

## VISIONARY ART

## The Art of Nigel Bart

Last year, Nigel Bart and his family converted an empty loft in Winnipeg, Canada, into an art gallery called Artbeat Studio. Artbeat supports and mentors professional artists through the effective use of studio space.

But the Artbeat Studio's mission extends beyond helping artists in general. It seeks to help those diagnosed with mental illness. "The philosophy behind what we do is healing and empowerment with the arts," said Mr. Bart, who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. "It's based on the recovery model of mental health. What we've discovered is that the art becomes a tool for getting better and finding meaning."

Artbeat provides artists with free studio space for 6 months, and so far, 30 artists have cycled through. "We haven't [had] any repeat artists so far in the studio. They sell their work, and they have shows in the community," said Mr. Bart, who manages the gallery with his mother, who works as studio director.

"Those who have come through are all living successfully in the community," he said.

Artbeat has a long waiting list of artists eager for space, and is funded almost entirely by local private agencies and businesses.

Besides managing Artbeat and acting as its curator, Mr. Bart continues to create his own art. His repertoire includes sculpting, painting, pottery, music, poetry, and video. "I'm sort of a jack-of-all-trades," he said. "I do all sorts of art."

Diagnosed while attending the University of Manitoba, Mr. Bart credits the support of his family, psychiatrist, and medication with enabling him to continue with his studies and receive a bachelor of fine art degree.

Mr. Bart has had his own work exhibited at Artbeat, and was a part of a group show, "Mindscapes," which was on display at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 2004.

—Deeanna Franklin



Torso, 2000



Silence, 2000

PHOTOS COURTESY NIGEL BART

## The Artist's Reflections

**I come from a creative family**, and the arts were nurtured in us, starting off with music. When it came to visual art, I was always into doodling and sketching, and submitting little posters for competitions in school. But in high school, I started developing my art more in depth with sculpture, and so on. I wasn't focused on the arts. I was trying to keep all of my doors open, especially with the sciences, mathematics, and music. Actually, art was not a priority at the time I had my breakdown. I was 19 when that happened. I had just graduated from high school and went into science at the university here in Winnipeg.

**I experienced hallucinations**, delusional thinking, very distorted and confused thinking, and an inability to concentrate. I was a real wreck. It built up over a period of a year of just bizarre behavior and sort of slowly, slowly ... little episodes at a time. I was slowly deteriorating until finally I was stuck in the library at the university. I felt very paranoid. I felt I couldn't leave the library. I felt that people were trying to make me stay there, and I had no assertive ability to say: "Screw this. I'm leaving." But I stayed there, and I was going to stay the night, but I ended up getting kicked out of the library. That's when I called my mom. My family was very worried. None of us had an understanding of what schizophrenia was. There is some depression in my family, but no real solid genetic link. I got diagnosed in 1994.

**I went to see a general practitioner**, and my GP thought I was just depressed, but he moved my paperwork quickly, and in a week I saw a psychiatrist. It was all through [Canadian] Medicare—it was all covered. I have an excellent psychiatrist, and I've stuck with him for the full 12 years. He's been really supportive. He's come to the studio and has given us a donation. He keeps that professional boundary there, though, and I think [that's] important. I do talk therapy with my wife.

**My wife and I are expecting** our first child in October, so things are really moving along for me. It's really great. My mom is very excited. I want to be a very supportive dad, whether my child has a mental illness or not. If my child does, I hope to help and guide the child through difficult times. I want to be as supportive as my parents have been to me, my dad, especially, and my mom. I want to be the kind of dad that my dad is. I have such a supportive family, and I think that is the number one reason I'm able to continue doing what I do.

**I should explain** some of the things that have helped me manage a full plate like this. I guess primarily it's my willingness and the effort to learn from my mistakes and grow as a human, rather than as just a consumer. I've never really made huge, huge mistakes, but I've learned from my mistakes. I reflect a lot on my experiences, and I think being this chronic reflector, and using art to express my experience and help me process it all—I think I've managed to deal with painful, dark experiences that would hold me down otherwise. It all has to do with being

very organized. A lot of it has been about taking risk. I'm not a huge risk-taker, but with certain things I'm not afraid to take on challenges. It's hard work, and some of my symptoms may persist sometimes. But the main thing is it takes a lot of effort and a willingness to embrace spontaneity.

**It took about 3 to 4 years** get the right mix of medications. I'm living with relatively few side effects. I'm on olanzapine, venlafaxine for depression, and lorazepam for anxiety, and a classic antipsychotic, Haldol. I'm on a real strong mix, and sometimes it slows me down. Through my doctor, I plan on tapering some of them off just to try and see if I can drive my bike without training wheels. It's a thought of mine, sort of a dream. But until the stress level goes down, I'm happy to take my pills and go to sleep each night.

**Art and mental illness sort of go hand-in-hand**, but I think there's a common myth, and it's based in a little bit of reality: That if you accept medication or treatment for your illness, your creativity will take a dive. Some of the older medications dulled the creativity in people, but not so much with the newer medications. I went through art school with the newer medications. I think people need to realize that they can be creative individuals even on medications. I'm one of those people who works better on medications.

**My wife doesn't have a mental illness.** [I met her when] I was sort of over my convalescence period where I had been sleeping for several months. I had gone out to my parents' farm, and I was exercising real early and I was in my first year of art school, and I met [her]. We actually knew each other from high school, but we were just sort of colleagues in high school. When we met, I just basically said: "Hey, I'm Nigel. I have schizophrenia." [She's] very open-minded. She didn't get scared. She just thought maybe that's why I behaved in certain ways in high school. I told her I was doing better. She's an amazing woman. She had a bit of a crush on me in high school. We got married in 2003, but we dated since 1995. My wife's Filipino, and there was a bit of pressure to marry after dating so long.

**The studio has been** very well-received in Winnipeg. The community really supports us. The artists only work at this studio, but they also give workshops in the community and work at home when they can. But that's very hard; most of them have little bachelor suites that are packed tight with paintings and stuff. So providing them with a space actually frees up things for them.

**We're getting ready to host** a large exhibit in honor of the National Schizophrenia Society conference. [Artbeat was] asked by the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society to host a celebration of recovery for people living with schizophrenia. It's basically a huge exhibit by artists living with mental illness, and it's in conjunction with the National Schizophrenia Society of Canada. It's been very busy.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Nigel Bart.