

January 2018

Connecting Through the Arts:

Art Work Provides Insight into Mental Illness



(Painting: "Hello Hello")

By Ryan Smoluk

Insight into Mental Illness by Ryan Smoluk

“Mental illness is the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about, until they absolutely have to.”

There is still a stigma attached.

In creating this art project, I hope to change some negative attitudes and to encourage more dialogue.

Mental illness like any physical illness can affect anyone regardless of their intelligence, wealth or culture.

Mental illness is not a character flaw. It has nothing to do with the lack of will power or being weak. It is an illness, no one chooses to become ill.

It's important that if you have a friend or a family member that you know is struggling, please remember always treat them with respect and dignity.

Wake Up Call

It's a cold winter day in Manitoba, Canada. My art show “WAKE UP CALL” (<https://the-art-of-autism.com/artist-ryan-smolukwake-up-call/>) at the ArtBeat Studio has just come to an end. It was another successful show. My mom and I have been busy packing and transporting all my art work back to my studio and I am exhausted. My anxiety is through the roof, I always feel this way at the end of a show.

Anxiety and Depression

Apparently, many artists have this same experience. I've been told that artists and creative people are very sensitive by nature, and often struggle with their anxiety or depression. I'm worried sick about what's going to happen to me when the grant money expires in March. I am trying to stay positive but the thought of having to move out of my studio stresses me out and where am I going to store all my artwork. It's a constant worry.

As a young child I was diagnosed with autism. Communicating was very difficult for me. I learned to communicate by drawing and handing out my pictures. I think that was the beginning of a very interesting career as an artist. I guess you could say art chose me.

Social Anxiety

Today as a public speaker I can talk to hundreds of people at a conference with no problem, but when I'm at home and I hear my phone rings I get serious anxiety. I don't like talking on the phone either. I prefer to actually see the person face to face. This anxiety was the catalyst for the cover painting titled "HELLO HELLO." The phone has a deep and personal meaning to me. It's symbolic and represents communication.



(Sculpture "Hello? Is Anyone There?")

Sculpture “Hello? Is Anybody There?”

I strive to create art that illustrates unconventional ideas through conventional or well recognized cultural symbols. My inspiration comes from my own life experiences. I always begin with very detailed coloured sketches. Often the concept evolves as I continue working on the piece.

In this show, I needed this piece to be visceral and surreal, encouraging more dialogue about mental health. On first impression the viewer will connect with a pleasant memory from childhood, when they played with a toy phone and chatted endlessly into the receiver assuming the world was listening.



As the viewer look closer and walks around this piece, they will notice the human faces appearing. This piece has now taken on a more macabre sinister feel. Now this piece has a different meaning. It is more chaotic and confusing. The phone cord adds another dimension to this piece. It is made up of a collection of hair cut from people in our community who struggle with their mental health.

It represents the frayed ends of sanity.

Community Project

You might be asking yourself; how did he manage to collect hair from only people whom have struggled with their own mental health?

My mom and I put out a call to the local hair dressers, in high schools and community colleges. We explained the project. They loved the idea and said “absolutely, we are on board.” I said there is one criteria, the hair can only be donated by people who’ve struggled with their own mental health and the clients needed to know the importance of their hair donation. I asked that they be told that I will honour and respect their contribution. I personally invited them to the opening night of the show. It was a very rewarding experience to see that a very personal piece of mine was impacting others as well.



Call For Help

This piece gave me so much grief. I made several large prototypes that all kept collapsing in on themselves. Geometrically the sides need to slant inwards but still be strong enough to accommodate all the extra weight at the top of the piece.

I phoned a carpenter instructor, Bruce Fergstad, from MITT a trade school I went to as a teenager. Through the years MITT has always helped me out when I run into a problem. Bruce said just bring the piece over and let's take a look at it. Long story short, I had to start all over again and make the base bigger and more solid out of wood, And I had to reinforce the whole piece. Lucky for me they have all the specialized equipment that I needed there.



I am currently working hard to produce artwork for my next show,
“REFLECTIONS” at Great West Life, here in Manitoba in April 2018.

I have been invited to the opening show luncheon event. I look forward to sharing
my story doing a PowerPoint presentation and my artist talk.

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To view more on Ryan visit www.ryansmoluk.ca