

Liberating Art

Helping shape a new generation of creators
by Daryl Yeap



The Painting Project by members from the Stepping Stone Centre with guidance from Daniel Brinsmead

Language is constantly evolving as a response to social change. Politically correct terms have replaced old fashioned ones that are deemed derogatory and insensitive. For instance, XXL was preceded by *Plus Size* for women's clothing but even that is under debate as many women now find the term *Plus Size* offensive. Similarly, what we used to call *Mental Retardation* is now called *Intellectual Disability*. *Learning Disability* is another commonly used term in certain parts of the world, while the equivalent meaning, *Developmental Disability*, is used in other parts of the world.

Yet changing the language doesn't often change the attitude.

In our pursuit to be politically correct, we often forget about the people we speak of. Common reaction to people with disabilities is to stigmatize or feel sorry for them. Kang Hooi Keng, a past employee and volunteer at the Stepping Stone Centre in Balik Pulau, Penang feels this sort of reaction often leads to exclusion and discrimination. "They would normally shut their mouth up if they have been told not to speak or if they speak, people will ignore them. This is the common reaction of the public", she says.

Hooi Keng joined the Centre in 2002 to help set an arts and crafts program for people with mental disabilities. The objective is to teach them a useful skill and provide employment opportunities so that they can be self-sufficient. Training is by rote learning. Members follow a daily routine and adapt their skills by learning from mistakes. New members start as apprentice, graduate to a skilled worker before becoming an in-house trainer and eventually master craftsman. Through her experience, Hooi Keng observes many of the Centre's members possess a unique sense of perspective. "They have good observation of the surrounding and of people. Just give them a paper and pencil and (you can) discover lots". And that is

exactly what she has been working on - giving the members at the Centre an opportunity to express themselves through art.

Hooi Keng herself branched out to develop her own artistic talent last year when she applied and was accepted for a residency at the RBS-Malihom-WOU AiR Program. Influenced by the "behavioural problems of the mentally challenged", she produced a series of paintings themed *Concrete Behaviour*. At the end of her residency in Dec 2010, she invited a few of her colleagues and members from the Centre to her exhibition. It was there the patrons of the AiR Program came to know about the Centre and a collaboration was quickly formed: to encourage resident artists to work with members from the Centre to help develop their artistic skills and to help promote the Centre and the work they do.

By giving them the right guidance and helping them to develop their talents, it is possible that artists such as Keng Hooi and Daniel will be able to help shape a new generation of creators.

When Daniel Brinsmead, the current AiR Program resident artist visited the Centre in early 2011, he took on the challenge as a volunteer. Throughout his artistic career, Daniel has always been interested in Art Brut and Outsider Art. "This type of art excites me because of the freedom its projects. It is closely related to the art of children which I also love. Art of children (at the right age) and Outsider Art has a different quality - it is direct, honest and not trying to gain or get anything. I saw some of the drawings that the members were doing with Hooi (Keng), and they excited me, I liked them".



L: Kang hooi Keng with one of her artwork, R: Daniel Brinsmead

Daniel spent the first few meetings trying to get to know the members. He studied their work, participated in the daily activities, ate with them, played ping pong and games with them. They started drawing on simple media - pencils, textas, oil pastel. After a while, a particular member, Bin, caught his eye. "His drawings were unique and stood out. He liked to draw just one object per page. This naturally lead to the idea of getting him to draw and paint on small canvases, one drawing per canvas, multiple pieces to make up an entire work". After playing around with different mediums and with the help of other members, they completed a series of paintings comprising two groups of twelve individual works. They called it "The Painting Project".

The members and Daniel are proud of what they've achieved. Khor Ai-Na, CEO of the Centre, is amazed with the work produced and thinks such collaborative effort may be a way for the Centre to "move away from welfare charity mentality". Patrons from the AiR Program are equally pleased and look forward to future collaborations. Judging from the enthusiasm, it looks like this small scale community cultural development project is paving its way to becoming something meaningful. By giving them the right guidance and helping them to develop their talents, it is possible that artists such as Keng Hooi and Daniel will be able to help shape a new generation of creators.

The Painting Project will be auctioned off to the highest bidder during the AiR Program exhibition at the Royal Bank of Scotland House in Beach Street on June 17th, 6.30pm. Proceeds from the auction will be channelled to the Centre.

An Interview with Daniel Brinsmead

RBS-Malihom AiR Program resident artist 2011

How did you begin your career as an artist?

I always knew that someday I would be an artist. But before I commit myself, I needed to grow and mature as person before I could do the type of art I want to do. After high school, I did a whole bunch of things: worked, studied, travelled and tried a few different professions. It wasn't until later I decided the time was right to study art. After completing my studies, I took the initiative to pursue a

professional arts practise. I applied to government galleries for an exhibition, approached commercial galleries for representation and entered art awards. Galleries showed some interest, opportunities opened to me, and there was demand for my work. Since finishing my studies I have been working as a full time artist.

How would you describe your (artistic) style?

I am interested in quality of expression rather than quality of mark. This sort of sums up my style and approach. So what I mean by this is - I come to my artwork from the opposite side to most artists. Most artist are trying to 'make a piece or art', trying to make the right 'mark'. By mark I mean, the right picture, the right image, the right type of line, creating the perfect picture, a painting that has the right elements to make it a good work of art. But I don't care about any of that! I don't care about trying to make the right type of mark. I am not trying to make a piece of 'art'. What interest me is what I am exploring in myself, in life, and expressing that. I let my artwork be like my diary, an open diary of my expressions. My artwork is just my history of exploration. The real art is what is going on inside me and the artwork produced is like a by-product, a kind of physical/written example or proof of the explorations I am making. It could be said that my art is raw, unrefined, direct, spontaneous. It is a kind of conceptual abstract expressionist style.

Getting back to what I was saying about quality of expression, I find that if there is quality of expression, then this will automatically produce quality of mark. Often my artwork will actually look pretty rough, maybe bad, but there is an unseen energy in the work that I like, so I keep it and it is a successful piece for me. Often it is this unseen, but felt energy, that I am seeking.

What influences your style of painting?

It is not like I am trying to paint in a particular style at all. It is more like a continual evolution towards my natural way for expressing what ever that is with everything I do. I try to stay aware with my art, and find a way of working that is energising and exciting, rather than it becoming like a chore or a task. I am finding the way I like to work that allows me to feel light and not weighed down. The more natural it is, the more it seems to flow and I find I look forward to working and making artwork. By being aware of this and wanting to work like this, it naturally effects the way I work. It effects my style, and my style has been constantly changing and evolving. It is like I have been led to working in the style that I do very organically, like a never ending dive deeper into myself, and a natural way of being.

Other artists also have had an influence on my art. I am most interested in the periods or artists that push the boundaries and create change. Most notably the Dada movement in Switzerland from 1917 onwards, following later with Duchamp and Manray - having the biggest effect of change for modern art. Then came the abstract expressionists busting apart the boundaries again particularly Pollock, and then the work of Tony Tuckson - Australia's greatest abstract painter in my opinion, who took Pollock one step further. I am very drawn to some graffiti art, and love indigenous art in particular Australian aboriginal art. Also integrated into my artwork and style are the effects of music, literature, film/movies, and time spent in a variety of natural environments.