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PAINTING THE WORLD WITH A **RAINBOW** by Emmanuelle Delmas-Glass

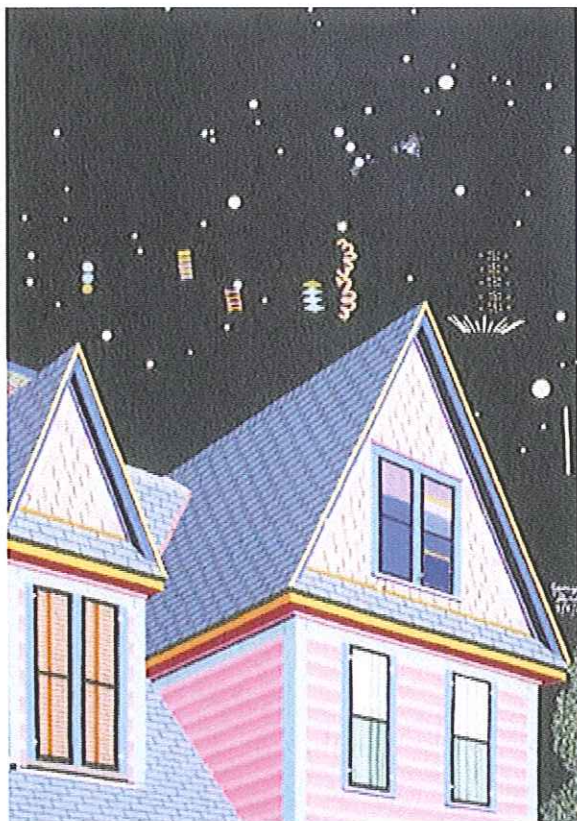


Jessica Park. Photograph by Jessica Bonzak.

I am looking up at the house at 53 Cole Avenue, and I don't recognize the familiar building. Every single architectural-- siding plank, shingle, cornice and pillar -- has been painted in hues of pastel pink, blue, green, bright orange, yellow and red. The house is all the more striking because it stands below a night sky brightly filled with constellations and other atmospheric phenomena resembling fireworks. I have just moved to Williamstown, Mass., and I know for a fact that this house really exists on Cole Avenue. This particular vision of the house, however, exists only as Jessica Park's painting, *The House on 53 Cole Avenue, March 5, 2002*. The painting is part of the exhibition, *Exploring Nirvana: The Art of Jessica Park*, at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts' Porter Street Gallery in North Adams, Mass., May 12 to June 30, 2004. This retrospective of Jessy's work focuses on the artist's rendition of the world and was the fruit of a semester of study and planning by students in the Museum Studies class of Dr. Anthony Gengarelly, chairman of the Performing and Fine Arts department at M.C.L.A.

To an unsuspecting eye, *The House on 53 Cole Avenue, March 5, 2002* displays the skillful ability of an artist to transform what she sees into a fairy-tale-like scene, full of sharp, multicolored details. As I study the exhibition, however, I realize that Park applies the same treatment to all the inanimate objects she paints — houses, monuments, heaters, radio dials or mileage gauges; she paints their exact rendition with a myriad of bold colors and geometric patterns. This obsession with detail and

use of vibrant colors, especially in her still lifes, is somewhat reminiscent of the work of certain contemporary mainstream artists, such as the Pop artists and the Surrealists. To her family, however, the paintings display the typical characteristics of an artist who is autistic.



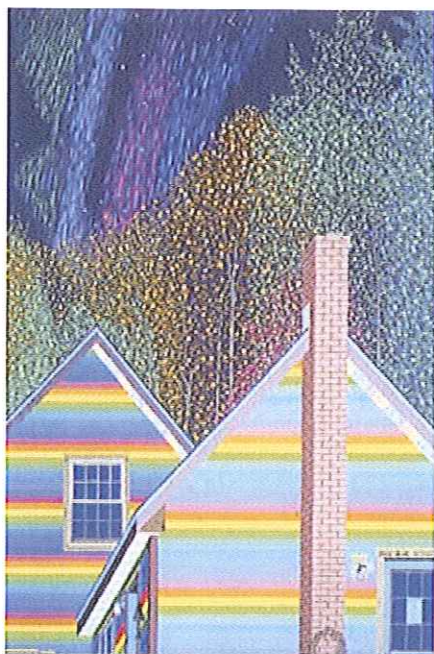
The House on 53 Cole Avenue, March 5, 2002.
by Jessica Park. Janice Adkins Collection.

Jessica Hillary Park was born on July 20, 1958, in Williamstown, where she still lives and works as a mail clerk for Williams College. She is the fourth child of Clara and David Park, who were, respectively, professors of English and physics at Williams College. Jessy's mother documented her daughter's struggle with autism in two groundbreaking books, *The Siege, The First Eight Years of an Autistic Child* (1967) and its sequel, *Exiting Nirvana, A Daughter's Life with Autism* (2001). Nirvana is the term her mother uses to describe her daughter's early age state of "enraptured, timeless, self-stimulating nothingness." In his foreword to *Exiting Nirvana*, Oliver Sacks, a psychologist and the screenwriter for the movie, *The Awakenings*, compares this state to the action of dribbling sand through fingers, "with a very real danger that such dribbling will engross an entire lifetime."

Only under the relentless persistence of her parents did Jessy slowly start to emerge from her state of Nirvana. She did not speak until the age of five. In order to teach Jessy how to speak, Clara Park used images. They looked at picture books together, and Mrs. Park drew shapes that her daughter then reproduced. Within a few months, Jessy could draw, on request, a red heptagon without difficulty. To make Jessy notice the world around her, her mother attributed colors to things. Jessy was quickly able to describe colors with adjectives such as "peacock-green." Her favorite colors are still purple-black and mint-green. She was able to draw in perspective before she was eight years old.

However, she was unable to answer the questions "Are you having fun?" or "Where did Becky [her sister] go?" because they alluded to concepts beyond her comprehension. As is characteristic of autistic people, Jessy developed "enthusiasms," as she calls them, such as obsessions with geometric shapes,

numbers, colors, radio dials, clocks, heaters, atmospheric abnormalities, electric blanket controls, flavor tubes and astronomy. Her autistic mind incessantly constructs complex systems from these obsessions, systems of which she is in total control.



The House in Monterey, Ma. with Aurora,
August 7, 2003.
by Jessica Park. Lisa Smyle Collection.

Her family has used Jessy's systematic approach to force her further to abandon her self-absorbed state. One summer, Jessy became passionate about a golf-point recorder that would keep records of points up to 100. Her siblings used the device to make her rid her sentences of language tics that rendered her speech unintelligible. She was told she would lose one point per unnecessary word. After an initial period of frustration when she counted her own score as being negative, it took her only four hours to stop using nonsensical words. Although this approach might be likened more to animal training than to therapy (a point which has always concerned the Parks), the result made her more adaptable to living in a society where language is a keystone.

As an autistic person, she finds that people are a mystery. It is extremely difficult for her to read facial expressions and comprehend the range and complexity of human feelings. Soon her parents realized that art was the perfect tool to expand her social skills.

Jessica Park is largely a self-taught painter. Her formal training consists only of art classes she took at Mount Greylock Regional High School under the direction of the painter John Maziarz. In addition to drawing with her mother, she sporadically drew and painted with the people who worked with her at home. Growing up in an erudite environment, she was in contact with books, especially art books. Her parents recall reading to her such books as *The Treasury of Art Masterpieces*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and books on Magritte. Furthermore, her grandfather was an art historian and an artist whose original prints are on display in the family home.

Jessy did not paint consistently until patrons started buying her work. She likes getting paid not for the value usually attributed to money but because she keeps track of it in her checkbook.

Jessy exclusively uses acrylic paints. Before starting to paint, she carefully arranges all 64 tubes and never uses a

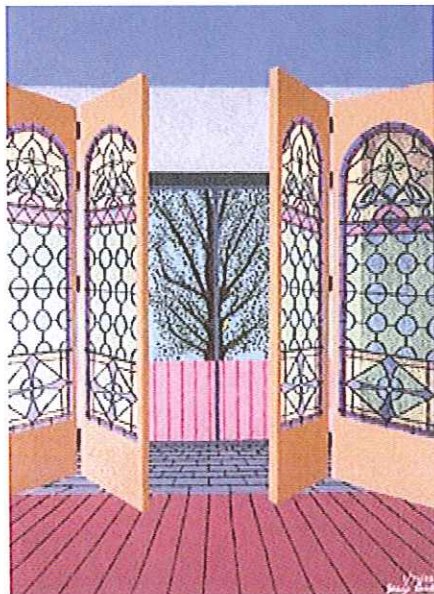
hue straight from the tube. Her heightened color sensitivity allows her to work with six or seven different shades of one color, diluted to the point that they look white to the unsuspecting eye. In order to achieve the most detailed rendering of a building, she sketches on site. She then refers to sharp photographed close-ups. "I rarely omit a drain pipe," she says. "Only by accident."



*The Jessica Building in New Jersey, July 17, 2001
by Jessica Park. Clara and David Park Collection.*

Despite this focus on detail, Jessy's technique has progressed to the point that she now uses colors to suggest shadows. She can detach herself from the camera-like vision supposedly characteristic of autistic people, and she uses her artistic license for the sake of the composition.

She has gone beyond her original myopic vision of the world. Her paintings are no longer portraits of appliances. It has slowly become evident to her that most people would rather buy a painting of their own house than a painting of a radiator. That achievement is to her parents' credit, for they were the ones who foresaw the use of "art as a vehicle for social learning," according to Clara Park.



*The Great Stained Glass Doors, #9,
January 24, 1988,
by Jessica Park. Clara and David Park Collection.*



*The Great Stained Glass Doors, #8,
August 10, 1985,
by Jessica Park. Clara and David Park Collection.*

However, her buildings made of many juxtaposed small segments betray her inability to grasp the object as a single entity. This eerie feeling is especially strong in *The Barn Burned Down, July 25, 1992*, where her use of color makes it hard to distinguish the inside from the outside of the barn. Perhaps she is countering her inability to grasp things as ensembles when she paints her houses with a repetitive rainbow pattern, as in *The House in Monterey, Ma., with Aurora, August 7, 2003*. Her mother has suggested that Jessy's choice of rainbow colors might emanate from a school assignment in which she had to paint a snow landscape in fantasy colors. I would like to offer another explanation: Could be that a rainbow is the perfect combination of her obsession with colors, weather patterns and science?

Jessy's paintings clearly speak of the Nirvana that she has left behind and offer us a vision of our world seen through her mind. Jessy's way out of her childhood state of grace has been made easier by the family and friends who surround her. As a result, she has turned her disability into strength. Ultimately, she makes our world more beautiful with her paintings — her gift back to the community that loves her.

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