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Mental patients' work shows art is fundamental

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BY MARGARET HAWKINS Galleries

The impulse to make art is hard to trace but impossible to marginalize. One sign of the fundamental nature of artmaking is that people in extreme states of poverty, distress and mental pain still do it. Indeed, sometimes they are the most avid practitioners.

"The Abstract Mind Mural," a collaboration between the Neumann Association, which serves people with mental illness, and the Aldo Castillo Arts Foundation, is presenting 60 paintings by and about the mentally ill at the Museum of Science and Industry. Some of the artists are mental patients and clients of the Neumann Association; others are professional artists.

The funny thing is that by and large, the most interesting work here is by the mental patients. Abstract, colorful, direct, mysterious without any forced symbolism, engaging and dynamic, these paintings could make a show all by themselves. And there is an established tradition of showing the work of the mentally ill as outsider art, most notably the powerful paintings by the artists at Gugging, the Austrian psychiatric hospital that even provides studios for artist patients.

THE ABSTRACT MIND MURAL

Through July 7

Museum of Science and Industry, 57th and Lake Shore

Free with museum admission, \$6.25-\$11

(773) 684-1414

Like many of Aldo Castillo's projects, this one could have been better edited. At least half of the works by professional artists are weak, taking away from the power of the other half, and the show would have been stronger without them. On the other hand -- and as usual -- Castillo's heart is the right place. The idea of presenting a compassionate view of mental illness from both inside and outside is generous and full of good will and reflects the mission of organizations like the Neumann Association, which tries to help those who are developmentally disabled or mentally ill find a place in mainstream society. Perhaps this works better as a compassionate philosophy and therapeutic strategy, though, than it does as a curatorial principal. It's good for us all to stretch our idea of what's normal to include people who are a bit different, but putting the work of the mentally ill next to the work of these particular artists just makes the sane people look fussy and rigid, cautious and even corny. Even the comments by the mentally ill artists are more candid and interesting than what normal artists often write about their work.

"Mad Sadness" by MK is a storm of whirling brushstrokes over a big pink boulder-shape form. The pulsing color is bright and unmodulated, appearing to have been squeezed straight from the tube in a hurry, to make an image the artist and Neumann client describes by saying, "This is how I feel when I am mad."

"Sunset" by Robert Soto, another Neumann client, is a starkly symmetrical, crudely painted half-sun hovering over blue water. It has a pale yellow strip over it and all around is orange sky. The shakiness of the marks may be just clumsiness, but I doubt it because the painting works so well, capturing the vibrating heat and light in a sky too bright to stare at long. Soto, whose painting was inspired by a trip to Puerto Rico, says of his work "Art is good -- it helps me feel better."

"How Far is Heaven" by Gene Smith, another brightly colored, severely symmetrical painting, shows configuration reminiscent of an altar, with doves and crosses that seem to be bursting with energy. Smith describes his color choices by saying, "the white toward the middle represents gathering anger and getting it together," while "green helps me understand myself." These might seem like disorganized thoughts to some, but to me they're good efforts at getting at the ineffable qualities of how art works, expressing ideas and emotions not easily put into words.

Not all the "sane" art is bad. Lorna Marsh's "Inner Language," an ink drawing of a head that shows birds popping out of places where eyes, mouth and hair should be, is a beautifully poetic, and optimistic, metaphor for mental illness. Cuban collage artist Pedro Baldriche's "Abstract Mind Flying" is less obviously connected to the show's theme but is a wonderfully compact and whimsical composition worthy of H.C. Westermann.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.