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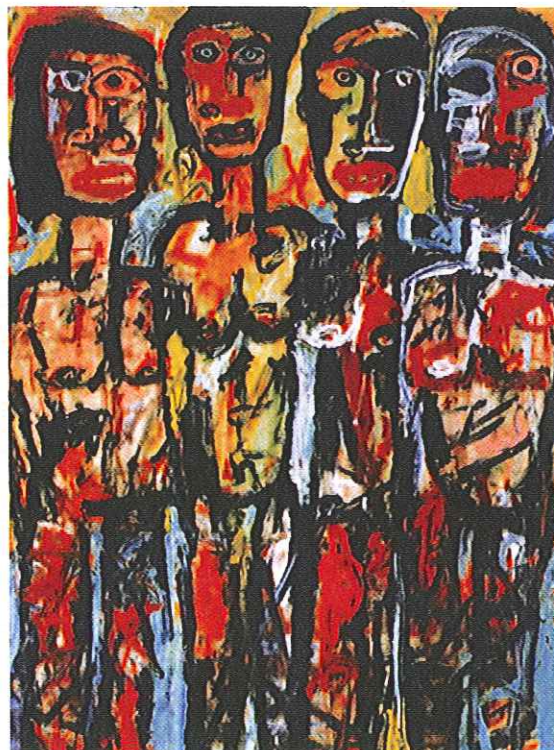
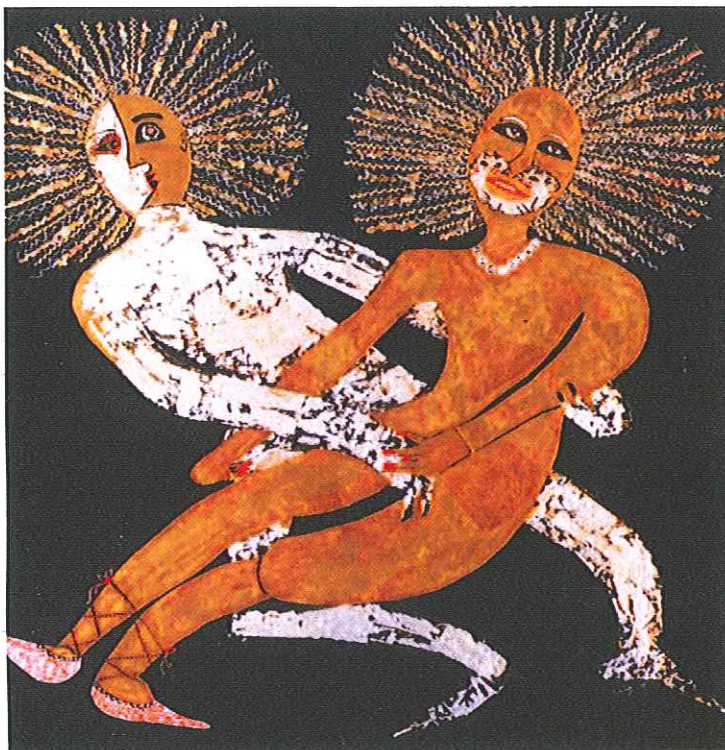
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OUTSIDER ART • ART BRUT • CONTEMPORARY FOLK ART

SURVIVORS

Joyce Beckinstein examines the impact of New York's art therapy and outreach organisations



Today's self-taught artists belong to an extended family that includes the physically disabled, the abused, the impoverished, the unconventional and those, like Candyce Brokaw, living outwardly conventional lives that belie their post traumatic stress disorder. Brokaw, 55, spans the spectrum of this contemporary genre: a survivor of incest and rape, she is a visionary artist and founder of Survivors Art Foundation (SAF). Her recent collaborations with Pure Vision Arts and Fountain Gallery, in New York, champion the works of talented visual artists.

Organisations such as Hospital Audiences, Inc. (HAI) in New York City, began an art therapy programme in 1969 and now provide community facilities for people with mental disabilities, including schools, homeless shelters and substance abuse centers, offering them interactive workshops in music, performance, media and visual arts. Many of their artists have become well known, including Ray Hamilton and Melvin 'Milky' Way.

These artists comprise a diverse population and are now referred to as visionary, marginal, naïve or folk artists, to name a few current identities. Blurred as these lines may seem, this expansive genre is essentially composed of self-taught artists whose remarkable instinct for what colour can do for a line involves little pre-planning. What they put down stays down. Their art is driven by inner necessity, something people like Candyce Brokaw are compelled to do.

At 38, Brokaw, a chronically depressed mother of three, broke down, retreated to her bedroom and began to obsessively draw; a menagerie of pigs, birds and snakes scratched in pencil, bodies spewing other bodies bled straight from tubes. 'My art came from within,' she says, 'I couldn't stop.'

She never expected to be a fine artist. 'My monsters still lurk, but my art helps keep them at bay,' says Brokaw. Art heals, but for Brokaw healing is an ongoing process and she founded Survivors Art Foundation in 1997 'to connect others in similar, silent worlds and give them a voice'. The umbrella organisation was open to all artists suffering from physical or mental trauma. Word of this international lifeline flashed through cyberspace, with thousands of

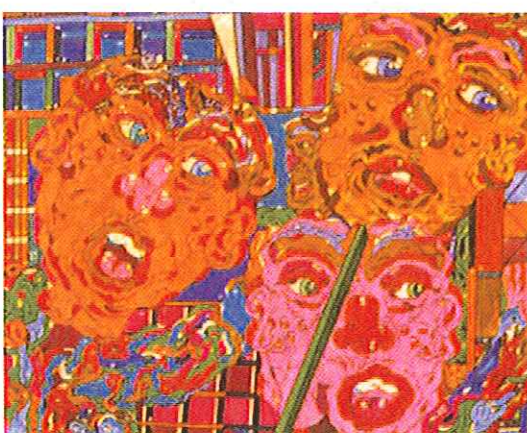
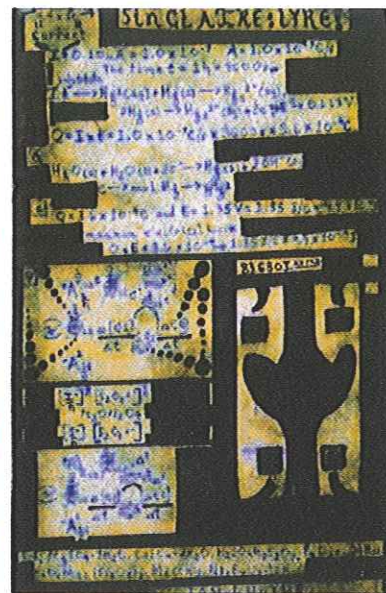
people – from Iraq to Indiana – accessing the site. By 2000, SAF's web gallery was part the Computerworld Smithsonian Collection on Information Technology.

Brokaw met many self-taught artists through SAF, like Ross Brodar and Alison Silva. Brodar, 38, began painting as a teen in a correctional program. Uninvited to the Annual Outsider Art Fair in SoHo, New York, he hung his paintings inside a rented mover's van and parked it curbside at the auspicious Puck Building fair site. Passers-by, invited into this make-shift gallery, purchased his art – outside the indoor outsider event.

His pun-besotted notoriety got a boost in 2008 when *The Wall Street Journal* covered his entrepreneurial resolve. He became an overnight investment and sold out his signature works: raucous figures rendered in bold outline that, he says 'reflect the thousands of people in my Brooklyn neighbourhood.' Brodar no longer needs the truck; his work sells inside the fair. 'My art didn't change; the perception did,' he says with deadpan humour. 'The story sells, the art keeps me sane.'

Alison Silva's art is neurologically connected to her story. Her simple figurative paintings became extraordinarily complex after she developed a potentially life-threatening brain lesion. Matt Sesow lost his left hand to a plane propeller at the age of eight. He turned to art at the age of 27 while working professionally as a computer programmer and quickly benefited from the healing effects of creating art, and now lives entirely off the sales of his paintings.

Such stories often sell art when art is the story. 'It's a problem,' says New York gallerist Phil Demise Smith, 'especially when artist's lives are so fascinating.' Art was therefore the determined focus for a series of Long Island-based collaborative events: the Annual Outsider Art in the Hamptons exhibitions (2006–2009) at Galerie BelAge in Westhampton Beach, NY, (curated by Brokaw and gallery director Robert Deets), and *Nothing is Black+White* (2008) at Art Sites (curated by Brokaw and gallery director Glynis Berry). The latter show won New York Times praise as '...impressive in its range, startling in its beauty'.



clockwise from top left
Matt Sesow, *Mousse*.

Alison Silva, *Milk Virgin*.

Melvin 'Milky Way', *Sinclair Liar*.

Dick Lubinsky, *Creepy People*.

Bary Khan, *Pure Vision*.

opposite left
Candyce Brokow, *Pig Girl*.

opposite right
Ross Brodar, *Summer With the Artists*.

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Collaborations were the linchpins of these successful but rare pairings of private art venues with not-for-profit organisations. Artists were culled from several advocacy groups: SAF; Pure Vision Arts, representing those with developmental disabilities; and Fountain Gallery, promoting artists with mental illness. Smith, who works with Galerie Atelier Herenplaats and Galerie Olof, both outsider advocacy galleries in the Netherlands, brought to these local exhibitions a contingent of international artists, including Dutch artists, Jaco Kranendonk and Marc De Bruijn, and Gerard Sendrey, founder of the Musee de la Creation Franche.

The art dazzled. But just as compelling was the display of advocacy organisations and the vital roles they play in the lives of their targeted populations. They clearly encourage their members to reach beyond their disabilities and develop their abilities, stretch beyond their dreams and make them realities.

These were Pamala Rogers' goals when she started Pure Vision Arts in 2002, the first New York City exhibition space for artists with developmental disabilities. It is an extension of the Shield Institute, founded in 1921 to serve children and adults with mental retardation, autism, Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy. Pure Vision Arts provides materials, studio and exhibition space, and interaction – but not instruction or art therapy. 'We celebrate the neuro-diversity of our members,' explains Rogers; 'the variations of normal neurological circuitry that is an intrinsic part of their shared culture.' She describes this culture as a 'Savant Garde' whose ranks, many believe, include Michelangelo, Mozart, Einstein and Warhol.

A visit to this vibrant Chelsea space dispels the stereotype of outsider style as uniformly raw, impetuous, or gushed from tubes with spontaneous abandon. Jessica Parks, whose works are widely collected, follows a meticulous process, executing her architectural paintings with an engraver's patient detail, creating colourful compositions sparkling with humorous gargoyles and astral references. Susan Brown's looser style alternates between vibrant cityscapes, crammed with herds of yellow taxis, and syncopated colour grids containing portraits of her mother. Works by Pure Vision artists

are included in major collections, including those of Nancy Reagan, Eunice Shriver and Dr Oliver Sacks, the well known neurologist and author.

Jason Bowman is the director of Fountain Gallery, an extension of Fountain House, organised 60 years ago by patients of Rockland Psychiatric Hospital to advocate for the mentally ill. Located in the Hell's Kitchen district near Times Square, it looks like any other gallery. Locals and tourists wander in for art's sake and buy art they like at affordable prices.

'Most of our members are self-taught, some have training,' says Bowman. 'It makes no difference: they would create art no matter what. The gallery provides focus and allows them to say, 'I am an artist, I show my work'. Artists also learn about and participate in the art business, working hourly gallery shifts and attending weekly planning sessions.

A prestigious roster of curators, including Agnes Gund, former president of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, helps organize exhibitions that include works by Dick Lubinsky, a former member of Fountain House. No one knew he was a prolific painter until his death in 2001 when his niece, June Kosloff, discovered nearly 2000 works in his cramped apartment. Fountain Gallery did a retrospective of his work in 2006, and his art is included in *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*, curated by Roger Manley, at the American Visionary Art Museum, (October 2009 – September 2010).

These non-competing organisations share a mission and seek broad representation for their artists. Government and corporate funding, grants, endowments and armies of volunteers allow them to interact in behalf of their members, and bring them to the attention of museums, private galleries, corporations, dealers and private collectors.

What started as a ripple at the local level – one or two people who wanted to make a difference – grew into a tsunami, strengthening communities of disabled artists worldwide. 'It's something you experience when you're surrounded by the artists and their art,' says Bowman. 'You feel the energy.'