

# Art on the Autism Spectrum: Pathways to Inclusion

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Often, when I am presenting at a conference or symposium about artists on the autism spectrum, an aspiring artist with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) will ask: "Where do I go with my art?" or, more specifically, "What direction should I take with my art and who can help me?"



Michael McManmon

A recent book authored by Michael McManmon and me, *Art on the Spectrum: A Guide for Mentoring and Marketing Artists with ASD* (November 2020), is our response to such questions, which have no easy answers. However, they can be addressed, as we do in this book, by presenting a number of pathways to success through case histories from and about established artists with ASD. Also, we point to some signs along the way, for example: progressive art studios, supportive organizations like the Folk Art Society of America, museums and galleries that feature outsider art, educational options



▲ Japanese Garden in Sydney, Australia by Michael McManmon.

in schools and through mentoring, and family and social networking.

By investigating and recounting these journeys, *Art on the Spectrum* hopes to provide an inspiring and practical guide into the established art world. Perhaps this could even lead to a career in art that can be a transformative experience for autistic artists and for those who appreciate and learn from their extraordinary and exceptional art.

Autism is a neurological disorder that



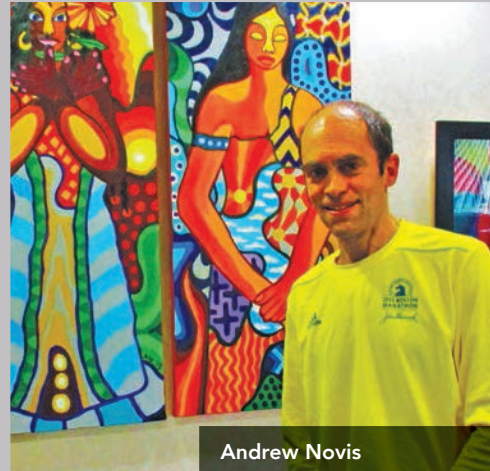
Jessica Park

manifests differently in every person. So it is with the artists we feature. Two might be characterized as "high functioning" with a late diagnosis that identified psychological abnormalities that were not previously understood, while two others experienced developmental disorders that were more debilitating and chronic and were diagnosed earlier. Regardless, the journey of each person demonstrates how, with determination and support, much of what might be considered a *disability* can become an *ability* in the making of art. Artists



with ASD often bring their extreme focus and prolonged concentration to the execution of original and imaginative works of art. Their art, in many cases, has also proved therapeutic and an engine for stability and personal growth. But we do not attempt to analyze and evaluate what is considered a pathology, but rather, fuse a perceived neurological disorder with the journeys of each artist, and others like them, into the world of art.

The four art biographies featured in this



Andrew Novis

book reveal a cross-section of those who create art on the spectrum. The personal accounts of **Michael McManmon**, **Jessica Park**, **Andrew Novis** and **Kevin Hosseini** are presented through a succession of developments in the lives of each artist. We discuss how they emerged as artists and how their talent was discovered. We consider the role of family and community in the creative unfolding of each. We look at the value of art education and mentoring. We observe the confluence of art and autism in their creative process. Then, the road to success with its many twists and turns is explored with chapters on overcoming obstacles, celebrating successes and advancing careers.



▲ Cat triptych by Andrew Novis

◀ Queen Anne Victorian House by Jessica Park

**Michael McManmon's** art has been an anchor helping him overcome an emotionally turbulent life. His talent for drawing with watercolor and ink was amplified by a number of art classes in high school and college, supplemented by his own observations of masterworks in museums and galleries. An accomplished educator, Michael is the founder of the College Internship Program (CIP), with five campuses nationwide, which provides transitional learning for those with



Kevin Hosseini and his mother.

Asperger's syndrome and other developmental challenges.

His professional life, which includes several advanced degrees, has provided him with entrepreneurial and marketing skills. In 2012, he established the Good Purpose Gallery on the Lee, Mass., CIP campus where he has shown his own art as well as that of students and other artists on the spectrum. His life dramatically changed at age 53, with a belated diagnosis of Asperger's that freed him to experiment with new subjects and mediums. His artwork continues to unfold with different approaches and breathtaking results.

**Jessica Park's** journey into art emerged gradually under



▼ Gauguin and Me by Kevin Hosseini

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▲ Toledo, Spain by Michael McManmon.



▲ Taj Mahal by Jessica Park



▲ Portrait by Andrew Novis



▲ Ocean Sunset by Kevin Hosseini

the watchful care of her family who found their autistic daughter's proclivity toward visual expression an excellent avenue to introduce language and social skills.

Jessica's art became more than stick figures and abstract color applications, however, with her entry into high school where she received art training in naturalistic drawing. Further mentoring led to the use of acrylic paints and tightly framed compositions of color. By the time she graduated from high school at age 21, Jessica's art had become a way to express her unique vision through brightly colored grid-like presentations of household gadgets.

Then, her extraordinary houses and landscapes followed, evolving into depictions of monumental buildings and urban scenes featuring bridges. Her talent was recognized and her work began to sell. Her mother and father became partners in her professional development which rapidly grew through the academic and professional communities to which they belonged.

Jessica's art—the compartmentalized color arrangements especially—has helped to stabilize her emotional stress and also provide an outlet for her fixations or, in her words, "enthusiasms" (for astronomical

phenomena, in particular). It has also proven to be a useful way through her own illustrated cartoons to modify social comportment and the tendency to lash out when something disturbing happens. Today she continues to paint on a daily basis, mostly for herself and on commission.

Her career has been advanced over the past 15 years by two programs: The Jessica Park Project at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, founded in 2004 to display and promote her art, and the progressive art studio Pure Vision Arts.

**Andrew Novis** is an artist and personal trainer whose brightly depicted, sharply outlined, full-color images have brought him recognition, exhibitions and a career in art. A graduate of Brandeis University, Andrew has been exposed to a variety of art styles through master teachers, but prefers his own decorative, poster style imagery.

Diagnosed with Asperger's, he struggled with self-doubts and was finding it difficult to continue with his art. Membership in AANE, the Autism/Asperger's Network and its Artist Collaborative, has turned his artistic life around through its supportive workspace and the opportunity for frequent exhibitions of his paintings. He now works

consistently at his art, is comfortable with his style of painting, and is finding success and satisfaction from his work.

**Kevin Hosseini** has become a successful artist whose autism has been an engine for creative and imaginative works of art. He has also found that the making of art and the organization it requires is helpful in developing executive functioning skills.

Debra Muzikar, Kevin's mother, tells his story through the lens of a dedicated parent whose efforts to support her son led to his mentoring by several artist/teachers. Kevin's early exposure to a variety of paint applications and stylistic experiments ultimately kindled an interest which developed into a career in art.

Debra, too, was transformed by her son's journey. She founded The Art of Autism, a dynamic promotional engine for artists on the spectrum. Through the Art of Autism, Kevin's art has found a pathway to exhibitions, commissions, awards and, for him, a personally fulfilling life.

Overall, these artists found guidance and support at different levels of their development and in different ways. The artists' journeys show us that many rest stations exist along the way to help artists with

autism develop their talent and overcome personal limits and limiting obstacles.

The inspiration and direction provided by these artist profiles are amplified in Part Two of *Art on the Spectrum* with a "Spotlight" on model community programs for artists with ASD, a select list of resources and a helpful guide to a career in art.

Finally, the book leaves aspiring artists on the spectrum with this exhortation: *Yes, you can do it! Let these pages be a helpful guide in your journey to becoming an artist with a professional edge. Let the community see and appreciate what you can do. Let your career be yet another step in the direction of altered perceptions and social change.*

*Art on the Spectrum* is available in hard copy or as a Kindle edition from KDP Amazon. It can be accessed through a Google search or with the following link: <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Spectrum-Mentoring-Marketing-Artists/dp/B08NVDLQYW> 📖

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