

Creating art, creating a healthier outlook

Struggling program gives mentally ill work experience, builds self-esteem

AS long as there have been humans, there's been mental illness. Anthropologists have observed that almost every culture that has ever existed has sought, to one degree or another, to accommodate and provide for those living with it.

In our more "advanced" society, approaches to dealing with mental illness have included everything from LSD to exorcisms to isolation. Most of those approaches were instituted by so-called experts (well-intentioned as they may have been), usually with little or no consultation from the patients themselves.

Perhaps that's what makes Artbeat Studio so refreshing.

I've written about Artbeat before, always on the same occasion — the end of the six-month studio period, in which the participants, artists who live with mental illness, display the work they've created.

Nigel Bart, the 25-year old studio coordinator of Artbeat who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19, says that most of the participants tend to far exceed the 20 hours they are expected to show up every week. Most show up for 40-hour weeks or more.

As to whether the nearly two-year-old program has been a success, even as it continues to struggle for funding at all levels of government, Bart offers this evidence: Not only have most of the artists experienced profound changes in their sense of self-esteem — and gained valuable work experience — but the program has now expanded.

Starting next month, graduates of the program, many of whom have remained involved as volunteers and mentors, will have the opportunity to continue their pursuit of art, as a new set of studios will be opening. The studio space is provided in exchange for the graduates continuing to lead workshops with the new students and with the community at large.

"We live in a culture that's quite fixated on work, on what you do," Bart says. "For people living with mental illness that can be very traumatizing, especially if you're on social assistance or have had trouble keeping a job.

"Being in this program gives people who live with mental illness a chance to have meaningful work, and a title. When people ask them what they do, they can say: 'I'm an artist.'

"That kind of thing can have a real, lasting effect."

The seven new graduates of the program include artists from their early 20s to their late 50s, with varying levels of experience. The common link, Bart says,



Lorne Roberts

ART REVIEW

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■ Artbeat Studio
■ 4th floor, 52 Albert St.

■ To July 29

is that each comes in with a willingness to apply themselves to learning and studying art, mostly through the actual creation of it.

Here, in this current exhibit, the work runs the gamut from painting to poetry, from drawing to sculpture, ceramics and collage. As with previous shows, most artists work in several media, experimenting until they find their niche.

Some of the art stands out — work by Mark Carruthers in particular, where he fills entire pages with tiny, regular lines, creating semi-abstract work that looks like it could be influenced by local legend Bruce Head, among others.

In addition to Carruthers' art, though, the entire exhibit is filled with unique, interesting, and truly creative work. From the charming and child-like paintings of Navy Phuong to Crystal Duncan's turbulent painting *Landmine* (which looks more like a stormy sea), there's a sense of the artists learning as they go, and as one artist put it, incorporating all their experiences and emotions, both positive and negative.

The other artists include Zev Kraut, Meagan Brown, Vanessa Russell and Hildi Janzen.

Programs like Artbeat succeed because they provide more than just Band-Aid solutions. And while they cost more at the front end, they may very well prove in the long run to be a far more cost-effective and — most importantly — a highly effective means of assisting people who live with mental illness.

"I'd like to see the art studio recognized as a tool for recovery, just like the other health services," Bart told the CBC last year.

So the question remains then: why aren't the various levels of government lining up to help fund this innovative and essential program?



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Above, four pieces (left) created by Meagan Brown and one (right) by Crystal Duncan. Left, a painting by Navy Phuong.

