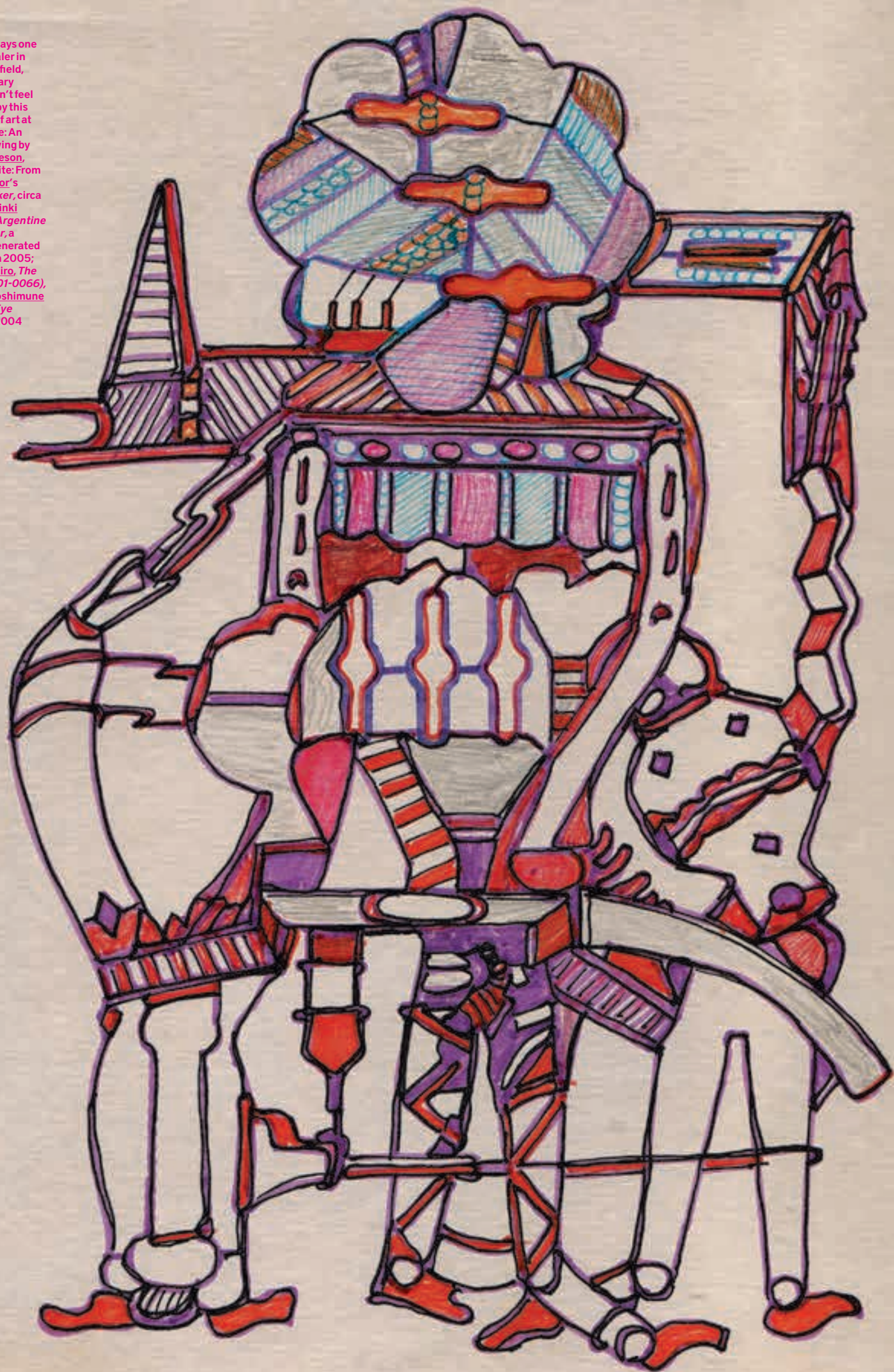
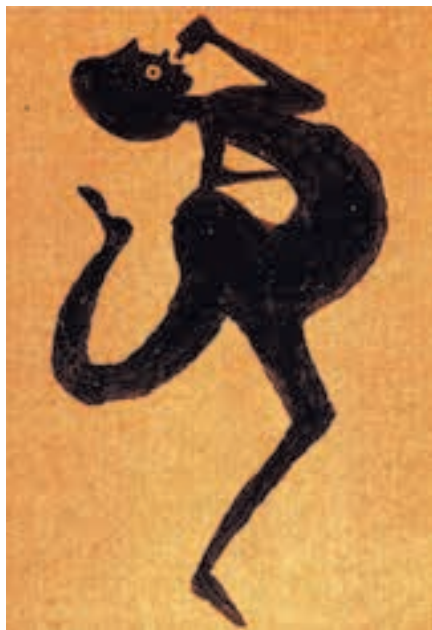


These days, says one longtime dealer in the Outsider field, "Contemporary collectors don't feel intimidated by this 'other' kind of art at all." This page: An untitled drawing by Thomas Burleson, 1988. Opposite: From top, Bill Traylor's *Female Drinker*, circa 1939–42; Shinki Tomoyuki's *Argentine Back Breaker*, a computer-generated drawing from 2005; Terao Katsuhiro, *The Third Floor* (01-0066), 2003; and Yoshimune Kazuhiro's, *Eye* (02-0099), 2004



from the outsider in



THE OUTSIDERS HAVE COME INSIDE—and there's no turning back. In the past several decades, the colorful Outsider art sector has developed a strong network of galleries, museums, specialized publications and annual fairs. Experts still quibble about what to call the unusual paintings, drawings, sculptures and assemblages that for many collectors represent a singular passion. The makers of this kind of art, without academic training and often operating in social isolation, have been dubbed "Outsider," "self-taught," "intuitive" or "visionary" artists, but these terms are neither completely accurate nor synonymous.

Whatever they are called, these artists and their deeply personal works, created primarily for themselves and positioned outside the commercial or cultural mainstream (before they are brought to market, that is, hence the term *outsider*), have never been more in demand. "This field shows no signs of slowing down—if anything, it has been expanding," says Sanford Smith, whose company organizes the Outsider Art Fair in New York, one of the biggest events in the field. (The 14th edition runs January 27 through 29). In Chicago, the three-year-old Intuit Show of Folk and Outsider Art, held each September, has quickly become second to the New York fair as a destination for self-taught art. That some European galleries participate in the New York fair is a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that the field often feels more dynamic in the U.S. than



Call it visionary or call it mad, work by self-taught artists is increasingly coveted by the contemporary world. With a bevy of major shows and rising prices, "Outsider art" is coming in from the cold
By Edward M. Gomez



outsider art

across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, Outsider art traces its historic roots to Europe, particularly Paris in the 1940s, when Jean Dubuffet began to promote what he called Art Brut (“raw art”), that is, work made by autodidacts.

But as affinities between the works of self-taught artists and those of their “professional” counterparts become better understood, separate



Clockwise from above: Yumoto Mitsuo, *Objects* (03-0046), 2004; Bill Traylor's *Fox and Man with Hatchet: An Exciting Event*, circa 1939-42, one of the highlights at Sotheby's Americana sale this month; Henry Darger's *At Cedernine and Phelantonberg*; Martin Thompson, *Untitled #1*, circa 2002-05. Opposite: Traylor's *Untitled (Fighting Couple)*, 1939-42

labels may become irrelevant. “This work has been crossing over into the realm of contemporary art, and the more it does, the more the prices go crazy,” says Smith.

“We brought the Cuban-born artist Felipe Jesús Consalvos’s work to Art Basel this past June, and it sold out,” recalls John Ollman, head of Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia, a leader for decades in the folk art and self-taught market. The gallery sells Consalvos’s works for between \$1,000 and as much as \$10,000 each.

Consalvos, who lived in Miami, Brooklyn and Philadelphia and died in the late 1960s, worked in cigar factories and used printed cigar bands, cigar-box wrappers and newspaper clippings to make collages and collage-covered objects—chairs, musical instruments, a typewriter, a wastebasket—that recall Dada and Surrealist works.

His imaginative creations were discovered at a yard sale in Philadelphia in the ’80s by a former museum curator, who bought them all and eventually consigned them to Fleisher/Ollman.

Considering the technical sophistication, fine condition and relative rarity of Consalvos’s works—some 650 pieces are known to exist—the curator’s unexpected find is the kind of discovery that many in the field dream of making.

“More collectors of contemporary art are coming to self-taught artists’ work and don’t feel intimidated by this ‘other’ kind of art at all,” says Randall Morris of Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York, another well-established venue in the field. Morris and co-founder Shari Cavin eschew what they consider the limiting, imprecise “Outsider” label. Instead they try to situate self-taught artists’ work in the broader context of art forms that emerge from indigenous sources. Their gallery also shows antique Japanese textiles, Mexican masks and Native American artifacts.

“A good example of someone whose work everyone seems to ‘get’ is the Czech artist Anna Zemánková,” Cavin says. Zemánková, a homemaker, started making delicately colored, pastel drawings of plantlike forms when she was in her 50s. Her prices range from the low four figures for smaller drawings to around \$10,000 for larger works. Like Zemánková, Mexican-born Martín Ramírez is known for works on paper marked by strong, graceful lines. A recognized self-taught master who spent years in psychiatric hospitals, Ramírez created pencil compositions on glued-together scraps of paper featuring the likes of horsemen in sombreros and statuesque deer.

His coveted works rarely come onto the market, but when they do, they can cost everywhere from \$35,000 to \$200,000, depending on their size,



condition and complexity.

Also at the high end of the Outsider market is Henry Darger, a Chicago recluse who is best known for *In the Realms of the Unreal*, his 15-volume, illustrated epic about legions of prepubescent warrior girls. Starting this year, the Darger estate will be represented exclusively by the Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York. “One of our major projects,” Edlin says, “will be the production of a Darger catalogue raisonné.” Darger’s larger mixed-media drawings, which are rarely available, can



sell for \$70,000 to \$130,000.

New York dealer Phyllis Kind, a pioneer in the field who first showed Ramírez’s work in the ’70s, says, “Whether it’s a contemporary or self-taught artist’s work, what I’m looking for is a developed, distinctive vocabulary of form, technical proficiency and a singular vision.” Lately Kind has found those attributes in the work of several Japanese artists from Osaka, including Terao Katsuhiro, Shinki Tomoyuki, Yoshimune Kazuhiro and Yumoto Mitsuo, all of whom she introduced at the previous Outsider Art Fair and is bringing back this year. Terao makes etchings and drawings (scratched out on crayon-coated paperboard) that resemble futuristic architectural plans. Yoshimune draws strings of numbers and ambiguous letter forms; Yumoto draws faces, birds and lopsided houses on colored paperboard; and Shinki uses a computer to create images of





wrestlers whose wild-colored hair and exaggerated limbs recall animated characters from the Beatles' 1968 movie *Yellow Submarine*. Of these artists, works range from \$250 for small prints to around \$5,000 for Katsuhiko's large paintings.

A major exhibition of drawings by self-taught artists is on view through March 19 at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) in New York. "Obsessive Drawing" features cloudlike agglomerations of tiny circles on rice paper by Hiroaki Doi, a Tokyo artist also introduced at Kind's gallery; detailed panoramas of a postapocalyptic world by British artist Chris Hipkiss; and works by Eugene Andolsek and Charles Benefiel, both from the U.S.; and Martin Thompson of New Zealand.

This and other high-profile presentations are giving an institutional imprimatur to self-taught art forms. An important Darger exhibition has been organized by AFAM, which, in addition to being a major venue for folk and self-taught art, also houses the world's largest public collection of Darger's drawings and related archival material. On view at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh from February 4 through April 19, it will then travel to the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. Last year a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Menil Collection in Houston paired works by African-American artists William Edmondson and Bill Traylor, now one of the best-known Outsider artists in the U.S. Likewise, through January 8, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is presenting a survey of works by Thornton Dial, a 77-year-old artist in rural Alabama who creates complex, abstract assemblages that take on such big themes as race, war and sex.

Of course, such shows can't hurt an artist's market. Sanford Smith recalls that some drawings by Traylor, who was born into slavery in 1854 and started drawing on found paper and cardboard at the age of 83, sold for around \$1,000 each in the early '80s. His works can now fetch more than \$100,000. Sotheby's upcoming Americana sale in New York on January 21 features one of Traylor's drawings, with an estimate of \$60,000 to \$100,000.

Greater public exposure is a positive thing for self-taught and Outsider art, says Stephanie Smither, an arts patron and collector in Houston. "Traylor and Edmondson at the Menil,

THIS PAGE: COURTESY HIROYUKI DOI AND PHYLLIS KIND GALLERY. OPPOSITE: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, AARON IGLER, COURTESY FLEISHER/OLLMAN GALLERY, PHILADELPHIA, © DOODLETOWN FARM; MARISA TORRES; COURTESY C. HELEN LOZOVY; AARON IGLER, COURTESY FLEISHER/OLLMAN GALLERY

and Dial's big retrospective—these are significant events in this field and also for this city,” she observes. Smither applauds the curators and museum directors who have recognized the power and uniqueness of these three largely unschooled, black Americans' varied bodies of work. She has assembled one of the most important collections of self-taught artists' works,



including pieces by Doi, Frank Jones, Adolf Wölfl and Carlo Zinelli.

Smither also praises the efforts of dealers like Kind, “who keep opening doors to other cultures and expanding the field.” At the same time, she says, “Lately I find myself looking to Europe, not only for classic Art Brut of decades ago but also for new discoveries.”

Similarly, Cavin and Morris note that the field—and the outlook of many of its key players—has become more open and international than ever. “Some people who collected only American self-taught artists' works are now turning toward Europe, and some Art Brut collectors are looking at a broader range of this kind of art,” Morris says.

One thing everyone likes, notes veteran New York dealer Luise Ross, is an exciting, substantial discovery. With this in mind, Ross is working with the estate of Thomas Burleson, an artist from Texas. Burleson, who died in 1997, never showed his art publicly during his lifetime. His dense, psychedelic, felt-tipped pen compositions incorporate geometric patterns and passages resembling mechanical plans and appear as

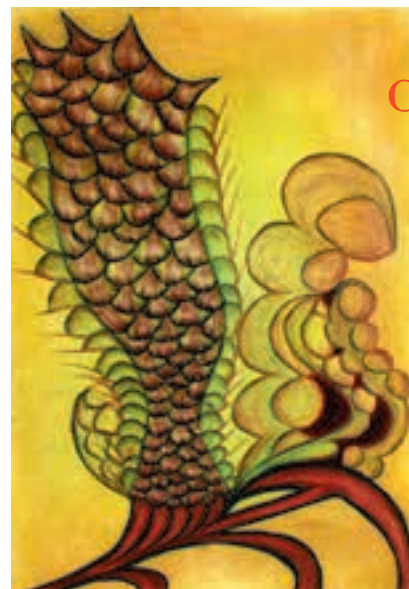
much of the moment as do some contemporary paintings and drawings. This pleases Ross, who says, “I like to mix things up. I show work by self-taught and trained artists side by side.”

In fact, says Lee Kogan, the director of AFAM's education program, the Folk Art Institute, “The more audiences look at and think about what's original and meaningful in art—any art—the more the border between ‘trained professional’ and ‘self-taught outsider’ seems to dissolve. Our ‘Obsessive Drawing’ exhibition is really a contemporary art show—it just happens to be by self-taught artists.”

Meanwhile, serious collectors in the field are focusing on works of the highest quality, and, as Ollman says, “the top end of the market is separating itself from the middle and bottom.” This does not mean that worthwhile, inexpensive pieces, ranging from under \$1,000 up to \$3,000, can no longer be found. But, says Morris, “it does mean that buyers have to be more discerning about quality, especially when it comes to what *looks* like a bargain.”

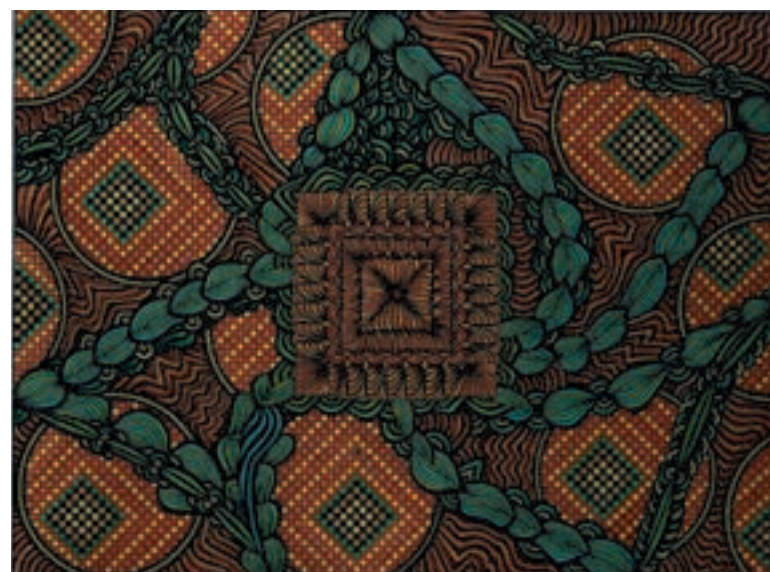
Dealer Frank Maresca, co-founder, with Roger Ricco, of Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York, states, “The best material is commanding the highest prices, and this trend will continue,” while works at the “quality end” of the lower-priced segment of the market remain strong. “Now material in the middle that doesn't fall into either category is going begging,” he adds, “and this is an interesting place to look. I'll often buy a good piece in that middle range, say, from \$3,000 to \$25,000, that others have mistakenly passed up or that isn't yet fully appreciated yet.”

Many collectors—including both bargain hunters and buyers on the lookout for specific pieces to round out their holdings—keep an eye on Steve and Amy Slotin's auctions of folk and self-



taught art, which take place several times a year in Buford, Georgia, and on the Internet. “Provenance is really big in this field,” says collector turned auctioneer Steve Slotin, “and increasingly, well-known collectors are selling with us, giving newcomers a chance to acquire works of recognized value.”

The Slotins have sold portions of several prestigious collections, including those of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., who co-founded the Museum of American Folk Art (now the American Museum of Folk Art) in 1961, and



Chuck and Jan Rosenak. When it comes to nuanced distinctions between the work of folk artists, self-taught artists or more strictly isolated-from-society outsiders, Slotin says. “There are so many more collectors today who are unbelievably knowledgeable. I can bring out the weirdest, most obscure item, and they'll know the artist and they'll know which gallery handled him back in the '40s or '50s. They'll know everything.”

Buoyed by that kind of market energy, at least at art fair time, many dealers may find that some of what they have to offer could almost sell itself. Still, Luise Ross is looking ahead optimistically to a day when awkward category labels may disappear entirely: “I think it should all just be seen as art.” ■

EDWARD M. GOMEZ, A CRITIC BASED IN NEW YORK, HAS WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY ABOUT OUTSIDER ART

Opposite: An untitled drawing by Hiroyuki Doi, 2002. **This page:** Clockwise from left, Felipe Jesús Consalvos, *Rude Stone Monuments*, circa 1920-50; Anna Zemánková, *Untitled (M)*, a pastel from the 1970s; Eugene Andolsek's *Untitled 13A*, 1950-2003; and Martin Ramírez, *Untitled (Super Chief)*, 1954