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The Periphererists

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The Periphererists, a group show curated by Jocko Weyland at Apex Art, is an ode to artists “away from the banal fuss of the validated...low-key and unsung.” The portmanteau “peripherer” is credited to the singer Tony Bennett, who, as related in the curator’s press release, once “pointed to a Kokoschka landscape in a book at Hacker’s on 57th Street and said he liked what Oskar did ‘along the peripherer.’” Its hybrid solecism is key to the high-low-brow curatorial concept of the show. But oddly minted words don’t necessarily make for new ideas; despite Weyland’s claims, “peripherer,” an amalgam of periphery and perimeter, is just another way to refer to outsider artists and their associated personae: social misfit, naïf, and savant.



Gerardo Castillo, “Untitled,” 2006.

Weyland’s press release, which decries a sold-out art world that “rarely has room” for artists like his lineup of benched players, is in essence a hymn to the outsider artist as social rebel. Meanwhile, the art on the walls—likable as much of it is—fails to discover that dangerous margin, the so-called peripherer.

Here we find a collection bound by personal taste alone; it is difficult to imagine a mode of expression that would possess the tough, confrontational mettle of something truly from the margins, bred in defiance of all norms and precedents, which hasn’t already been proclaimed as art.

Alfredo Martinez’s rendering of a machine gun in marker on paper patched up with tape (“HK MP5K”) comes closest in style to the graphic brutality one would typically ascribe to the renegade outsider. “Boo, Fuckface!” by Randy Turner plays on the idea of social outcast, but humorously, with a drawing of a Goth, Marilyn Manson-like face peering from behind a colorfully painted window pane with attached flowerbox. Mark Hubbard’s curvilinear drawing of a skateboarder village is a carefully detailed teenage utopia. Gerardo Castillo’s stylized imagery derives from the realm of tattoo illustration. These are outsider images in the most generic sense of the word—belonging to well-recognized urban art traditions that carry on very well without needing the “fine” in front of them. Weyland’s store of images here conforms to the expectation of outsider art as banished from the cold precincts of museums and high-end galleries—a dated and imprecise polarity given New York City’s incestuously mixed visual culture.

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Maybe outsidership is about sex—breaking down any vestigial prudishness. Stu Mead’s “It Only Takes Two To Tango” combines a palette of green, orange, and yellow in a retro illustrational style to depict a couple’s erotic romp in what could be an art museum with tickling lewdness. Or maybe it’s the OCD quality of the images, an uncomfortable intensity beyond schooled polish. Yet James Niehues’s gloriously detailed scene of snow-covered Colorado peaks— influenced as much by airbrush illustration techniques as classical landscape—seems to result from patience and pleasure rather than deep obsession. Similarly, Gary Kachadourian’s “Motor,” rendered in ballpoint pen, evinces technical concentration, but also a fondness for mechanical systems that is more agreeable than off-putting.

With the word peripheter, Weyland is attempting to carve out a subaltern category of outsider while claiming that his artists “elude the normal definition of the term. That is, people that didn’t study, or have been committed, or are ‘primitives.’” The artists in his collection are “amateurs in the exalted sense of the word, though several do make a living from it...and it can be argued that they reach a wider audience than many ballyhooed operators with mid-career vanity museum surveys.” As Weyland’s premise would present it, the peripheter is a narrowly restricted space populated by the dilettante, the mannerist, and the purveyor of kitsch whose artistic vitality stems from an asocial purity, yet who paradoxically achieves some fame among their own circles. In other words, it is the stereotypical alternative, a gilded art world dressed as shabby chic.

This position offers little clarity, and the question remains: can something as slippery as outsider art, for which the goal posts seem in constant movement, be circumscribed to a hazy notion of unstudied authenticity?

What is “outsider” to our current gallery system?

And once such work is shown in a gallery, even one as adventurously programmed as Apex Art, can it be said to exist at the peripheter? Are these “prodigiously gifted” artists destined to permanent exile from the institutional circuit, and should this exclusion be celebrated as the true source of their legitimacy? I would believe that most of them would welcome a museum show if given the opportunity.

If artwork from the fringe is merely more amateurish than that at the center—rather than more interesting or outright better—then the narrative of the excluded social rebel, the source of outsider appeal, fails to ignite. To look at the work of one of the more recently inducted outsiders, Henry Darger—a quiet janitor whose handwritten tomes about the fictitious Glandeco- Angelinian wars included lush fold-outs with at times disquieting fantasies about young girls—is to encounter a more visually arresting, consummate, and socially borderline form of art than anything on display in *The Peripheterists*.

Mainstream encroachment on the alt-sensibility is a sad fact, but I would venture there are less stylistically familiar trapdoors to the underground. More likely, the issue is one of context and timing. As the major institutions unearth bygone obscurities, we can wager that in due course everything from the underground, at the periphery and in between, will find prime exposure—if it hasn’t already yesterday.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/07/artseen/the-peripheterists>