vast diorama became a sensation. The film, based on Jeff Malmberg's documentary *Marwencol* (2010)—the name of the fictitious village—looks at the artist through the aperture of his own rabbit hole, immersing the viewer in an alternative reality. CGI brings the dolls to life. It's pretty art-house for a movie by the director of *Back to the Future*.

Social lepers



Nicole Kidman as Diane Arbus in *Fur* (2006). Image © Picturehouse/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock

Outsider art is oxymoronic—aren't artists meant to have unconventional perceptions? The term is rooted in a cocktail of snobbery, misogyny, racism, canonical thinking and vested interests. To have outsiders you need insiders. And, of course, Hollywood does like to take on the establishment.

In *Fur* (2006), Nicole Kidman plays Diane Arbus, the outsiders' outsider, a photographer who snapped every outcast imaginable, from giants and dwarves to the mad, bad and dead. Arbus was the daughter of a wealthy Manhattan retail magnate, the wife of an advertising photographer and, privately, a fan of society's fringes.

Fur is not a biopic but rather an "imaginary portrait". The director Steven Shainberg eroticizes Arbus, having her fall for a hairy circus performer who has moved in upstairs (a very downy Robert Downey Jr). It's kind of a burlesque *Beauty and the Beast*.

On film, autodidactic artists tend to live in attics, cabins and hovels. The fictitious painter in Phil Morrison's *Junebug* (2005) works out of a shed in rural North Carolina, where the old curmudgeon produces grotesque scenes of the American Civil War—"a sort of Hieronymus Bosch meets LS Lowry", observed Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. The gallerist who wants to sign him—a crisp Embeth Davidtz—soon realizes that her discovery is borderline deranged. Sometimes they are outsiders for a reason.

No pain, no gain

You don't get much more marginalized than if you're rural, female, poor and ill. But, as two biopics of real-life artists highlight, talent can still triumph (if only briefly).



Maud Lewis, *Chickadees* Date N/A. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, all rights reserved.

In *Séraphine* (2008), Yolande Moreau plays Séraphine Louis, the French housekeeper turned naïve painter who used pig's blood to create the distinctive rouge in her fantastical floral compositions. Briefly feted in the 1920s, she ended her days in a psychiatric hospital. Martin Provost's dramatization won seven César awards—the French Oscars—including for best film of the year.

A one-room hut on the coast of Nova Scotia—complete with chickens—is a long way from the art districts of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Yet this is where Maud Lewis created some of the most celebrated Canadian folk art of the mid-20th century, a story deftly told in *Maudie* (2016), directed by Aisling Walsh.

Sally Hawkins plays the chronically arthritic artist who married a fish peddler (Ethan Hawke) to escape her claustrophobic family. Lewis painted almost every surface in their simple home with images of nature that were Technicolor in their hues. Hawkins, herself a painter, immersed herself in the role. “The beauty of her performance is that soon you see only Maud,” noted *The New York Times*.

Posthumously Inside

Obscure during their lifetime, many outsider artists have made a posthumous mark. Alexandra Branyon's documentary *Treasures from the Rubble* (2011) is a fascinating portrait of 20th-century Alabama folk artist and collector Lois Wilson. She was born and remained in poverty throughout her life, both in the Deep South and in New York, all the while creating assemblages out of found objects and furniture, painting on table legs, drawers and toilet seats.

“I no longer will allow myself to be a ditto artist, copying other artists' concepts and styles”

“I no longer will allow myself to be a ditto artist, copying other artists' concepts and styles,” Wilson stated. The film captures a rebellious spirit. And one which left a fabulous legacy: her collection of works is now housed in the Fayette Art Museum.



A Vivian Maier self-portrait, from *Finding Vivian Maier* (2014). Courtesy of the Maloof Collection and Sundance Selects.

More puzzling is the story of Vivian Maier, the Chicago nanny whose secret life as a street photographer was only exposed after her death in 2009. With an eye for the tragicomic she photographed the vagabonds, cops, shoppers and hawkers. The feature documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* (2013), directed by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, explores how she kept her obsession to herself (stashing her film away undeveloped).

How does a director untangle an enigma? By turning it into a detective—or perhaps ghost—story. The film follows the trail of the collector who bought a hoard of 30,000 of Maier’s negatives that had been boxed-up at a storage facility sale. Gradually, he realizes the enormity of what he has unearthed.

Maier’s character was slippery but it allowed her to focus on her sidewalk subjects. Being an outsider has its benefits. As an admirer tells Edward Scissorhands: “If you had regular hands, you’d be like everyone else.”

Too Much, Even For The Surrealists

The Must-See Work in England



Reuben Mednikoff, *The Bengal Colonel* (1945-47). Courtesy of De La Warr Pavilion. Photo credit Rob Harris

By  Louisa Buck

contemporary art correspondent

Published 24 January 2019 in [Must See](#)

Reuben Mednikoff's *Bengal Colonel* is a perplexing creature. Painted between 1945 and 1947, it is equal parts benign children's toy and savage deity. Baring ferocious fangs and claws, it carries on its back a peaceful sleeping baby (which weirdly appears to be suckling from the colonel's tail). There appears to be a partially formed fetus inside the tiger's gaping mouth and, indeed, the colonel himself is in turn contained within another giant mouth, hemmed in by a frieze of stumpy teeth.

Although the painting was executed by Mednikoff, a British artist of Russian-Jewish origin—and is arguably his most important work—it is also the outcome of one of the most unorthodox artistic collaborations in British art. The 29-year-old Mednikoff met Dr Grace Pailthorpe, a 52-year-old surgeon and practising Freudian analyst, at a party in London in January 1935.

In his words, he “allowed the unconscious to express itself”

There was an instant rapport and fascination with each other’s work and almost immediately they embarked on an intimate joint project involving art and psychoanalysis that was to last more than 30 years, until Pailthorpe’s death in 1971. Mednikoff died just a few months later in 1972.

The couple were rarely apart, with Mednikoff teaching Pailthorpe the rudiments of art and she instructing him in the basics of interpretative analysis. The result was an outpouring of drawings and paintings made by the duo. Pailthorpe assumed the role of surrogate mother, haunted by the trauma of birth-giving, while Mednikoff’s troubled family relationships found often bizarre expression in a flood of images issuing forth from visions, dreams and free-association. In his words, he “allowed the unconscious to express itself”. Repressed childhood memories of a cold, critical mother and domineering father were expressed as terrifying, engulfing beasts of fantasy—of which *Bengal Colonel* is a striking example.

These researches chimed strongly with Surrealism’s explorations of the subconscious and Pailthorpe and Mednikoff were invited to participate in the 1936 “International Surrealist Exhibition” in London, as well as in the early activities of the British surrealist group.

Surrealism’s founder and prime mover André Breton considered their paintings and drawings to be “the best and most truly Surrealist of the works by English artists” and Pailthorpe and Mednikoff had their first joint exhibition at the Guggenheim Jeune gallery in London in 1939.

“The best and most truly Surrealist of the works by English artists”

But although the pair expressed their internal hallucinations in a more extreme, direct and brave manner than any other artists in the British Surrealist movement, their more scientific approach also alienated them from the group. An attempt by Mednikoff to organise a meeting to define the role of Surrealism in wartime Britain led to them being expelled from the group in 1940. From then onwards, this odd couple worked in almost complete isolation.

They spent the war years in America and Canada and *Bengal Colonel* was completed shortly after their return to England. By this time Mednikoff’s anthropomorphic animals had become even more flamboyant, large and vividly colored and the pair rechristened their boundary-blurring of art and psychoanalytic theory “psychorealism”.

The oddness of their relationship took another turn when, in 1948, Pailthorpe decided to adopt Mednikoff as her son. He changed his name to Richard Pailthorpe and called her “Mother Flower”. By the end of their lives this strange couple became increasingly immersed in occultism and mysticism and lived out their last years on England’s south coast, where they ran an antiques shop in Battle, East Sussex.

Bengal Colonel was one of only a few works hanging in their final home in nearby Ninfield, where apparently guests were invited to gaze into its mouth to test their interpretive faculties. It still invites multiple and disquieting readings today.

Bengal Colonel can be seen in “A Tale of Mother’s Bones: Grace Pailthorpe, Reuben Mednikoff and the Birth of Psychorealism” at [Camden Arts Centre](#) from 12 April until 23 June.

Standing Apart



"Always a grouper show, never the solo."

By Kaitlin Chan

By  Kaitlin Chan

cartoonist

Published 17 January 2019 in [Cartoons](#)