

ART

Bringing Out the Works of So-Called 'Outsiders'

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

TRENTON

SINCE a halfway adequate review of "Dream Singers, Storytellers: An African-American Presence" would be as long as the show's 238-page catalogue, this can be no more than a notification. To begin with the nuts and bolts: the spectacle celebrating the "sister-state" agreement between New Jersey and the Fukui prefecture in Japan is now on view here, at the State Museum, where it was organized by the assistant curator, Alison Weid. Its debut, however, took place last year in Japan — hence the bilingual catalogue.

As explained in the forward, 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 Japan'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 producing at an advanced age images reminiscent of cave 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 folk artists (more than half the 33 participants are self-

taught, including four quilt makers) but that excludes Richard Hunt, Martin Puryear (admittedly at his own request), Betye 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 every artist, Ms. Weid contends that distinctions made between folk art and the

An exhibition comes home from Japan.

mainstream kind are "artificial." She also states that the differences are "merely a question of particular life situations and discernible motivations," thus demolishing the barrier between amateur and professional.

Whether or not one accepts Ms. Weid's proposition, three anthropomorphized tree stumps by Bessie Harvey and three more by a kindred spirit, Ralph Griffin, are enough already. The same goes for the eight junk assemblages of Hawkins Bolden, who is blind, and the 14 little bundles of metal and plastic objects compul-

sively trussed up by the Philadelphia Wireman, who is presumed to have been black because his work was discovered in a black neighborhood.

While Traylor has no more devoted a fan, this observer sympathizes with black professionals who wince slightly at the overly enthusiastic mention of his name and those of other black "outsiders." Could it be that, in the art public's uninhibited embrace of his "unspoiled" talent, they suspect a fondness for noble savages and their natural sense of rhythm?

To make matters more complicated, James Smalls-takes issue in his essay with those who would know "precisely" what makes the art African-American. He feels that the question smacks of the "division between us and them" that has caused so much trouble in the world.

Notwithstanding the title identifying the art as African-American, Mr. Smalls, an assistant professor at Rutgers University, insists that it is not about us and them but rather about "cultural continuities and understanding." Admirable as such sentiments are, they make "outsiders" of the professionals who have achieved fame in the real world but who are mixed in with the self-taught under headings seemingly designed to promote political equality. Thus, recent assemblages by Mr. Edwards, which are, by the way, larger and less clenched than their predecessors, fall into the "Poetics of Accumulation" category, along with the Wireman's assemblages and those by Lonnie

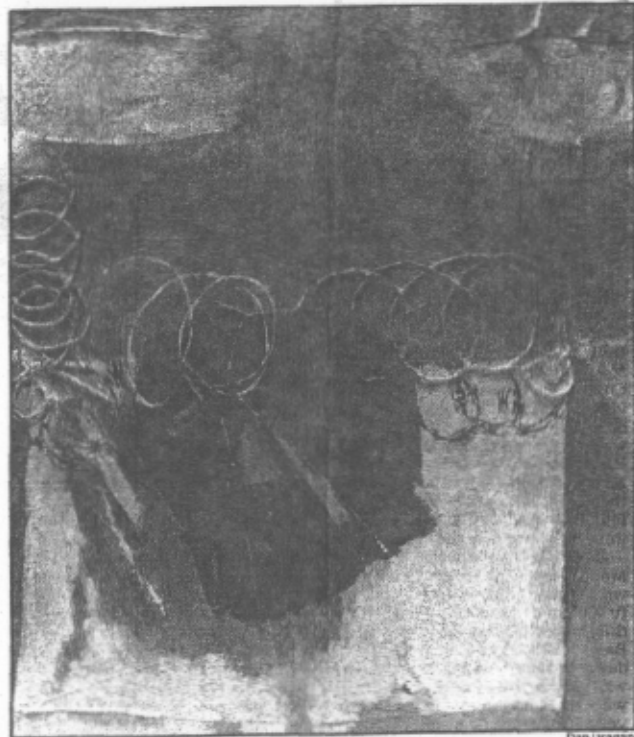
Holley, another autodidact.

The logic of this grouping can be understood if not necessarily applauded. But what to make of William T. Williams's inclusion in the party? His patchworks of alligatored paint on canvas could symbolize the accumulation of years, especially in slum dwelling décor. But in appearance, they seem closer to the quilts, which fall under the heading, "The Constructed Image."

This pattern of incongruity continues with "The Poetics of Economy." On the one hand, the category includes 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 irregular Cubistic grids smudged in orange and brown on white paper.

Ms. Weid appears to have joined the school of thought that would discourage all notions of aristocracy in art, would in fact divert the viewer from esthetic values altogether. Considering her record both as a curator at the museum and as the former director of Rutgers' Robeson Gallery in Newark, this is a crying shame. In any case, most of the professionals in the show resist her efforts, willy-nilly. They include Benny Andrews, Willy Cole, John L. Moore, Joe Overstreet, who is currently showing some massive new abstractions at Kankeleba House, in Manhattan, Jacob Lawrence and Faith Ringgold.

Nevertheless and despite its im-



"Black Jacket," an oil with collage by Joe Overstreet.

plied contentiousness, "Dream Singers" is a visually handsome and spiritually heroic statement that is guaranteed 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., Tuesday through Saturday; noon to 5 Sundays.