Bringing Out the Works of So-Called ‘Outsiders’

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

TRENTON

SINCE a hallway adequate re-
view of “Dream Singers, Sto-
ricetters: An African-American
Presence” would be as long as the show’s 238-page cata-
ologue, there can be little more than a
notification. To begin with the nuts
and bolts: the spectacle celebrating the “inter-state agreement” be-
 tween New Jersey and the Fukui pre-
fecture in Japan is now on view here,
at the State Museum, where it was
organized by the assistant curator,
Alison Weld. Its debut, however, took
place last year in Japan—hence the bilingual catalogue.

As explained in the foreword, the project seeks to reconcile differences between the two countries, on the assumption that art is a universal language. Be that as it may, viewers in a homogeneous culture like Ja-
pan’s may have had trouble grasping the nuances of an African tradition modified by three centuries of subjugation and one of relative freedom.

Without slavery, would there have been a Bill Traylor, suddenly pro-
ducing at an advanced age images reminiscent of cage drawings? Would the sculptor, Mel Edwards, have been inspired to devote 30 years to welding his series, “Lynch Fragments,” while also making monumental sculpture in the David Smith tradition? Finally, can a show be called representative that is heavy with loft artists (more than half the 53 participants are self-taught, including four quilt makers) but that excludes Richard Hunt, Martin Puryear (admittedly at his own request), Benga Saar and many other major figures?

The first two questions are unanswerable, the third one, too—but only after a glance at the catalogue. In an essay that discusses the artist, Ms. Weld contends that distinctions made between folk art and the mainstream kind are “artificial.” She also states that the differences are “merely a question of perspective.” Admireable as such sen-
timents are, they make “outsiders” of the professionals achieved in the real world but who are mixed in with the self-taught older holdovers seemingly designed to promote political equality. Thus, recent assemblages by Mr. Edwards, which are, by the way, larger and less clenching than their predecessors, fall into the “Poetics of Accumulation” category, along with the Wirmann’s assemblages and those by Lonnie Holley, another autodidact.

The logic of this grouping can be understood if not necessarily ap-
plauded. But what to make of William T. Williams’s inclusion in the party? His patchworks of alliterated painted on canvas could symbolize the accu-
mulation of years, especially in slum dwelling decor. But in appearance, they seem closer to the quilts, which fall under the heading, “The Con-
structed Image.”

This pattern of incongruity contin-
ues with “The Poetics of Economy.” On the one hand, the category in-
cludes William Edmondson’s chunky stone figures and, on the other hand, the sleek, pigmented forms carved in wood by Tyrone Mitchell and the paintings by Norman Lewis of which the sparest and loveliest are two ir-
regular Cubistic grids smudged in orange and brown on white paper.

An exhibition comes home from Japan.

Ms. Weld appears to have joined the school of thought that would discour-
ge all notions of aristocracy in art, would in fact divert the viewer from esthetic values altogether. Con-
idering her record both as a curator at the museum and as the former director of Rutgers University in Newark, this is a crying shame. In any case, most of the professionals in the show resist her effort, wilfully. They include Benny Andrews, Wiley Cole, John L. Moore, Joe Overstreet, who is currently showing some mas-
tive new abstractions at Kânekeleha House, in Manhattan, Jacob Law-
rence and Faith Ringgold.

Nevertheless and despite its im-
plied connotiveness, “Dream Sing-
ers” is a visually handsome and spir-
itually heroic statement that is guar-
anteed to ignite discussion long after it closes next year, on March 20. The museum is at 205 West State Street; hours are 9 A.M. to 4:45 P.M., Tues-
day through Saturday; noon to 5 Sun-
days.