Matt Sesow is an independent American artist residing in Washington, DC.
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Painting From Pain

Matt Sesow Lost A Hand To A Plane, But He Rejects Labels Such As `Art Brut'
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By ADRIAN BRUNE, Special To The Courant

When he first started painting a little more than 10 years ago, Matt Sesow's work conveyed his reality: enduring a significant trauma in childhood.

Though titles such as "Lost Luggage," "Alone in Death" and "Waiting for Coagulation" provided hints, the story of Sesow's life became clear on the canvas. In 1974, a landing airplane struck Sesow, then 8 years old, as he played near his family's home in Lincoln, Neb. . Though surgeons reattached his left arm, severed by the propeller, they amputated his gangrenous dominant hand. At 9, Sesow learned to write and draw all over again; at 27, he taught himself how to paint. At first, his favorite subject was the accident.

"Losing my hand gives me an additional theme to explore through my paintings," says Sesow, who is known for blood-red backgrounds that sharply contrast the angry and averted orange eyes of his heavily outlined figures.

"It's as if I have another dimension of emotions and experiences to draw from while creating my work. Painting has enabled me to express things that would have not otherwise been possible."

Though he says he's moved on from the trauma days, many collectors still classify the self-taught Sesow as a practitioner of Art Brut, known in some circles as Outsider Art, or raw art that is "uncooked by society." The movement is defined by the early 20th-century painter Jean Dubuffet, and aficionados consider Art Brut the purest form of creation - art that often looks more like art therapy. And its popularity keeps growing.

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But even Art Brut has not entirely escaped the cultural manipulation of the gallery world. Like their starving Pratt and Parsons counterparts, many "discovered" Art Brut artists suffer through wine-sipping openings, pay agents and curators up to 50 percent commissions and wind up selling their work for a song.

The categorization of Art Brut has also expanded. Originally meant as art created almost solely by trauma survivors or people with mental illnesses, artists can fall under the Art Brut umbrella if they meet more than one of the following criteria: Their illness or trauma influences their work; they are self-taught; they do not participate in the "mainstream art world"; they create prolifically; and they often use found, or given, material for their media.

All of this creates a fundamental problem for Art Brut artists, according to Sesow, who says that Art Brut is more a phase in an artist's career than a movement. He makes the point that if an Art Brut artist has any talent, he or she will eventually learn the fundamentals by creating. If an artist has experienced trauma or is living with a mental illness, the art heals it. Finally, if an Art Brut artist starts deriving an income from the work, he or she cannot avoid baptism into the invasive art world - Art Brut or not.

"I don't consider myself part of the old Outsider or Art Brut movements. I don't know what label I am. ... I just know I like to do it. It challenges the hell out of me, and I'm going to keep doing it," Sesow says.

"I don't know where the Brut or Outsider movements are headed. I suppose desire to make a lot of money from the living painters will eventually spell the downfall of the movement," he says. "Regardless of the label, people will continue to use art to heal and express themselves."

The Collector

Walk into the home of Beverly Kaye, one of Connecticut's premier Art Brut collectors and curators, and you walk into a gallery of raw art. Works by Sesow; Maurice Hansen, a deceased New Haven painter who had schizophrenia; and Clyde Angel, an Iowa scrap metal sculptor with schizophrenia, compete for every bit of wall space not already occupied by other Outsider Art creations.

"I've been collecting since college," Kaye explains, as she pulls out a large sheet of butcher paper filled with miniature caricatures of patients in mental hospital. "When we're children, we're taught to draw in the lines, use certain colors. In this art, the talent and the creativity we had as children hasn't been squashed. The early stuff is still there."

Kaye, who studied special education and fine art at Syracuse University, explains how she finds the artists she represents. She will stop at a flea market or a remote weather-beaten store along a lazy stretch of highway. Occasionally she will take the call of a mental health clinician impressed by something from a patient's art therapy session. Quite frequently, she just stops at a table on the street, which is how she discovered Sesow in Georgetown, then a software engineer at IBM pulling in close to six figures a year.

Though Kaye no longer represents Sesow, she has kept some of his artwork. Some of her current favorites - and clients - are Alexandra Huber, a German artist whose small mixed media drawings, mostly of childlike "head-footer" people, reflect the puzzling order of life circumstances, and Paul Pitt, a factory worker who paints about 12 historically inspired, almost Puritan looking, oil canvases a year.

"In every one, he paints a little black boy wearing a red scarf - that's



'repeating myself' (BEVERLY KAYE GALLERY)

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his signature," Kaye says. "He used to paint each one over and over obsessively. I told him, `Paul, you're never going to finish them if you keep doing that."

Once Kaye finds an aspiring, self-taught artist, the door to the Art Brut world swings wide open. As in the established art world, the first step in the process is entrance into the shows: Chicago's Intuit Show of Folk and Outsider Art in the fall and New York's Outsider Art Fair every January, where all of the best-selling Art Brut artists started. Next comes a residency in an Art Brut-approved gallery, followed by an ad or better yet, an article in Raw Vision or The Outsider magazines, the Art Brut journals of record.

Once the paintings start selling, Kaye says collectors keep coming back for more, often for work from the same artist. For all her connections and promotion, Kaye takes half of a painting's selling price, but she says that working with Art Brut artists, depending on the mental conditions of some, isn't always easy. She recently ended the representation of one artist because of his demanding, and sometimes threatening, e-mails.

"I help many artists, who often don't want the world at their doorstep, bring their art to people who wouldn't normally see it," says Kaye. "I don't want to sell the art because a person is schizophrenic or manic depressive or traumatized in some way. I want to sell the painting.

Institutionalization

Sesow says not all art in the tradition of Art Brut is created by people with mental health diagnoses, but the movement certainly has roots in mental institutions. Beginning in the 1920s, European psychiatrist Dr. Hans Prinzhorn began noticing something interesting in the work of their patients when they were handed paper, pen and paint, and it began to appeal to him. He started collecting thousands of works, then wrote the book "Bildernerei der Geisteskranken" ("Artistry of the Mentally Ill"), which distinctly influenced the contemporary and Surrealist artists, including Dubuffet.

The French painter and several other artists, including Andre Breton, formed the "Compagnie de l'Art Brut" in 1948, a collective in which the artists believed that innovative art should "bypass the Renaissance," according to Raw Vision magazine, "and return to a much earlier tradition of art dictated by ideas rather than by appearance." Dubuffet also sought out works of extreme individuality by untrained creators for his own personal collection, the "Collection de l'Art Brut," which he eventually sent to America in the hopes of finding it a home.

That never materialized. But the city of Lausanne, Switzerland, eventually agreed to house it. The Collection de l'Art Brut, or Art Brut Museum, is now one of the most popular art museums in Europe.

With the advent of psychiatric medications, however, far fewer people live their lives in psychiatric hospitals, and far less artwork is discovered. But there are still those who find a way to create.

New Haven's Van Gogh

Like Van Gogh, Maurice Hansen, who had schizophrenia, spent time in mental institutions. But unlike the peripatetic Vincent, he created the majority of his large-scale paintings and wall murals in his hometown, New Haven. Throughout his 40-year career, the self-taught artist painted thousands of canvases, each depicting dozens of interlocking mythical scenes and popular story tales.

While Van Gogh's artwork achieved notoriety after his death from the complications of a suicide attempt, Hansen, who named his earless cat Vincent, became the poster artist for the American Art Brut movement during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s before he died of leukemia in 2000 - an illness exacerbated by his fear of treatment.

In retrospect, Hansen fits Sesow's mold of Art Brut artist: "an artist who evolved, who used the art to heal and who eventually transcended the label."

Though he started in the outsider shows, beginning in 1992, the mainstream art world took notice of Hansen's work. Lincoln Center's Cork Gallery displayed his 8- by 30-foot mural "Coney Island" in 1995, and he held retrospectives throughout the Northeast. One of Hansen's paintings hangs in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. It is simply signed "Maurice" and, like every one of his paintings, includes a depiction of the earless feline Vincent - his true imprint.

New Incarnation?

Sesowhas probably outgrown the Art Brut scene, though some of his paintings still evoke trauma, and he continues to paints obsessively.

"Beverly [Kaye] first associated my work into the Art Brut genre, and I went with it. I figured I had to keep painting disability issues and keep going to these shows, which were just bringing me down," says Sesow, though he acknowledges Kaye's help and says the two still have an amiable relationship. "I still do some disability painting, but I'm past that; I have tackled social problems such as 9/11, the wars in Iraq, divorce and disabled soldiers through my paintings.

"I feel my purpose as a painter is to document the times I've lived through ... the personal and the societal."

Sesow suggests he might have developed a more modern variation of Art Brut by selling his work almost exclusively from his website and working outside the traditional gallery system. Surrounded in his studio by miniature busts of the Communist hero Vladimir Lenin, he wants to teach emerging artists how to escape the Art Brut system.

Kaye waffles when it comes to defining Sesow as an Art Brut artist, but she also believes the "umbrella has become too large." In the end, however, both agree it's still all about the work.

"In 50 years, people will forget the stories behind the paintings and the sculptures, and they will probably look at them as fine art," she says.

For more on Matt Sesow's work, visit the website www.sesow.com.

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