

From angst comes beauty. Eric, 47:
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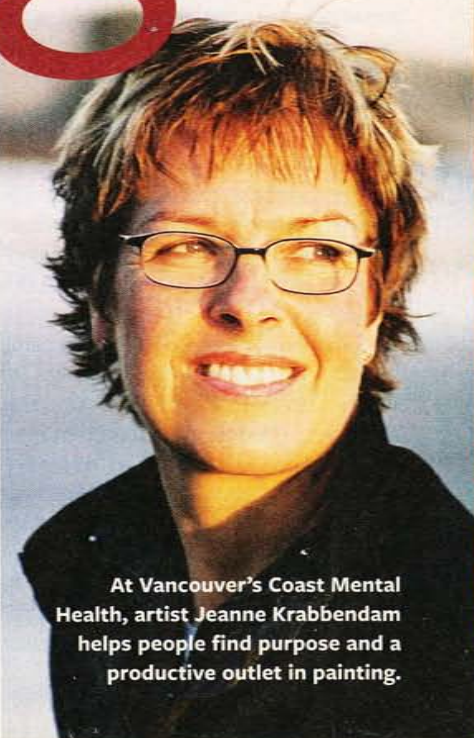
Art From the Edge

A Vancouver program
helps the mentally
ill by tapping into their
artistic creativity

BY CAROL CRENNNA

Several years ago, a man named David used to wander the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, trapped and tormented by a psychiatric disorder. Then one day he discovered Coast Mental Health, a nonprofit organization that provides housing, food, clothing and practical support for people with mental illness. Inside its resource centre's Art Room, David positioned himself in front of an easel and began to dabble with acrylics. It was a good place to spend the day after being forced out of his overnight shelter—his refuge for the past ten years.

Of the hundreds of individuals who walk into the organization's resource



At Vancouver's Coast Mental Health, artist Jeanne Krabbendam helps people find purpose and a productive outlet in painting.

PHOTO: COURTESY JEANNE KRABBENDAM

centre, 80 percent are, or have been, homeless and desperate. Up to 75 mentally ill men and women aged 20 to 80 are drop-ins for the weekly art program. They're skeptical at first, but within this safe environment (with strict rules against drugs and alcohol), their now-unhindered imaginations come alive, repressed talents are freed and the resulting artwork is sometimes astounding. When they are then able to sell their artwork through Coast's annual exhibit and obtain 80 percent of the price, they are given hope, purpose and resolve.

Though David, 51, is painfully shy and rarely speaks to strangers, his voice grows confident when he discusses art. "My concentration was nonexistent—my mind raced with hundreds of thoughts at the same time—but I began to have peace of mind when I painted," he says.

David once owned a multimillion-dollar business and was internationally recognized within a prestigious industry. After working 90-hour weeks and spending 250 days a year traveling, he began to have mental-health issues.

"I had major panic attacks. I became withdrawn and would be in a rage for weeks. I still don't like crowds or going on a bus. I don't see former friends or family. It's too difficult." After traveling aimlessly, spending all the money he had, David ended up in Vancouver. Finding Coast's Art Room was a big step forward. David has since sold 20 paintings, for \$150 to \$850 each, including one that hangs at Simon Fraser



David, 51: "I now paint still life because I need a still life."

University. He lives in Coast's social-housing unit in Vancouver's Yaletown, and has access to a workshop, where he makes frames he sells to artists.

David says that if it hadn't been for the friendship of artist Jeanne Krabbendam, who runs the Art Room, he wouldn't have left his apartment.

"When I met David, he was a zombie, not allowing any contact with the outside world," Krabbendam says. "His compulsive perfectionism was reflected in tedious, tight drawings. He began to enjoy his time here and his work became looser and very good."

Krabbendam has seen several such transformations since she started volunteering with Coast five years ago.

"The first time one of their pieces sells, they suddenly recognize that they are worthy and have talent," says Krabbendam, who organizes Coast's annual curated show. This exhibit draws hundreds of guests, including gallery owners, and features more than 200 paintings and sculptures from 75 artists.

Krabbendam often laughs with her students about "being crazy." "I tell them it can be an artistic asset, and that everybody is crazy in one way or another," she says. "They're fearful about speaking to customers, but I encourage them by saying that the public expects artists to be a little off the wall, and I challenge them, saying that if

they want to be artists, being good with the public is mandatory."

Another patient, Eric, 47, was not able to speak to anyone—including Krabbendam—when he came to the Art Room five years ago. Any communication would simply cause him to cry. Since age 15, Eric had suffered from depression that became so paralytic he would isolate himself from others for months. "There's a point where you get

Art as Therapy

Art and mental disorders are often linked, and many noted artists with psychiatric problems have expressed their emotional turmoil and distress through their paintings. Vincent Van Gogh, who suffered from recurrent psychotic episodes, may be the most famous artist of this kind. And today, even nonartists can tap into their creativity as part of their counselling or psychiatric treatment: Specialized art therapists encourage patients to understand and cope with their problems through visual expression.



Adolf Wölfli

so down, you can't get yourself back up again," he says. "I went from being university educated, having a full-time job and two books of poetry published, to losing everything and winding up at a facility called 'The Living Room' in downtown Vancouver. It's the bottom—a hard place with a lot of violence—but the saints who work there gave me crayons to draw with."

Eric started coming to the Art Room daily, staying all day to work independently. Krabbendam remembers his initial cartoonlike drawings—so detailed and tiny that they were difficult to look at. As he gained confidence, his work became colourful, loose and impressionistic. "I've learned that making bad paintings is necessary to

generate good ones and that beauty doesn't have to be attractive," he says.

His paintings began to sell, and Eric was able to move from the street to his own apartment. Eric now shares a studio in Gastown and (under the name Leef Evans) has sold about 60 paintings for \$500 to \$1,000 each. One, bought by a judge, hangs in Vancouver's new community court.

"My work has a confessional element," Eric admits, "though I don't paint about my issues. I am an artist with mental-health problems, not a mental-health artist; there is a big difference. I wasn't at this point when I first came to the Art Room, but I know my path now."

Though Eric now tells his story to

Online Tour the Exhibit

For a slide show of incredible works by participants in the Art Room, visit readersdigest.ca/art.

Untitled (Caballero) by Martin Ramirez



The work of artists with severe mental disorders often has been slotted into the category of "raw art" or "outsider art." Here are a few notable early outsider artists:

Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930), a former farmhand and labourer, was confined to a Swiss mental asylum, where his doctor, Walter Morgenthaler, provided him with art material. Wölfli produced a 25,000-page collection of text, drawings, collages and musical compositions and Morgenthaler penned the landmark book *Madness and*

Art, based on Wölfli's case history.

Martin Ramirez (1895-1963) came to the United States in 1925 to earn money for his family in Mexico. In 1931 he was diagnosed as demented and placed in an asylum in California. Remaining institutionalized for the rest of his life, he produced hundreds of drawings.

Henry Darger (1892-1973), orphaned at eight, was institutionalized until he ran away at age 16. He lived a reclusive life, working as a hospital janitor in Chicago and living in a room,

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large audiences at Coast functions and to media, the story isn't over. "There is a tendency for people to think mental illness has a beginning, a middle and an end, and if you're doing well, there will be a fairy-tale ending," he says. "This isn't true."

Though they cannot cure mental illness, end homelessness or make professional artists out of all those who participate, art programs like the one at Coast can lighten the journey. And for some, painting becomes an act of necessity, a way to bring coherence to thoughts that threaten to overwhelm them.

The program helps the mentally ill to be viewed as capable people wishing to contribute to soci-

ety, helping them recover their dignity. In 2007 Krabbendam took ten of her students to Vancouver's Eastside Culture Crawl (a large-scale art-studio tour), and last year, five of them had their own shows at this event. Krabbendam stresses care and cleaning of art tools, to promote the feeling of property ownership, and her students' supplies have now become precious to them.

"If I didn't paint, I don't know what I'd do," says Eric.

Krabbendam adds, "Sometimes crossroads in life, like becoming mentally ill, turn into a blessing. Art can bring joy and depth to life, and connection with others."

where he produced *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in what is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, a 15,000-page narrative illustrated by hundreds of large watercolours, smaller drawings and collages. His art was only discovered when he was sent to a nursing home near the end of his life, and it is now exhibited at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. In 2004, a full-length documentary was made about Darger: *In the Realms of the Unreal*.



"Queer Winged, Purple Bellied Blengin," by Henry Darger.

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