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## Carson Monahan and Clarence Swinyer: Self-Taught Artists Shine

Mysterious paintings at Monya Rowe Gallery and rustic Americana at Kerry Schuss Gallery prove that the pull of autodidacts remains strong.

By *Brian P. Kelly*

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Installation view of 'Clarence Swinyer: Lake George' at Kerry Schuss Gallery. PHOTO: KERRY SCHUSS GALLERY

*New York*

There's romance in the idea of the self-taught artist. We're drawn to upstarts, bucking convention and institutional mores to pursue a passion and forge their own path. They come in many forms, from "outsider" artists who often have few if any professional aspirations in the field to more focused individuals who give

up other opportunities to try to stake their claim in the mainstream art world. Members from both those poles—and the broad spectrum between them—have achieved artistic renown (though not always during their lifetimes), names like Henri Rousseau, Grandma Moses, Henry Darger, Scott Kahn, Raymond Pettibon and Thornton Dial. Two shows in New York emphasize the breadth of autodidacts, and the reasons they remain so captivating.

...While Mr. Monahan opted to leave his former life behind to pursue painting as a career, we see a far different sort of self-taught artist at Kerry Schuss Gallery. **Clarence J. Swinyer** was born in 1893 and worked at a paper mill on Lake George in upstate New York. After his retirement around 1950, he began to transform his home and surrounding property in the Adirondacks with his sculptures, whirligigs and paintings—items depicting local flora and fauna, rural pastimes and traditional Americana.



Clarence Swinyer's 'Whirligig (With Cowboy)' (c. 1950-60). PHOTO: KERRY SCHUSS GALLERY

Though the art he made was intended only for his own private enjoyment, we're lucky that it has made its way into the public eye. His whirligigs—two here, one with a cowboy, the other with an American Indian—stand above the usual rough-hewn folksiness of the form thanks to their impressive attention to detail. For example, instead of simply being painted onto a cutout form, the hairs on a horse's tail and each feather in a headdress have been meticulously sawed into the figures' silhouettes. That care is evident in the construction as well, as these

objects, over a half-century old and having spent a good deal of time outdoors, still function like new.



Clarence Swinyer's 'Washington Crossing the Delaware' (c. 1950-60). PHOTO: KERRY SCHUSS GALLERY

His works on paper are even more captivating. A herd of bison with glowing eyes embodies the animals' power, the flat composition of the piece making it appear that we're facing a literal wall of the creatures. A black bear and her cub romp in a tree in a work that features more dimensionality than much folk-influenced outsider art. A Christmas scene of snow-covered houses and a horse-drawn sleigh adds seasonal flair to the show. And Swinyer's rendition of Emanuel Leutze's famed "Washington Crossing the Delaware" is a singular interpretation: The icy waters of the river have turned a warm peach, the flag is an abstract weave of red and white, and the distant shore is in sharp focus, like the future of America in the vision of the stoic general.

Best of all are the sculptures, once staked across Swinyer's land, of humble animals that spring to life. A proud tom appears to watch over a shy female turkey; a bobcat seems pulled from a shamanistic hallucination; a spotted fawn is both delicate and eager. Again it is the details that grab our attention—spotted feathers, a carefully attached ear. These phenomenal pieces show the power of creativity, even when exercised in private.

### **Carson Monahan: Phantom Town**

*Monya Rowe Gallery, 224 W. 30th St. #304, through Jan. 4*

## Clarence Swinyer: Lake George

*Kerry Schuss Gallery, 73 Leonard St., through Jan. 11*

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