

Showcasing 'Neurodiversity'

Artists with autism, cerebral palsy, and other disabilities are attracting mainstream attention

On any given morning, some 20 artists are at work at Pure Vision Arts, a combination artists' studio and gallery space in New York's Chelsea district. Their art and that displayed on the walls reflect a cross section of contemporary styles, from the architecturally precise images of Jessica Park to the Pop-like canvases of Susan Brown, which feature rows and rows of ice-cream sodas.

What the artists here share is that they have developmental disabilities, which include autism, mental retardation, and cerebral palsy. Pure Vision, a nonprofit offshoot of the Shield Institute, which provides services to children and adults who are developmentally challenged, is the first New York gallery dealing exclusively with such artists.

"You often see arts-and-crafts programs with this population," says Pure Vision director Pamala Rogers. "But we are a fine-arts program. We don't work with pop-sicle sticks and things like that."

Rogers, an artist who has shown with New York's OK Harris gallery, initiated an art program at the Shield Institute in 1990 before launching Pure Vision, in 2001.

The organization is supported by state and city funding, including the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The Fashion Institute of Technology provides looms for woven artworks, and another organization, Rehabilitation Through Photography, donates photography and computer equipment.

Yet Pure Vision isn't about charity. With works ranging in price from \$200 to \$7,000, the gallery's 30 contracted artists receive 50 percent of the profits and are garnering mainstream attention. At this year's Outsider Art Fair in New York, Willie Britt, Walter Mika, and Brown were particularly popular, says Rogers. Collectors include actress Penny Marshall, writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks, and the pharmaceutical company Pfizer. Nancy Reagan and Prince Charles also collect Britt's art, says Margaret Bodell, Pure Vision's curator.

Rogers dislikes the catchall description "outsider art," which is used by critics and art historians to describe work by self-taught artists whose work is regarded as being outside established culture and society. (In that category, the reclusive Henry

Darger and Adolf Wölfli, who spent 35 years in a Swiss psychiatric hospital, are among the most famous.) Rogers prefers the word "neurodiversity" to describe her stable of artists.

"We focus on ability rather than disability, and we show these people as real cultural contributors," she explains. Pure Vision, Rogers adds, "is about being in the world, not on the fringe in a hospital-like environment."

Rebecca Hoffberger, founder and director of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, a museum for self-taught artists that opened in 1995, believes the outsider-art movement has made the public more interested in art by the disabled. "There is more openness to the value of art by disabled people since the outsider-art movement has gained so much momentum," she says. "More people are drawn to the freshness of an image. When a life experience is too big for words, often it comes out in very powerful art."

Bodell says many of her artists have an aptitude for "hyperfocus" that enables them to create highly precise renderings or to convey an encyclopedic mastery of a field of knowledge. One Pure Vision artist, Andrew Friedman, an expert on aeronautical design, created a large work with suggestions for improving the design of a 757 jet.

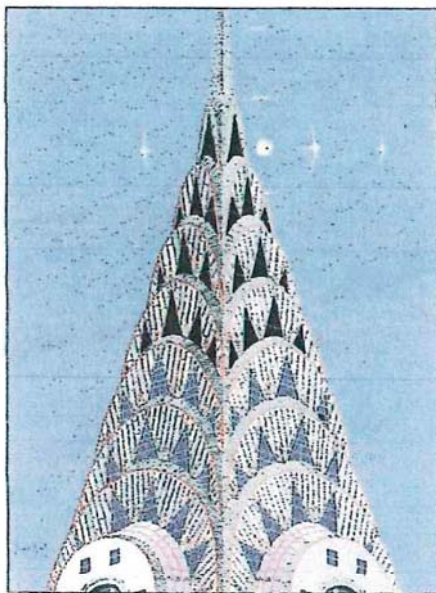
Pure Vision's mission dovetails with a trend that started in the 1970s to take patients from large institutions such as hospitals and

move them into smaller group homes.

Many of the artists have overcome hardships and long hospital stays. Britt, now 69, taught himself to paint at the Willowbrook State Hospital in Staten Island, New York, where he was institutionalized for more than 30 years. Victor Critescu lived in Romania without special assistance until his sister brought him to the United States, when he was in his 30s. Now in his 40s, the nonverbal Critescu, who is developmentally disabled, draws only images of churches on paper, which is his primary form of communication and expression.

"Autistic people often have access to secret art-making abilities that 'straight' artists don't have," says Bodell, who joined Pure Vision in 2001, after closing her New York gallery. "If an artist has talent, we want that artist to be recognized."

—Sarah Bayliss



The Chrysler Building with Perichellion and Transit of Venus #2, 2004, by Jessica Park, an artist with autism whose work is exhibited at Pure Vision Arts.