

December 2, 2001

## ART/ARCHITECTURE; Art, a Healer, Draws Out the Artist in the Afflicted

By KAY LARSON

CHARLES JENULEVICH has begun a new painting. Guiding his wheelchair up to a table, he bends over a bare white canvas and lays down a wedge of color with his left hand. His right arm hangs uselessly in a sling, a result of a stroke that paralyzed his right side and put a brake on his words.

Mr. Jenulevich was a poet, but now he gags on language. Groping to speak, he points to his head to indicate where the words are -- words that resist all his efforts to force them out. But when he's asked about his plans for this painting, the jam-up suddenly eases. "I have no idea," he says, and laughs uproariously.

Outsider Art erupts out of the creative urgencies of people who have mostly never heard of the art mainstream. But the term has always been a bit disingenuous. Outside what? Who's an insider? Mr. Jenulevich's art suggests you can be an outsider to yourself. In one of his earlier paintings, a maelstrom of ice-cream colors swirls around a cipherlike black figure: a void in the shape of a person.

The painting hangs in the main corridor -- colloquially called Main Street -- at the Northeast Center for Special Care, a hospital opened in 1999 in Lake Katrine, on the edge of Kingston. Main Street is an informal art gallery of works by people with chronic disabilities like brain injury, aphasia, spinal cord trauma, stroke and some forms of dementia. They have all entered the airy, light, well-stocked art studio here -- many from a very dark place -- and have emerged as artists.

The term Outsider Art is an invention of insiders. It was first applied in the early 20th century to the visionary art of the insane -- the Swiss asylum resident Adolf Wölfli and the patients of the psychiatrist Dr. Hans Prinzhorn. The Surrealists loved its untutored aspect, and Jean Dubuffet formalized its rawness with the label Art Brut. But is the term art-historically useful for those who are not sharecroppers or the urban poor? Can it be applied to people who may have been among the culturally privileged? Even if they never picked up a brush until their lives changed?

The art studio occupies a soaring, light-drenched two-story atrium in this elegantly rehabbed former training center for I.B.M. executives. The studio is run by a painter, Bill Richards, who brings an artist's viewpoint to the healing process. Mr. Richards once organized a similar program for injured and disabled children at Harlem Hospital. He envisions this adult experiment as something more intense than recreation. He wants to challenge neophytes to break the deadlock of disease.

"What I try to do is get them connected to the process of making art, so it's really an involvement in process and not with projects," Mr. Richards said. "Once they get connected to the art-making process it becomes self-sustaining."

Traumatic brain injury (T.B.I.), according to a report by the National Institutes of Health in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, results mainly from motorcycle and car accidents (50 percent) as well as falls, violent assaults and sports injuries. It happens to men twice as often as women, peaking from ages 15 to 24 and after 75. Alcohol is involved half the time, and those who bear the injury are often the innocents. Alcoholic binges can bring on permanent brain trauma and coma, as can anaphylactic shock from surgery.

The aftermath is inevitably stunning. The injured brain frequently knows it's not working properly, but the knowledge is useless. The illusion of omnipotence is shattered. Body and mind become strangers to themselves. The paralysis extends to emotions. In the art studio, Mr. Richards cajoles people to take charge, even if it's in a small arena.

They are obliged to make choices. Which color to lay down? What to paint? How to pick up a brush when your hands don't work? "So all of these things directly relate to the triggers for brain rehabilitation," Mr. Richards said, "focus, making choices, independence, sustaining interest, motivation."

If they don't come to the art studio, Mr. Richards goes after them. Erich Miethner got so tired of visits from Mr. Richards, he finally gave in. Wheeling around the art studio in his high-tech motorized chair, Mr. Miethner explained his objections: "I just said, Bill, I've never painted in my life, I have no idea of color coordination or anything."

His reluctance seems reasonable when you learn that Mr. Miethner has no use of his hands or feet. He explained that until October 1999 he played classical piano, bassoon and bagpipes professionally. "I competed with the bagpipes at the Highland games," he said. "I was a member of the Air Force Band for four years. I formed my own orchestra in 1978, the Putnam Symphony Orchestra in Putnam County, N.Y., and conducted and directed it for four years." Then he fell out of bed and twisted his spine.

How could Mr. Richards expect him to paint? Mr. Miethner wondered. "I'm the ultimate pessimist, and I didn't think it would work at all, but Bill said, 'We will find a way for you to do this.'"

Mr. Richards designed easels so that wheelchairs could roll under them. He laid out small pots of paint for Mr. Miethner and wedged a brush between his teeth. "I have fairly good control," Mr. Miethner said. "I can make thin lines and fat lines. I get tired quickly. But it builds strong neck muscles."

Mr. Miethner paints about one picture a month. Several, including one titled "Deer Maze," were shown over the summer in the exhibition "Amazing Art" at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Twenty-nine artists from the art studio showed paintings. Mr. Miethner explained that "Deer Maze" is literally a maze; it's about how to find your way to the center when the path isn't obvious. On a blue-green background, black hieroglyphic figures blazed in red join leaping black deer in a dance of anarchic lines. The center is indeed hard to reach.

The artists offer evidence of complex inner lives, even when the outer ones are impaired. Trauma has not magically conferred equal abilities on all, but neither has it obliterated the imprint of habits of expressing consciousness. Jurgen Blank, a printer who claimed to hate art until he entered the art studio, envisioned flaming chronicles of his near-death experiences that would have been perfectly at home in a group show in the East Village in the 1980's. Paul DiFranco's drawing is a pile-up of words that smash into the paper's right side with the force of a train wreck; the only fully readable phrase says "Forgive me."

Gregory Dedyo, a Wall Street stockbroker before his injury, now speaks haltingly and with obvious difficulty as he describes a masters-of-the-universe sort of life: a business degree from the Wharton School, skiing at Jackson Hole and Vail, playing piano at weddings and benefits. He has done only two paintings, but they are complex schematics of graphic information, sharing aspects of Stuart Davis and Jean-Michel Basquiat, and coded with private symbolism and pulsing with an urban graffitilike energy.

Some patients at the Northeast Center come and go in the art studio with casual indifference. Others, like Mr. Jenulevich, discover an irrepressible urgency. "He's there every day when he's not in physical therapy," Mr. Richards said. "He paints four or five hours a day. He's a real artist. I've watched him enough and seen enough of his work to know he's really using his brain to work out a lot of conflicts in the work. Everything he does pertains to the dichotomy between light and dark, injury and health."

In the studio, Mr. Jenulevich pressed a book into a visitor's hand: a small literary and art magazine he edited under a pseudonym before his stroke. He pointed to a page of poetry: his own.

The fascists killed Garcia Lorca

The communists offered their own Rogue Dalton

The Christians slaughtered the pagan poets

The Muslims silence the publishers

And they all end up apologizing

But poets who partake of the fruit of truth

From the word tree

And spit out the seeds of power

Will never be sorry.

Mustering his words like precious fruit from a paradisiacal tree, Mr. Jenulevich gasped, "Art makes me feel whole."

Kay Larson's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about the PBS series "Art 21."