

SELF-TAUGHT STORYTELLERS

by Paul Laster

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Frank Diaz Escalet, *NYC 1920's*, 1989, acrylic on Masonite, 30 x 48 inches (76.2 x 121.9 cm).

Courtesy of Hollis Taggart.

The key difference between fine art and what we call “outsider art” lies in formal training, institutional connections, and artistic drive. Fine art is created primarily for its aesthetic, conceptual, or intellectual significance. Fine artists understand technical guidelines, composition, and critical theories. Their success depends on galleries, museums, critics, and curatorial standards.

The term “outsider art” refers to art by individuals outside institutional constraints. Classic outsider artists, such as Henry Darger, are often isolated, like psychiatric patients, recluses, or visionaries who create art for themselves without seeking fame, reflecting pure personal vision. Other “outsiders” are simply artists marginalized by poverty and racism. This fall, four presentations at Independent 20th Century highlight five outsider artists. The interplay at the show between these two aspects—outsider and fine art—reveals that it is not academic education that makes a great artist; it is what the artists learn through experimentation and apply on their own.



B.J. Newton, *Nymph*, 1972, oil on canvas, 17 x 23 7/8 inches (43.2 x 60.6 cm).

Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

B.J. Newton (1926–94), a self-taught, visionary Black American artist, remarkably spent much of his adult life in California prisons, particularly at Folsom State Prison in the 1960s and '70s, where he created most of his artwork. He is best known for his extensive apocalyptic series of densely layered paintings created at Folsom Prison and titled *Depositional Records of the Second Coming in Abomination of Desolation*.

The paintings on view from that series in the exhibition presented by San Francisco's Fraenkel Gallery at Independent, created circa 1969–76, feature bold, heavily textured paintwork and surreal subject matter—visionary landscapes filled with swirling clouds, rising suns, and fantastical, dreamlike creatures. A red, monochromatic oil on canvas, *One Sow, One Reap* (circa 1969) portrays a cluster of lost souls in a Hieronymus Bosch-like hell, while Newton's 1972 painting *Nymph* depicts nature as animatedly threatening a young, red-headed nude.



Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled*, 1964, gelatin silver print, 16 x 14 1/2 inches (40.6 x 36.8 cm) framed. © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Because he was institutionalized, Newton's work was initially sold directly to the public through the Folsom Prison inmate hobby craft store. Despite his isolation, his unique style astonishingly caught the attention of prominent figures in the art world, including Chicago Imagist artist Jim Nutt, who had previously discovered the work of outsider artist Martín Ramírez, and curator Philip Linhares, leading to his inclusion in the 1970 *American Primitive and Naive Art* exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute. Although it remains largely unknown, his work is included in the American Folk Art Museum's collection in New York and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925–72), also shown by Fraenkel Gallery, was an American photographer known for his enigmatic and surreal black-and-white images that merged everyday family photos with a dreamlike aesthetic. He pioneered visionary conceptual photography during an era when the art world valued raw, documentary-style street photography, carefully arranging family, friends, and everyday objects into haunting visual narratives.

A professional optician living in Lexington, Kentucky, he bought his first camera in 1950 to photograph his newborn son. He held a nine-to-five job but dedicated his weekends to exploring the Kentucky countryside with his family, capturing strange, avant-garde photographs. What started as a weekend hobby grew into an innovative and internationally acclaimed artistic legacy before his untimely death from cancer in 1972.

His backdrops usually depicted decaying, unglamorous settings near Lexington, placing his visual poetry in abandoned barns, rundown houses, and shadowy forests, as in an untitled photo of two children

seated in the woods, with the older child's face blurred beyond recognition, creating an eerie scene. Other haunting untitled images offer distant views of figures in motion, including a 1959 photo of people approaching the audience like phantoms from a snowy realm, and another print from 1959 of a family outside their farmhouse, blurred to the point of becoming more of a memory than an actual sighting.

Meatyard's inquisitive mind was strongly influenced by Surrealism, Zen Buddhism, jazz, and literature. An experiment with light flashes reveals what appear to be weeds along a lake or a darkened road in an untitled 1969 picture, while another—titled *Lucybelle Crater and her P.O. brother Lucybelle Crater* (1970–72)—captures a couple wearing Halloween masks (one of Meatyard's signature ways of transforming subjects) as they sit on the ground in front of a car. Decades later, his distinctive visual style continues to significantly influence contemporary artists who employ conceptual staging such as Roger Ballen and Joel-Peter Witkin.

Fraenkel's pairing of Meatyard and Newton makes evident the dark psychological approach in each artist's work. While working in completely different media—Newton in heavily textured painting and Meatyard in black-and-white photography—both bypassed mainstream institutions to construct profoundly mysterious, metaphysical worlds.

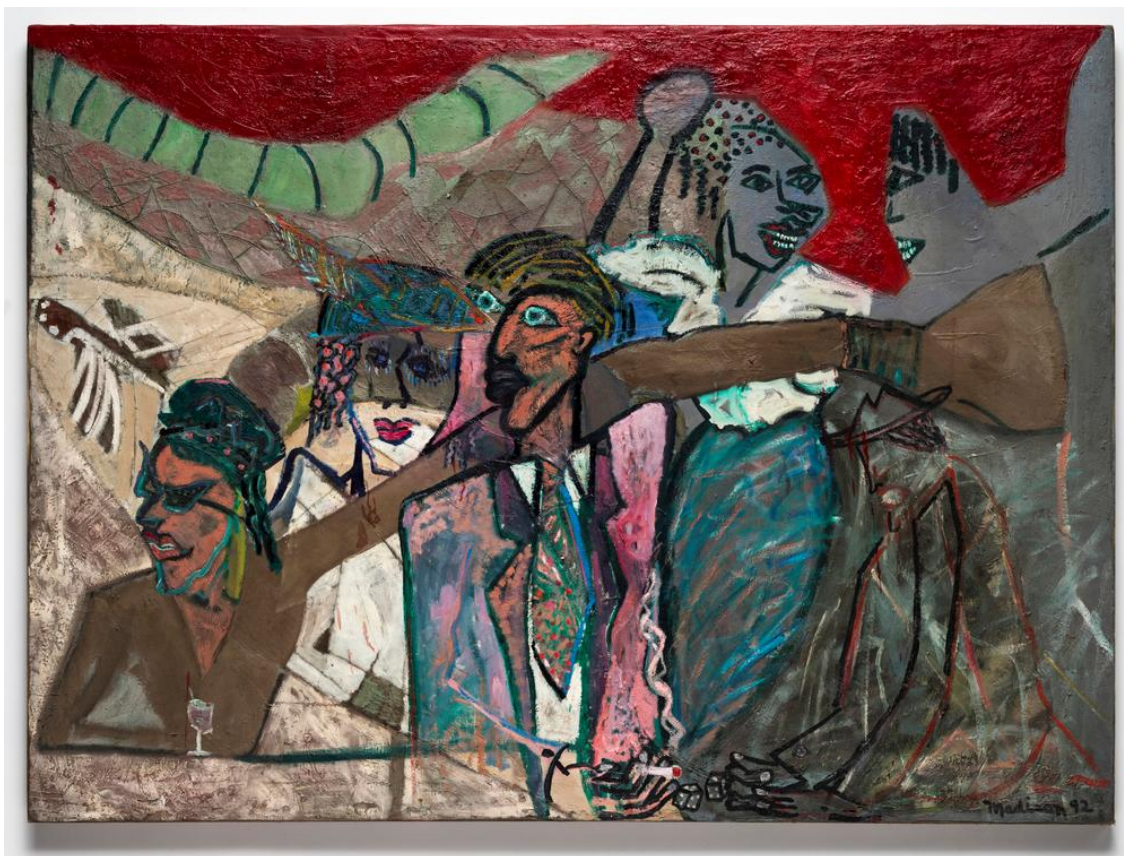


Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Lucybelle Crater and her P.O. brother Lucybelle Crater*, 1970–72, gelatin silver print, 16 x 14 1/2 inches (40.6 x 36.8 cm) framed. © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard.
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

An American painter and sculptor who emerged from the Black Arts Movement in Chicago of the 1960s and '70s, Reginald Madison (1941–2026) was highly regarded for his deeply intuitive, self-taught genius. Discovering art on his own as a teenager after finding a discarded box of paint supplies, he worked at U.S. Steel in Chicago, taking on extra shifts to support his young family and to fund a formative year of travel in Europe, where he visited museums and galleries in Paris, Munich, and Madrid.

Despite frequently being labeled as an outsider or untrained artist because of his lack of formal education, his deep understanding of art history and materials distinguishes him as a master of spontaneous expression. The artist himself rejected the term “outsider” as another form of marginalization. His first significant artistic breakthrough occurred in 1968 in Chicago, when his work was recognized in a public competition at an experimental art center; the judging panel included the legendary sculptor Richard Hunt and Jan van der Marck, the founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Madison’s art, created over a long career in Chicago, Western Massachusetts, and Hudson, New York, is characterized by an intuitive, improvisational style influenced by free jazz and textile traditions. His extensive body of work blurred boundaries between abstraction and figuration, producing richly textured, improvisational canvases characterized by a distinctive palette of vivid colors toned down into earthy, matte shades.



Reginald Madison, *Zenobia*, 1992, oil on canvas, 55 x 75 inches (139.7 x 190.5 cm). Photography by Pete Mauney.
Courtesy of Uffner & Liu and SEPTEMBER.

He painted directly on his studio walls and used brushes, rags, or his bare hands to apply paint to canvas and wood, while, as a sculptor, he created large-scale assemblages from found materials. Two

abstractions in oil stick on paper, *VIII* (1987) and *XIII* (1989), reflect his interest in textiles, while his 1992 oil on canvas, *Zenobia*, seems to capture a communal scene of colorful customers at a lively jazz club. A fantastic late sculptural wall work dubbed *Ohmm* (2024) transforms salvaged wood scraps into a divine work of art featuring repeated crowned figures, star-studded wings, and a title that suggests a sacred sound or mantra.

Madison exhibited with the acclaimed Phyllis Kind Gallery from 1975 to 2009, when the gallery closed. He later became a cultural pillar in Hudson, where he curated local exhibitions and co-organized a jazz music festival. An artist who created each work of art like an avant-garde jazz solo, he experienced a late-career renaissance. At Independent 20th Century, Uffner & Liu from New York partners with SEPTEMBER from Kinderhook to mount an exhibition of Madison's works created between 1987 and 2024.



Frank Diaz Escalet, *English Road Race*, 1984, cut leather on Masonite, 24 x 30 inches (61 x 76.2 cm).
Courtesy of Hollis Taggart.

A self-taught artist and master leathercrafter, Frank Diaz Escalet (1930–2012) was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York. He grew up in poverty in Spanish Harlem and Greenwich Village and left school after the eighth grade to work and help support his family. He stands out in the outsider art scene for his innovative method of crafting bright narrative “paintings” using carefully hand-cut and inlaid leather. Unlike many self-taught artists who depend on conventional paints and found materials, Escalet transformed a commercial craft into fine art, highlighting the dignity and resilience of working-class and immigrant lives.

Following his service in the U.S. Air Force, he took on various manual labor roles before realizing his talent for craftsmanship. By the late 1950s, he established a leather shop named The House of Escalet in

Greenwich Village, creating custom garments for renowned rock stars and cultural icons, including the Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, and Sly and the Family Stone.

Escalet blended his masterful leatherworking skills with a modernist, folk-art-inspired aesthetic, as visible in the works made between 1976 and 1985 that Hollis Taggart from New York will exhibit at Independent. His innovative inlaid technique, used in works such as *Zinnias* (1982), a still life of three flowers in a vase on a table, involved cutting leather pieces and then assembling them onto Masonite boards.

The joins between the leather were so carefully fitted that they are almost undetectable to the touch, creating rich, textured surfaces that traditional paint could not replicate, as in nostalgic, historical narratives such as *English Road Race* (1984), which portrays a string of old roadsters traveling along a highway under a bright, sunlit sky. A painting in a similar vein, *Greyhound 1940* (1985), shows a detective-type guy scrutinizing passengers as he strolls up the aisle.

Escalet described his work as giving a “bird’s-eye view of the world” and focused on humanizing marginalized and everyday individuals. A jazz fan, he vividly depicted the vibrant energy of New York jazz clubs, including a pianist and saxophonist performing onstage in *Jazz Eye* (1977). Later, his themes broadened to include stylized Western landscapes—such as *Painted Desert* (1982), an aerial view of a colorful stretch of mountainous desert—and simple geometric abstractions.



Frank Diaz Escalet, *Zinnias*, 1982, cut leather on Masonite, 23 x 17 inches (58.4 x 43.2 cm).

Courtesy of Hollis Taggart.



David Byrd, *Tortured Woman*, n.d., oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches (71.1 x 58.4 cm).
Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery and the David Byrd Estate.

The mysterious yet marvelously talented American painter David Byrd (1926–2013) devoted his life to creating art without public recognition, working in complete obscurity for more than 40 years. Having spent much of that time as an orderly in a psychiatric ward, he created a vast, concealed collection of deeply empathetic paintings, drawings, and wooden sculptures that reflect a lifetime of subtle observation.

Although he studied in the late 1940s with French modernist Amédée Ozenfant, whose students also included Tarsila do Amaral and Leonora Carrington, Byrd is often considered an outsider artist because he worked completely apart from the conventional art market. Interestingly, he was discovered through a chance encounter with an artist neighbor in 2012, when he was 86, less than a year before he passed away from lung cancer.

His most popular and influential body of work came from working the night shift at the Veterans Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose, New York, and captured daily routines, deep isolation, and the unpredictable nature of mental illness through a natural surrealist style in paintings such as *Food Tray Patient* (1976) and the undated *Tortured Woman*, both on view in an exhibition at Independent presented

by New York's Anton Kern Gallery. Even after retiring, he continued to paint scenes of the patients entirely from memory.



David Byrd, *Study in Brown*, 2008, oil on canvas, 20 x 25 inches (50.8 x 63.5 cm). Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery and the David Byrd Estate.

Byrd employed a dry-brush method with thinned oil paint, resulting in a sparse paint surface, as evident in scenic landscapes such as *Otego* (1999) and *Sidney Dam* (2009). His subdued palette features soft, pale tones, imparting a serene yet impactful presence to these everyday motifs. In these and other works, he depicted the ordinary, melancholic life of Upstate New York, including his sublime *Laundromat Scene* (2011), in which a lone woman sorts her clothes in a staged setting, and the whimsical *Study in Brown* (2008), which captures a rowdy winning bidder at a country auction. In addition to paintings, he created life-sized wooden figures, such as *Sculpture/assemblage 003 (Centaur)* (1993), which oddly depicts a man holding a bottle while perched on a circular container atop an old stool—with the centaur being one of his recurring motifs—and assembled artworks, such as *Sculpture/assemblage 011 (Ghost)* (1993), which abstractly stacks a pair of found geometric forms, constructing an imaginary ghost from scavenged materials.

Reflecting the true essence of the global art community, Independent 20th Century showcases self-taught artists and “outsider” art alongside modern and contemporary fine art presentations. The show thus intentionally creates room for self-taught and visionary artists, striving to offer a comprehensive view of the international art scene rather than focusing solely on gallery artists with academic training.

Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, advisor, artist, and lecturer. A contributing editor at *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art* and *ArtAsiaPacific*, Laster also writes for *Galerie*, *Artsy*, *Artforum*, *Art & Object*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Family Style*, *Ocula*, *Raw Vision*, and *Sculpture*. A former Adjunct Curator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1, he has also curated fine art exhibitions for White

Columns, Independent Curators International, and Otis College of Art and Design, as well as numerous other galleries, institutions, and fairs, while organizing exhibitions of self-taught artists and outsider art for the Outsider Art Fair in New York and Paris, and Andrew Edlin Gallery, the owner of the fair. Additionally, Laster has served as a curatorial advisor for Artsy's benefit auctions for the American Folk Art Museum and Hudson River Museum.