

### Eye Exam

#### The Process of the Mind

##### Sarah Dahnke

Art therapy has long been touted as relief from all sorts of ailments. The process of visualization and creation has been proven to be a powerful healing tool, especially for those suffering from mental illness. The Neumann Association, in collaboration with curator Aldo Castillo, realized that they could help promote awareness of this exciting therapy while helping to remove the stigma associated with mental disorders. The association, which serves people with mental illness and developmental disabilities, encouraged clients enrolled in its programs to submit original work, which were posted online. These works were seen internationally by professional artists, who were inspired to create pieces as well. They were placed together, and a mural of sorts was formed.

Last year "The Abstract Mind Mural: Art Exploring Individuals Living with Mental Illness" circulated around Chicago, opening at the Museum of Science and Industry, The Daley Center and Terminal 3 at O'Hare Airport. The mural is continuing its tour with a recent unveiling at the Chicago Board of Options Exchange, and twelve pieces have also been installed at the old Montgomery Ward headquarters at 600 West Chicago.

Upon first glance, it's difficult to distinguish the work of the polished artists from the Neumann clients. The international professional artists carefully mimic the tendency of someone with a mental disorder to select bright colors and one large focal point in the middle of a painting. Heads and faces are an ongoing theme used by many of the artists who contributed to the mural, not surprisingly, since each artist tackled issues dealing with the mind. It's not until you take a closer look at the individual paintings and begin reading their corresponding descriptions that you discover that some of these artists literally feel trapped in their own minds. "Having a mental illness makes me want to take a vacation," Neumann artist Robert Soto writes in the description of his painting "A Sunset."

Other Neumann artists provide painfully simple descriptions of their work or their life in general. "I would love to become the greatest artist," Rufino Mariano writes in the description of his painting "Stand Up Straight." "The color makes me feel good," Gene Smith writes when describing his Christian-symbol-filled painting "How Far is Heaven?" "The greens make me understand myself." One would think there would be a dramatic juxtaposition between the Neumann artists and their professional counterparts, but in most cases there is not. Guatemalan artist Klara Chavarria captures the same simplistic shapes and faceless bodies used by some of the Neumann clients in her painting "Pure Souls." The viewer learns that she has a deeper connection to people with mental illness after reading her description, which points out that she has not one, but two siblings with mental illness, which made this project a "personal study and the expression very intense."

Other professional contributors aimed to make a statement about how mental illness must make someone feel, rather than trying to imitate their artistic style. South African artist Lorna Marsh's "Inner Language" portrays a very uncomfortable, genderless person who has birds for eyes, birds for a mouth and birds escaping from his or her head. She asks the viewer, "What is in a person's head? Can we ever truly understand the thoughts of our neighbors?" United States-based artist Daniel Nolan makes sure to highlight the portrayal of those with mental illness in the rest of society. His painting, quite possibly a self-portrait, includes a face that is full color on one side and black and white on the other, demonstrating how friends and family's perception of someone with a mental illness can change once they are diagnosed. He writes, "The shame, in conjunction with the mental disturbances, blocks the individual from expressing their true and authentic self, suppressing and hiding their perceived dark side, while only allowing the world to see what is socially acceptable."

But it should be noted that the overall tone of the mural is not focused on the negative side of having a mental illness. If anything, it is educational and uplifting, serving as a reminder that life is not without obstacles--those that only make us stronger. "Having a mental illness is a good thing," Danny Hannah writes when describing his painting "Mind Process," which depicts the profile of a head filled with color blocks instead of a face. "It can represent how I do in life. If someone has a mental illness, he/she has to strive to work hard."

*"The Abstract Mind Mural" is on display at the Chicago Board of Options Exchange, 400 South LaSalle, through April 30, and the lobby of 600 West Chicago, through May.*

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