

ArtSeen

An Alternative Canon: Art Dealers Collecting Outsider Art

Curated by Paul Laster

By [Jonathan Goodman](#)



Bill Traylor, *Black Horse*, 1939-42. Pencil and poster paint on cardboard, 14 x 22 inches.
Courtesy Andrew Edlin, New York.

Organized by art writer and curator Paul Laster, *An Alternative Canon: Art Dealers Collecting Outsider Art* presents nearly 75 artworks collected by some 30 dealers. The range of the works, shown salon-style in Edlin's space near the New Museum, is remarkable—major figures, such as Bill Traylor, Grandma Moses, Henry Darger, and the Chinese artist Guo Fengyi, are available for viewing, but also powerful, lesser-known artists are included in the show. This kind of work was collected early on by the

gallerists Sidney Janis and Phyllis Kind; indeed, interest in such art has been taking place since before the middle of the last century—Janis wrote a major study of American “primitive” artists in 1942, called *They Taught Themselves*. Interest in such art may stem both from the wish to appreciate and even canonize artists whose training was unconventional and whose imagery, by usual standards, may have seemed raw or even crude. There is also the desire in the contemporary art world to eschew the strictures of what is deemed acceptable. The art we see in Laster’s fine curation has a lot to do with evading tradition in favor of a radically direct perception.

Some of the art will seem familiar to a contemporary audience, for whom this kind of work is rather well known—at least that of the more prominent artists. And this is borne out by the excellence of the images, some by artists prevalent in contemporary art discourse. For example, in a beautiful image by Bill Traylor, *Black Horse* (1939–42), collected by Lucy Mitchell-Innes, the Black artist’s talent at rendering animals is in full force. A study of a broad-bodied and thick-chested animal on a small piece of brown cardboard, the image conveys in a direct but nuanced fashion the sturdiness of the horse in a general manner. Joseph Elmer Yoakum, a Black, self-proclaimed Native American artist born in the late 1800s, is represented with an imaginary landscape: a small colored pencil on paper work, called *King Leopold Ridge, Argyle Downs, Australia* (ca. 1969), with simultaneous representations of hills, valleys, trees, a river, and a small building. It is a visionary representation of a place Yoakum had never been to. Henry Darger, collected by Andrew Edlin, is included with *Untitled (She Got to Sit on Ringo’s Lap)* (ca. 1966-67). It includes a group of Darger’s young girls, variously dressed in red and yellow frocks, framed on the top and bottom by black-and-white pictures of children and celebrities, including the Beatles. Darger’s powerful mixture of innocence and imminent catastrophe is underplayed here, but the image is still affecting.



Henry Darger, *Untitled (She Got to Sit on Ringo's Lap)*, c. 1966-67. Mixed media on paper, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy Andrew Edlin, New York.

Matthew Wong's *Untitled* (2005), owned by John Cheim, is an abstract drawing rendered with ink on rice paper. It consists of a large boulder-like image, filled with individual strokes that cumulatively might resemble hair, over a flatter rock-like image, also with interior single strokes, that lies flat on the bottom of the drawing. It seems to be an entirely abstract effort, dramatic given its black-and-white palette. Hawkins Bolden, of African-American and Native American ancestry, blinded in a childhood accident, made raw assemblages notable for their directness of materials. In his piece, *Untitled (Scarecrow)* (ca. 1980s), owned by Scott Ogden of Shrine Gallery, the assemblage consists of a tire, with two thick strips of green carpet hanging from its bottom rim, while on top, slightly to the right, a piece of denim jeans has been folded over the wheel. Simple but affecting, the piece refers to the history of Black American artists transforming so-called "poor" materials. The last work to be mentioned, by

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, an Ivory Coast artist who died at the age of 91 in 2014, is *Des Hommes Admirant (L'Arc en Ciel)* (2007). Collected by Barry Malin, the work consists of colored pencil and ballpoint pen on cardstock. It is composed of seven male heads with sparse hair, each a different color, surrounding a bright yellow sun with a benign smile on its face.

Looking over the show, we can say that the taste of the dealers is more than catholic; the work is impossible to contain within a single categorization. The point, though, is that fine art occupies a much broader spectrum than what we see via approved channels. Interestingly, too, it is increasingly clear that the art in this show will be considered part of the spectrum of what we might call fine art—work no longer in need of a descriptive adjective that would limit it, separating its creativity from the mainstream. *An Alternative Canon* is well named, but it may be that the art shown here will be brought quickly into the fold, if not already contained within it. The lesson to be learned from a show like this is that the impulse to draw, paint, and make things dies hard among people who are not conventionally trained, just as much as people who are. Our inclusivity is thus made wider—a better way of negotiating the artistic impulse.

Jonathan Goodman is a poet and art writer who has covered New York art for three decades. He takes a special interest in sculpture and in new art from Asia.