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## Art Helps People Live With Mental Illness

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Artists are working intently when I arrive at the studio -- a large, open loft in an old factory building in the SoHo section of New York City. Some are sitting at tables, some are standing at easels, some are looking at computer screens and a couple are sitting on the floor, brush in hand, a palette of paint at their knees, and a painting in progress propped against the leg of a table.

I am visiting the [HAI Art Studio](#). All of the artists have mental illness, and the studio is funded as a mental health program designed to facilitate rehabilitation. But I would never have known that without being told.

"Because of the stigma about mental illness," Carmel (1) -- her "stage" name -- tells me, "I get treated like I am not functional in society. Here we are treated like artists, and I feel like an artist, not a mental patient." She is working on a fairly large canvas. She has painted a background in shades of blue and has just added a flower in vibrant purple. "I have a cocktail of anxiety and depression," she says. "Blue is healing. It helps me slow down and be in the moment. I hope it helps others too."

The work being done at the studio is a remarkable mix of genres and styles. Elliott Johnson is working on an illustration that could be used in a magazine. He tells me he has recently sold two paintings at an art exhibit. Barry Senft is "experimenting," he says, with a geometric design, although usually he paints portraits. Phillip Clark creates his own action heroes. Today he is drawing "Princess Powergal." Everette Ball, who usually prefers inanimate objects, is drawing eyes today. Paul Kordas is working on a painting of a religious figure using very strong colors and a form of chiaroscuro that he tells me he has borrowed from Rembrandt.

Samantha Alvarez, who is sitting on the floor, doesn't seem to notice me watching her paint a female figure with a bizarre blue face and a woman who appears to be flying through a bright red sky until I say something to her. Then she looks up, smiles, and tells me that she likes surrealism -- especially Dali and Kahlo.

Vinnie Salas, who is sitting at a table beginning a new painting, tells me that he doesn't know what it will become. In contrast, Pedro Alomar, who is "laying down" a background of blues and whites tells me he sees the final painting "in my mind's eye."

Lynn Berg tells me that she does "outsider art." We chat a bit about a [museum of outsider art in Baltimore](#). Near her, Michael Taylor -- who often draws comics -- is working on a collage for a show with the theme of friendship that the studio will mount in the fall. Ioan Taralesca is working on color drawings, also for the fall show, but he shows me "psychological drawings from a darker period." They integrate geometric, abstract, and realistic images, some of them toys, such as a teddy bear, with words such as "I am afraid" and "Fear of crowds."

Everyone at the studio is working from his or her own artistic vision. Francis Palazzolo -- the creative director of the program and a working artist -- says that the individuality of the artistic experience is at the heart of the studio's philosophy. "We do not have a single standard." Sometimes Mr. Palazzolo offers suggestions to help the artists realize their personal vision or to experiment doing something different and challenging for them, but the goal is for each artist to be engaged in the effort to create images that speak to them personally.

However, Mr. Palazzolo adds, "Artistic work at the studio is not just a private experience. We mount our own shows, curated by the artists, so that they can have the experience of public presentation of their work. We also have group critiques for artists who want focused review of their work by their peers."

The artists speak about the studio in glowing terms. "People with mental illness need an outlet," Mr. Salas tells me. "The studio gives people a chance to create, to experiment, and to show their work."

Ms. Berg, who is sitting nearby, adds, "It's very inspiring here. You pick up the energy, ideas, and creativity of everyone else."

Being with so many like-minded people and having a sense of camaraderie are clearly important dimensions of the experience for these artists. But there's much more to it. It's being in a place without stigma, where people believe in themselves and their abilities. It's having a source of pride. It's having the opportunity to be totally engaged in work they care about. It's having a sense of accomplishment.

Positive psychologists, such as [Martin Seligman](#), tell us that these are among the primary components of psychological well-being. In our society it is not easy for people with mental illness to find opportunities to engage (to immerse themselves) in activities they find meaningful, to experience a sense of accomplishment, and to be part of a community of shared interest and mutual concern. Art can make it possible.

"We need more programs like this," Mr. Johnson tells me. "We need people to advocate for more funding so that more and more people with mental illness can have art in their lives and a reason to get out of bed in the morning."

*(1) All names in this post are real and used with permission from the artists.*

*(2) Martin Seligman. Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being. Free Press. 2011.*

*The HAI Art Studio is a program of HAI, a non-profit arts and social service organization, the mission of which is "to inspire healing, growth and learning through engagement in the arts for the culturally underserved in New York City." It provides access to the arts for about 350,000 people each year.*

*Michael Friedman will deliver the keynote address for the NYS Psychological Association Annual Meeting on art and psychology on June 9. For information [click here](#).*

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