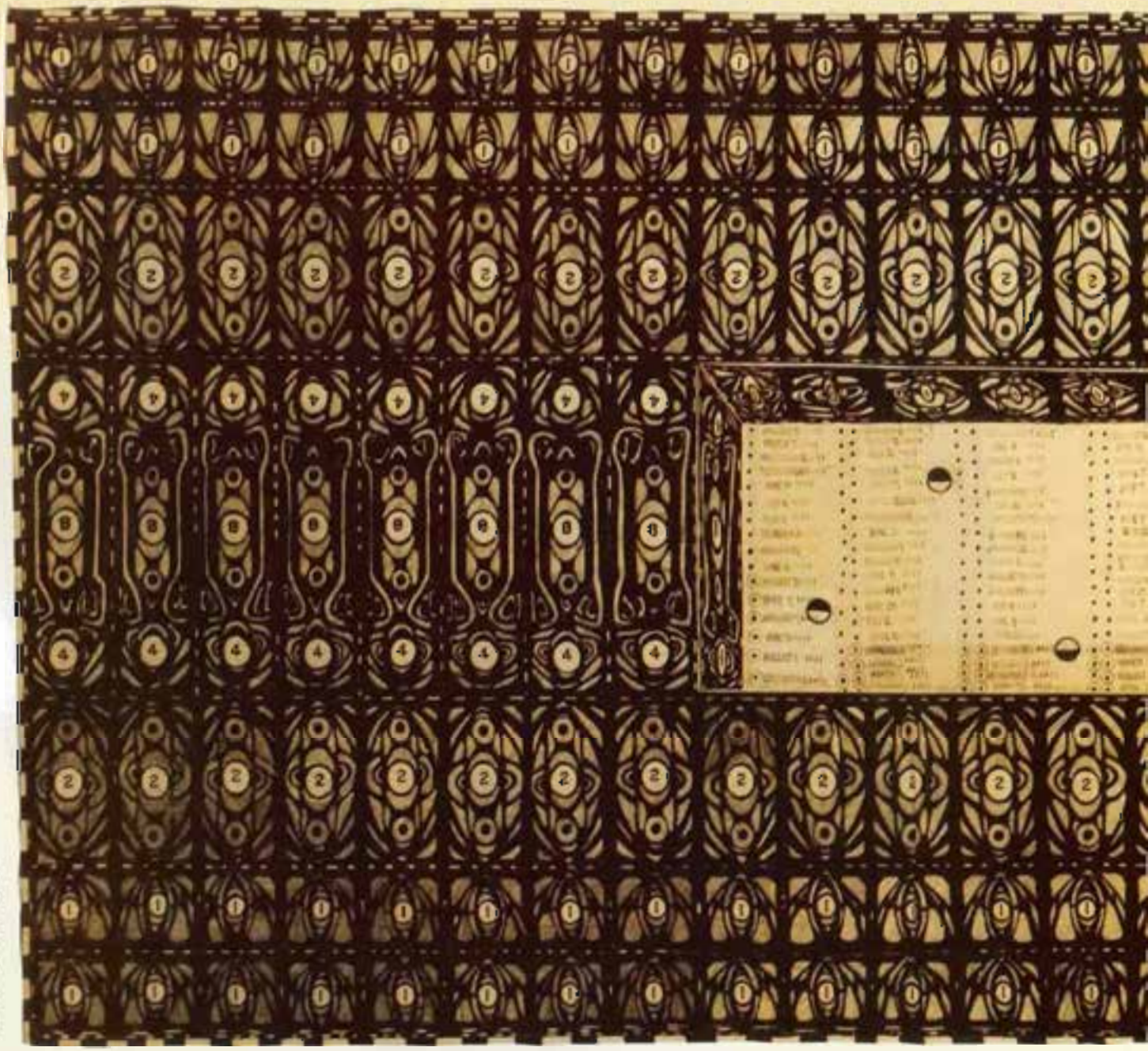


On the BORDER

As the contemporary art market becomes ever more diversified, does the distinction between the work of trained artists and that of their self-taught counterparts really matter?

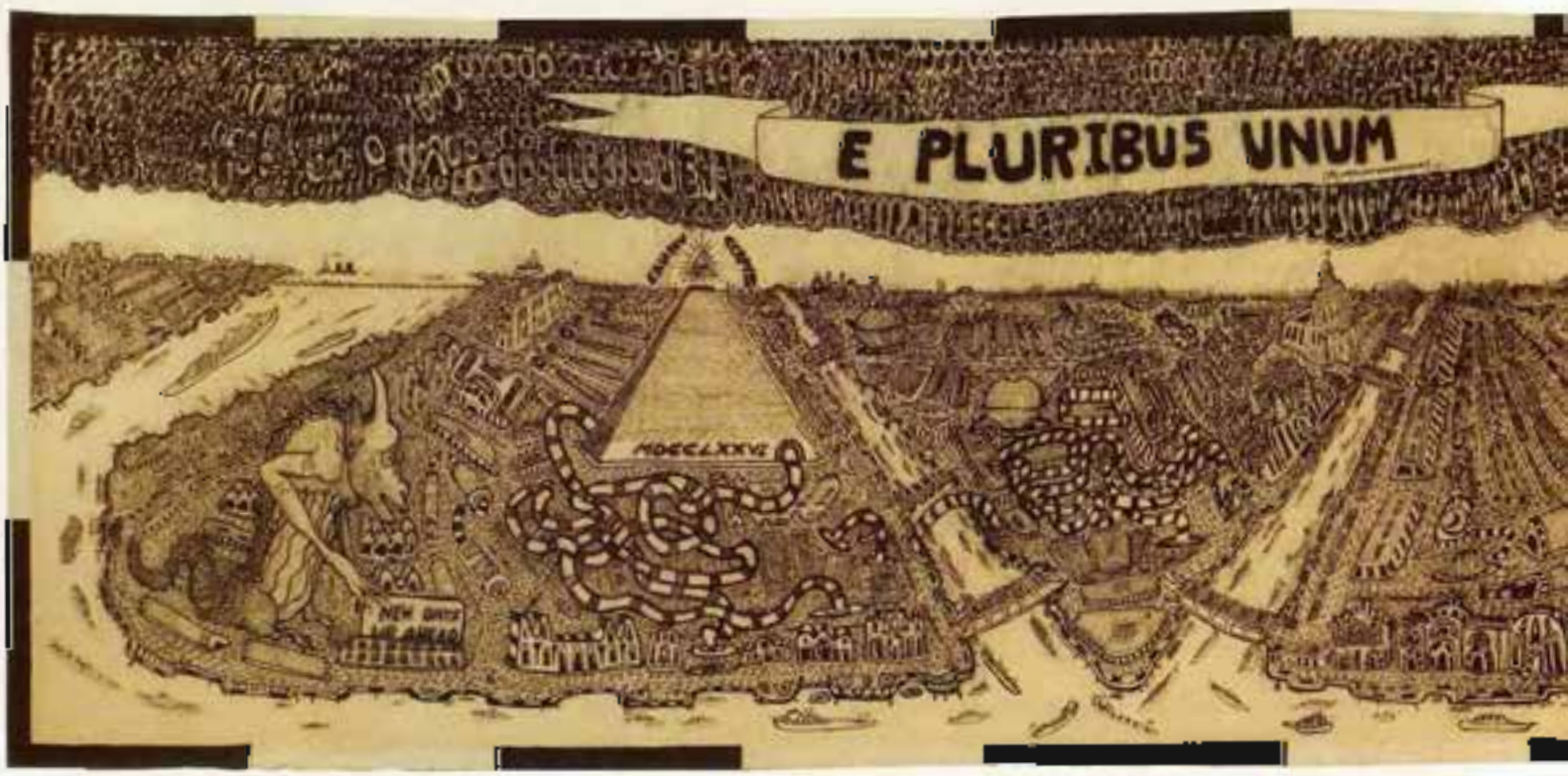
By Edward M. Gómez

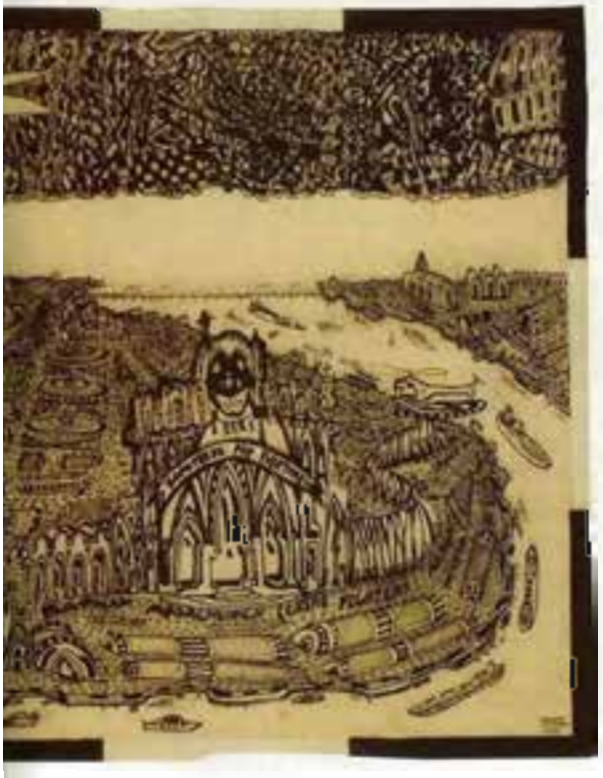
George Widener, *Untitled (4421)*, mixed media on paper, 2010.

For as long as anyone who has paid close attention to the aesthetic issues that have shaped the outsider-art field can remember, a clearly delineated, market-imposed border has separated work made by talented autodidacts—artists who have tended to live and work away from the cultural and mass-media mainstream—and the creations of their peers who studied art making and art history in specialized schools and became recognized as "professional" artists. For the most part, those in this latter category have been aware of the historical and critical contexts in which they have made and displayed their work and have produced works to be publicly presented and sold in the established art market.

By contrast, not a few of those in the art establishment's opinion-shapers underrated much of the work of self-taught or "outsider" artists, several legendary examples of whom came to the attention of the mainstream art world in the 1940's and '50's thanks to the enthusiasm of the modern artist Jean Dubuffet. The French painter-sculptor dubbed such works "*art brut*," or "raw art"—referring to the unbridled creative energy they embodied and reflected—and was moved by their deeply personal character. Here was art, Dubuffet argued, whose makers produced it not because they wanted to but because they had to: their urgent need to create allowed them to tap into the fire itself.

The history of outsider or "self-taught" art, as it is sometimes called, is about a century old. Its roots can be traced to the discoveries of the works of certain naïve/folk artists in Europe and to distinctive variations of vernacular art forms that sometimes popped up on the margins of mainstream art history. The market for self-taught art is somewhat younger, about a half century old. In the United States, commercial ventures such as the Janet Fleisher Gallery in Philadelphia, which opened in 1952 and is now the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, the pow-





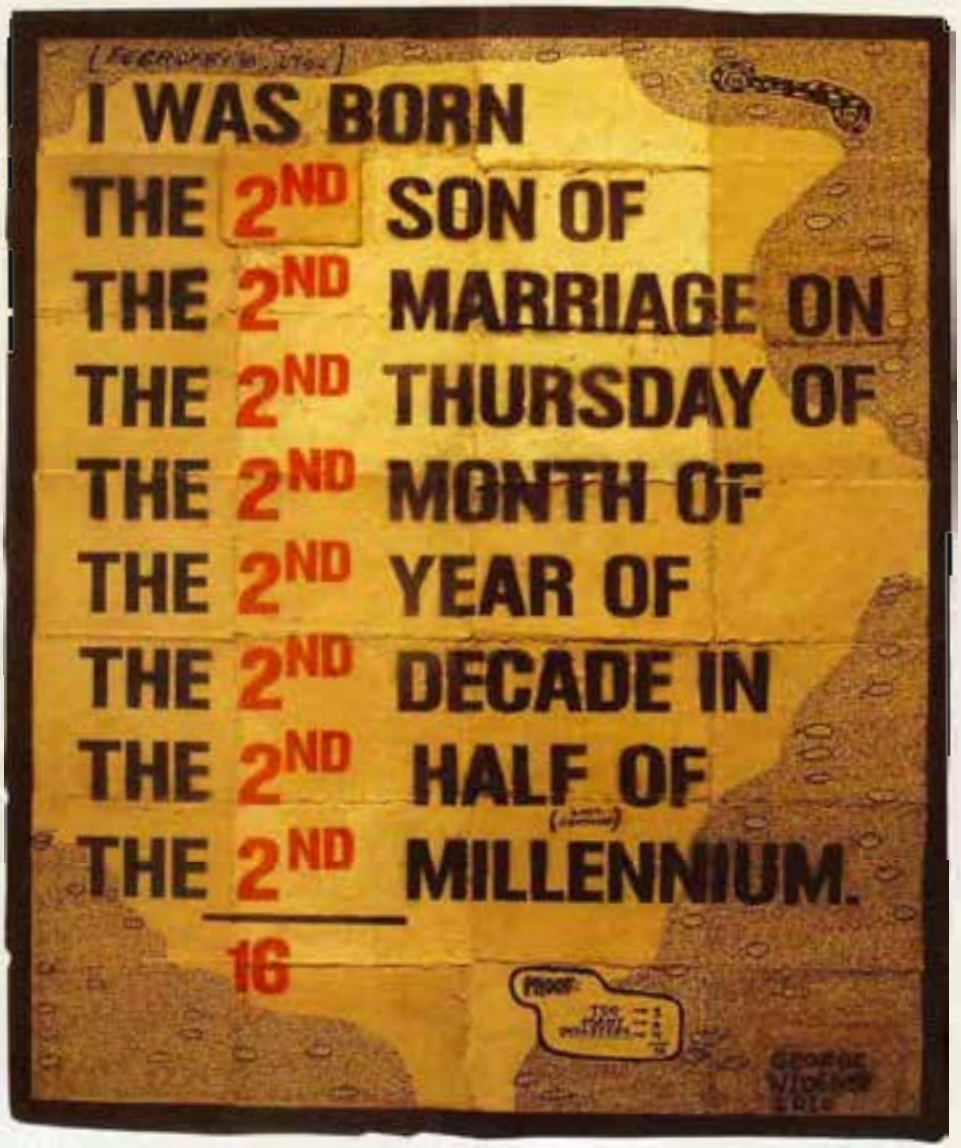
From left: George Widener, Untitled (E Pluribus Unum), 2010; Thornton Dial, High and Wide (Carrying the Rats to the Man), 2002

defunct Pavel's Kind Gallery (Chicago and New York) and, in New York, the Luise Ross Gallery, Ricco/Maresca Gallery and Gavin Morris Gallery, played key roles in the development of a market for the work of self-taught artists.

In some ways, over the years DeVatter's aesthetic heirs, who started as passionate fans of the art of the self-taught and often longed to see it win the respect of the establishment, have seen that dream come true. In New York, the American Folk Art Museum has presented important exhibitions of what it calls "contemporary folk art" for more than a decade. In Baltimore, in 1995, the outsider art enthusiast Rebecca Hoffberger founded the American Visionary Art Museum to showcase the work of self-taught artists from around the world. The annual Outsider Art Fair in New York (February 11–13, 2011) and other similar events in other cities offer specialized settings for dealers in the field to present their latest discoveries. A still-expanding literature—in category-specific books, exhibition catalogues and magazines—has documented many aspects of this singular art.

Has the market tamed the Outsider? Is work created by outsider artists and art produced by their trained counterparts begun to blur? If such a trend is starting, as the exhibition programs of some galleries and museums nowadays might seem to suggest (even the Museum of Modern Art in New York has included self-taught artists' works in some group shows of drawings), then in plain marketing terms, is the work of some artists lauded as to seem to be having successfully crossed over into the contemporary category?

Late last year, Ricco/Maresca showed the enigmatic mixed-media drawings on paper of George Widener, a North Carolina–based artist-savant whose elegant compositions of black and white, highlighted with just a few basic colors, stunn-



tures show strong affinities with those of modern artists known for their simple lines and stripped-down geometry. Widener's pictures are sophisticated visual depictions of the complex calculations he does of astronomical seconds, based on certain dates, such as that of the sinking of the *Titanic* on April 15, 1912, that were his imagination.

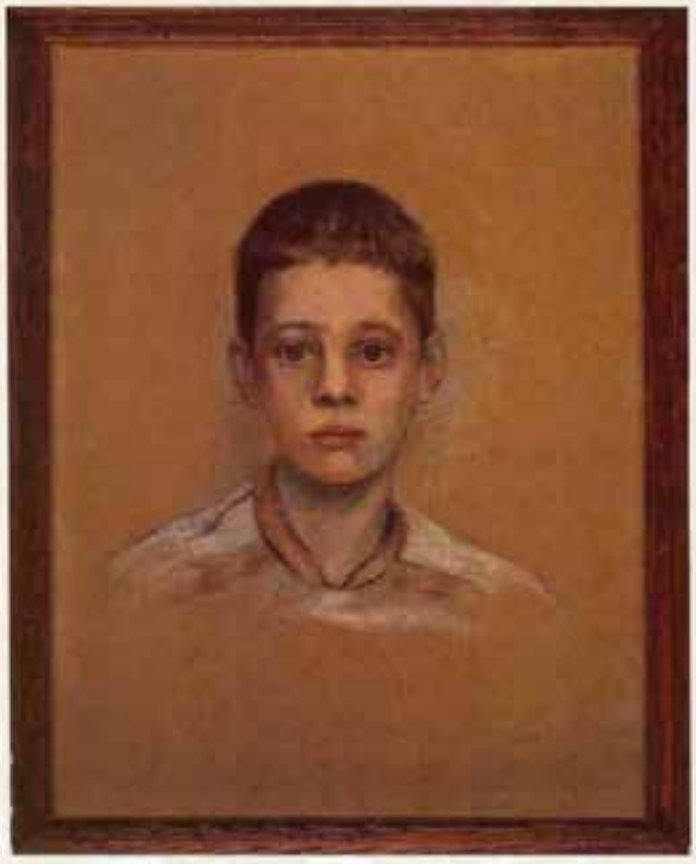
Marlene Dumas, the South African–born contemporary painter whose watery images of pregnant women, naked adolescents and closely cropped human faces won critical praise in a traveling exhibition that opened in Los Angeles in 2008, has observed that, in her practice, based artworks, Widener "constructs worlds of intricate calculations" and that, as someone preoccupied with disasters, she's "a modern artist of the tragic." Dumas' appreciation of Widener's drawings and sensibility offers a good example of the appeal the most original self-taught artists' work has to some of the international art world's most celebrated figures of the moment. Conversely, it's interesting to note the affinity many of Dumas' loosely elaborated paintings share with some of the brashest, most impulsive freeing bodies of work to be found in the outsider field, such as the late Mose Tolliver's images of people and animals in house paint on plywood, or the late Inmates Lee Sudduth's pictures in mud and natural pigments on board.

Some of the most impressive evidence of how far outsider art has come to be appreciated by the contemporary art establishment will soon be seen in "Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial," a career-survey exhibition of the work of a self-taught Alabama artist whose mixed-media paintings and sculptures are as theatrical as they are reaching, as, say, Anselm Kiefer's haunting tableaux that evoke Germany's Nazi past. "Hard Truths," which will feature some 75 of Dial's works in different media and formats, will open at the Indianapolis Museum of Art on February 28 and run through May 15. Then it will travel to several other museums in the U.S. through 2014.

It will not be Dial's first museum presentation; to date, his work has been featured in several big shows of this kind, including one at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2006–07, and another that took place simultaneously at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 1993. This time, though, the IMA will not primarily promote Dial as a self-taught artist whose status as an art master is off the grid or whose creations may be seen as folk. Instead, most conveniently and appropriately, the IMA's exhibition, which was been organized by Joanne Cubbs, its adjunct curator of American art, will present Dial as one of the most relevant artists of his time, completely in touch with the issues of the moment.

In her catalogue essay, Cubbs points out that Dial, who "grew up in the black rural South in the 1930s amid unimaginable economic hardship" and who "personally suffered from the region's institutionalized racism," "is a keen observer of the human spectacle and its narratives of corruption and moral strength, ruin and triumph." She notes that, over the past 20 years, in particular, Dial's art has "explored the most challenging social and political issues..., from gripping commentaries on poverty, homelessness and the abuse of the natural environment to harrowing meditations on the wars in Iraq and the tragedy of 9/11. His subjects range from the history of race and class struggle in America to the events of contemporary global politics and life's deep existential quandaries."

A former bricklayer, carpenter and welder, who once worked in a Pullman railway-car factory, Dial has spent his life in and around Bessemer, Ala., where



Opposite: George Widener, *Untitled (I Was Born)*, 2010. Above, from left: John Waters, *John Jr.*, 2009; Royal Robertson, *Untitled (The Day the Earth Splits 4 Ways)*

ar still resides today. Completely unassuming in his approach to art making, Dial has used everything from animal hides, plush toys and barbed wire to spray paint, bones and carpet scraps to produce his mixed-media paintings and assemblages. His "self-invented expressionistic style," Cobbs notes, has prompted comparisons of his art with that of such esteemed modern and contemporary art stars as Jackson Pollock, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kiefer.

In New York, Andrew Edlin Gallery, which also represents the estate of Henry Darger (1892–1973), a Chicago-based draftsman-collagist who is considered one of the giants in the outsider field, has since become Dial's exclusive representative. The gallery aims to present what Edlin calls "the freshest, most resonant art of our time, no matter who or what it is or where or how an artist went to art school or not as important as the quality of the work and the vision it expresses."

Randall Morris, of Clavin Morris Gallery, thinks the traditional borderline between the work of self-taught and trained artists was always "more motivated by certain collectors, usually those in the folk art field." But Morris admits he has also noticed that some experienced collectors in the outsider field have been "making belief" that self-taught artists create art "for the same reasons trained artists do, because they want to put their investments and thus do not want to engage the theoretical aspects surrounding outsider art." At the same time, he says, "We're seeing more people who know the arguments and the labels but would rather accept that art comes out of many peoples in the world who make it for different reasons. The best collectors never lose sight of a great work of art's context and the intention of its maker. Martin Ramirez is still not Jeff Koons."

Both the Dallas-based collector Karel Howard and the New York dealer Lucas Ross feel that, more and more, general art audiences are appreciating both self-taught and trained artists' works without drawing strict distinctions; they credit outsider art's increasing presence in museums and art fairs for helping to steer this trend. Howard and her husband, George Morton, have built a collection that wittily brings together self-taught and trained artists' works in many different formats and media. Howard says, "What kind of artist may have made a particular piece is less important to us than its overall strength and the appeal of its subject matter." However, Ross notes that, in the self-taking art economy, "there are no younger clients; young people look at the work but never inquire about anything." Even if outsider art may appear to come to us breaking out of a fixed curated category, she suggests, it is solid sales that give an art market trend its momentum.

Brought up in Texas and based in Brooklyn, the actor and filmmaker Scott Ogden is also a collector of outsider art. One of his special interests is the special-pin paintings of the Louisiana-born African American self-taught artist and self-styled "prophet" Royal Robertson (1936–97). Robertson, Judith Scott, Ike Morgan and Hawkins Bolden are the subjects of *Make* (2009), a documentary that Ogden produced with Malcolm Hearn

Opposite, from top: Thornton Dial, *Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle*, 2003; *Don't Matter How Raggly the Flag, It Still Got to Tie Us Together*, 2003. Above, from left: Domenico Zindato, three untitled works, ink and pastel on paper, 2008–09.

that has just been released on DVD. Ogden and two other collectors loaned works by Robertson to the American pop musician Sufjan Stevens, who reproduced them on the packaging designs for the vinyl record and CD editions of his latest album, *The Age of Adz*. "Sufjan was very interested in Robertson's images and the stories," Ogden says. "In turn, the music on his new album was inspired by Royal's drawings: aliens, spaceships, prophets, futuristic automobiles and warnings about the Last Judgment, and also his last public site. Royal was poor and mentally ill. Like Royal's art, Sufjan's new music refers to big, mythological themes but also refers to hard times and desire. His album will introduce a whole new audience to Royal's work."

Ogden, who has collected self-taught artists' works for many years, believes it might still be "too early to tell if the line between contemporary and self-taught artists' works has blurred or not, or if this is just the wishful thinking of a few collectors, artists and galleries." He says, "I love the idea that 'art' is just 'art.' But I've always been something completely different when looking at work made by self-taught artists as opposed to that of contemporary artists. Outsider art has always had a raw, direct power for me. It leers me when I see a work of art that looks like, whoever made it, in whatever state of mind, just nailed it. That's what I'm looking for."

The self-taught Italian artist Domenico Zindato, who makes richly patterned, semi-abstract drawings on paper that recall the writing systems of ancient civilizations, feels that nowadays the contemporary art market is so all-encompassing that all kinds of art from anywhere may be swept up in or measured in relation to it—self-taught work and other art forms, too. "Maybe they cannot be separated from the bigger market," he says. The New York dealer Miyake Yoshinaga, who normally shows contemporary video, painting and photography, last year presented a selection of works by

Domenico Zindato, two untitled works, 2008–09

a group of self-taught artists. All of them were from Japan. She says: "I believe that promoting self-taught artists can open up exciting new possibilities for contemporary art galleries." There are, she notes, "many gaps and differences between their works and the works we usually exhibit, but with our all open-minded attitude and strong emotional attraction to the material, these artists will never be discovered, and that would be a shame. These artists can only come to the surface if they are discovered and promoted within our existing system."

Andrey Heckler, a New York–based collector of outsider art who is a member of the board of directors of the American Folk Art Museum, says she is not so sure that "self-taught artists are gaining any kind of significant foothold in the mainstream art world." However, she admits, "I'm biased. I don't see a lot of contemporary art that I appreciate. But when I get home and look at the works in my collection, I see art that is just so much more alive. So many 'trained' artists do not seem to be able to convey the spirit and energy you find in so many self-taught artists' works. I call this kind of work 'the hidden art' because, in comparative, monetary terms, it doesn't grease the wheels of the art market the way certain hyped-up contemporary work does."

Hatzberger, the founder and director of the American Visionary Art Museum, believes the rote box categories labels—as we would be—over, including the "contemporary art" tag itself. "I'd eliminate it," she proposes. "Our current exhibition, 'What Makes Us Smile?', features the work of 90 different artists, from the filmmaker John Waters to the late quadriplegic cartoonist John Callahan. What matters in art is whatever shows evidence of free, thinking—from artists who are true to themselves and can transport us through the power of their vision." ■