

Autistic Calgary artist breaks into elite New York gallery scene

By Barb Livingstone, Calgary Herald April 21, 2014



The work of Calgary artist Shawn Belanger will be exhibited at the Agora Gallery in New York in June. Diagnosed with autism at the age of five, the artist and his parents hope the showing will help shatter myths about autism.

Photograph by: Colleen De Neve , Calgary Herald

Visual artist Shawn Belanger's intricate ink drawings, with their explosions of vibrant colour, have been exhibited as far as China and featured in several coffee table books.

In June, when the 28-year-old's work is exhibited at a prestigious New York gallery, he will get a viewing in the esteemed U.S. art world while shattering myths about autism at the same time.

Belanger is a primarily non-verbal autistic. From the time he was young, his parents Nancy and Greg were told their son was severely disabled, with “no special talents”, that he would “never have functional use of a pencil” and that he should be institutionalized.

Instead, his art work — which has been exhibited and celebrated at showings and in books with other disabled artists — will be displayed June 10 to July 1 at the Agora Gallery, which focuses on emerging artists and is often cited as one of New York’s best contemporary galleries.

In the heart of the city’s Chelsea art district, Agora also publishes the ARTisSpectrum magazine — and had no idea Belanger had autism before deciding he would be part of its Figurative Realms exhibit.

“And, in fact, when he was chosen, another representative of the gallery was asking about whether he would be willing to be interviewed and videographed at the reception,” says mom Nancy, laughing. “We said, probably not.”

The buzz around Shawn’s talent is growing beyond June’s exhibition. His work has already been championed in Agora press releases and a second New York gallery has called wanting a solo exhibition.

“He is being recognized as an artist, who just happens to have autism, not as an autistic man who does art,” says Nancy.

Shawn, with his gigantic smile, is thrilled when complimented on his work and quick to offer a “thank you.” He loves bowling, swimming and even karaoke, and is a voracious reader — including the Herald each day, cover-to-cover.

But most of the verbalization of his path and his talent is left to his parents, who have two other sons.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released new data on the prevalence of autism in the U.S, saying as many as one in 68 children has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a complex, lifelong developmental brain disorder. Individuals with ASD — the spectrum refers to the fact that persons with the disorder can range from genius level to severe disabilities — often have communication difficulties, social impairments, and restricted, repetitive and stereotypic patterns of behaviour.

For Nancy, who founded Autism Calgary and is president of the Autism Aspergers Friendship Society (AAFS), and Greg, the important message from Shawn’s journey is the individuality of each person with autism.

“There is no box any more; no one model fits all. Just because someone has a label does not make them all exactly the same,” says Greg.

When Shawn was diagnosed with autism at age five, teacher Nancy, at the time a stay-at-home mom, had no idea her son had artistic talent, only that he liked to draw.

He would often draw from picture books — he loves Disney characters — sometimes guided by his mother’s hand since he had trouble holding a pencil. Soon, however, he was dissatisfied with those results, and would re-do everything on his own — despite that therapist’s suggestion he would never be able to hold a pencil.

“He would push my hand away. It was pretty clear who was the artist,” says Nancy.

As his drawings became more complex, and Shawn moved into junior high special education classes, the

family tried to get him into a mainstream school art class but was refused.

Although Shawn was often asked to make school posters because of his beautiful calligraphy, the art teacher “apparently said she couldn’t modify the curriculum to his needs — even when we asked that he just be allowed to sit in class and soak up what he could.”

In high school Shawn did join an art class, and was further inspired when a teacher showed him books of master painters.

“He would always see something and translate it in his own way.”

On graduation, Shawn started in a program for adult with disabilities and an artist on staff encouraged the young man to switch to ink markers as a tool for his drawings, to prevent the smudges from pencil.

The mostly self-taught artist draws from magazines — National Geographic is a favourite — or from photos on commissioned work (word of mouth has given him commissions for the next year and a half).

His artwork, which can take four months to ink weeks more to add the bursts of colour, stands out because of both the vibrant colours and the intricate detail.

“He will draw every blade of grass, and every faint hint of whisker on that jaguar’s face,” says dad Greg. “It is extraordinary.”

Or as the Agora Gallery describes it: “Belanger draws scenes alive with players and complex scenery. His eye ranges from a lounge crowded with jazz musicians to a field of workers harvesting crops to a single horseback rider, alone with his animal and a lush background of greenery ... Belanger’s work both plays with and celebrates the beauty of life and the natural world.”

When the Belanger extended family travels to New York in June (20 are going) it will not only be in support of Shawn’s talent, but also a statement on stepping back and letting any child, including an autistic one, find his or her talent and passion.

While Shawn offers only intermittent and short answers during the interview, it is obvious he has listened to all of it.

When asked: “Has Shawn broken a lot of the myths of autism?” before his parents can chime in, a clear and immediate “YES,” is the artist’s definitive answer.

For more information:

www.Shawnbelanger.com

www.agora-gallery.com/artistpage/shawn-belanger.aspx

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