

Art & Design

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On the surface

A mural at MSI explores the challenges of living with mental illness

The “Walk-Through Heart” has long been one of the Museum of Science and Industry’s most beloved exhibits, but if you visit this weekend, you’ll also have the chance to explore the human mind. Sixty-eight artists from around the world have come together to create *The Abstract Mind*, a mural investigating the challenges of living with mental illness. It is presented as part of Bodies of Work, the Chicago festival of disability arts and culture.

The mural was created in collaboration between the Neumann Association—a Chicago-based organization that has served those with developmental disabilities and mental illness for more than 55 years—and the Aldo Castillo Arts Foundation.



Lorna Marsh, *Inner Language*, 2006.

In *The Abstract Mind*, the artists drew inspiration from the clients of the Neumann Association to create the bulk of the mural. But nine of the mural’s 68 panels were created by Neumann clients. Not surprisingly, these untrained artists turn out to be the most compelling of the bunch.

Anger meets salvation in the broad strokes of Gene Smith’s *How Far is Heaven?*, a symmetric composition consisting of a trio of crucifixes and a convergence of color. “Green helps me understand myself,” the artist says in a brochure.

Cathy Craigs’s *Future in a Crystal Ball* plays with memory via juxtaposed symbols and jagged shapes. “Bad times can be like a nightmare” she explains in the brochure. “This painting represents the good times.”

Our enthusiasm for the Neumann clients’ work is not meant to detract from that of the more polished contributors from Spain, Norway, Chile, Colombia and the U.S., to name a few. Residing in Chicago, South African Lorna Marsh contributes a gorgeous, haunting piece. A pale solo figure appears riddled with anxiety and seemingly has a nest of birds living atop its head. Esperanza González Perlado’s work presents a stunning, tightly cropped image on a gritty wood panel depicting a man with his fists up—a physical action that shows feelings of defensiveness and daily combat.

A problem arises, however, when third-person artistic interpretations are placed in direct competition with first-person expression. The work of many of the fine artists presented here comes off as affected in comparison to the instinct, of say, MK, whose *Mad Sadness*, with its aggressive repetitive motion and magenta hues, packs a powerful punch.

The clash between the work presented in *The Abstract Mind* only illustrates our lack of understanding of mental illness—and we consider that a silver lining. No doubt the artists made a valiant attempt to wrap their heads around their subject matter, but the fact remains that it simply cannot be done. Though we may not be able to understand, we can work to become more

understanding. *The Abstract Mind* helps to open an important dialogue about the challenges of living with mental illness, and it demonstrates some of the surprising gifts it brings.—*Jason Mojica*

“The Abstract Mind Mural: Art Exploring Individuals Living with Mental Illness” is on display at the Museum of Science and Industry through May 15 (see Around Town, Museum listings).