“Insiders Out: Insiders In.”

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One way to appreciate art is to enter a gallery without preconceptions. Avoid the labels and artist statements. Just look at the work and be open to the affect. Art critic Clement Greenberg famously used to cover his eyes, have a painting placed in front of him, then flash open his hands and absorb the rush of innocent visual experience: first impression, best impression. This method sees art as a pure communication between the artist and public through a sensuous object. The sensitive viewer luxuriates in the pleasure of the aesthetic moment before the contaminating world of judgment and desire rushes in.

Consider a beige watercolour of the Eiffel tower by Jack Coggins. The strokes are as light as a summer memory and as economical as a haiku. The brush wanders the paper wilderness leaving a vision in its drying trail. The shimmering subject is recognizable, but the work’s deep character is in the faint means that call it into being. A nervous but willed brush searches out the form and discovers not only an iconic memory, but a trace of the self, a will to be, a desire to leave an impression however fugitive.

This is a delicate, modest, enchanting drawing. Does it matter that the artist painted it with a brush in his mouth? Knowing that Jack Coggins was a history professor until paralyzed in a recent bike accident renders the work even more of an achievement. Instead of being a general existential gesture, these questing lines have a specific, poignant resonance. The will to express, to remember and to signify, feels even stronger when the barriers are higher. These simple human marks now seem extraordinary.

Some argue that the biography of the artist should not contaminate our consideration of his or her work. This is an understandable prohibition if our anxiety about physical and mental challenges so disables our sensibilities that we can only see these art works as symptoms arising from difference rather than as expressions of creative minds. But if this informing knowledge helps us to see the work as part of a greater lived experience, then knowing the extra-ordinary conditions of creation can only compliment our understanding and appreciation.

Insiders gathers dozens of paintings and drawings made by long-term care residents at the Sherbrooke Community Centre—seven men and five women who have cognitive disorders and/or limited mobility. The works have proper frames and mattes and are titled and arranged according to the conventions of an art gallery. They are treated as art. At the same time, the curator, Jeff Nachtigall, has not hidden their makers’ differences from mainstream artists and publics. Their differences are a distinct and advertised feature of the show. The curatorial statement offers a glimpse into the project and people behind the work, as does Thelma Pepper’s photographic portraits of the artists, but it is the objects in the center of the room that underline the exhibition’s alternate ontology. On a low plinth are three, four-legged canes with paint-soaked cloths fitted to each foot. Beside this, in a long vitrine, are several improvised gadgets—prototypes for Nachtigall’s Mobile Painting

Device—paint delivery systems designed to fit onto a wheelchair so the operator can create large floor paintings. These are relentlessly real things, not works of art but tools. They are included to give us a haptic sense of the artists' limitations and some of the inventive means they use to reach a little further beyond their perceived limits.

Matthew Proctor's two *Wheel Chair Paintings* are afocal, layered, patterned arcs of paint applied to canvas by wheel chair tires. Jackson Pollock might have done this sort of thing if he had survived the crash and was a paraplegic. They are surprising action paintings from a person from whom not much action is expected. Produced using the Mobile Painting Device, these are not accidental tracks but rhythmic and controlled marks, deliberate drawings composed for these confined spaces. More than static pictures, each records a distinct passage of time and the poetics of Proctor's elegant movements in that restricted rectangle. The canvas is a stage, and we are the audience who traces these lyrical choreographic notes to reassemble the dance.

Nachtigall's Mobile Painting Device converts what some might see as a symbol of confinement into an art tool. It, along with the enlarged creativity it facilitates, may expand our sense of what is possible for those with motor challenges. In this light, both disabilities *and* abilities are the subject of the exhibition. The show also bridges the line between high art and other types of art. Public galleries do not generally display products of 'therapeutic' situations. High art is thought to be different; things made by trained professionals working against the backdrop of art history and theory. Nachtigall blurs this border by including what looks like art therapy with works that are more conventionally 'art' even high art, and everything between.

Kathleen Robertson's sensitive drawings of her fellow residents and vibrant paintings of their caregivers and facilitators (including Nachtigall) are noticeably the work of a studied artist. Her probing line drawing of "Professor Jack" is not only a thoughtful portrait, but also a deep reflection on a subject who mirrors the artist. Jack Anderson looks uncomfortably strapped to a complex reclined chair. On the other side of the page, the author is similarly positioned in her chair. There is a wonderful exchange here between the sitter and the artist. In this drawing is an intimate, knowing exchange, a gazing and recording that attempts to capture deeper, shared experience. The inclusion of Robertson's work should disturb stereotypes of the sort of person thought to be living in an institution like Sherbrooke and their capabilities.

Linda Friesen's "Braille Painting" looks like art therapy. These forty acrylic and watercolour paintings on Braille paper show an unrestrained fun with materials. They are dense, juicy explosions of colour made with buoyant brush marks. The textured paper creates an added sense of velvety depth. This could be the work of a child, though few children would build up a consistent body of work quite like this. Knowing it is by an adult might give some viewers a melancholic feeling of pleasure and loss. Here is someone engaging in an intrinsically rewarding activity that we once enjoyed but abandoned when we 'grew up'. When I look at Friesen's paintings, I want to get my hands dirty. I want to find out when happens when I finger paint in acrylic rather than cheap kid's paint. I, too, want to try painting on Braille paper. Art of this type appeals not

because of their craft and cleverness but because of their simplicity, the evident joy in the effort and experiment. The colour research she engages has no application beyond this. What holds us back from this sort of play? Must everything we do be instrumental, organized or passively entertaining? Art is a sign of life. The fact of a non-instrumental object created by someone whose body is fundamentally restricted—who may have almost no mobility or speech—is a special sign of life.

Bringing these paintings into the gallery and arranging them in a grid was probably not Friesen's idea. It is a curatorial and artistic gesture. Similarly, the crazy but resourceful Mobile Painting Device would not exist without the alchemy of this artistic residency. Who in a wheelchair imagines that they need a hose to get paint down to their wheels? Which artist dreams that limited mobility could increase inventiveness?

Much in this room can be considered a collaboration between Nachtigall and his Sherbrooke mentees. He saw potential artists where others saw 'clients'. He did not come there as a caregiver or even a teacher but as an artist seeking to push their creative activity from a therapeutic model towards an artistic one. Therapy can be solipsistic play, or a private communication directed to a very small audience—from one part of one's self to another or to a receptive therapist and back. Fine art is usually made within a larger imaginary. It is addressed to the art world and a wider public. Taking a therapeutic event out of context and presenting it as art does a small violence to the original intentions of the artist—a breech of privacy like reading someone else's diary in public without permission. However, when, as is the case here, Nachtigall encourages his team not only to express themselves but express themselves to others—this is not longer therapy but an art practice and deserves space in the gallery.

The therapeutic/rehabilitation model employs art materials as an end in itself or as a coded communication with a specific therapeutic value. Nachtigall altered this by letting his group know that their work might go to a prestigious gallery. This gave their activity a potential signification beyond its intrinsic value—that it might have a public meaning worth pursuing. It is empowering to have value beyond yourself and your close circle. Nachtigall also shifts the emphasis when he encourages people to use quality art materials and innovative supports, like Braille paper, and tools like the Mobile Painting Device. At times, his coaching seems simply to be the expression of interest: 'What does it feel like to be you?" This care led to an explosion of memories in artists like Esther Heimbecker and Margaret Vogelgesang. Other times, he appears to have encouraged people to think big like the modernist heroes he admires, think beyond the tabletop and take up some real estate. Larry Fitzpatrick's massive "Forest" and Stuart Sherin's "Pick-up Sticks" certainly take up this call. These are big paintings displaying ambitions and a physical range not normally associated with those with movement and cognitive restrictions.

Nachtigall's push and challenge, facilitation and encouragement rings throughout this room and Dennis Anderson is one resident who rose to the occasion to produce some very powerful works that are therapeutic *and* fine art. His notorious *Misplaced Sensitivity* is a large beige conceptual painting with the word "diaper" in thick mauve letters and an

arrow pointing at a real "incontinence product" attached to the canvas. Multiple sclerosis has robbed him of control over some basic bodily functions. Already frustrated with his deteriorating condition, euphemisms and "misplaced sensitivities" annoy him further. A diaper called by another name smells the same. "Incontinence product" may seem less infantilizing, but does it improve his condition?

His call for candid language appears to have a larger target. In his untitled comic strip-like series Anderson waits in a wheelchair to be helped into bed. When the orderlies finally arrive, they speak to each other as if he were invisible, less than human. In fact, he draws himself transformed in their absent presence into a football hoisted and passed from place to place. Yet, in the last panel, when finally settled into bed, he is grateful for the help. Euphemisms are pleasant or neutral terms that replace ones with offensive associations. Anderson's paintings have me wonder, for example, if calling a person a 'client' or 'patient' masks feelings that these people are "offensive." *Misplaced Sensitivity* suggests that rather than candy-coat reality we should deal with the real in a straightforward partnership. The diaper seems synecdochaic of Anderson, a part standing-in for the whole. Behind the visual rant is a cry for human dignity. He does not want his identity to be reduced to his necessary imposition on others. He does not want to be treated as a leaking body but as a thoughtful person.

To be sure, Anderson's diaper in-your-face shock tactics are not appreciated by everyone. Many would prefer to keep this aspect of his—and by association, their—lives private. Some of his fellow residents actively protested the inclusion of "Diaper" in the show. Anderson confronts the public with this artifact of his daily (hidden) existence to give us a full view, to increase our picture of lives like his. He wants us to see things as they are. His preferences may not be everyone's, but they are his. Having and expressing a preference, and not always conforming to the tastes of others, is a sign of individuality, something he is not keen to relinquish. Much can be taken from him, and much has, but get the feeling that his opinions are going to be the last to go. He does not want to be seen as a nuisance, disposable. From an artistic point-of-view, Anderson is also challenging the aesthetic attitude, the preference to step past meaning to look only for beauty and perfection.

Only nine months before *Insiders* was hung in the Mendel Art Gallery, Jeff Nachtigall took the position as Artist in the Community at Sherbrook. The program was new, and no one quite knew what to expect. Other essays in this collection tell this story more completely. Suffice it to say, when you invite an artist who is an artist—not just a picture maker, someone who makes art of his whole life—he is not likely to simply supplement the existing programs and lives he touches. The situation has the capacity for disaster or transformation.

Institutions of any sort first conceive themselves as a set of mandates, constitutions, business plans and by-laws. Before they are concrete, they are ideas. Next, they are buildings that need maintenance. The ideas and spaces are formed in advance of those who will fill them. The people are latecomers who fit into and, to varying degrees, conform or agitate against the designs. Staff and clients often feel that they are guests,

interchangeable units in an enduring matrix. A few feel they are agents in an evolving community.

Sherbrook is a remarkable place. The designers applied empathetic and creative insights to make it homelike. Even so, residents cannot have the unique engaged relationship with their space as they would with their home. Order, cleanliness and routine trump personal style. Every gesture is haunted by the fact that when people leave they will be replaced by others, who will be replaced by others. Their former rooms will be scrubbed and their things removed. Little or no trace of their passage will survive.

Anderson's "The Dream" maps this view of the institution and of life. A white thought balloon hovering on a beige ground suggests that the contents of the picture are the artist's dream as he lies in bed. The scene is a grey factory in a bleak landscape. A procession of a dozen people in wheelchairs or using walkers move toward the building entrance. The interior is impenetrable. A succession of coffins conveying bodies stream out of the exit. Rosy angels ascend from some of the caskets. An iridescent silver Buddha and an alien in a spaceship wait to collect the souls. Anderson is a non-denominational Dante. Only one seems to be escaping. He or she rises from the assembly line of death with the aid a yellow balloon halo. Two grey, Icarus-like figures cannot escape their fate and appears to be falling to earth.

Below, a pitchfork wielding devil escorts three unfortunates to hell. Interestingly, the disabled get the same treatment as the rest of humanity: a tortured body in one realm is no guarantee of goodness or absolution in the afterlife in this cosmology. Below the factory and conveyer belt is the underground featuring the building's pluming, a spider-web, hell and flames. For Anderson, the institution is a purgatory, a place of prolonged waiting. It is significant that he chooses to organize the picture within the 'frame' of a thought balloon or dream. This is his vision, or the thoughts of someone like him; he is not saying that everyone in the institution thinks this way. This personalizing device marks it as an expression, a perception rather than a report. Again, he announces his difference, his individuality—not everyone with MS thinks the same. Anderson's is an incontinent activity, an uncontainable surplus that disturbs his fellow residents, and our images of people in institutions like Sherbrooke.

What a recipe! Take one orderly, clean and efficient institution and add an artist known for making paintings out of garbage! As I walked with Jeff through the scrubbed halls of Sherbrooke to the group studio he set up, I saw that the studio floor was covered in paint tracks. Art was stacked everywhere. The contrast between this painting abattoir and everything beyond it was palpable. I could just imagine the exasperation this disorderliness and its possibility for leakage must cause the cleaners! Sherbrooke is modeled like a small town. Perhaps every town needs a messy, organic, unruly space. Fictional utopias that do not allow spaces for misrule notoriously turn out to be dystopias.

Most art made in institutions is designed to be disposable. The paper and paints are cheap. They are not destined to last. Works are taped to the wall and soon discarded. When expression seen as the greatest value in art activity, why bother with good

materials. [Conveniently, this attitude suits institutional budgets.] While expression is important, the corporeal aspect of the work of art can be a metaphor for ourselves, a stand in for our understanding of our own body. People have always sought not only to express their selves but to extend those gestures in time and space. They have used sensuous but durable materials to post their thoughts, feelings and physical passage into the future. Artists carve marble, cast bronze, make textiles, publish books and use archival sound paints and canvas because they want their work to last beyond their brief lives. Even children are pleased when their parents save their art and are pleased further when as adults they look back on their earlier selves through that rescued work.

What then is the message when we confine institutionalized adults to poor quality art materials. Some might feel that they are unable to make “real” art without “real” art materials. Most will, as prescribed, concentrate on experimentation and therapeutic self-expression rather than try to compose visual thoughts and feelings that deserve to survive the ages. The value we place on our created objects can be a metaphor for the value we place on our self-expressions, even our value as persons.

On a personal note, I have known Jeff Nachtigall for seven years. He is a terrific artist and a real character, but he is not a catalyst. A catalyst induces a transformation without itself changing. Jeff did touch lives here, but he is not unscathed. The people he worked with encouraged him to distribute his prodigious energies beyond himself and to find meaning in service, in collaboration. He might have gotten as much out of this program as his fellow artists have.

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