



clockwise from top left
Matt Sesow, *Mousse*.

Alison Silva, *Milk Virgin*.

Melvin 'Milky Way', *Sinclaire Liar*.

Dick Lubinsky, *Creepy People*.

Bary Khan, *Pure Vision*.

opposite left
Candyce Brokow, *Pig Girl*.

opposite right
Ross Brodar, *Summer With the Artists*.

Joyce Beckenstein is an art historian and writer living on Long Island, New York.

Collaborations were the linchpins of these successful but rare pairings of private art venues with not-for-profit organisations. Artists were culled from several advocacy groups: SAF; Pure Vision Arts, representing those with developmental disabilities; and Fountain Gallery, promoting artists with mental illness. Smith, who works with Galerie Atelier Herenplaats and Galerie Olof, both outsider advocacy galleries in the Netherlands, brought to these local exhibitions a contingent of international artists, including Dutch artists, Jaco Kranendonk and Marc De Bruijn, and Gerard Sendrey, founder of the Musee de la Creation Franche.

The art dazzled. But just as compelling was the display of advocacy organisations and the vital roles they play in the lives of their targeted populations. They clearly encourage their members to reach beyond their disabilities and develop their abilities, stretch beyond their dreams and make them realities.

These were Pamala Rogers' goals when she started Pure Vision Arts in 2002, the first New York City exhibition space for artists with developmental disabilities. It is an extension of the Shield Institute, founded in 1921 to serve children and adults with mental retardation, autism, Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy. Pure Vision Arts provides materials, studio and exhibition space, and interaction – but not instruction or art therapy. 'We celebrate the neuro-diversity of our members,' explains Rogers; 'the variations of normal neurological circuitry that is an intrinsic part of their shared culture.' She describes this culture as a 'Savant Garde' whose ranks, many believe, include Michelangelo, Mozart, Einstein and Warhol.

A visit to this vibrant Chelsea space dispels the stereotype of outsider style as uniformly raw, impetuous, or gushed from tubes with spontaneous abandon. Jessica Parks, whose works are widely collected, follows a meticulous process, executing her architectural paintings with an engraver's patient detail, creating colourful compositions sparkling with humorous gargoyles and astral references. Susan Brown's looser style alternates between vibrant cityscapes, crammed with herds of yellow taxis, and syncopated colour grids containing portraits of her mother. Works by Pure Vision artists

are included in major collections, including those of Nancy Reagan, Eunice Shriver and Dr Oliver Sacks, the well known neurologist and author.

Jason Bowman is the director of Fountain Gallery, an extension of Fountain House, organised 60 years ago by patients of Rockland Psychiatric Hospital to advocate for the mentally ill. Located in the Hell's Kitchen district near Times Square, it looks like any other gallery. Locals and tourists wander in for art's sake and buy art they like at affordable prices.

'Most of our members are self-taught, some have training,' says Bowman. 'It makes no difference: they would create art no matter what. The gallery provides focus and allows them to say, 'I am an artist, I show my work'. Artists also learn about and participate in the art business, working hourly gallery shifts and attending weekly planning sessions.

A prestigious roster of curators, including Agnes Gund, former president of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, helps organize exhibitions that include works by Dick Lubinsky, a former member of Fountain House. No one knew he was a prolific painter until his death in 2001 when his niece, June Kosloff, discovered nearly 2000 works in his cramped apartment. Fountain Gallery did a retrospective of his work in 2006, and his art is included in *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*, curated by Roger Manley, at the American Visionary Art Museum, (October 2009 – September 2010).

These non-competing organisations share a mission and seek broad representation for their artists. Government and corporate funding, grants, endowments and armies of volunteers allow them to interact in behalf of their members, and bring them to the attention of museums, private galleries, corporations, dealers and private collectors.

What started as a ripple at the local level – one or two people who wanted to make a difference – grew into a tsunami, strengthening communities of disabled artists worldwide. 'It's something you experience when you're surrounded by the artists and their art,' says Bowman. 'You feel the energy.'