

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

When “Outliers” and “Outsiders” Are No Longer Useful Categories in Art

Inherent in the show *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* is a kind of subtle hierarchy among artists, even if the curator has tried to delimit its force.

Douglas Messerli December 5, 2018



Marsden Hartley, “Adelard the Drowned, Master of the ‘Phantom’” (c. 1938–39), oil on board, 28 × 22 in. (the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the lone and Hudson D. Walker Collection)

LOS ANGELES — *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, which recently opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is overwhelming in the quantity and quality of the art shown. Organized by the National Gallery of Art and curated by that museum’s Lynne Cooke (coordinated here by LACMA curator Rita Gonzalez), the exhibition not only argues that vanguard, trained American artists were often influenced by untrained artists who were ostracized or simply ignored because of their gender, race, and simple styles of their art; it also attempts, as a significant contribution to art history, to be a kind of historical compendium of the several art gallery shows that first brought the “outliers” to the public’s attention.

Outliers cites the 1924 Whitney Studio Club (now the Whitney Museum of American Art), whose artist collectors included modernist painters such as Charles Sheeler and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Moving into the 1930s, we learn of the private collections of artists such as Elie Nadelman, and of the founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, who in the 1930s hung European artists (Henri Rousseau was one of his favorites, three of whose paintings grace these walls) and Americans who refused to differentiate between what came to be called "outsider" art from the experimentation of the day.

More contemporary exhibitions include *Naives and Visionaries* (organized at the Walker Art Center by Martin Friedman and others in 1974); *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980* (curated for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1982 by Jane Livingston and John Beardsley); LACMA's own *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (curated by Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Eliel); the 2002 touring exhibit of African American women living in rural Alabama, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (promoted by folk art collector, historian, curator William Arnett); and LACMA's 2015 show, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* (curated by Franklin Sirmans).



Installation view, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (photo © Museum Associates/LACMA)

Beyond all of these interstices, the show also highlights six visionary environments, including Simon Rodia's monumental Watts Towers, and James Hampton's compelling "Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly," which was discovered in a Washington, DC garage and is now housed at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and is too fragile to travel.

To top the trophies of art that over the decades have been described variously as "outsider," "folk-art," "craft," "child-like," and just plain "junk" art, Cooke and her clever associates have gathered a large collection of truly memorable "vanguard" works, including five Elie Nadelman sculptures and paintings, pieces by Florine Stettheimer, the stunning "Boy Stealing Fruit" by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, several Marsden Hartleys, works by almost the entire so-called Chicago school (Jim Nutt, Barbara Rossi, Roger Brown), and masterworks by Jacob Lawrence, Elijah Pierce, Sister Gertrude Morgan, and contemporary artist Betye Saar. The list goes on and on, and so do the visual pleasures until you are nearly exhausted by the intense visionary experience.



Sister Gertrude Morgan, "Revelation 7. chap" (c. 1970), paint on wood, 32 1/4 x 15 3/8 in. (the Museum of Everything, London, photo © Todd-White Art Photography)

Although this show is as well-intended as it can be — trying to batter down the barriers between those whom Cooke prefers to describe as “outliers” and the truly American vanguard artists — it inevitably seems to give a kind of “slap-on-the-back” appreciation for those who often felt no need to be appreciated since they simply went about creating art without any institutional approval. Inherent in this show is still a kind of subtle hierarchy, even if Cooke has tried to delimit its force. And if the differences between the two become rightfully blurred, her insistence on art history confuses us. Was Marsden Hartley, the well-trained artist who early on painted beautifully abstract works of German soldiers and their medals, and later drew on Native American imagery, truly influenced by the “outliers” when he gave all that up to paint lovely, sometimes crudely homoerotic pictures of his Maine friends? Was Jacob Lawrence, a hero in the black community, a naïf painter because he drew children painting on a sidewalk? If

trained artists grew to love folk and craft art, perhaps it was not because they simply discovered it from outliers, but because it accorded with their own world views.



Horace Pippin, "Interior" (1944), oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 30 3/16 in. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin, in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art)

Despite the vastness of riches in this show, there is still so much missing. If you're going to include Sheeler, why not represent that master of Iowa folk art, Grant Wood? Or the other Midwest faux-realist Thomas Hart Benton? If you're interested in outsider gay art, why not go for the wonderful kitsch painter Paul Cadmus — certainly an outlier if there ever was one?

If you're going to include the art of the quilt, where are the artists of the "Pattern and Decoration" movement like Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Kim MacConnel, Miriam Shapiro, Merion Estes, and Robert Zakanitch, all of whom have long worked with materials that weren't conceived of being worthy of the "true" art world?



Jacob Lawrence, "Sideshow Drawings" (1943), gouache on paper, 22 3/8 x 29 1/2 in. (Collection of Shahara Ahmad-Llewellyn, © the Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

And if you argue that child-like art is an important influence of the vanguard, why not include someone like the contemporary artist Susan Bee, who paints, through child-like images, metaphors of great seriousness. Why did a show that so lovingly represented Morton Bartlett's dolls not represent the numerous doll-like images and child-like fantasies of Mike Kelley? The list could go on forever, and you can't blame any curator who has created such a vast and fascinating show for having her own choices.

Yet, there are confusions that arise. Was Cindy Sherman (whose work I like very much) truly more influenced by "outliers" than all these others? I feel the problem — which strangely enough this show bravely tries to address — is that, in the end, there is no outside or inside. Art is art, some of which may seem more brutal, more immediate, even less talented than other works, depending upon the viewer's eye and sensibility.

Perhaps Lynne Cooke, in this grand collection of beautiful works, has done something truly wonderful, helping us to realize that despite the art history or any categories that we might divide it into, art is created by artists who simply have to create, and they created it straight through the century, not in only a few selected years. Just as much bad art might come from training within institutions than from not having any obvious artistic education. Those who create art do so because they love it.



Installation view, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (photo © Museum of Art Associates/LACMA)

Outliers and American Vanguard Art continues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (5905 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles) through March 17, 2019.

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