

ARTFORUM

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Band of Outsiders

By Alex Jovanovich



Left: Gina Gershon and Serge Becker at the opening of “Known Unknown” at the Museum of Sex. (Photo: Kelsey Stanton/BFA.com) Right: Museum of Sex curators Frank Maresca and Lissa Rivera. (Photo: Kelsey Stanton/BFA.com)

DESPERATE TO LOCATE SOME SHRED OF LIGHT, grace, or decency at the beginning of our New Dark Age, I lumbered downtown to see the Outsider Art Fair the Saturday before last—as my blessed sisters were marching, raging—held at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Chelsea. I was in dire need of tempering my apoplectic bloody-mindedness. (When I saw our new chef à l’orange being sworn in with the Lincoln Bible—the same bible Barack Obama used for his 2009 and 2013 inaugurations—I wanted it to explode into flames.)

When I got there I had the good fortune of meeting and talking to the delightful Jackie Klempay—proprietress of the former Jackie Klempay Gallery in Brooklyn, now Situations in Chinatown, which she runs with artist Mariah Robertson—about her display of works from Joyce Frizell (expressionistic owl drawings), Raynes E. Birbeck (sexy figurative drawings paired with boat and submarine sculptures made from paper, electrical tape, and toothpicks, among other media), and Jerry Torre, also more famously known as Jerry the Marble Faun, from Albert and David Maysles 1975 documentary, *Grey Gardens*.

Klempay gave JTMF his first solo exhibition at her Brooklyn space in 2014. “He’s had an extraordinary life,” she said—no kidding. According to a 2015 interview she did with the artist, he was an assistant to 1970s cabaret star and frequent Hollywood Squares guest Wayland Flowers, who was known for his performances with his Mame-like dowager puppet, Madame; worked for Saudi Arabia’s royal family and J. Paul Getty as a gardener; survived horrific bouts of drug addiction and pennilessness; and won the title of “Mister Baths”—with a \$5,000 cash prize—at Manhattan’s gay Club Baths sometime during the late

'70s. Three of his carved stone sculptures were on view—an older work done à la Brancusi in Carrara marble, and two others, like Celtic grave markers, stained by moss and pigment, in limestone. You wonder what our country's right-wing regime, mostly white and exceedingly well-off, would think of the artists featured at the fair. How would they look at or value these eccentric objects, often made from castoff materials, i.e. garbage, by Black people, Latinos, Native Americans, queers, the poor, the HIV+, the homeless, the mentally ill, the physically disabled, and criminals (not the white-collar kind)—aka, some of society's most vulnerable people?

Kent Fine Art used their booth to honor visionary artist Paul Laffoley. The Harvard- and Brown-educated Laffoley, who died in 2015, made scrupulously wrought paintings of mandalas as charts that would map out his thinking regarding extraterrestrial communication, the apocalypse, lucid dreaming, time-travel, and psychotronic technologies. Dealer Andrew Edlin, the fair's grand maestro since 2012, directed me to the booth of the UK-based Henry Boxer Gallery, which prominently featured William A. Hall's delicate, numinous drawings—landscapes that seem filtered through Lebbeus Woods's architectural designs, the Ming dynasty paintings of An Zhengwen, and The Jetsons. (Hall spent more than a decade of his life living in a car—cars appear frequently in his work.) Julie Webb of Webb Gallery in Waxahachie, Texas hung up a handpainted sign by late artist Joe Light in her booth. It read “Stupid fools [get] their nuts of [sic] by hurting people. Racism is one of the most ignorant things that could happen in this world. You have just got to have a deformed mind to be a racist.” I chatted with Webb briefly: “Not every person who lives in the South voted for him,” she said.

Edlin also organized a series of readings based on speeches made by Obama—a wide range of texts from the former president's eight years in office were available on the fair's website. Visitors who picked a speech and let the fair's administrators know ahead of time that they wanted to read were given free admission. Glamorous nonagenarian Beatrice, Edlin's mother, read the sad and confused speech Obama made on November 9, attempting to make sense of Trump's victory. Another woman read a speech Obama delivered when he visited Hiroshima last May—a first for a sitting US president. I read a speech he made which recounted the occasion he saw Egypt's pyramids for the first time—he marveled at their beauty and mystery. After my short performance I thought of something Stephen King said in a tweet after Obama's January 10 farewell address: “You won't hear anything so cogent and kind for a long time.”

On Wednesday, January 18, I went to the **Museum of Sex**—MoSex—for the opening reception of “Known Unknown: Private Obsession and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art,” a massive group exhibition scheduled to coincide with the fair. Organized by art dealer Frank Maresca and the museum's Lissa Rivera, “Known Unknown” was staged to provide “tantalizing [and] sometimes disturbing insight into the psychological terrain of their creators.” The show features nearly two hundred pieces from artists such as Henry Darger, Aurie Ramirez (watercolor paintings of Bratz doll-like women in Alice Cooper makeup), Edwin Lawson (an architecture professor at the University of Cincinnati whose draggy, Mae Westy self-portraits were discovered after his death in 1980), Thornton Dial, Eugene von Bruenchenhein, Ike Morgan (rather unsettling Day-Glo renderings of XXX girls; Morgan was accused of murder when he was seventeen, and spent twenty years confined to the Austin State Hospital as a psychiatric patient), Morton Bartlett, and Marilena Pelosi (quite possibly the only woman in the show, whose amazing and alien drawings call to mind Dorothy Iannone and Steven Fievet's fucked up Baby Sue comics).

During the party I caught Kalup Linzy taking phone snaps of Steve Ashby's hairy little sculptures encased behind glass. I also saw actress Gina Gershon and jewelry designer Maripol—who influenced many of Madonna's early '80s looks—milling about.

Rivera introduced me to Norman Brosterman—art dealer, writer, and artist—who also happens to collect Japanese propaganda kimonos from the 1930s and nineteenth-century kindergarten artifacts. Brosterman introduced Maresca to the works of Gil Batle, who was also included in the show. Batle was a career criminal who used his skills as an expert counterfeiter and tattoo artist to carve into the thick shells of ostrich eggs. His exquisitely detailed pieces, two of which were presented in a vitrine, illustrate events from his harrowing life spent behind bars. “Oh yeah—this is where a pimp gets murdered,” said Brosterman, pointing out an elegant, filigreed scene. “And you see this guy here? He was raped with a toilet plunger.”

Before I left the museum, I struck up a fun conversation with a fabulous woman—a raven-haired minx!—in dramatic, New Romantic eye maquillage and (maybe?) vintage Thierry Mugler trousers—so shiny, violet, and fitted. I asked her how she was planning on handling the next four years: “I’m gonna fuck whomever I want, look at art about fucking, and stay really, really mad.”



Left: Maripol and Jo Shane at the opening of “Known Unknown” at the Museum of Sex. Right: Jesper Lannung and Ricky Clifton at the opening of “Known Unknown” at the Museum of Sex. (Photos: Kelsey Stanton/BFA.com)