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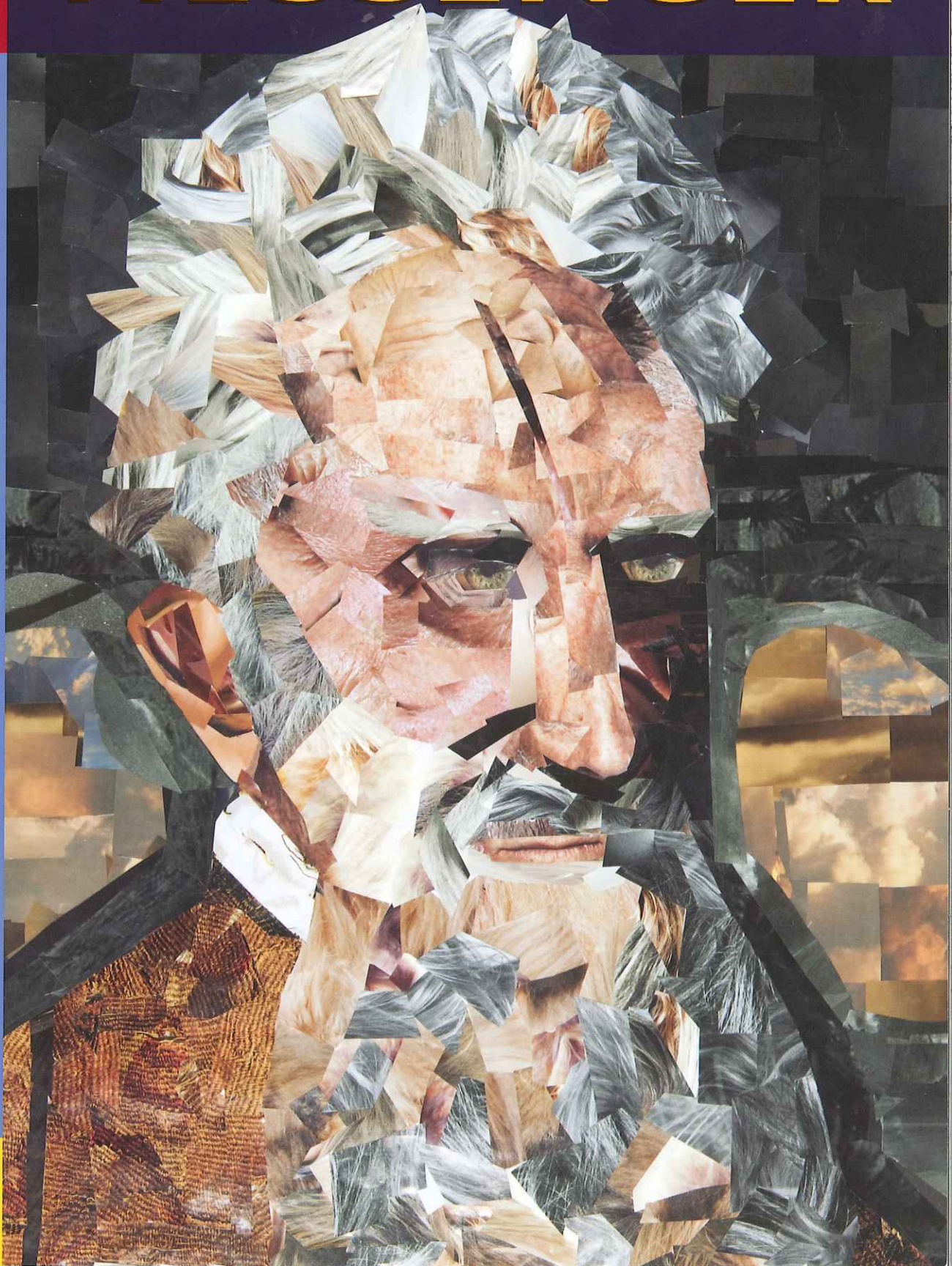
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# Outsider Art in the Hamptons



Old Grand Glory by AB the Flagman.

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN

**A** visitor to the exhibition, *The 5th Annual Outsider Art in the Hamptons: Visionary, Art Singulier and Self-Taught Artists*, shifted his gaze from the rainbow-hued, pristine cityscapes of autistic artist Jessica Park of Williamstown, Mass., to the whimsical sculptures by Rondi Casey, an education instructor at Adelphi University, and asked, “What exactly is an outsider artist?”

The exhibition at Galerie BelAge in Westhampton Beach, Long Island, N. Y., on view May 29–September 6, 2010, brought together more than 80 artists from France, Russia, the Netherlands, Austria, England, China and the United States, with a concentration of artists from the Long Island area. In addition to mainstream artists, artists were chosen from three organizations known for their work with the disadvantaged: Pure Vision Arts of New York City, which provides studio and exhibition space for artists with autism and other developmental challenges; Fountain Gallery, also of New York City, which represents trained and self-taught artists with mental illness; and Survivors Art Foundation, which works with trauma survivors and which advocates healing through the arts.

“Deciding [what outsider art is] has been a process for me,” says self-taught artist and exhibition curator Candyce Brokaw, the founder of Survivors Art Foundation (SAF). This yearly event is

her brainchild; educating the public, her mission. “I want people to understand and respect the many sub-genres of this growing outsider art phenomenon—visionary art, Art Singulier and folk art—to name a few.” She says she finds that despite the celebrated niches these genres occupy today, outsider artists are more generally kept at arm’s length by the larger fine art world. Brokaw’s idea behind this exhibition was to exhibit a mixture of artists and art forms in order to show their similarities as well as their innate commonalities.

This mind set has continued, despite the fact that today’s self-taught “outsiders” create their art from the same authentic and spontaneous wellspring

that Picasso, Jean Dubuffet and Paul Klee tapped to brew the DNA for 20th-century modernism. After these masters grasped the intuitive power of non-western and non-traditional forms (including African art, children’s art and art by the mentally ill) art textbooks, art schools, museums and tony galleries sopped it up, appropriated it, even made fortunes with it.

To be sure, the landscape has changed. Today, artists with disabilities are mainstreamed through social and educational channels, and many artists living conventional, unassisted lives are discovering their intuitively creative selves. To refute the myth that today’s outsider artists teeter on some fragile edge, Brokaw and co-curator Robert Deets, Galerie BelAge managing director, chose for this exhibition artists with lifestyles as diverse as their eclectic art styles. They include well-known names—Gerard Sendrey from Bégles, France; Danielle Jacqui from Pont de l’Etoile, France; the late Miami artist, Purvis Young—and others newly discovered, such as AB the Flagman (Roger Lee Ivens of Atlanta, Ga.). Some found their creative selves as youngsters, others later in life. Some live in pick-up trucks, others in suburban homes with nice lawns. “There is no one specific vision,” says Deets. “We look for intuitive art that expresses the inner soul without drawing



Co-curators Candyce Brokaw and Robert Deets.



Ronnie Wiener with her work **A Room of One's Own**

inspiration from past art history styles.”

Do outsider artists agree with this assessment? Many of the participants in this exhibition showed up for the gala opening celebration at Gallerie BelAge on June 19th. The crowd spilled from the ample sun-washed rooms of the converted mansion onto the sidewalks of this balmy seaside village. Here was a rare opportunity to ask the artists what they thought.

Long Island artist **Ronnie Wiener** built an installation, *A Room of One's Own*, on the lawn outside the gallery, and it welcomed viewers to the exhibit. It is one of several sanctuaries she began to build while her husband of 30 years

vines meander through these wooden fretworks, and pink geraniums in sturdy window boxes nod to a life-affirming sun.

“We take risks when we make or look at art because it forces us to confront intense memories,” says Wiener. Her sanctuaries assuage loss and celebrate life. Architectural elements recall centuries of material worlds—stained glass, the spiritual essence we leave in our wake and vegetation, the joy of renewal and hope. “They are how I survived,” says Wiener. “They spring from impassioned experience, not historical reference. I’m untutored, I have no mentor.” I’m not driven by these things.”

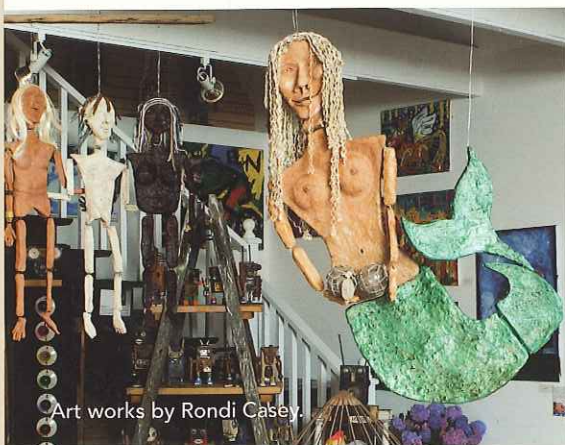
Swiss-born **Garance** was an actress before she turned to art. Now living on Long Island, the award-winning stage-set and costume designer exhibits her works in museums and galleries throughout the United States and Europe. Her large portraits, based on quick impressions of people she’s seen on the street, are rendered in rich layers of exuberant color. “I paint from memory,” she says of these likenesses that for all their whimsy betray an underlying angst. (Garance’s only son died at age 20.) But her objective is to see people “smile when they see my art; have it and be happy.” And on being an outsider artist? “As long as that means I do not follow what is fashionable, that is fine. I paint from the heart so people feel it in their bellies, and laugh.”

Self-taught artist **Rondi Casey**, also of Long Island, is driven by vivid memories, no less deeply felt, but rooted in cultural realities very different from her middle-

class New York upbringing. The child who spent summers with grandparents in Norway, playing not far from the remnants of a WW II Nazi camp, grew up to win a fellowship that in 1994 took her to study in Israel. There she reports meeting “inspiring women among the Bedouins, Ethiopians, Israelis and Arabs.” Later, visions of oppression, faith and identity swirled through her imagination—chadors, veils, saffron and crimson Armenian costumes, ancient relics and lyrical notations of exotic calligraphy. These things inspired her marionette-like sculptures, such as *Three Graces*, made of *papier maché* and clay. Breaking ranks with their sister goddesses of ancient Greek myth, Casey renders

her figures with distinctly different body types and skin tones that speak to the shared experiences of all women.

Some artists in this exhibition explain their obsession for making art as just that—obsession. “I’m like a kid playing with toys,” admits Malverne, N. Y. artist **Giovanni Gelardi**, who works in his family’s butcher and deli shop. “There is no such thing as an outsider artist,” he insists, “because you learn from everyone you meet and everything you do.” Gelardi’s intricate boxes, jam packed with found



Art works by Rondi Casey.

was dying. This pristine white structure, constructed from 19th-century windows with mottled glass panes, trellises, a distressed-wood door and picket fencing, provides a solid frame for dazzling stained glass threaded on wire and set within window-like openings. Vegetable



Garance with her work **Homage aux Jeunes**.

objects, toys, store-bought knick-knacks and photographs, recall Joseph Cornell, whom he claims as a mentor, along with Leonardo da Vinci and Vincent van Gogh. Each engaging construction tells a story that is as much informed by insight as it is by the artist's intuitive sense of visual composition. He pays homage to his hero Cornell and centuries of exploration with his *Cosmic Arcade*, a concoction of suspended constellation medallions, an astronaut suspended in space, a fallen apple symbolizing Isaac Newton and miniatures of Old-World ships zigging and zagging across the construction's surface.

**John van Orsouw**, originally from the Netherlands, spent many years in the American South. His riotous canvases, in screeching reds, yellows and oranges resonate jazz and conjure the taste of thick gumbo. Like Gelardi, van Orsouw always made art—he doodled as a kid, then painted as an adult when not attending to his restaurant business. "I never have set ideas," he explains. "I just put color down and see what happens. I want people to enjoy it and have pleasure. I have no choice. I'm always doing it."

**Stephen Mulhauser**, a young deaf man, takes classes at Pure Vision Arts—where materials, not instruction, are supplied. He smiles broadly when viewers praise his *Plane Rescue*, a multi-media work portraying the miracle of a jet plane landing on the Hudson River in January 2009. Signing, with his mother as interpreter, he



A painting by John van Orsouw.

expresses his thrill at seeing his art alongside that of so many other talented artists.

June Koslov oversees the oeuvre of **Dick Lubinsky**, her late schizophrenic uncle. She credits Fountain Gallery for making known the works of this gifted artist. And SAF has helped artist-member Alison Silva, from Queens, who struggles with a brain tumor, network her now signature style.

Through the leadership of those like Brokaw, Pam Rogers (Director, Pure Vision Arts) and Jason Bowman (director, Fountain Gallery), perceptions of Outsider Art are changing. Brokaw, who for years sought to "break the walls of bias," succeeds with Deets in doing so in this fifth exhibition at Galerie BelAge. She explains, "It is not about disability. It's about the phenomenon of intuitive art that is made by essentially self-taught artists. It comes with knowing what John van Orsouw inherently knows to do in his painting, *Gumbo Son*,—to counterbalance a single large figure in blue against a crowded field of yellow and orange figures and signs. That sensibility

has only to do with making art. It has nothing to do with disabilities or lifestyles."

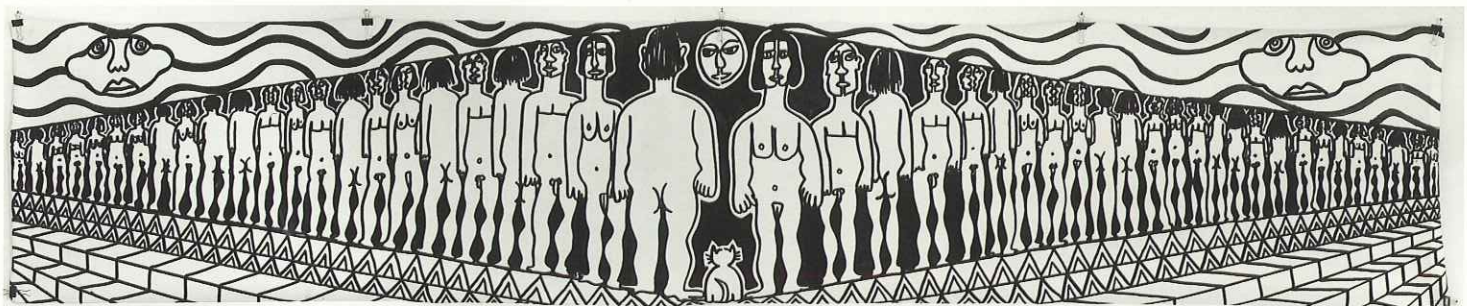
The artists interviewed for this article echoed Brokaw's thoughts. They uniformly described themselves as spontaneous in what they do and inwardly driven to create art. For many of them, commercial success is a welcome perk. And, reports Deets, savvy art collectors are expanding their collections to include Outsider Art genres, purchasing a broad range of art styles by both known and emerging artists.

Deets cites a woman from East Hampton with a collection of paintings by Renoir and Matisse who buys Mark May's multi-media robot constructions. He mentions an affluent collector with a chain of funeral homes selecting Garance's whimsical heads for his Westhampton digs. He tells of a famous film producer choosing Jim Bloom's moody, alienated characters and a delightful couple in their 80s who just "had to have" a painting by Alison Silva. "Every day, people just fall in love," Deets says. ❏

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Stephen Mulhauser with his work *Plane Rescue*.



Untitled by Gerard Sendrey.