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Bennington  Banner

The intersection between disability and the arts

By Andrew Roiter - April 3, 2013



Bennington Museum Curator, Jamie Franklin guides a tour through the progressive studios gallery in "More Like You Than Not."

BENNINGTON -- The mission of the newest exhibits at Bennington Museum are similar, to show the intersection of the art world and disabilities. But "Engage," which is curated by Greensboro-based artist Paul Gruhler for VSA Vermont takes a different tactic than the Bennington Museum companion exhibit, "More Like You Than Not." Both on display now at the Bennington Museum.

On Saturday, April 6, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. the museum will waive its entrance fee for Community Day, a series of free events for "Engage" and "More Like You Than Not."

The day is broken up into three main events: Gallery Talks with Bennington Museum Curator Jamie Franklin from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.; an artist reception with light refreshments for some of the artists from "Engage," VSA Vermont representatives and Gruhler from 2 to 4 p.m.; and an artist panel moderated by

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Franklin from 4 to 6 p.m., during which four artists from "Engage" and "More Like You Than Not" will discuss art and their experiences with it.

"I want to be sure to avoid the trap of focusing on their illnesses, because the shows are really about their art. And I really want their art to be at the forefront," Franklin said. "I think we need to allow the works to speak from themselves sometimes."

"More Like You Than Not" takes its name from a quote by artist Larry Bissonnette, who is featured in the exhibit. Franklin scoured two centuries worth of art by people with disabilities to put together the exhibit. Each piece is paired with information about the artist including their disability, if the information is available, since some of the artists are from 19th century asylums and were never properly diagnosed.

"I had been researching work created by individuals who had been institutionalized in the 19th century," Franklin said. "Particularly individuals with mental illness and were creating artwork in the context of asylums in the 19th century."

While the exhibit contains the works of several outsider artists (pieces by people without training who do not consider themselves artists), it is not made up strictly of them.

"There are many outsider artists who have disabilities and many of these artists would be considered outsider artists," Franklin said. But not all of them are, he added.

"This exhibition includes artists who had major physical handicaps there's a whole section devoted to artists with mental illness who were institutionalized in the 19th century, though the clinical and scientific definitions of various mental illnesses were far from being well understood back then and people were often institutionalized for a wide range of reasons of which we don't often know why these people were institutionalized," Franklin said.

The third section of the exhibit is dedicated to progressive studios. Progressive studios are art groups that work with those who were held in institutions or were formerly referred to as "retarded" or "developmentally disabled." One such group featured is the Grass Roots Art and Community Effort, GRACE, out of the Northeast Kingdom, started in 1975 by artist Don Sunseri, who became disillusioned with the art world, according to Franklin, and moved to Vermont, where he worked in a convalescent home.

"(Sunseri) saw the potential of all of the people around him," Franklin said. "And instead of giving them art classes, what he did was he provided them with art supplies and he provided them with space and he provided them with encouragement and then he let them go at it. And that model has been followed now by dozens if not hundreds of organizations around the country and around the world."

One such GRACE artist was Bissonnette, an autistic man who communicates through a process known as supported typing.

"He's an incredibly articulate and poetic communicator, (though) his verbal communication is almost nonexistent, but he communicates beautifully through typing," Franklin said.

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"That method has really made the inner thoughts of people available for the first time," VSA Vermont executive director Judith Chalmer said of supported typing.

Another GRACE artist featured in the exhibit is Gayleen Aiken, who was never formally diagnosed.

"(Aiken) is probably one of the most famous or well known of the artists in this exhibition, (she) came to recognition through GRACE," Franklin said.

Aiken, who died in 2005 at the age of 71, was recently featured in the New York Times for an exhibition of her work in New York City.

"It's always difficult. Because everyone operates on different levels at different capacities at different points in their life so I always try to hold myself back when I try to make some sort of qualitative statement about how she was," Franklin said. She was a very happy person though, he added.