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Disabled students tap into their artistic abilities

by Marie Glancy , qboro Contributor



Though the almost two dozen artists participating in the current exhibition at the Topaz Arts gallery in Woodside share the same teacher, methods and materials, their creations are decidedly their own.

One painting is an earthy blotch in the colors of mud and moss; another, spare lines of black on a mostly white canvas that look like a constellation of exploding stars. One wire sculpture is a multichromatic crescent; another is a globule of mustard-yellow metal.

None are necessarily what you would expect to emerge from an art class for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Yet it is these artists who provide an astonishingly unique point of view in *Out of Bounds: Pathways to Creative Empowerment*, on display until Oct. 26.

"I teach them the way I would anyone else," said Jason Cina, an instructor at the Association for the Help of Retarded Children in New York City, an organization that offers support to mentally disabled people and their families.

When he started working part-time at AHRC last January, Cina wanted to get away from what he considered juvenile approaches used in art therapy — a still-evolving discipline that blends instruction of artistic technique with traditional psychotherapeutic practices.

So out went the finger paints and in came the latex paint and brushes. "They're adults and I wanted them to work with adult materials," he said.

A professional photographer and painter, Cina introduced his students to the abstract method made famous by groundbreaking artist Jackson Pollock. By spreading paper on the floor and letting paint drip from a stick held above the paper, Cina let the students direct their own work. "I don't want to have any of myself involved in the process at all," he said.

Believing in the power of improvisation that inspired mid 20th-century American artists like Pollock, Cina plays jazz in class while his students let loose. "I introduce them to the materials and I see what they do with it," he said.

Similarly, when starting the artists on their wire sculpting projects, he instructs his

students to bend, twist, tie or wrap the wire, then steps back to let them work independently.

According to Paz Tanjaquico, the co-director of Topaz Arts with Todd Richmond, Cina's hands-off teaching tactics really work. "He got something out of the artists that was individually theirs," said Tanjaquico.

The exhibition was Cina's idea, with Tanjaquico and Richmond agreeing to look at the students' work just a short walk from their gallery on 39th Avenue in Woodside. "We were pleasantly surprised," Richmond said.

Tanjaquico and Richmond found many of the works compelling and original. Out of dozens of paintings, they selected 17 representing a diversity of styles that stood out in terms of composition, according to Paz. The result is a collection of works that can be appreciated regardless of whether the viewer knows anything about the artist, or their disability.

And that's the kind of unprejudiced viewpoint Cina tries to bring to his AHRC classes. His students have a range of disabilities, but he said he doesn't ask for specific information. "By watching them work, I learn about them... I see how they process the world around them," he said.

Cina chooses a lesson plan based on those observations, moving from abstract painting techniques to wire sculpture to, most recently, spray painting.

Among his students, the response has been enthusiastic. Each day at the beginning of class, they gather around their teacher for that day's lesson and to get a peek at the new art materials Cina brings to each class.

Many of the artists showing at *Out of Bounds* have jobs at packaging plants and assembly lines. Through his art classes, Cina hopes to teach his students to understand that art is not work, but a time to unwind. "It releases endorphins. It's therapeutic."

Still, Cina is not an art therapist by training and doesn't consider himself one. "I just tap into their primal, innate abilities as human beings," he said. "It's their art; it's their work."

By finding a way for them to show their works publicly, Cina gave them an experience they might never have otherwise had.

Attending the show's opening last Friday with their families, the artists relished the recognition.

"There were a lot of families who probably never expected their son, daughter, brother, sister would have art framed, hanging in a gallery for people to enjoy," Richmond said.