

An abstract painting featuring horizontal bands of color. The top section is dark, with a transition into a wide band of blue and white, followed by a prominent, vibrant red band. Below the red is a section of light green and yellow, and the bottom section is a mix of dark green and black. The overall effect is one of layered, textured brushstrokes.

# SELF-TAUGHT ART

HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Self-taught art (also known as “Outsider art”) rejects convention. In that spirit, we have taken a different approach in this e-catalogue, which is presented as a dialogue instead of a list of works with short essays. Frequently asked questions about this often perplexing field are answered by Tom Parker, a Director at Hirschl & Adler and a well-respected authority and lecturer on the subject.

Our hope is that this format will provide an easy-to-understand introduction to an area of the art market that is often confusing and difficult to approach. Better yet, we hope that it might introduce some to an exciting field that is still in the process of gestation and discovery. History is being made, right now, by the legacy of these works, and the collectors, curators, and scholars that are moved by their visionary and emotional content.

For more information on the works presented here, please click through the links embedded in the images and text.

For inquiries, please contact:

[Modern@HirschlAndAdler.com](mailto:Modern@HirschlAndAdler.com)

212.535.8810

*Please note: The items in this catalogue are available for purchase. All works are offered subject to prior sale.*

**Q** When and how did Self-taught art become recognized as its own genre? What distinguishes it from the rest of the art world?

**TP** French artist Jean Dubuffet is usually credited as the first to elevate art made at the extreme margins of society—what he termed “Art Brut” or “Raw Art”—beginning in the late 1940s. He took particular interest in the art of mental patients, prisoners, and children, whose circumstances rendered impossible any interaction with mainstream culture. In 1972, cultural historian Roger Cardinal coined the term “Outsider Art” to identify and call attention to a broader group of untrained artists who could not, or in some cases *chose* not to, conform to the standard image of a practicing artist as defined by both the academy and the general public.

Outsider artists are sometimes conflated with Folk artists with whom they share a naïve or primitive sensibility. But there’s a stark difference between the two. Folk or Vernacular artists are untrained artists who aspire to established academic traditions, whereas Outsider artists are less aware of, even oblivious to, art world norms and conventions and therefore unconcerned with following them.

BILL TRAYLOR (1854–1949)

*Man with Barking Dog (Blue and Red Construction)*, about 1939–42

Pencil and poster paint on cardboard, 6 x 7 3/4 in.





**Q** Why are certain authorities in the field now calling it “Self-taught art” instead of “Outsider art”?

**TP** For decades the term “Outsider” served disenfranchised artists well. Assigning them a name heralded their existence and conferred a degree of status on a previously unseen sector of the art world.

But, with enthusiasm for Outsider art increasing, many believe the term has outlived its usefulness. As we become more attuned to the hazards of classifying or labeling individuals, and as institutions and mainstream collectors look to embrace Outsider art, the term is seen as a hinderance to that acceptance. Instead, “Self-taught” is emerging as the one characteristic this wide range of artists all share, and that doesn’t emphasize their “otherness.”

PURVIS YOUNG (1943–2010)

*[Pregnant Woman]*, about 1978–80

Paint on board, 39 x 16 1/2 in.



FRANK WALTER (1926–2009)

*Sunset with Black Forms*

Oil on paper, 11 x 17 1/4 in.



**Q** Are there any artists who have had a particularly important role in defining the field?

**TP** Internationally, the Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930) was probably the earliest celebrated artist in this field. In America, we most often praise the triumvirate of Henry Darger (1892–1973), Martin Ramirez (1895–1963), and particularly **Bill Traylor** (1854–1949), who was born into slavery, worked most of his life as a share-cropper in rural Alabama, and didn't make art until a three-year stretch while in his mid-80s and homeless in the city of Montgomery. Instantly recognizable, Traylor's straightforward depictions of people and animals are deceptively sophisticated, revealing his uncanny observational powers, innate grasp of abstract principles, and unguarded characterization of the Black experience in the American South. Hirschl & Adler Modern was perhaps the first large, mainstream gallery to promote Traylor's work to a wide audience in the 1980s.

To these I would also add **Purvis Young** (1943–2010), the prodigious Miami street artist who enjoyed cult status in Florida and the South throughout his life, and whose popularity has “blown up” since his death. In the early 1970s Young was an ex-con back in his inner-city Miami neighborhood of Overtown and watched it decline around him. With little more than an eighth-grade education and a budding passion for drawing, he began painting scenes of everyday life on found pieces of plywood and broken furniture. His subjects included incarcerated men, pregnant women, police chases, parades, funerals, horses, Cuban “boat people,” and Jazz musicians. Young covered the façade of an abandoned warehouse with hundreds of his works making a powerful statement about the Black struggle in American society and packing a visual punch that still resonates to this day. The sheer size of his output has made Purvis Young accessible to a broad spectrum of private and institutional collectors, and his early fame made him one of the longest celebrated and studied Self-taught artists in America.

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**BILL TRAYLOR (1854–1949)**

*Mexican Man with Green and Red Spotted Shirt,*  
about 1939–42

Poster paint on cardboard, 11 3/8 x 8 in.

**Q** What should one look for when collecting Self-taught art? Is there something that makes a particularly great example?

**TP** Self-taught art is inherently individualistic. The joy of collecting it comes from applying our own personal criteria to the work, free of academic dogma, art world trends, or market forces. The appeal is often visceral, emotional, and highly intimate. “It speaks to me” is a perfectly valid reason to buy a work of art. Why shouldn’t it be the most valid reason of all?

Form, color, technique, materials, and meaning are all hallmarks of great examples of Self-taught art. But I prize originality above all else. And it’s the biggest reason collectors of other genres are moving into this field. Imagine an artist who’s unaware of other artists’ work; who doesn’t make art to sell it or to measure themselves against their peers. It’s a romantic ideal, one that’s quickly becoming the “Holy Grail” for art collectors disenchanted by a world saturated with highly trained, culturally savvy, market-aware artists. Self-taught artists come the closest to delivering on that conceit. Discovering truly novel work is a powerful motivator.

I would add that, while a work of art should always succeed on its own, we cannot divorce it from the story of its maker. To not ask “who,” “how,” or “why” deprives us of a crucial aspect of the work’s appeal. These artists are heroes, overcoming immense challenges, finding grace in their circumstances with humility and honesty. Viewing their art through this prism helps us see the artworks for what they truly are: poignant glimpses of the human condition.

FRANK WALTER (1926–2009)

*Yellow and Red Sky*

Oil on paper (Polaroid box cover),  
with metal cartridge, 3 7/8 x 3 1/4 in.



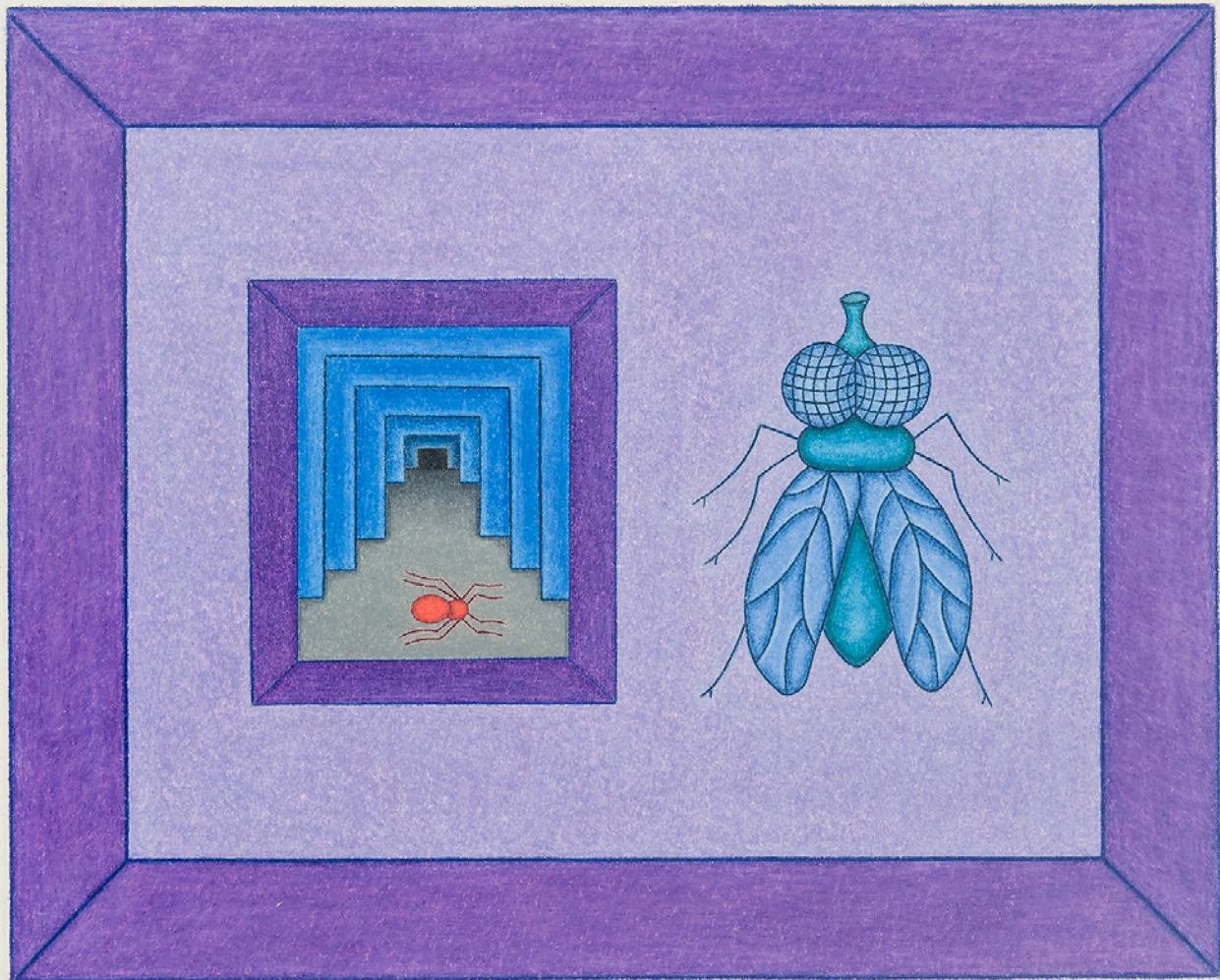




JAMES EDWARD DEEDS, JR. (1908–1987)

House / "GARDEN WORK" [257 / 258]

Graphite and crayon on ledger paper (double-sided),  
9 1/4 x 8 3/8 in.



DAVID ZELDIS (b. 1952)

*(Fly with Interior)*, 1987

Colored pencil on paper, 4 x 5 in.

**Q** What is going on right now in the Self-taught world? Are there any museums or collections that have particularly strong holdings in Self-taught art?

**TP** The past decade has seen burgeoning interest in Self-taught art as collectors and art enthusiasts seek alternatives to a linear art-historical narrative. That trend dovetails with the broader public's embrace of marginalized and under-recognized people, including minorities, women, and the disabled.

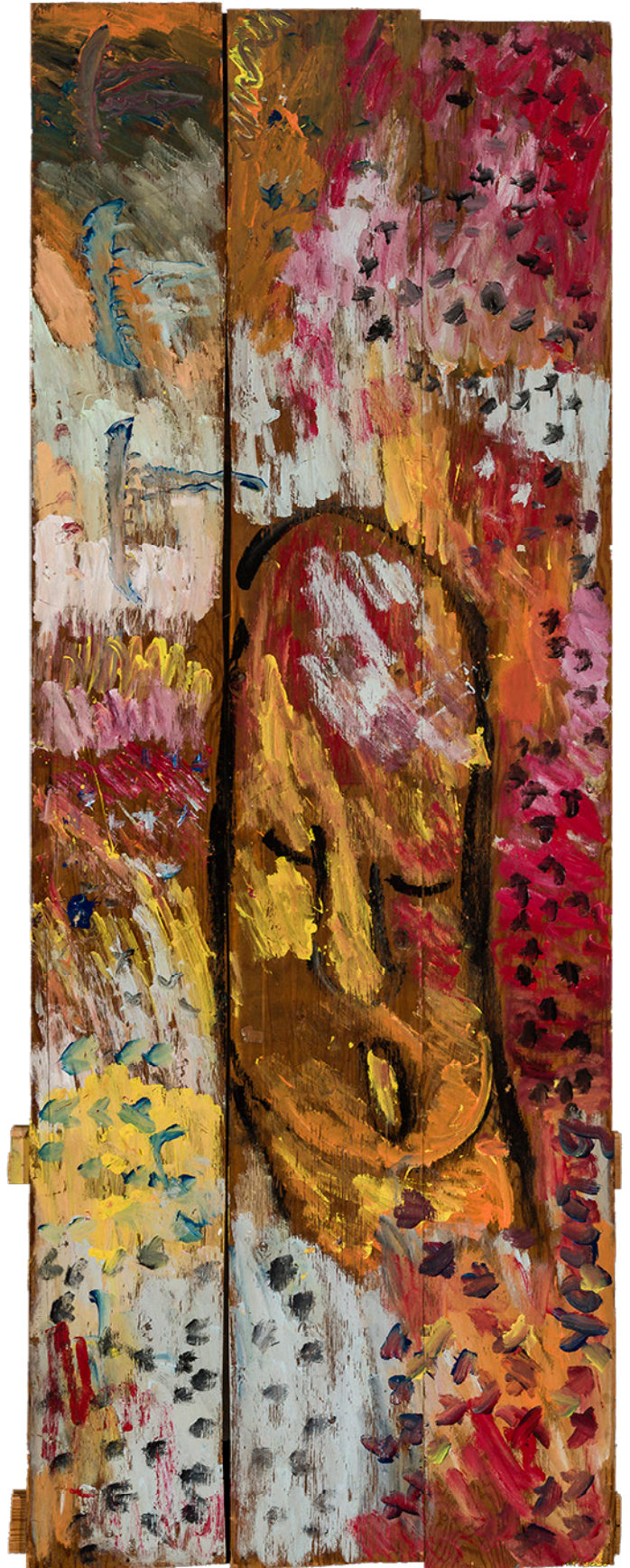
Recent years have seen important exhibitions of Self-taught art at major museums like the Philadelphia Museum of Art (*Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*, 2013); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (*History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation*, 2018); and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. (*Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*, 2018), to name a few.

Some of the top institutional collections of Self-taught art can be found at the American Folk Art Museum, New York; American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore; Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland; Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago; The Museum of Everything, London.

PURVIS YOUNG (1943–2010)

(*Zulu Dreaming*), early 2000s

Paint on wood, 96 1/4 x 36 1/4 in.





JEANNE BROUSSEAU (b. 1952)

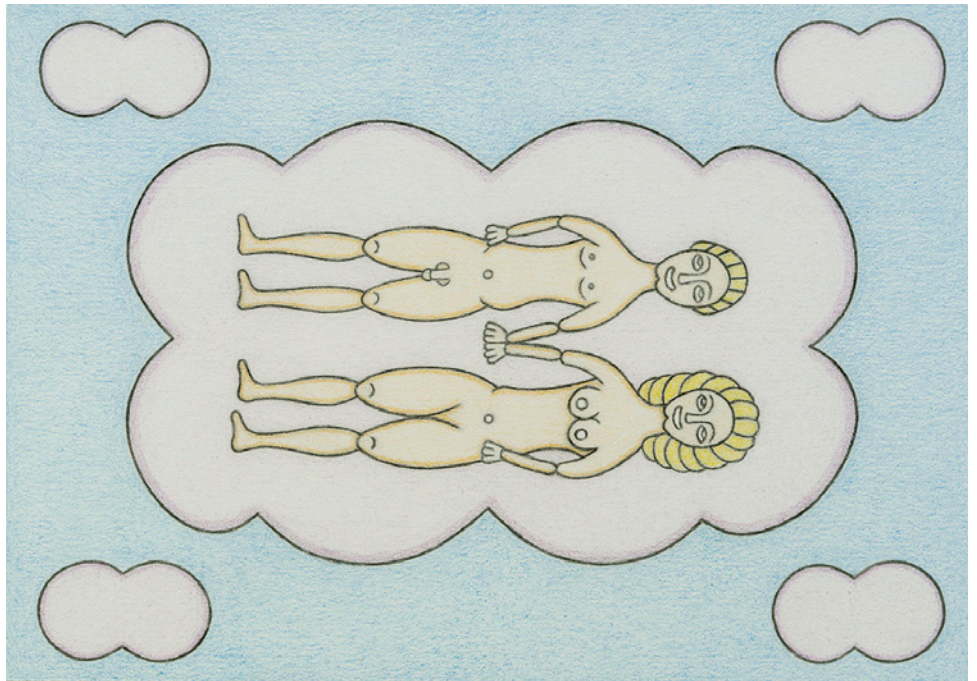
*Untitled*, about 2018–19

Colored ink marker on paper, 14 x 10 1/2 in.

DAVID ZELDIS (b. 1952)

*Lovers in the Clouds*, 2012

Graphite and crayon on paper,  
7 x 10 in.



PURVIS YOUNG (1943–2010)

*[Angel with Ants and Zulu Riders]*,  
about 1990s

Paint on wood, 35 1/2 x 82 1/2 in.



**Q** How does Self-taught art integrate with other genres? How does it augment a preexisting collection?

**TP** Much is made of Self-taught art's distinctiveness. But equally fascinating are the visual languages or currents that seem to course through totally unrelated examples of Self-taught and mainstream academic art. Most obvious of these is the shared affinity for abstraction. Academic artists took generations to refine their aesthetic principles down to a simple combination of form, plane and color. Self-taught artists, free to follow their impulses unconstrained by precedent or by market forces, come to abstraction more naturally. The juxtaposition of a highly evolved, controlled sense of abstraction with a more spontaneous, unstudied one can be both eye-popping and revealing of human ways of seeing. Think of Bill Traylor's pure blue geometric forms filling the picture plane in off-beat, asymmetric fashion alongside any Post-War master. The combination can be magical.

Another example is the Surrealist tendencies found in both groups. Once again Bill Traylor's unlikely combinations of figures and animals atop bizarre structures using shifting scales and sometimes inscrutable narratives hold their own against works by Duchamp, Magritte, or Miro. It's not hard to imagine that an artist who is isolated by his or her circumstances or a clinical mental condition could gravitate effortlessly to the fantasies of the subconscious.

The obvious links between mainstream and Self-taught art make them integral pieces of an art-historical puzzle. Self-taught artists then are increasingly sought after for collections both public and private that seek a more comprehensive, inclusive, and lively telling of our visual history.

BILL TRAYLOR (1854–1949)

*Man and Bird over House*, about 1939–42

Colored pencil and graphite on cardboard,  
12 1/2 x 11 1/4 in.









JAMES EDWARD DEEDS, JR. (1908–1987)

“MISS. MILLBURN”/ *Chickens, Turkey and Trees* [217 / 218]

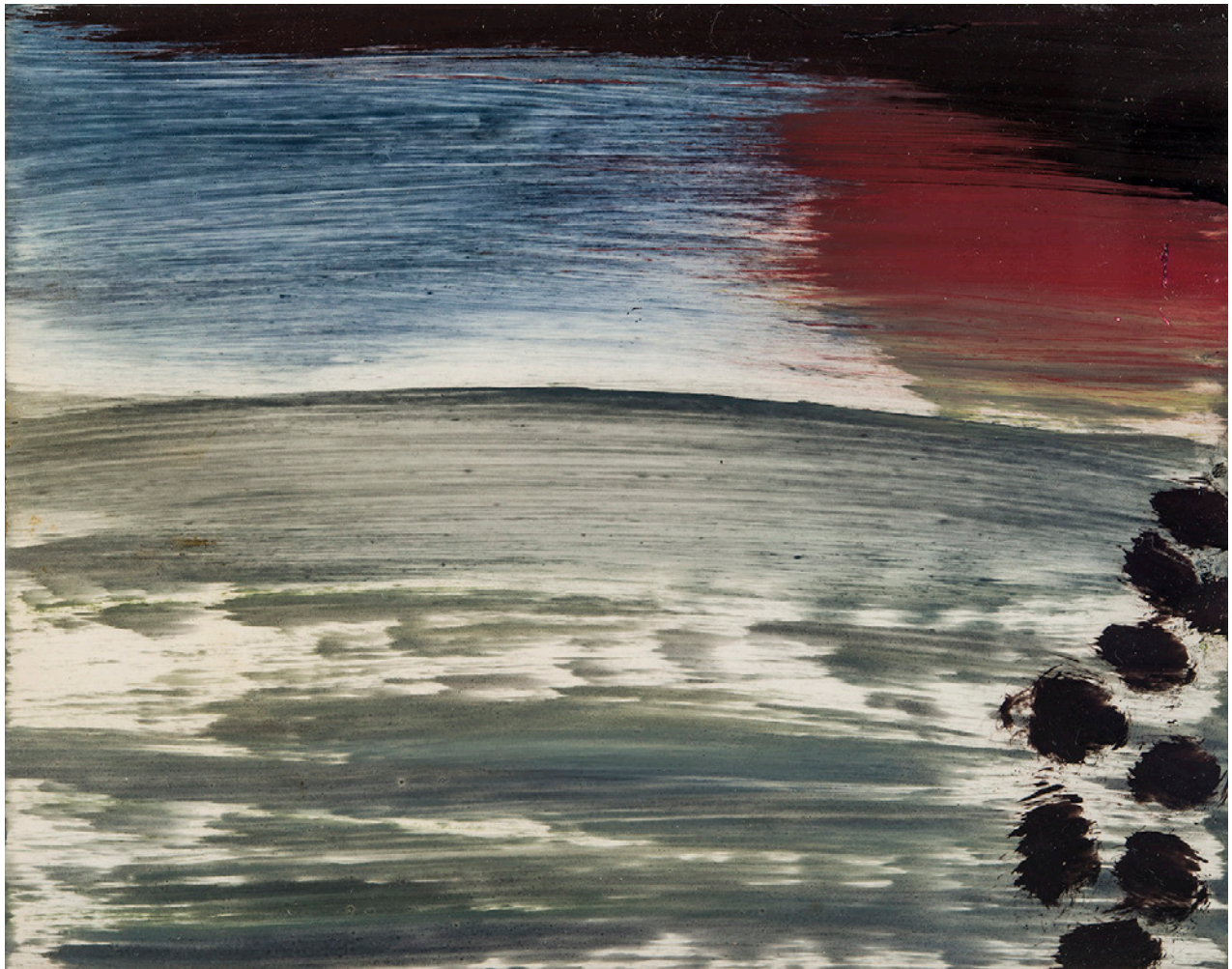
Graphite and crayon on ledger paper (double-sided),  
9 1/4 x 8 3/8 in.

In addition to his newly recognized prowess as a painter, sculptor, and photographer, the Antiguan savant **Frank Walter** (1926–2009) was also an author, philosopher, poet, and composer. Practicing his own form of self-isolation, Walter spent the later decades of his life living alone on a hilltop on the island's south shore. His small, unforgettable paintings reveal a mastery of light and shadow, reductive forms, and evocative coloring. Walter battled what some believe to have been undiagnosed schizophrenia. Propelled by an inner sense of superiority, but unable to convince others of the same, Walter poured his immense talent into even the humblest carved stick or painted Polaroid packaging. Each work is a kind of hymn to his native island, nourishment for his soul, and for ours.

FRANK WALTER (1926–2009)

*View of Coast with Grey Clouds*

Oil on photographic paper, 8 x 10 in.





FRANK WALTER (1926–2009)

*Architecture*

Oil on wood panel, 14 1/2 x 19 in.

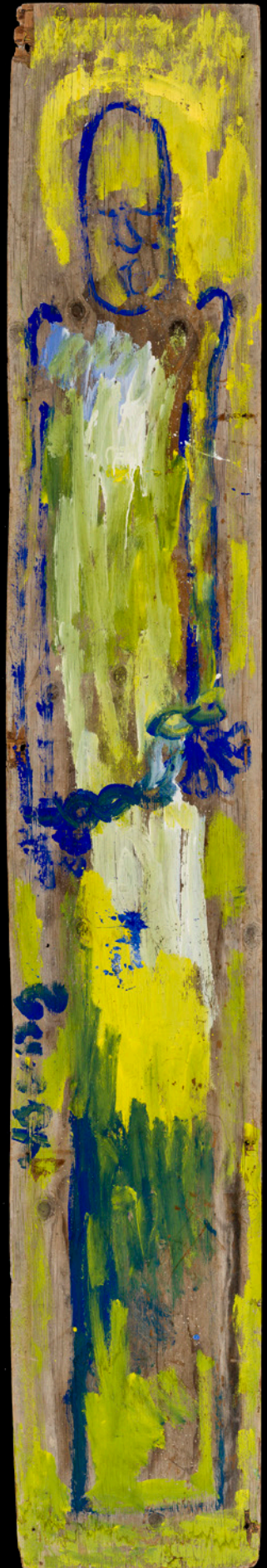
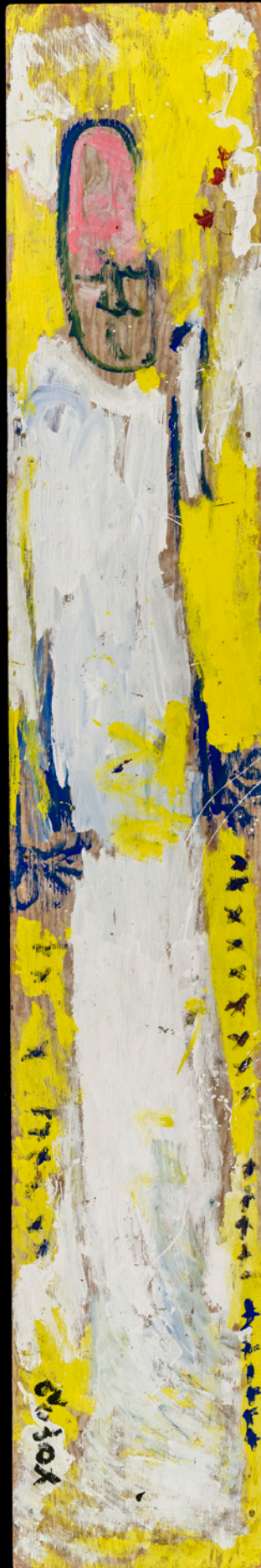


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BILL TRAYLOR (1854–1949)

*Man Pointing, Woman in Green*,  
about 1939–42

Crayon and pencil on cardboard,  
15 x 9 1/2 in.



PURVIS YOUNG (1943–2010)

*[Tall Angel without Chains]* and  
*[Tall Angel in Chains]*, 2003

Paint on wood panel, 117 1/2 x 19 in.  
(each)

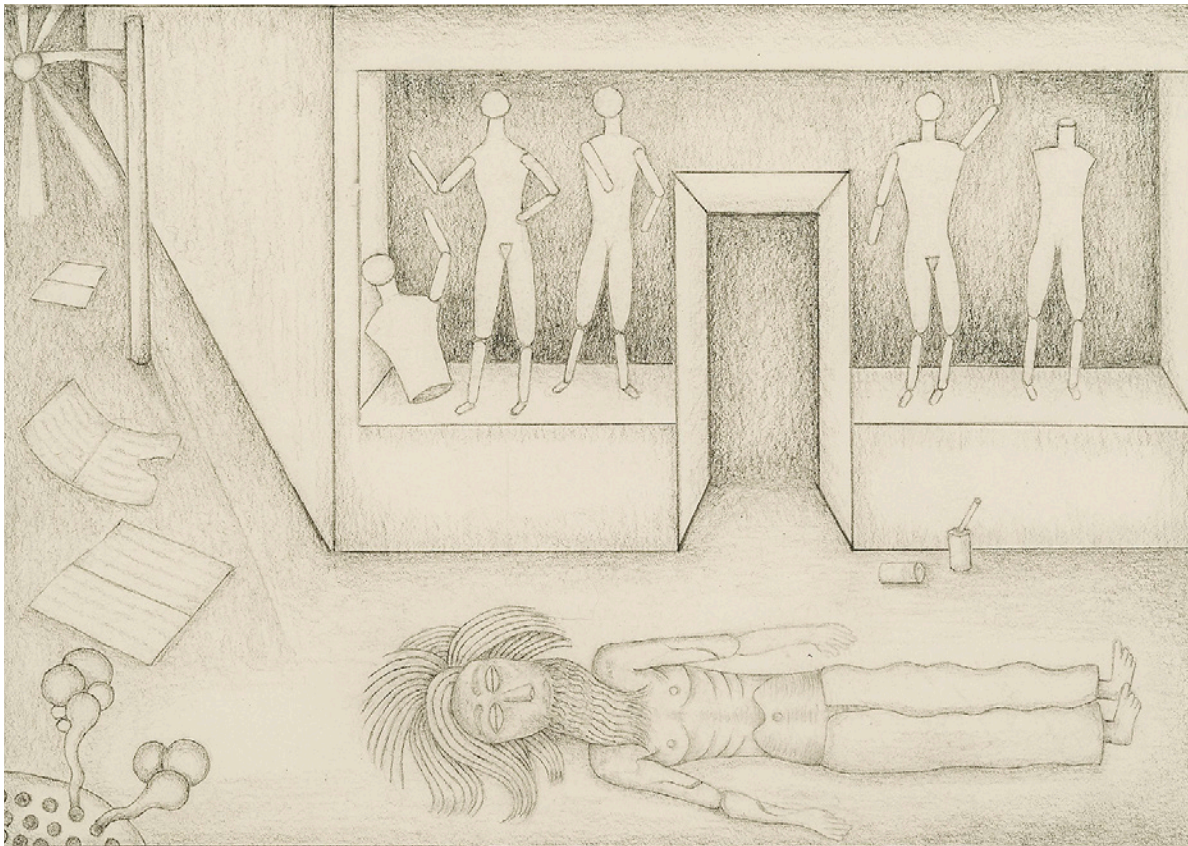
## Q Are there any living Self-taught artists we should be aware of?

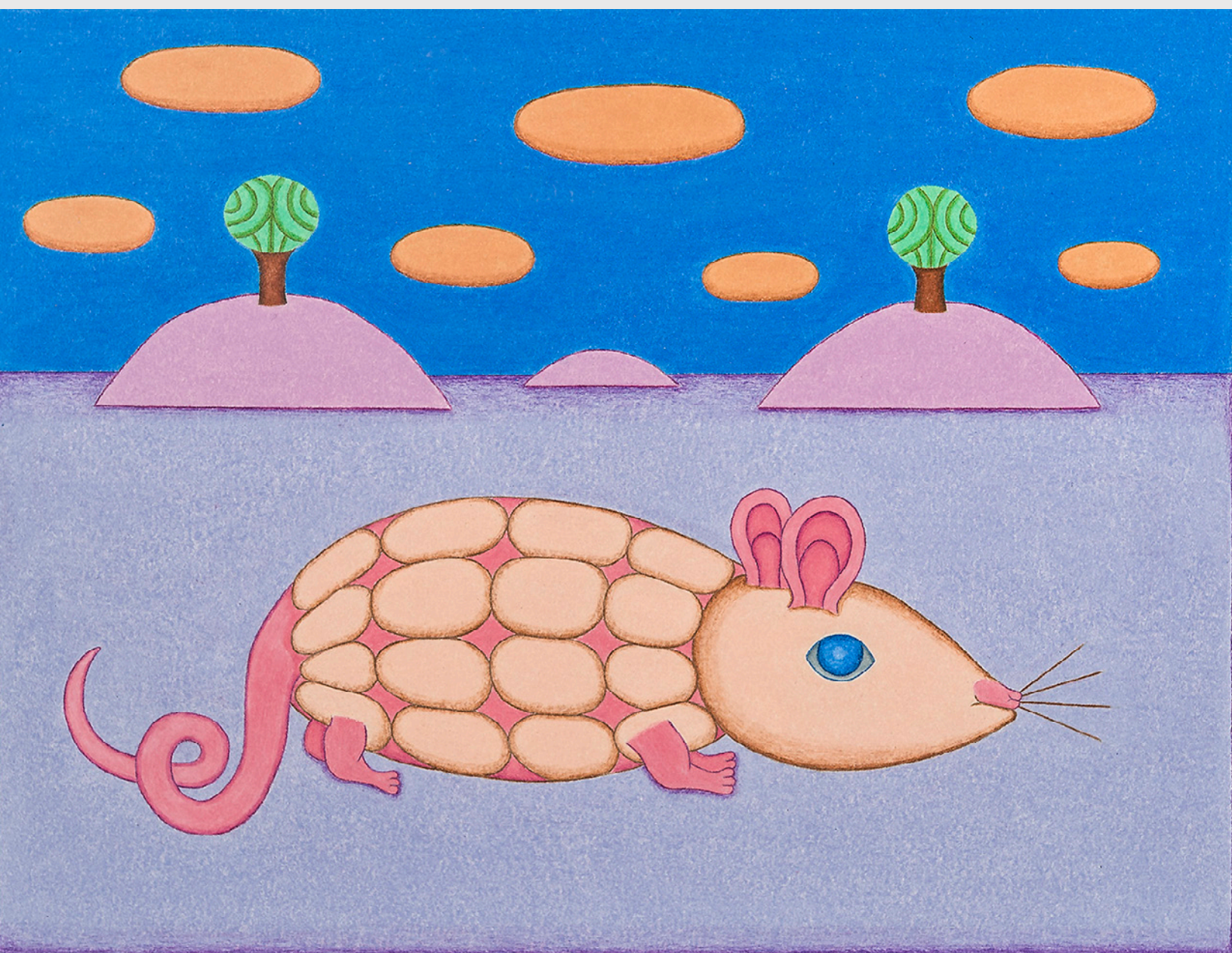
**TP** Fortunately the Self-taught “umbrella” is broad and inclusive, wide enough to include many living artists who, though represented by a gallery, are working far outside the mainstream. Two are currently showcased by Hirschl & Adler Modern. One is **David Zeldis** (b. 1952) who toils away in his New York apartment drawing impossibly precise, fanciful illustrations of figures and animals. Fearing anything that might bring him harm, Zeldis avoids sharp objects, electricity, and open windows. Every day is a battle waged courageously against himself. His artwork seems to document his victories and losses. Sometimes serenely beautiful, other times grotesque, either monotoned or brightly colored, his highly symbolic drawings speak to the fears and foibles of humanity, but also of the distinct joys of being alive.

DAVID ZELDIS (b. 1952)

*Man Sleeping in Street (The Derelict)*,  
about 1979

Graphite on paper, 5 x 7 in.





DAVID ZELDIS (b. 1952)

*(Mouse in Landscape)*

Colored pencil on paper, 6 7/8 x 9 in.

**Jeanne Brousseau** (b. 1952) lives in rural Maine, a crafter and retired farmer. Until recently, no one had known of her intimate drawings that confront a long-suppressed past of childhood abuse at the hands of her father. Begun as a kind of unsupervised therapy, her intricate, colorful drawings have taken on a talismanic and empowering role in Brousseau's life. Her richly imagined, shape-shifting characters tell a horrifying and, at times, graphic story. These are brutally honest works made palatable by an innocence of vision and undeniable beauty. Once the victim in her personal narrative, Brousseau is now the heroine. She has vanquished her past and emerged with the strength and artistic acuity to tell us about it.

JEANNE BROUSSEAU (b. 1952)

*Untitled [Vengeance Tale with Horse & Dragon], about 1994–98*

Ink marker on paper, 9 x 11 1/2 in.







JEANNE BROUSSEAU (b. 1952)

*Untitled*, about 2018–19

Colored ink marker on paper, 14 x 10 1/2 in.

PHOTOGRAPHY

All photographs by Eric W. Baumgartner, except:

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HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

The Fuller Building  
41 East 57th Street  
New York, NY 10022

212.535.8810

[www.HirschlAndAdler.com](http://www.HirschlAndAdler.com)

[Modern@HirschlAndAdler.com](mailto:Modern@HirschlAndAdler.com)