

North by Northeast

EDITED BY JANET FILLMORE



Seth Chwast (in front of his painting, *Fantasy Horse*) "makes you see things new," says his teacher, Donna Rogers. Chwast wears earplugs because he is sensitive to sound.

THE ART WORLD

An Outsider Comes In

Seth Chwast stands before a 6-by-7-foot blank canvas, picks up a piece of charcoal and boldly draws the outline of an almost life-size horse. He fills in details, including the horse's eye and a background of hills, mountains and clouds, occasionally taking a break to run back and forth in the hallway outside his studio, a converted bedroom in his Cleveland Heights home.

Chwast, who is 21 years old and autistic, is what the conventional art world calls an "outsider artist." These people, who can include prisoners and psychiatric patients, work and often live outside the mainstream while creating art that doesn't correlate with conventional movements or styles.

The drawing and painting of Chwast's red *Fantasy Horse* is the

subject of an eight-minute documentary, *A Different Kind of Journey*, which will be shown Thursday at 4 p.m. at the Ohio Independent Film Festival at Cleveland Public Theatre. *Fantasy Horse* and several of Chwast's other paintings will be displayed in the theater's lobby.

The video came about after Chwast was invited to participate in a Medical Humanities Consortium on Disability Studies at the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Knowing that Chwast could not participate in a panel discussion, his teacher, Donna Rogers, videotaped him painting.

With financial support from Chwast's mother, Debra, and countless volunteer hours from Rogers and other local artists specializing in storyboarding, filming and editing, the video blossomed into a short documentary that, along with Chwast's artwork, enthralled the audience in Hershey. Annetta Mar-

ion, the co-founding artistic director for the Ohio Independent Film Festival, says she chose the film for the festival because "It's both a great story and visually beautiful."

Debra Chwast, who a year ago was told that her son should find a job dry-mopping floors, says she now has hope for his future.

"Art is not a verbal world, so it's a place where he can compete," she observes. "For me as a mom, on some level, I feel like I can die some day. Maybe he'll be OK; maybe he'll have peers and a life with meaning. It's what every mother wants for her child."

— JAYNE EIBEN

The film festival's free opening reception will be Monday, November 8, from 7-8 p.m. at Cleveland Public Theatre, 6415 Detroit Avenue, Cleveland. For more information: 216-651-7315, www.ohiofilms.com; advance tickets (\$10 each), www.ticketweb.com.

"Everybody needs to be heard, and painting is Seth's voice."

— Donna Rogers, Seth Chwast's teacher