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New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

by Will Heinrich
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“Ladies Will Stand by Their Tigers,” circa 1990, by Thornton Dial Sr., in the show “Memory Palaces: Inside the Collection of Audrey B. Heckler” at the American Folk Art Museum. Credit...Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Visko Hatfield

‘Memory Palaces’

A catchall term for the work of self-taught artists isolated from the mainstream by poverty, mental disability or eccentricity, “outsider art” is more of a sociological phenomenon than a genre. But in “Memory Palaces: Inside the Collection of Audrey B. Heckler,” organized by Valérie Rousseau at the American Folk Art Museum, you do find a certain consistency.

Ms. Heckler, a trustee of the museum, began collecting around the time of New York’s first Outsider Art Fair, in 1993, and she’s assembled a comprehensive introduction to all the category’s varieties, from the inordinately expressive to the staggeringly obsessive; from the stark, primordial silhouettes of Bill Traylor to the exacting architectural drawings of Achilles G. Rizzoli; from Henry Darger’s uniquely majestic epic of little girls battling evil to George Widener’s endless numerology; from the Italian Carlo Zinelli’s neat parades of brightly colored little figures and houses to the Moravian Anna Zemankova’s pencil and embroidery undersea gardens.

In quantity, it can all start to feel a little flat. There’s an emotional inaccessibility that makes you feel like an outsider, too. And with about 160 works, from all over the world, the show can be hard to take in anyway, unless you quickly locate and fix your attention on a few favorites. My own would be a handful of sublime paintings and drawings by Thornton Dial Sr. and by Martín Ramírez, the Mexican rancher who spent half his life confined to midcentury American psychiatric institutions.

Dial, who grew up among sharecroppers in 1930s Alabama but experienced much of the acclaim his work deserved between middle age and his 2016 death, is famous for paintings and assemblage that seem to infuse the whole material world with the raw creative power of his own imagination. With ropy legs and ears that look like horns, the gouache and watercolor cat at the center of “Ladies Will Stand by Their Tigers,” from around 1990, could be a spider or an octopus. Two topless, wraithlike women are tucked under the legs of the tiger, his broad black mouth looking just like one of his stripes. It’s an entrancing vision of the boundary-dissolving power of sexual charisma.

A steel-blue train with dark windows snakes through a bloody trough in a large, untitled piece by Ramírez, from 1954, pasted together from four separate sheets of found paper using a mixture of cafeteria food and saliva. Tall, feather-shaped curves on either side of the train, colored with yellow and blue, create an eerie sense of floating motion. You feel as if you’re falling into a bottomless obsession, a state for which you have no name.