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## Gullah artist Sam Doyle's narrative portraits shine at Outsider Art Fair in New York

His works, painted on found wood and discarded tin, illuminate culture on the remote Saint Helena Island



The Gallery of Everything's stand devoted to works by Sam Doyle at the Outsider Art Fair.

Courtesy The Gallery of Everything

**Carlie Porterfield**

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One of the highlights of this year's Outsider Art Fair in New York (until 22 March) is a series of paintings by the self-taught folk artist Sam Doyle. The 20 works on The Gallery of Everything stand come from the collection of the publisher Bob Roth, a co-founder of the Intuit Art Museum in Chicago, which is dedicated to outsider and self-taught art. Prices range from \$35,000 to \$85,000.

Doyle was a self-taught artist from Saint Helena Island, South Carolina, born into a Gullah family in the US Lowcountry, a remote region of islands, marshes and rivers where descendants of enslaved Africans preserved rich linguistic and cultural traditions.

Born in 1906, Doyle became a local storyteller in the St Helena community of Frogmore. His portraits and narrative paintings draw on a cast of neighbours and scenes from oral histories passed down through generations. Residents would have recognised depictions of local root doctors, Doyle's own grandmother and historical figures such as Robert Smalls, who escaped slavery during the Civil War by commandeering a Confederate ship and delivering it to Union forces. Beyond local subjects, Doyle also depicted prominent figures including Martin Luther King Jr., Ray Charles and Jackie Robinson, orienting his work as both a cultural record and reflection of change in the United States.



The Gallery of Everything's stand devoted to works by Sam Doyle at the Outsider Art Fair.  
Courtesy The Gallery of Everything

He often used house paint on found wood and weathered tin, displaying the works in his yard on St Helena in what he called his “outdoor gallery”, where neighbours could stop by to view them.

Doyle rarely left his native South Carolina. One notable exception was in 1982, when his work was featured in *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC—a landmark exhibition that exposed him to wider recognition. His bold, graphic style influenced Jean-Michel Basquiat, who reportedly traded his own works for Doyle’s and later shared them with fellow artists such as Andy Warhol. Ed Ruscha also paid tribute with a painting incorporating Gullah dialect, now in The Broad's permanent collection in Los Angeles. Doyle died in 1985, but his work has only grown in importance—major institutions to exhibit his work include the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2024, the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2023 and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2022.