
Diverging from the existing norm in an original and experimental way, Groundwaters accesses the work of twelve artists that are not quite vainglorious and mythical, but more self-justifying and grandiose in content and medium. The book runs the range from Adolf Wölfli’s color-by-number approach found in his intricate pencil markings on newsprint to Bill Traylor’s muddy but vibrant red, blue and brown silhouettes painted on cardboard. The book does not omit work such as Henry Darger’s subtle eggshell pastels that signal the disturbing to an inexpressible degree, or Nek Chand’s obsessively done eighteen-acre rock garden, complete with follies and all. This volume brings into view the depth and knowledge of scholarship that self-taught artists have defined and presents them in a way that fascinates readers interested in this genre.

The book is arranged in three sections. Russell first constructs a historical timeline of outsider art both from European and American perspectives. He clearly points out important issues addressing concerns in psychoanalysis and discrete aesthetic movements related to this group of artists. Then the author dives into a deep formal analysis of each artist’s work and draws upon comparisons with their counterparts. The juxtapositions establish that a working-man amateur, a schizophrenic in a hospital, and an “untrained” artist surrounded amongst the provincial milieu are as capable of making great art as anyone else. The conclusion is not as rigorous as the first two sections. It reiterates the vagueness of the term “outsider art” and what categories should also be included within this discussion. In doing so this area raises some interesting points about the value of art markets and intelligentsia. Russell also briefly brings to light a few more contemporaries in a short section that could have easily become an additional chapter.

This hardcover may be humble in its production standards, with its layout of 180 full-color illustrations and text, but the detail in each essay probes artwork created at critical junctures of the twentieth century. Groundwaters is not only a significant addition to any art library collection; it is also a wonderful supplement to books such as Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art, edited by Annie Carlano and Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond by John Maizels.

Lori Salmon, Evening/Weekend Reference Librarian, Visual Arts Library, School of Visual Arts, lsalmon1@sva.edu