INSIDE THE OUTSIDE

Reconsidering Our Views about Art

BY TONY GENGARELLY

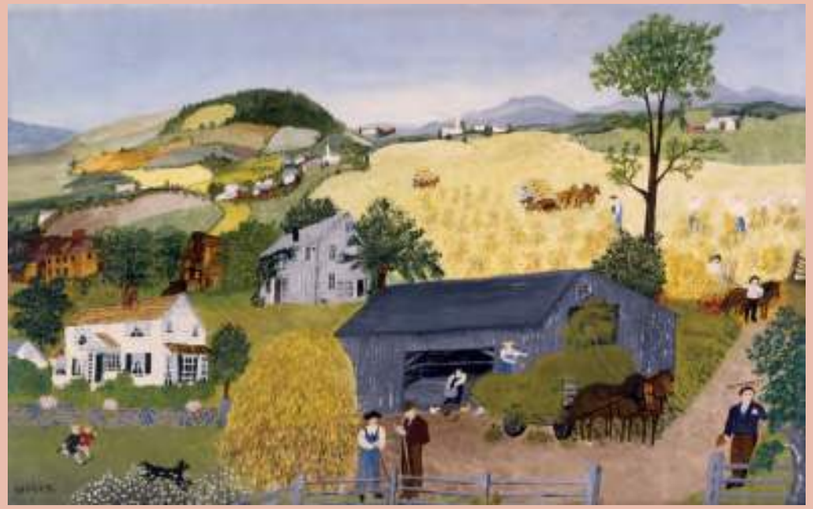
During the month of March 2014, artists and educators gathered at Gallery51 on Main Street in North Adams, Mass., to consider how outsider and self-taught art can alter our notions of creativity and to explore the value of biography and art education as vehicles for appreciating and understanding a work of art. The background for these discussions was the exhibition *Inside the Outside: Reconsidering Our Views about Art*, sponsored by the Fine and Performing Arts Department and the Jessica Park Project at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA). This exhibition of more than 50 works of art included outsider and self-taught artists, as well as contributions from patrons and art teachers who admired these artists' creative originality. Since the educators represented were also art therapists, questions about the therapeutic value of art-making and the legitimacy of art made in a therapeutic context surfaced as well. Opening night also occasioned the release of a new art biography on Jessica Park (See "Book Reviews," *Folk Art Messenger*, Summer/Fall, 2014), and the artist was present to sign purchased copies.

On the walls were artist biographies and wall texts from MCLA students who had helped organize the show. In the text near Park's paintings, one student asked: "How do imagination and creativity interact with the artist's unique perspective to create extraordinary works of art?" She concluded, "[Park] has combined order and attention to detail, both of which are autistic traits, with her wonderful sense of color and form and drawing skill to become a successful artist." Another posed this question: "If a work of art is therapeutic for the artist, is it still art?" Referring to those who make art in a therapeutic setting, she wrote: "They have the ability to change a negative experience or emotions into something beautiful and creative for them and their audience. They are [expressing] their voice through art."

Later in the month, two sessions at Gallery51 highlighted some more of the issues raised by the exhibition. First, the topic "Art and Biography" was explored and then "Art Education and the Education of the Artist." Art professionals, artists and arts educators participated. MCLA Professor emeritus Tony Gengarelly, Project Director for the exhibition, served as moderator.

Jamie Franklin.

Photograph courtesy Bennington Museum.



Anna Mary "Grandma Moses" Robinson, **In Harvest Time**, 1945. Oil on Pressed Wood. Collection of the Kallir Family Foundation. Copyright 2014, Grandma Moses Properties Company, New York.

The featured presenter for the "Art and Biography" discussion was **Jamie Franklin**, curator for the Bennington Museum in Bennington, Vt. Franklin has an abiding interest in self-taught art, both as curator of the largest public repository of paintings by legendary folk artist Grandma Moses and as a private collector of outsider and self-taught art. In this last pursuit he is joined by his wife **Renee Bouchard**, artist and art educator, whose own art, along with many pieces from their collection, was displayed in the gallery.

Franklin advocated a need for balance between information on the artist's life and a critical observation of the art. He cited many examples to demonstrate how biography can indeed enhance the understanding and appreciation of an artist's work, but cautioned that an excessive focus on the artist's story can overshadow the art and distort our perception of it.

Renee Bouchard.

Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Beginning with his current reinstallation of the Bennington Museum's Grandma Moses collection, Franklin explained that Moses's paintings were typically thought to be autobiographical reminiscences of country life in rural New England. Focusing on a genre scene completed by Moses near the end of World War II, *In Harvest Time*, Franklin observed that a 1943 letter from Moses to her art dealer contained a reference that seemed to contradict assumptions that the artist's memory paintings had little to do with contemporary life. Aware of the devastation of the overseas war, Moses had expressed a hope for an eventual return to peace and tranquility. Could her picture be addressing a contemporary appreciation of the seasonal productivity exemplified by New England farm life? Franklin suggested that when one looks at Moses's picture with a sense of history in mind, a straightforward autobiographical image can take on a more allegorical tone. Moses's World War II painting thus represents the longing she shared with many at that time for a "promised land of peace and repose." When the viewer goes beyond the usual assumptions about Moses's art, the larger question surfaces about "how the artist was feeling and how was she trying to convey those feelings through her art," Franklin concluded.

After speaking about his investigations into the previously unknown backgrounds of artists in his own collection of self-taught art, Franklin indicated that self-taught and outsider artists may require biographical information to identify more accurately their outsider status and even to legitimatize their work. However, an anecdote about a series of paintings by the artist Paul Humphrey revealed that the artist's comments about the creation of some of his own work were, upon investigation, proven to be false, opening a whole psychological dimension to a series of images called *Sleeping Beauties*. Humphrey had claimed that the "beauties" were originally inspired by a high school picture of his daughter Sandra—"re-imagined, copied and colored." He had, in fact, no daughter named Sandra, so this preoccupation with a fictitious person becomes a question mark about the motives of the artist. Assumptions about biography, Franklin emphasized, can sometimes be misleading and cloud our view of the art. One has to be cautious not to put too much emphasis on the life of the artist or use it as a substitute for a careful reading of the art.

Panelist **Nancy Mathews**, former Eugenie Prendergast Curator at the Williams College Museum of Art and author of a book on Paul Gauguin, resonated with the Paul Humphrey story. According to Mathews, much of Gauguin's life in Tahiti, recorded in his travel journal, *Noa Noa*, was "simply made up." The artist had tried to

"go native," to bring his vision of art into his own life experience. Mathews then asked: "Where does the artist's life end and the artist's work begin.?"

She also suggested that there are many "biographies" to consider when viewing a work of art: the artist, of course, but also those who have commented on the work and the viewer's own frame of reference, as well. Franklin agreed, indicating that a curator's observations about a work of art are never completely objective, "You are always going to be affected by your own life's story."

The discussion took on a more personal dimension with commentary from **Anna Saldo Burke**, expert in the field of special needs education and a lifelong friend of Jessica Park. Saldo-Burke, with her twin sister Diana Saldo, first met Jessica in a high school art class. The twins took the awkward student with autism under their wings and became her art teachers and support system at the school. In her memoir about their time with Jessica, *Green Mittens Covered Her Ears*, Saldo-Burke outlines her relationship as more inclusive, with Jessica's health and welfare foremost; thus regarding her art as a vehicle for a better hold on life.

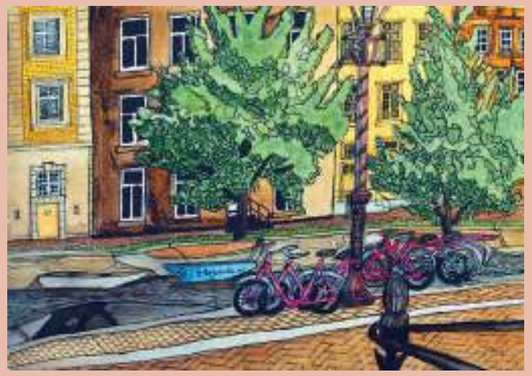
In this context, the life of the artist supersedes the artist's work, which becomes a partner in a kind of coping and healing process. From this perspective the art carries a different weight of importance. When asked by Mathews how Jessica "identifies herself as a successful artist," Saldo-Burke responded, "She identifies herself as a successful person." According to Saldo-Burke, Park's day job in the Williams College Mail Room and her network of family and friends "sum up her life, not just her art." Her art is a complete reflection of a successful life—"Things that delight Jessica now delight others." The art is, in Saldo-Burke's experience, part of a larger story. But, considering the Humphrey and Gauguin accounts, what is the real story and *how* is it manifested in the art?

Artist/educator **Michael McManmon** followed Saldo-Burke with a personal witness to his own life and art. Founder and Director of the College Internship Program (CIP), a college-level program for students on the autism spectrum, located in Lee, Mass., and five other campuses, McManmon holds advanced degrees in psychology (M.S. , M.A) and education (Ed.D.). A late diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome freed him to accept his exceptional gifts intertwined with his so-called "crazy" behavior patterns and to make a leap in the creation of his art.

Moving around the gallery, McManmon commented on his paintings displayed in the show. He revealed his delight in nature, especially trees, and his love of materials for their tactile qualities. As if he were reliving the last few years of his life, the animated McManmon talked about his new experiments with color and shapes—more abstract and less carefully drawn than was the case with his earlier work. He openly shared the impact of his diagnosis on his life and art: "I can be who I want to be in my life; I am not dysfunctional; I am not defective—I just think differently; like Temple Grandin I have a visual process for everything." Art has become his way, along with another passion (organic farming) to refashion a life—the life of the artist. His life and his art are, for Michael McManmon, partners on an exciting journey.


Michael McManmon.

Photographs courtesy College Internship Program.


Amsterdam, 2012, by Michael McManmon, watercolor and pen and ink.

Two nights later, the "Conversations" continued with a session on "Art Education and the Education of the Artist." The featured presenter was **Ilene Spiewak** who teaches art at the CIP campus in Lee where "the art teacher creates a warm, inviting and flexible classroom environment where each student feels valued; and where meaningful self-expression leads to improved self-esteem." Spiewak's own experience with art education was, in her words, "underwhelming." Only through studying art therapy and art education did she discover her own artistic voice as well as a way to help others. Spiewak's art and that of her students was displayed on the gallery walls.


Ilene Spiewak.

Spiewak communicated her particular sensitivity to the need for an open approach to art education, which she developed during her time at the Mill Creek School in Philadelphia. Here, Spiewak had an ample budget to buy art supplies and a large space where she could set up art stations and invite students to drop in "and explore themselves with art materials." For Spiewak, art education is meant to inspire individual creativity and nurture self-worth.

Panelist **Renee Bouchard** picked up on the theme of open art education. For years she has been inspired by artists outside the mainstream of established art schools, galleries and museums. A graduate of the Maine College of Art and a professional artist who exhibits regularly, Bouchard has chosen to go outside by going inside in order to find what she needs to say. Often her blend of colors and multiple layers of paint will reveal a thought or an inspiration only after the painting is completed—then she will title the work. Bouchard's *Monk*, 2011, a cauldron of flaming color with latent fear breaking through the painting's surface, is a reference, perhaps, to the self-immolation of Tibetan monks protesting political repression.


My Favorite Flower, by Ilene Spiewak, acrylic and oil on canvas.

Photographs courtesy of the artists.

As an educator Bouchard has a keen interest in children's art. Most recently she has been "collaborating" with her two-year-old son, engaging with his marks on the canvas in a kind of duet. For her, the innocent eye of the child is a priceless gift that opens new worlds. In a recent article for the *Bennington Banner* she is quoted: "I'm very interested in intuitive mark making. It's helping me develop my vocabulary. I like the idea of somebody saying, 'Did Renee do that or did a child do that' and not knowing." How, then, a questioner wanted to know, does one preserve the child's innocent eye through years and layers of education? Bouchard offered a few observations and then concluded: "I do not know the answer."

Eileen Mahoney, art therapist and Spiewak's colleague at CIP, elaborated on the subject of creativity. According to Mahoney, creativity is inherent in everyone, "not only in art but in many aspects of our lives." Art, however, "is for all of us, whether we are talented or not, a way to tap into that creativity." She spoke about the need for art education to invite people into what she termed the "imaginal world that we experience less and less in our lives." Art education, according to Mahoney, is less about how to make art and more about tapping into one's creative center.

MCLA professors **Greg Scheckler** and **Lisa Donovan** rounded out the evening. Scheckler, MCLA Professor of Art, recounted his own learning curve through the maze of contemporary art. Scheckler, who comes from a traditional art background, described his growing awareness that art is "diverse, strange, full of graffiti, magical, jazzy." Under such circumstances lines blur and categories multiply to the point of irrelevance. To punctuate the point, Scheckler introduced art by some of our fellow animal species—especially winsome images by "Metro the horse" and "Simon the pig," which provided a much appreciated levity. How does one teach art under such circumstances? "All we can do," Scheckler concluded, "is provide some grouping to show some of the dimensions of the art world and then help the student jump into the unknown."

Picking up on the outsider theme, **Lisa Donovan**, Associate Professor of Arts Management, lamented the outsider status of arts education. Donovan recounted her experience at a recent conference where art education was barely mentioned. Yet, there was plenty of talk about creative economies and creative cities. "Where was that creativity going to come from," she asked, "without arts education?" Here the evening seemed complete with the assertion that art is a multi-dimensional part of human life and ought to be central to the education of everyone.

Taking down the exhibition provided the chance to look more carefully at comments from gallery visitors who had participated in an interactive display, in which a question was posed and small cards were supplied for the visitors' responses. The completed cards were then hung on the wall, thus becoming part of the show. The question read: "What do you think art is, or can be?" The open-ended nature of the question invited a number of reflections. However, none of the 75 respondents thought art was the cultural property of the professional artist, the art historian, the gallery or the museum, nor was it necessarily learned. Neither did its quality of execution or the qualifications of its creator matter at all. Art was, for many, a manifestation of the mind, the human spirit, an expression of feelings and love—all the aspirations and attributes of being alive. Art is apparently everywhere, and "Inside the Outside" seemed to be a perfect place for it to thrive.

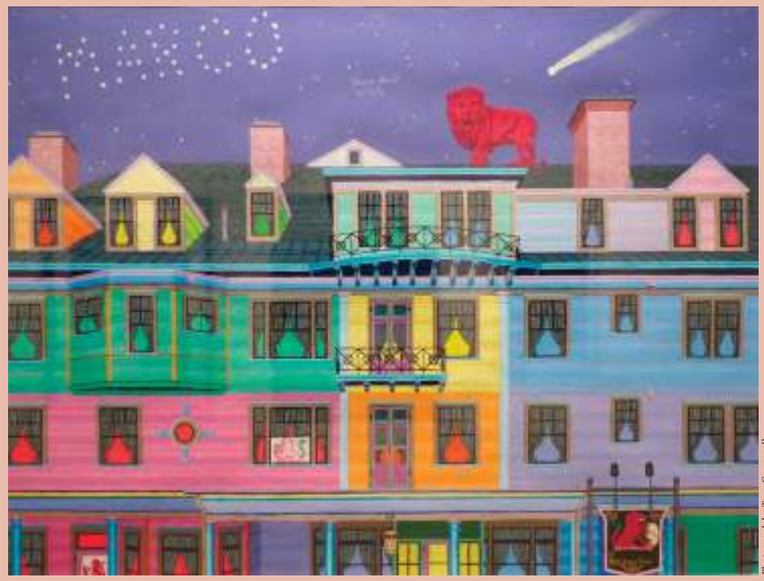
The questions raised during this month-long focus on the personal and creative context in the making of art far outpaced the answers, but the questions were well framed, both in the discussions and on the walls. The "answers," ever illusive, will keep us searching, asking and creating art.

TONY GENGARELLY, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Art History and Museum Studies, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and Director of the Jessica Park Project.

Comments or questions about "Inside the Outside" should be forwarded to the author at: a.gengarelly@mcla.edu.

Monk, 2011, by Renee Bouchard, oil on canvas.

The Red Lion Inn, by Jessica Park.



Photograph by Tony Gengarelly.