

ARTnews

Outsider Art Is Increasingly Moving to the Art Market Mainstream

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After the pandemic, works by young, unproven artists flew off dealers' walls onto the auction block, where these pieces set records. Over the past two years, that trend seemingly **came to an end** amid high interest rates and geopolitical and economic instability. Now, the market is more fragmented, with a greater emphasis than ever on quality.

Collectors—the good ones, anyway—have started to look for value, advisers have told *ARTnews*, eschewing the figurative work that has more recently dominated the market for works **on the margins** of art history. Last year, more attention was paid to **overlooked modernists** and **Indigenous artists**. This year, don't be surprised if collectors looking for a hidden gem turn their focus to **outsider art**. (The term “outsider art” is itself the subject of debate, with some opting for the term “self-taught art.” For simplicity's sake, we've used the term the auction houses use and kept the term “outsider art” throughout the piece.)

Last week, Christie's held a **145-lot sale** dedicated to outsider art, the latest in a series of dedicated auctions held by the house since **2016**. This year's sale wasn't a blowout success overall, generating just over \$1.8 million, with a sell-through rate of 90 percent by lot and 85 percent by value. (All prices include fees and buyers premium.) That's down from 2024, when the equivalent sale generated \$2.5 million on 128 lots, with admirable numbers for **Thornton Dial, Minnie Evans, Amos Ferguson**, and **Anna Zemánková**. However, there were numerous lots that over-performed. One artist's auction record was even broken twice in the same sale. William Hawkins's *Juke Box* (1987) sold for \$98,280. Then, 10 lots later, Hawkins's *Neil House with Chimney #2* (1989) brought in \$113,400.

(Most of the works at the Christie's sale fell comfortably between their high and low estimates which means the auction house was able to gauge their value appropriately and collectors responded in kind.)

“There's real interest today in collecting art by people with different backgrounds, with different sources, and with different focus,” Christie's head of Americana and outsider art, **Cara Zimmerman**, told *ARTnews*. “A lot of the collectors who are looking at outsider art are people who say ‘I know about the modernists, I know about contemporary art, where can I fill in the gaps?’”

Among the shows Rousseau pointed to were “Projects: Marlon Mullen” at MoMA, “Mary Sully: Native Modern” at the Met, “Creative Growth” at SFMoMA, and “The Way I See It: Selections From the KAWS Collection,” which showcased KAWS’s forward-thinking championing of inspired underdog artists. Late last year, Hauser & Wirth held an exhibition of large-scale works by Thornton Dial, an artist who has been collected by MoMA, the Met, and other **major museums**, and “Edges of Ailey,” a Whitney Museum show about the dancer Alvin Ailey, teems with works by outsider artists, with pieces by Sam Doyle, Purvis Young, and others sharing space with ones by blue-chippers like Rashid Johnson and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Amos Ferguson, one of the stars of Christie’s outsider art sale in 2024, had four works in this year’s equivalent auction. A jaunty, impossibly blue picture of five birds fishing sold for \$27,720 against a high estimate of \$10,000. Another Ferguson, ***Untitled (Yellow Flower)***, earned \$15,120 against a high estimate of \$5,000. James Castle’s ***Untitled (Abstract Book)***, one of several lots from the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation, was estimated to sell for between \$12,000 and \$18,000, and ultimately sold for \$31,000. (Many works by outsider artists aren’t dated. Zimmerman said that this was common, as “some of these artists created over the course of many years, and there wasn’t always a linear progression to their expression.”)

Auction houses, museums, and galleries have historically marketed outsider artists to the public by focusing on biography. In the case of Castle, for example, the house noted in its lot description that he was born deaf and mute, and that he could not read. Many have critiqued this tendency, claiming that it exoticizes outsider artists and pointing out that this terminology is disproportionately applied to artists who are of color, disabled artists, and queer artists.

Most agree, though, that outsider art must be studied differently from work produced by people who are professionally trained. “In some ways this work has always served as a salve or antidote to contemporary art,” **Andrew Edlin**, an art dealer and the CEO of the Outsider Art Fair, told *ARTnews*. “It’s not really hyper-conceptual or based on any art historical trends or references.”

One reason that outsider art has gained so much recognition is that curators have begun presenting it in the world’s biggest shows. Massimiliano Gioni notably featured such art in his **2013 Venice Biennale**, “The Encyclopedic Palace,” as did Cecilia Alemani in her 2022 Venice Biennale. The 2024 Venice Biennale, by Adriano Pedrosa, included historical sections in which outsider artists, many of whom were Indigenous and from the Global South, were placed alongside modernists who are more well-known.

In a **recent column** for *Cultured*, adviser **Ralph DeLuca** wrote that collectors need to look “beyond labels,” revisit the undervalued, and “embrace the outsider” to get ahead this year. “In this day and age to separate artists by any label, including their art educational background is just less and less relevant,” DeLuca told *ARTnews*. “Connoisseurship has been in a coma for long enough. It’s all art, and we should be collecting without prejudice.”

We’ll have to wait and see whether that embrace this year becomes a full-fledged hug or the awkward shoulder-hug-pat-on-the-back combo. For those interested in expanding their view past traditional art history, into the arena of the self-taught, Edlin suggested that, first and foremost, collectors must have the courage of their convictions.

“Don’t treat art like a commodity,” Edlin offered. “It’s not a mutual fund. Art like this should be breath of fresh air.” The eye develops over time, he said, but what’s important is that something strikes you. “Outsider art is about creativity. It’s more personal and not meant for a market.” Of course, like any segment of the art market, there is research one can do, auction records to sift through, and museum collections to peruse. But for Edlin, nothing should eclipse intuition and instinct.

For those whose interest is piqued, the Outsider Art Fair **opens in New York** on February 27 and runs until March 2.