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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

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“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.

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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.