

Exhibition: *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*

On View: November 18, 2018–March 17, 2019

Location: BCAM, Level 2



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(Los Angeles—October 11, 2018) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is pleased to host the West Coast presentation of *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, the first major exhibition to explore key moments in American art history when avant-garde artists and outliers intersected, and how their exchanges ushered in new paradigms based on inclusion, integration, and assimilation. Featuring over 250 works in a range of media, the show will present works by more than 80 self-taught and trained artists such as Henry Darger, William Edmondson, Lonnie Holley, Greer Lankton, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Matt Mullican, Horace Pippin, Martín Ramírez, Betye Saar, Judith Scott, Charles Sheeler, Cindy Sherman, Bill Traylor, and Kara Walker.

Outliers and American Vanguard Art is curated by Lynne Cooke and organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, where it was on view January 28–May 13, 2018. The show then traveled to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, where it was on view June 24–September 30, 2018. The presentation at LACMA is coordinated by Rita Gonzalez, curator and acting department head of Contemporary Art.

“LACMA has a longstanding relationship with the content presented in *Outliers*,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “*Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, presented at LACMA in 1992, signaled the breakdown of a model based on center and periphery relations; and the museum has been bringing vernacular photography, folk art, and art by the self-taught into the collection. We are now pleased to host *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, further exploring often overlooked histories and artists.”

“*Outliers* offers a profoundly different way of assessing how modernism unfolded both in official enclaves, like the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, but and in peer-to-peer, artist-driven networks,” Rita Gonzalez added. “Rather than leading with pathologizing and romanticizing narratives of the ‘outsider,’ this exhibition foregrounds the historical importance of artists who have been marginalized by categories and hierarchies mostly connected to academic training and museum support.”

About the Exhibition

Outliers and American Vanguard Art is organized across three periods: mid-1920s to early 1940s; late 1960s to early 1990s; and mid-1990s to the present. These were moments marked by social, political, and cultural upheaval when values were brought into question. It was during these periods that the boundaries between self-taught, marginalized artists and the avant-garde became porous, and interchange generated receptivity from the center towards the periphery. New kinds of art making were welcomed and considered on an even playing field and artists who came from the margins gained a measure of agency that they would not have previously had.

The first section of *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* centers largely on the years 1924–43, particularly the aftermath of the Great Depression. Starting around the end of World War I, American artists turned to the country’s historic folk art for inspiration. This was consistent with the era’s broader interest in cultural forms of expression that, at the time, were thought to be “primitive” modes, including folk, naïve, tribal, and children’s art. Beginning in the early 1930s, Alfred Barr, the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, campaigned to establish what he called the “modern primitive,” which implied artists working in a self-taught context. Taking an international perspective, Barr juxtaposed European and American artists in his landmark *Masters of Popular Painting* exhibition in 1938. The exhibition featured Henri Rousseau, the French artist who turned to painting full-time after retiring from his post as a municipal inspector. Furthermore, in 1941, Barr installed a suite of galleries mapping his vision of the history of modernism, dedicating the first room to self-taught artists.

In the mid-1930s, as the Depression deepened, the government generated New Deal programs to support artists, including those with little or no formal training, such as Patrociño Barela, whose sculptures are on view in this section. The widespread disruptions of the 1930s challenged modernism’s segregation of the artistic mainstream from its margins. As a result, a number of self-taught artists gained

unprecedented recognition from critics, commercial galleries, and art institutions alike.

The next section of the exhibition focuses on the years 1968–92 and examines the effects of the civil rights, feminist, gay liberation, and countercultural movements of the postwar era that critiqued establishment values and traditions and ushered in a more accepting and pluralist environment. In the 1960s and 1970s, the prominence of alternative lifestyles and back-to-the-land communes led to a new interest in environmental works. In this section, a slideshow highlights six visionary environments created by S. P. Dinsmoor, Howard Finster, James Hampton, Jesse Howard, Simon Rodia, and Clarence Schmidt. Built between 1921 and 1955, Rodia's Watts Towers is the world's largest single construction created by an individual and remains a cultural and community icon of Los Angeles. This section also includes work by Betye Saar, Noah Purifoy, and John Outterbridge who, in the wake of the 1965 Watts Rebellion, were among the first group of Southern California artists to use so-called black collectibles to challenge stereotypes of race and gender in their work.

As photography, performance, and text-based work gained prominence in the 1970s, there was a heightened interest in creators who also worked with these forms of art outside the mainstream. Assembled in this section are works by a range of photographers including Lee Godie, Zoe Leonard, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, and Eugene von Bruenchenhein who explored the tension between notions of truth and artifice and the function of masquerade. These and the other artists in this section share an awareness of the restrictive values underpinning the conventional roles assigned to women, as well as of the risks and rewards that can arise from contesting their norms.

By the early 1980s, a more complex understanding of artistic production in the American South was fueled by the establishment of what sociologist Julia Ardery calls the "folk art field," as well as the development of scholarship and collections devoted to self-taught artists. Distanced not only from the New York art world but also from major urban cultural centers, Southern artists were embraced as exemplars of regional artistic traditions, as with Appalachian whittler Edgar Tolson, or for their visionary evangelism, as with Georgia's Reverend Howard Finster. Some 20 African American artists with no formal academic training were brought to national attention in the groundbreaking 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, which was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (and traveled to Los Angeles in 1983). Many of these artists including Steve Ashby, David Butler,

Sam Doyle, and James “Son Ford” Thomas were self-taught and living in small rural communities, yet produced work the curators acknowledged as contemporary and first-rate.

The third and final section of the exhibition explores the years c. 1998–2013 which witnessed another sweeping revision of the evolving relationship between self-taught and vanguard American artists. By this time, a new paradigm had emerged that positioned artists, whether trained or untrained, on an even playing field without distinction or hierarchy. Quilting and textiles, which had traditionally been considered craft art as opposed to fine art, started to be exhibited by some curators in the late 1960s to demonstrate that their colorful patterns and grid structures were an unacknowledged forerunner to the geometric abstract painting that dominated American art at that time. Several decades later, a 2002 touring exhibition, *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*, featured works created by a close-knit community of African American women living in rural Alabama, including Mary Lee Bendolph and Annie Mae Young. This section places works made by the Gee Bend quilters in conversation with fabric works by Rosie Lee Tompkins and several New York-based abstract painters including Howardena Pindell and Alan Shields. Similarly, the placement of sculptures by Judith Scott alongside those by Nancy Shaver and Jessica Stockholder spotlight critical assumptions and museum practices regarding “women’s work” and domestic space. Through these dialogues, as in so many throughout *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, questions of gender, vernacular traditions, craft, and representation challenge both our normative institutional practices as well as the broader canon of cultural expression.

Exhibition Catalogue

Outliers and American Vanguard Art

Hardcover \$65 | Member Price: \$58.50

Softcover \$39.95 | Member Price: \$35.96

412 pages, 450 color illustrations, 2018

SKU: 36491

Available in-store or online at www.thelacmastore.com.

Related Programming

Lynne Cooke and Stephen Prina in Conversation: *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*

Sunday, November 18 | 1 pm

Bing Theater | Free and open to the public

On the opening day of *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, curator Lynne Cooke and artist Stephen Prina will engage in a wide-ranging conversation about issues raised by the exhibition, notably the question of inclusion in museums and cultural institutions today as well as in the past; and a resurgent reconsideration of American modernism through different regional vantage points (mid-west, west coast and the south). Exploring the disenfranchisement of a range of creators across the last century of American modernism, not only due to lack of formal academic training but on account of class, race, ethnicity, gender and disability, they will consider the role of vanguard and mainstream artists as advocates for their peers considered self-taught or amateur.

Visit lacma.org for the latest on exhibition-related programming.

Credit: This exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, mirroring Los Angeles's rich cultural heritage and uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of over 139,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of art history from new and unexpected points of view. A museum of international stature as well as a vital cultural center for Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collection with the Greater Los Angeles County and beyond through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over 1.5 million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions more through community partnerships, school outreach programs, and creative digital initiatives. LACMA's main campus is located halfway between the ocean and downtown, adjacent to the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the future home of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Dedicated to serving all of Los Angeles, LACMA collaborates with a range of curators, educators, and artists on exhibitions and programs at various sites throughout the County.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions

(Left) John Kane, *Self-Portrait*, 1929, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund, 1939, digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY; (Center) Barbara Rossi, *Rose Rock*, 1972, courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, © Barbara Rossi; (Right) Rosie Lee Tompkins, *Untitled*, 1996, (quilted by Irene Bankhead in 1996), Eli Leon Trust, photo by Sharon Risedorph

Press Contact

Erin Yokomizo | Senior Associate, Communications | eyokomizo@lacma.org | 323 932-5825

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