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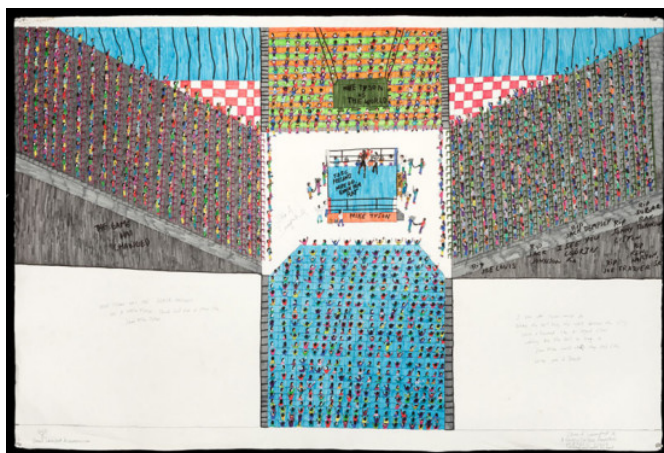
artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

Saturday, February 7th, 2015

Bruce Davenport Jr. at the Outsider Art Fair and Louis B. James Gallery

by David Cohen



Bruce Davenport Jr., T.D.B.C. Presents Knock Em Down Mike Tyson, 2013,. Archival ink on acid-free paper, 40 x 609 inches. Courtesy of Louis B. James Gallery.

It is one of the abiding ironies of art and taste that the current, growing, popular fascination with “outsider art” coincides with a historic deskilling in academic artistic training, a near cult status of “authenticity” in aesthetic standards and a prevalence of OCD detail among many artists. This might all contribute, you’d think, to a blurring of the distinction between fine art and outsider art, between the art world and the untrained, the

knowing and the savant. The gravedigger scene in Hamlet comes to mind. The mad prince was sent to England because “there the men are as mad as he.” And yet, exaltation of “outsider” status abounds, despite the pervasive outsiderish quality of the inside art world.

None of this detracts one iota from the sheer visual splendors and moving testimonies to the creative urge that awaited visitors last weekend at the redoubtable Outsider Art Fair. On three floors of the old Dia building were abundant examples of the “old masters” of art brut (Henry Darger, Albert Loudon, James Castle, Bill Traylor, the Philadelphia Wire Man) rubbing shoulders with anonymous side show placards, self-taught originals like Morris Hirshfield, many extraordinary works by artists at every point along the autism spectrum, even an art world luminary like the eminently sane Peter Saul who simply “looks” a bit nuts. The criteria are kept loose as befits riposte to regulation.

As if to prove the slippery boundary between outsider and hipster, Louis B. James has the same artist, Bruce Davenport Jr., in their booth and at their Lower East Side premises. His exhilaratingly vertiginous and obsessively fandom-annotated fight scenes document his love of Mike Tyson. They are knock out.