CRITIC'S PICK

Nellie Mae Rowe Levels the Wall Between Insider and Outsider Art

The artist has been a major — if underrecognized — American talent. But the biggest look yet at her achievement gives it a whole new stature.

By Roberta Smith
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If you've paid any attention to that roiling mass of talent variously known over the past century as folk, naïve, primitive, Art Brut, self-taught or outsider, chances are you've come across the infectious creations of Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982). They rivet the eye with bright, dense colors, ingenious patterns and thickets of line and buoyant, sometimes bulbous figures and animals. Arranged in the topsy-turvy manner of a patchwork quilt, these elements fill the page and push forward with an energy that is both modern and primal.

Rowe's materials were modest — felt-tip and ballpoint pens, pencil sand colored pencils and above all, crayons with which she achieved an unusual magnificence: solid planes of brilliant color that give so many of her drawings the power of paintings.

Perhaps one or two of Rowe's works on paper have stuck in your memory, like her nearly hallucinatory “Untitled (Pig on Expressway)” (1980), in which a porker with dainty white hooves and big rabbity ears balances along and among swaths and swoops of rainbow stripes that devour the surface like a deranged cloverleaf interchange.
But it’s one thing to know a few Rowe works and another to grasp the full force of her achievement, which is revealed as never before in “Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe” at the Brooklyn Museum, the most extensive survey of her work yet realized. With over 100 of her paintings on paper, several sewn dolls (and one chewing gum sculpture) as well as two amazing reimaginings (not replicas) of her home and yard recently constructed for a hybrid documentary-feature, the show fills the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Altogether, it propels Rowe’s art into the upper echelons of the self-taught canon with the likes of Martin Ramirez, Bill Traylor and James Castle, where female artists are rare.

Rowe was not your customary outsider artist, an isolated genius who often became known for one style or motif reproduced with consummate control. “Really Free” is the operative phrase here. She was gregarious and restless, prone to exploration of both subjects and materials. Her complex scenes often combine fantasy and autobiography. “Making Soap” shows a queenly woman on a thronelike chair, overlooking a bubbling kettle on an open fire. In photographs and images that are more clearly self-portraits she holds her head high, looking regal.
“Making Soap” (1981); felt-tip on paper. Rowe's complex scenes often combine fantasy and autobiography. Estate of Nellie Mae Rowe/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation
Rowe made beguiling drawings of single figures, as demonstrated by a cluster of eight from before 1978 in the Brooklyn show. Houses, a frequent subject, contribute a geometry unlike anything else, as in the chalets of “Untitled (Nellie and Judith's Houses)” of 1978-82. And in numerous works words take over, quoting gospel music lyrics, the Bible and so forth. One of my favorites here is “God Said,” the title stated in vibrant blue on orange with a beautiful floral event at far right, in purple and white. Her images develop on the page and frequently mutate, so that, whatever the central image, a work’s four corners are rarely identical.

Rowe knew she was an artist from childhood, as indicated by “When I Was a Little Girl.” In it she floats above a childhood scene in which she is being punished by her mother for piecing artworks together with a homemade glue that attracted rats, one of whom observes the scene from the lower center. Mother holds a switch in one hand and with the other gives her daughter some fruit for comfort. Framed artworks adorn the wall and a succession of trees and plants enlives the scene.

But Rowe's artistic ambition was obstructed by racism and poverty. She spent much of her childhood laboring on her family's farm, and much of her adulthood keeping house for various white families in Atlanta. She didn't give up art entirely. The show includes the lovely “Untitled (Cross and Trees)” from 1947, in yellow and pink, and from the 1950s, “Untitled (Woman and Plaid Background); both indicate that she hadn't connected with crayon's ability to make color blast.

Only in the mid-1960s, after the deaths of a white couple she had worked for since 1939, was Rowe able to make art full time, producing an astounding number of works on paper and also turning her small four-room house and its yard into a work of environmental installation art that she called the Playhouse, perhaps in reference to her disrupted childhood artistic ambitions. By 1971, her eccentric residence was attracting photographers and passing traffic; the Atlanta Journal-Constitution followed with an article in 1973.
This glorious show originated at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta — whose Rowe holdings are the most substantial in the country — organized by the estimable Katherine Jentleson, the High’s curator of folk and self-taught art, and numbered about 55 works. It will travel to three museums beyond New York, with its checklist adjusted to accommodate the delicate nature of works on paper.

As the show headed to New York, the Brooklyn Museum curators — Catherine Morris, the Sackler’s senior curator, and Jenée-Daria Strand, its curatorial associate — decided to expand it with additional loans. Ultimately they doubled its size with works from the American Museum of Folk Art in the city, the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., and the Judith Alexander Foundation in Decatur, Ga., which was formed to honor the collector and dealer who gave Rowe her first solo show in her Atlanta gallery in 1978. Around 2000, a few years before her death, Alexander made substantial gifts of Rowe’s work to both the High Museum and the American Folk Art Museum. Rowe’s first solo show in New York took place in 1979 at the Parsons-Dreyfuss Gallery and she traveled to the city for the opening. Her first institutional appearance in the city was in the formative “Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980,” originated by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1982, and then traveled to the Brooklyn Museum.
Despite the hardships of her life, Rowe made art that is exuberantly celebratory — of her God, her world and herself. The show opens with five small colorful drawings that feature her name. Four simply depict it — Nellie Mae Rowe, Mrs. Nellie May Rowe — in extravagant, curling and in one instance, snakelike cursive. The fifth, edged in orange and red, invites visitors into the Playhouse, the pages of whose sign-in book — photographed and enlarged — cover a nearby wall.

Looking at Rowe’s efforts summons many analogies, to modernists like Klee and Chagall, to American nonconformists like Roy DeForest, Gladys Nilsson, Bob Thompson and Emma Amos, to cartoons and children's book illustrations, to the floral decorations painted on European peasant objects (a.k.a. Pennsylvania German in this country). These connections have less to do with influence or precedent than with ideas in the air, inspired by similar things like nature, perhaps, but always moving fluidly across divisions like high and low, trained and self-taught, insider and outsider.

Rowe’s expansive, self-aware work and career argue against these oppositions, suggesting that they are obsolete. The more we know artists like her the clearer it becomes that most artists, not just outsiders, are in some way “self-taught,” and also that many outsiders aren’t nearly as isolated as is sometimes assumed. Nellie Mae Rowe didn’t resist being celebrated in both Atlanta and New York. She once mused that her work would make her “famous,” and she was right.

Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe

Through Jan. 1 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, (718) 638-5000; brooklynmuseum.org.