

Autistic artist speaks in language of color

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Seth Chwast pads around his Cleveland Heights home in a T-shirt and sweat pants. He's 6 feet tall in his stocking feet, a dark-haired young man with a faraway gaze. What he glimpses in that vague distance is a mystery. Seth, who has autism, has few words for it.

But on this mild January morning, a blank canvas nearly 6 feet tall and 7 feet wide stands in the studio he has made in his mother's living room. Painting is how Seth, 23, shows the world what he sees, and today he has a new vision in mind.

"Orange Fantasy Horse," Seth says, his words sliding into each other as he announces the subject and title of the painting he's about to begin.

Donna Rogers, a photographer and Seth's full-time art coach, will lend emotional support and encouragement and help him stay focused. Seth always chooses the subject matter and the palette and does all the painting, of course. Today, Rogers wonders whether Seth should try something a little different. Most artists favor one side, and Seth's "fantasy horses" tend to face right.

Seth holds a piece of charcoal, which he'll use to draw the shapes on the canvas before he begins painting. With his free hand, he reaches out for Rogers, and she returns his touch. They wiggle their fingertips together in a silent gesture all their own.

Then Rogers asks Seth if he would consider making the orange horse face left.

"Yes," he answers softly. "Grow your brain."

Seth develops a bright visual style

In less than four years, Seth Chwast ("kwahst") has filled his expansive Cleveland Heights home with canvas after canvas. Paintings hang in spaces once reserved for other art. They stand on easels. They line hallways. His mother, Debra Chwast, supports him in every way, from hiring art mentors to investing in pricey art supplies to making room to display his work as it practically tumbles into being.

Seth isn't just prolific. While his work has many of the hallmarks that make outsider art look primitive or childlike, he also is developing a bright visual "voice" that calls out to people of all kinds.

At Reddotproject.org, a nonprofit registry that puts buyers in touch with Cleveland-area artists, Seth's fine-art prints and original canvases are priced from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, and they're selling.

He began getting noticed in 2005, when a friend of his mother's asked her to bring Seth and some of his work to a Pennsylvania Medical Humanities Consortium conference. Seth created the 6-foot-by-7-foot "Red Fantasy Horse" especially for that event. It's a scarlet horse against a blue sky and snow-tipped mountains. It is at once grand and sweetly innocent.

"I almost died," said his mother. "I thought it looked like a 6-year-old drew it."

But conference-goers loved the painting. The red horse was later featured at a reception for an independent film festival at Cleveland Public Theatre, and earned a surprising endorsement.

"Michael Cunningham, who bought art for the Cleveland Museum of Art, said, Well, this could go in the contemporary gallery of any museum in America.' And I thought, What?"

Cunningham is a longtime friend of Debra Chwast's and her ex-husband, Rob. Cunningham was curator of Japanese and Korean art at the Cleveland Museum of Art until 2003, when the museum cut the position to save money. Outsider art -- work created by unschooled, often physically or emotionally disabled people -- isn't his specialty. He simply likes how some of Seth's paintings make him feel. He loves how Seth plays bright colors against each other.

"I've seen stuff that has names' attached to it, as it happens, that I don't get excited about the way I do about some of the things that Seth does," he said.

At the beginning of this year, a brief feature on NBC's "Today" show brought Seth's Web site, www.sethchwast.com, repeatedly crashing down from all the traffic. (Bellefaire-Jewish Children's Bureau, a children's agency that has provided services and schooling to Seth over the years, bought more bandwidth to accommodate the demand.)

In March, a show of Seth's work will go up in the Humphrey Atrium Gallery at University Hospitals Case Medical Center. Also, a show of his art is scheduled for this fall at Lorain County Community College. A small museum in Louisiana has asked to show his work.

How do you separate the interest in Seth's art from his identity as an autistic painter? It's almost impossible. In his book "How to Look at Outsider Art" -- which contains a section on other autistic artists -- Lyle Rexer writes: "Our appreciation of the art cannot help being colored by our recognition of the urgency, and occasionally the desperation, of the process."

Seth has a high IQ but limited verbal skills

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects communication and how the mind processes information. The National Autism Association notes that autistic people often have other physical ailments, such as allergies, digestive disorders or sensory dysfunctions.

It can be slight or hugely disabling. Seth is somewhere in between, but as his father, psychologist Rob Chwast, said, "As a poster boy for autism, Seth doesn't work that well."

He is less verbal than many autistic people, yet his vocabulary ranges widely. He doesn't display some of the stereotypical autistic mannerisms -- rocking, for instance -- but he is highly sensitive to noise and often wears earplugs. He loves meeting new people and has been known to ask them, on first meeting, "Number of friends?"

Both his parents believe him to be highly intelligent, and Debra Chwast said his nonverbal IQ is around 148. His disability keeps him from being fluent in the manner society most closely associates with intelligence: verbal articulation.

His musical ear is highly tuned; he can identify a song's key within a few notes and remember long strings of notes from a single hearing. He's uncannily attuned to dates and to all facts pertaining to roller coasters, about which he is passionate. He punctuates silences with sentences like "One hundred twenty-two days till Cedar Point opens on May 12, 2007," and he can mentally calculate the number of roller coasters in, say, Pennsylvania. Over the years -- between speech therapy and music therapy and ballroom dance lessons and orchestra concerts -- his parents have taken him to countless amusement parks.

But until 2003, art was never anything special in his world. He wasn't even a doodler.

Seth was 20 when his mother signed him up for a four-week oil-painting class at the Cleveland Museum of Art and in a one-time drawing class. It was just the latest effort to expand his world and keep him stimulated.

The drawing and painting classes went well. His mother thought providing him with art mentors might be another way to engage him with the larger world, and she had the financial means to hire them.

She found several art mentors, including Donna Rogers, whom she calls a "genius," and who became Seth's main art coach.

Seth began to paint -- and paint and paint and paint.

His first horse was "Hungarian Horse and Peacock," a large canvas in brilliant blues and reds on which he mixed folk images in his own composition. He painted landscapes. He painted whales. A music student came to the house and played cello, and, working with Rogers, Seth produced the "cello series," a group of vibrant interpretive abstracts. He painted the northern lights with "Peanut Butter and Jelly Mountains." After a year of resisting Rogers' suggestion that he try painting himself, Seth one day asked for a new sketchbook and began a series of large-scale self-studies.

As happy as Seth seems painting -- he works for eight or 10 hours without complaint, humming the whole time -- he works only when one of his coaches is around to help him focus. Rogers wants him to someday feel confident enough to go to the canvas by himself.

Seth's parents come at the question of his future in art from different perspectives. Seth paints during the week, when he's home with his mother. He spends many weekends with his father, but he doesn't paint there.

"One of my dilemmas in watching this from the outside is that I think there's been an urge to celebrate his art before it's cultivated," said his father. On the other hand, he added, "If it brings him into the world of others, and into a career, that's wonderful."

Debra Chwast said that 10 years ago, her plan for Seth's future was to buy adjoining condos for herself and Seth and set him up with 24-hour care for after she was gone.

Now she believes that her son is finally doing "what he came to earth to do" and that it makes him happy for many reasons -- in part because his art gives him common ground with others.

"He was always so sweet and so charming and so invisible," Debra said. "I mean, I wish people loved him for his essence, but at least he's not invisible now."

Seth at work on his latest creation

As Seth gives his attention to painting a horse "in many oranges," certainty gives way to initial tentativeness.

Seth likes Rogers' suggestion to make the horse face left, but now he stands with a piece of charcoal in his right hand, tentatively drawing the horse's ear. "Real ears," Seth says. "Real ears. Grow your brain."

He studies a toy horse and eventually draws in the face and nose. Along the way, he stops several times to do yoga stretches. Seth isn't fat, but he wants a "slim belly," and has been on an exercise and weight-loss regimen. He stands on one leg and tilts sideways.

"Exercise burns calories," he says. It is one of his mantras. Another, "Grow your brain," comes out frequently when he's facing a challenge.

He makes a curve that will be the horse's back and rear end. He draws the lines of the tail, seemingly lost in the pleasure of making parallel lines. Rogers wants to keep him from getting caught up in detail too soon.

"The horse is waiting for his legs," she reminds him.

The drawing is taking longer than usual. Rogers thinks the different orientation of the horse might be slowing him down, but there's no way to be sure. "He's a beautiful mystery," she says.

Eventually, he finishes the drawing, though, and he begins with color. Rogers helps spur him to mix pigment and asks questions that help him concentrate. The two of them work all day. By dinnertime, when Rogers leaves, the horse is half alive with thick paint. Already, the body is "many oranges."

After dinner, another of Seth's mentors arrives. Kathe Widen guides Seth as he works on another new painting -- a silvery griffin who flies through the air with his golden toes and talons extended. They paint till around 10 at night, then Widen leaves and Seth and his mother get ready for bed.

Debra Chwast goes to her bedroom. Seth lies in his room with the red-horse painting.

But neither can sleep.

Just after midnight, his mother is all keyed up, thinking about Seth's new work, when noises begin emanating from his room. He is laughing. She hears him crowing with what sounds like joy. She climbs out of bed to see him.

There is Seth, lying in bed, laughing and smiling. He seems to be in ecstasy.

"Seth," his mother says. "Are you happy?"

"Happy," Seth answers. "Orange horse and griffin."

Seth lies in bed laughing for another hour before falling asleep.

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