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The Artists of Pure Vision

BY TONY GENGARELLY

On a cold December day, my students and I visited Pure Vision Arts (PVA), a studio and exhibition space for self-taught artists with developmental disabilities located in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. Established in 2002, PVA is an initiative of The Shield Institute, a non-profit organization that provides clinical and educational services to children and adults with autism and other developmental challenges. A look around the studio gives a quick assessment of what has been provided. A large, well lit area features carts of drawing and painting materials; a variety of work surfaces; provisions for those with special handicaps; shelves with other art supplies, and finished art displayed everywhere—on the walls and the tops of cases, even in the studio's bathroom.

We were greeted by Pam Rogers, the director of Pure Vision Arts. Dr. Rogers, an artist with an Ed.D in art education from Columbia University, is also a psychoanalyst with a private practice in Manhattan. Fifteen years ago Rogers started the art program at the Shield Institute. Now, with its own space, PVA

“Dare to be different; go the museums and observe; then when you create, make your mind into nothingness.” —Evan Gozali, artist

sponsors beginning, emerging and established artists; many in the latter category, such as Jessica Park and Susan Brown, have attained national and international reputations. “We opened this space seven years ago,” Rogers told us, “in an art gallery section of the city. We wanted our artists to be exposed to the best art, be connected to a broader art community and have someone showcase their work. Now many of the Pure Vision artists have achieved recognition as a result.” Rogers understands both the disabilities of her artists and their need for special attention, but she prefers to use the word ability. Pure Vision is all about recognizing and facilitating the artists' remarkable talents, then displaying, publicizing and marketing their art. PVA hosts exhibitions and participates in New York City's Outsider Art Fair as well as other events such as the Annual Outsider Art in the Hamptons event at Galerie BelAge, and exhibitions in conjunction with Olof Gallery and Galerie



▲ **Untitled** (color abstraction), 2008, by Alba Somoza.

Atelier Herenplaats in the Netherlands. Ultimately, Pure Vision Arts celebrates “neurodiversity” and strives to stimulate social change. According to Rogers, “Many of the artists have led amazing lives. The sheer power and uniqueness of their expression adds greatly to our

humanity and helps society advance by breaking down negative stereotypes and misperceptions about people with autism and other developmental disabilities.”

Our walk through the studio began with Alba Somoza, a beautiful young woman and one of the more important emerging artists at PVA. Somoza has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair as well as a voice facilitator. Nonetheless, she is a docent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she conducts guided tours on modern abstract art. When we approached Somoza, she was at work on a new painting with her signature drips and dribbles and splashes of multicolored paint. An assistant, to whom she gives directions, was on hand to help her. To see the finished work, reminiscent of the New York School's action paintings, is to witness something truly amazing.

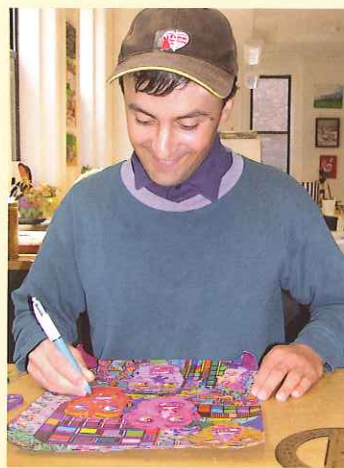
Somoza is self-taught, but not unmindful of the tradition to which her paintings refer. She represents the Pure Vision teaching methodology that facilitates an artist's work without interfering with its well spring of creation. It is the artist's inner world, the pure vision, that is cultivated. PVA facilitators take their cues from the artist to help provide what is necessary (art materials; subjects of interest). There are no art classes here, no one way to make art, no copies of established art. That is what makes PVA artists and their works so original and important.

Another Pure Vision artist, Evan Gozali, who has had a measure of art training, was eager to reinforce this view: “When they teach art in college, they sort of mess with the creativity process.” Nods and smiles

from my students, as he now spoke directly to them: “Dare to be different; go the museums and observe; then when you create, make your mind into nothingness.”

Rogers led us to another area, where the artist was using an adjacent window for his light box while he copied video and movie logos onto a

▼ Barry Kahn at Pure Vision Arts.





◀ **Untitled** (faces on background grid), ca. 2008, by Barry Kahn.

appears to be a random application of signs and symbols is apparently a narrative which greatly excites the artist.

Kahn's monologue was infectious, but we needed to pull away and follow Simone Johnson, holding a pair of recently created cat dolls, as she led us to a wall where some of her latest work was located. Human-like house cats, wild cats, party cats, wedding cats, belly-dancing cats—Johnson is a belly dancer and performs with a New York dance company—dominate

decorative objects such as pillows and handbags. Her face showed little affect when Rogers praised the magic of her art and recounted that she works as a gallery assistant at PVA. Johnson, and the other artists retain 50% on their sales. The other 50% funds studio expenses such as framing, art supplies and exhibitions. Like other PVA artists, Johnson acquires a sense of

herself as an artist as well as income from participating in the art studio.

We accompanied Rogers to an opposite wall where the work of Pure Vision artist William Britt was displayed. Britt is one of the studio's star performers, and

▼ William Britt painting in his home studio.



large piece of drawing paper. Barry Kahn is known for his nightmarish faces and motley-colored nude figures superimposed on or integrated into elaborate background grids. Kahn works with graphite and pen to sharply outline his forms before filling them in with bright colors. The movie logos are very entertaining and somewhat unusual, but Kahn was obviously fascinated with his subject and lectured us on the intricacies of video companies and their subsidiaries, mergers and evolution. What

The triumph of William Britt is our triumph. He is telling us our individual stories; despite the ignorance which imprisons us, and the loneliness of our lives, each of us can be reached and liberated by Divine imagination and human concern. —Maya Angelou, poet

her work. She places her feline subjects in different settings, from an outdoor banquet replete with a tablecloth decorated with hearts, to jungle settings with palm trees and starlit backgrounds. Johnson draws directly onto the canvas; then uses vibrant colors to enliven the scene. Her art is also printed on greeting cards as well as mouse pads, and her original work on canvas has been stitched into

at 75 he continues to paint his beloved nature images in the contemporary folk art style that has earned him the nickname "Grandpa Moses." Britt's landscapes are riveting with their sharp definition and full applications of color. The artist has developed his own style over the years and by now is a master of composition and perspective; his scenes are complete to the last detail. Britt currently resides in his own home with limited assistance.



▲ Simone Johnson with her stuffed artwork.

▼ **Belly Dancing Wild Cats**, ca. 2009, by Simone Johnson.



▼ **Untitled** (Pond in Summer), 2009, by William Britt.



“We wanted our artists to be exposed to the best art, be connected to a broader art community and have someone showcase their work. Now many of the Pure Vision artists have achieved recognition as a result.” — Pam Rogers, director

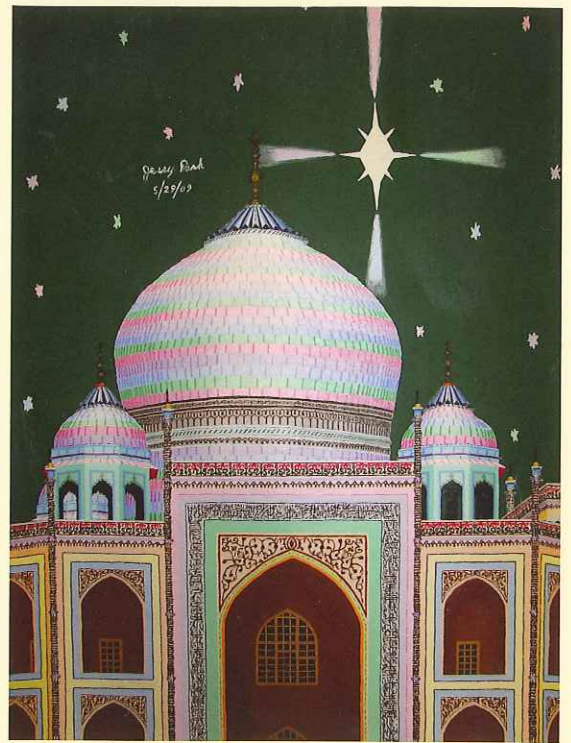
Severely compromised speech led Britt early into art as a means of self-expression. Institutionalized at the Willowbrook State School in Staten Island for 34 years, Britt has created his own success story through his art. A woodworker and frame-maker as well, Britt operates mostly out of his home studio where he is surrounded by what Rogers calls “his folk art museum.” Britt’s work is in many private collections. In 1986, he received the Kennedy Center Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement. In her tribute to the artist on the occasion of this award, poet Maya Angelou wrote: “The triumph of William Britt is our triumph. He is telling us our individual stories; despite the ignorance which imprisons us, and the loneliness of our lives, each of us can be reached and liberated by Divine imagination and human concern.”

This was an extraordinary afternoon for us, and as we took our leave of this unusual place where miracles seem to happen naturally, we stopped to look again at the work of two other PVA stars, Jessica Park and Susan Brown. Park works at home and most often on private commissions. She is represented by PVA, and her prints and original paintings are frequently included in exhibitions. Her signature style—day-lit, rainbow-colored, architectural monuments set against magnificent night skies featuring multitudes of star

clusters, constellations and other astronomical phenomena—has won the artist acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. One of her most recent paintings of the *Taj Mahal*, something of a new departure for the artist, was featured and sold last fall at the PVA 8th Anniversary Exhibition titled *Paradise Found*.

Susan Brown’s pop art-style renderings of family and transportation themes have won high praise as well. Brown works mostly at home in Sayville, Long Island, but enjoys long train rides to the city as well as the 17-block walk from Penn Station to Pure Vision Arts, where she often puts in an eight-hour day creating and finishing art. Looking at her freely rendered cars or thumbnail images in grid-like patterns, one can appreciate Rogers’s description of Brown’s art: “Her technique is raw, energetic and improvisational like jazz music, which she loves.” Brown’s work was recently on display at the Olof Gallery in Leiden, the Netherlands, in an exhibition of women artists titled *Outside Hers*. Brown’s and Park’s art has been featured in many exhibitions showcasing artists with autism and has been the subject of books and numerous articles.

Our departure was reluctant and



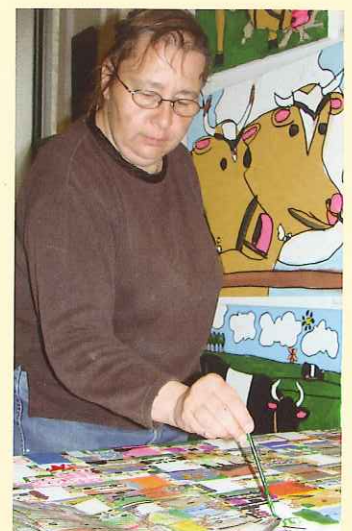
▲ *Taj Mahal*, 2009, by Jessica Park.

informal as we trailed out of the studio. But, the energy and vitality of our day confirmed that art is indeed everywhere and is especially alive and well at 114 West 17th Street, 3rd floor, in New York City. [For more information on Pure Vision Arts see: www.purevisionarts.org.] ✉

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◀ *New York City Taxi Cabs*, c. 2007, by Susan Brown.



▶ Susan Brown painting at Pure Vision Arts studio