

JESSICA PARK: THE POTALA PALACE IN TIBET, 16 X 20 INCHES, 1998. COURTESY OF PURE VISION ARTS.

NURTURING THE WAYS IN WHICH WE SEE THE WORLD

BY TEMPLE GRANDIN

When I was a child, my mother nurtured my artistic ability. I was always encouraged to draw many different subjects. As an adult, I used my artistic talent for my business of designing livestock handling facilities. One of the lessons my mother taught me that really helped to develop my skills was to create pictures that other people would want.

In elementary school, I drew many pictures of horses. Individuals on the autism spectrum often become fixated on their favorite things. Often a child will keep drawing the same things over and over. The great motivation of these fixations has been channeled into the creation of all the beautiful art featured in this book.

Talents need to be carefully nurtured and directed. I have heard sad stories of a misguided teacher stamping out a child's interest in art. If a child draws the same cartoon character over and over, one simple way to encourage him or her to draw other subjects is to ask for something that is related to the character. One example would be to draw a house or a car for their favorite character.

Jessy Park (see pages 6 and 124), a famous artist with autism, creates beautiful paintings of houses formed by multi-colored geometric patterns. Her mother, Clark Park, worked with Jessy to direct her artistic talent to create paintings that other people would want. Some of her early favorite paintings were of electric blanket controls and corporate logos. Today many people buy her paintings of houses, but few people would want pictures of electric blanket controls. Her mother worked to direct her talent to create pictures with broader appeal.

Most individuals on the autism spectrum often excel at one thing, while struggling with something else. The skills are often uneven. I have observed that there are three different types of specialized autistic minds.

The first type is the visual thinker like me. My mind works like Google for images. When I design equipment, I can test run it in my mind like a computer-generated virtual reality. When I draw a piece of equipment, I can see the actual object. My weak area is algebra. Algebra makes no sense because there is nothing to visualize. The artwork of visual thinkers is often quite photo-realistic. I have never done anything resembling Impressionist art.

Some people who are visual thinkers can do geometry and trigonometry and they possess the second type of mind: the pattern thinker. Instead of creating photo-realistic pictures in their imagi-

nations, they see patterns and relationships between numbers. It is a more abstract form of visual thinking. I have talked to a great number of these individuals. Some of them have visual processing problems that interfere with the ability to think in photo-realistic pictures. When they are tired they report that their visual perception can become distorted. It is similar to the distortions that people with migraines experience. Reading is difficult because the print jiggles on the page.

Such visual processing problems in the brain may change their art in beautiful ways. If they do visual art, it may be more abstract and impressionistic, as opposed to photo-realistic. Donna Williams (see pages 20-21), in her many books and writings, has explained how she is not a visual thinker — she is an auditory thinker. When I first looked at her work I had expected to see nothing but abstract and impressionistic art. For somebody who claims not to be a visual thinker, she has created a great range of paintings and sculptures. Some of her paintings are very impressionistic and others are not. At the same time, I looked up Claude Monet and saw some of the same soft images with a dream-like quality. Problems with visual processing will vary depending on how tired the person is. Both Donna Williams and Monet have a mixture of very abstract impressionist art and more photo-realistic art. Perhaps this is due to changes in their visual perception. Visual processing problems tend to improve or get worse depending on fatigue or sensory overstimulation. Some people have such severe visual processing problems that they cannot draw at all. Out of 40 students in my design class, I find one in every class who absolutely cannot draw. Many of these students also have difficulty driving at night, reading is hard and they all hate the flicker of fluorescent lights.

The third type of specialized mind on the spectrum is the word specialist mind. These people are often really good with words, and they usually are not interested in art.

No matter the type of mind, ability has to be nurtured. It took me three years to learn how to design cattle handling facilities. It was not done overnight. Parents, teachers, doctors and everybody who works with individuals on the spectrum need to help these individuals develop their abilities.

I hope you enjoy the artwork in this book.

TEMPLE GRANDIN: DIPPING VAT SYSTEM, TOP VIEW; 1978.

TEMPLE GRANDIN: DIPPING VAT SYSTEM; 1978.



MARILYN COSHO: WORST FEAR; COLLAGE: 8 X 11 INCHES; 2009.

AS SEEN THROUGH THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

BY JILL MULLIN

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability associated with social interaction and communication impairments and rigid and/or repetitive behaviors. An individual diagnosed on the autism spectrum can experience a variety of symptoms, all varying in severity, hence the word "spectrum" in the disability's title. An individual can be diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (NOS) [Not Otherwise Specified], Autistic Disorder or be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, all of which fall on the autism spectrum. ASD affects individuals from all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic groups. Currently 1 in 150 children are diagnosed with ASD. Boys are four times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with the disorder. Parents who have one child with ASD have a 2-8% chance that each of their other children will be diagnosed as well (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/overview.htm>).

Because of the increase in diagnoses over recent years ASD has experienced increased media attention. Films, television shows, books and articles in magazines and newspapers have examined the disability in order to increase autism awareness, explore current research and epidemiology and to examine the daily lives of individuals affected by the disorder. Because ASD is a spectrum disorder the range of disabilities, as well as abilities and talents, varies from individual to individual. Commonly in the media, individuals with autism have been shown to have great talents in certain areas such as science and math. The intention of this book is to display another area where individuals with autism possess unique abilities.

Drawing Autism began with an artist named Glen Russ (see page 15). Glen was diagnosed with autism at an early age. It was also at a young age when he developed a passion for music and drawing. I met Glen at a residential group home in New York City where he lives with 5 other men with varying disabilities. During the first two years I worked with Glen he would draw, week in and week out, many pictures of his favorite bands, such as The Jackson 5, Temptations and The Whispers. These stylistic stick-figure drawings depicted the bands, singing, dancing and playing instruments as if they were caught in a snapshot from The Ed Sullivan Show.

For two years I cheered Glen on; every time that I saw him I asked, "Did you draw any pictures today?" If he had, he would proudly display his work (often times the drawings from the day would be stapled together with numerous staples). With each presentation I would ask, "May I take one home with me?" to

which he would promptly shrug his shoulders and reply "Ahhh, no." And so this scene played out for two years until one day Glen finally answered, "Why yes, you can have it!"

During the two years that Glen's creations have been displayed in the fine art gallery otherwise known as my kitchen, many casual observers have commented on his art. The real power of Glen's work is how the details he renders – bow ties, squiggly hairstyles – combine with the composition of the images to create subjects that almost everyone can recognize at first glance. The emotive power of Glen's work grabs everyone's attention. Guests who passed through my home would remark on the distinctive images, asking about the artist and his inspirations. Their questions sparked my interest to look into other autistic artists as I was sure that their work would be as visually singular.

As a professional with many years of schooling and experience working in the field with children and adults diagnosed with autism, I am well-versed in the eclectic and compelling ways in which the minds of autistic people work. But for laypeople, for those who have only ever heard of autism, it is harder to really drive home the varied nature of ASD. As I began to solicit and collect work my hope was to assemble an array of visual examples of how these autistic individuals, only a small sampling of autistic people, interact with and react to the world.

The contributors reflect the world. Submissions for the book were received from the United States, Canada, Australia, India, Belgium, The Netherlands, Scotland, Lithuania, Wales, Romania, Croatia, Russia, China, England, Panama, Ireland, Lebanon, New Zealand, Hungary and Singapore. The contributors in the book range from 9 years old to well into their 60s, and some of these artists began showing and selling their art from as early as 7 years old.

The chapters are organized by themes I identified as I spent more and more time with the submissions. My clinical background in behavioral psychology and education informed how I sorted the work so that it provides an overview of the spectrum while celebrating the creative individuality of every single person on the spectrum. These themes and visual tendencies do speak to aspects of the diagnoses.

For example, it is not uncommon for individuals with autism to become "obsessed" or engage in repetitive behaviors, hence the chapter "Repetition, Repetition, Repetition." Repetition in the use

of numbers, letters or overall patterns is a trait that some individuals with autism experience. Some of the artwork in "Repetition, Repetition, Repetition" includes this use of letters and numbers in patterns. Some of the artwork in this chapter includes recurring themes. Some of the artists will recreate the same exact image over and over, where other artists will focus on a favorite theme, such as Zach Hamm (see pages 66-67), who has drawn thousands of pictures of his house because it makes him happy. These simplistic images are incredibly telling with regard to one aspect of autism.

In "Interaction," many pieces depict or speak to isolation. Many of the artists expressed frustration in relation to interacting with people in general or with individuals who do not understand autism. When spoken or written language does not always succeed for these individuals, their visual creations convey an amazing amount of emotion, which provides viewers avenues of understanding.

"Another World" demonstrates the universes of these artists' imaginations. Some artists dreamed of new places when their homes and lives made them feel as if escape was the best option.

"Bird's Eye View" features landscapes that are meticulously detailed in ways that would make many art school students jealous. In some cases every ray of sunlight is accounted for or every autumnal leaf is aflame with color. The detail and beauty related to the scenes can help us see how some of the artists may see their world every day.

"Getting From Here to There" deals with more everyday themes, namely transportation. It became apparent through the submission process that many artists were interested in transportation hubs as well as vehicles. So much of what individuals with autism deal with is internalized – they cannot always communicate their needs and thoughts – so the external physicality of these modes of transportation seem to resonate with those artists who were interested by how we board some mechanism that takes us wherever we need to go. Some of the artists expressed that they enjoyed being able to take a ride and simply watch the world go by.

Historical figures and events intrigued a number of the artists. "It's All History" features work that the artists created because of their interest in the past and their abilities to imagine it anew today.

"Art for Art's Sake" is an extremely important chapter because some of the artists simply completed their work for the sake of creation. Not every piece of art displayed in the book can be tied directly to a characteristic of autism. When answering the questionnaire many artists reported that they felt a compulsion to create something beautiful and emotional.

Every artist in *Drawing Autism* was invited to answer the following questions:

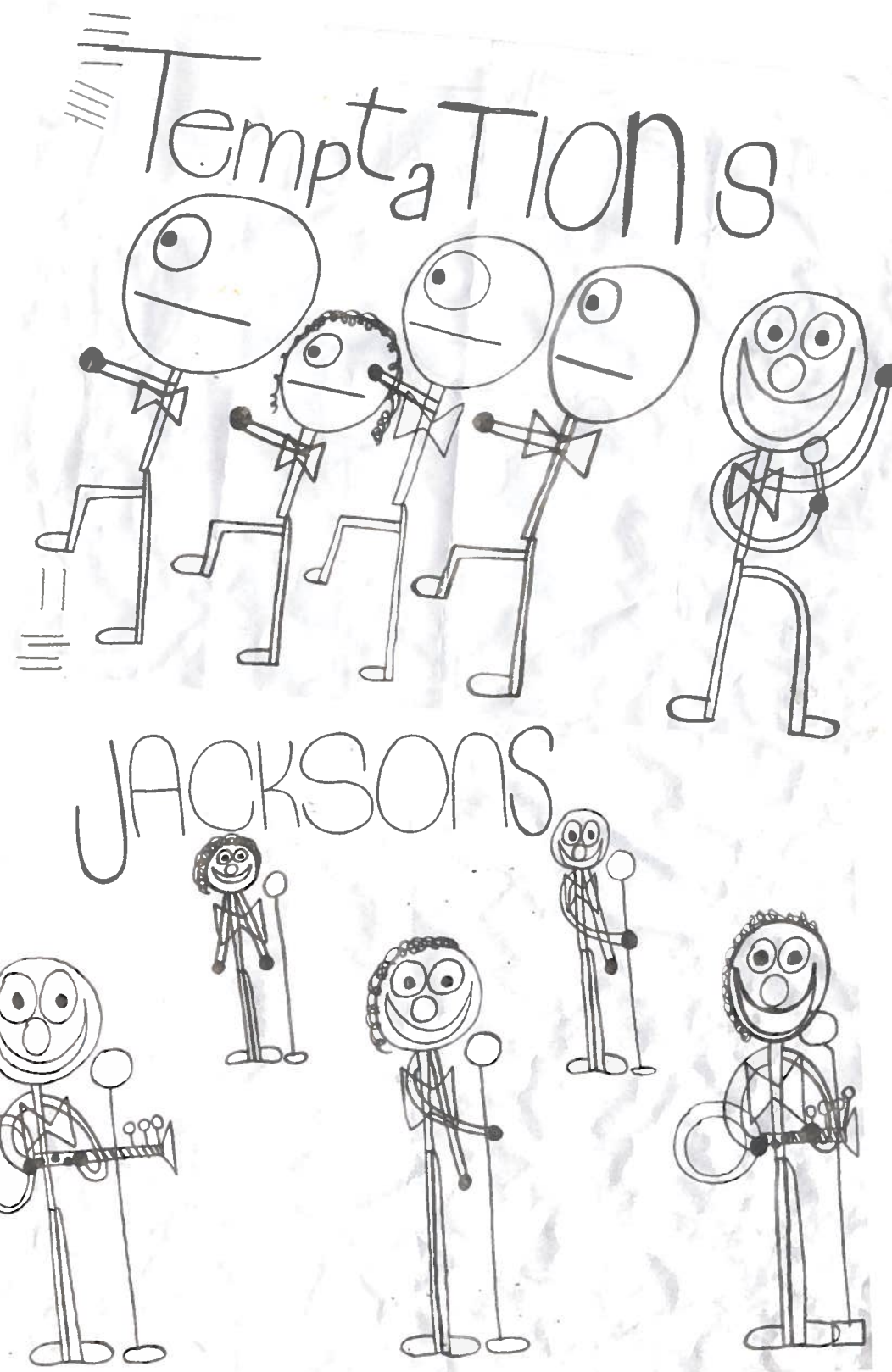
- At what age did the act of creating art enter into your life?**
- Why did you start creating art?**
- What inspires/excites you about creating art?**
- How do you choose your subjects?**
- Do you think your art helps others understand how you view the world?**
- Who are some artists that you like?**
- What was the inspiration for each piece of art that you have submitted to *Drawing Autism*?**
- Anything else that you'd like to say about your artwork?**

Some of the artists answered the questionnaire independently, introspectively discussing their creative processes. Other artists needed some assistance with either reading or writing the answers; some artists were interviewed by parents, friends or caretakers. Other artists were unable to understand the questions and struggled to answer because they simply could not relate to them. Some of the artists in the book are completely non-verbal and are unable to tell us anything about their work; in these cases we have relied on their family and caregivers to share their own interpretations of the work. We have noted all instances where someone else is speaking for one of the artists.

No matter the length of the answers or who issued the answers, all of the written content that accompanies the art has been included to drive home the point about how ASD manifests differently in every diagnosis. The written thoughts about the art provide deeper insights into how these individuals react to external and internal stimuli.

I have culled out the most intriguing, insightful and emblematic of the responses in order to enhance the art, as well as how readers view the work and its creators.

More importantly, I wanted to make sure that when possible the artists expressed their thoughts about their work and their lives on their own terms in their own voices.



GLEN RUSS: THE TEMPTATIONS (TOP), THE JACKSONS (BOTTOM); PENCIL; 8 1/4 X 11 INCHES; 2007

And what work it is. Inspired by artists ranging from Michelangelo to Salvador Dali, cartoonist Chuck Jones to Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon, as well as the seemingly mundane everyday occurrences that most of us hardly pay attention to, the work draws from myriad influences and inspirations, filtered through the eyes, minds and hands of these remarkable artists.

The overwhelming number of submissions I received astounded me. There were those already established in the art world, while many others used art as a hobby or an emotional outlet. Some of these artists have drawn and painted since they were old enough to pick up a crayon, but others came to art later in life. The tactile act of fingerpainting induces a calming effect for some; for some the compulsion to create illustrations is simply that, an inexplicable need, for others it is a desire to express themselves realized through art.

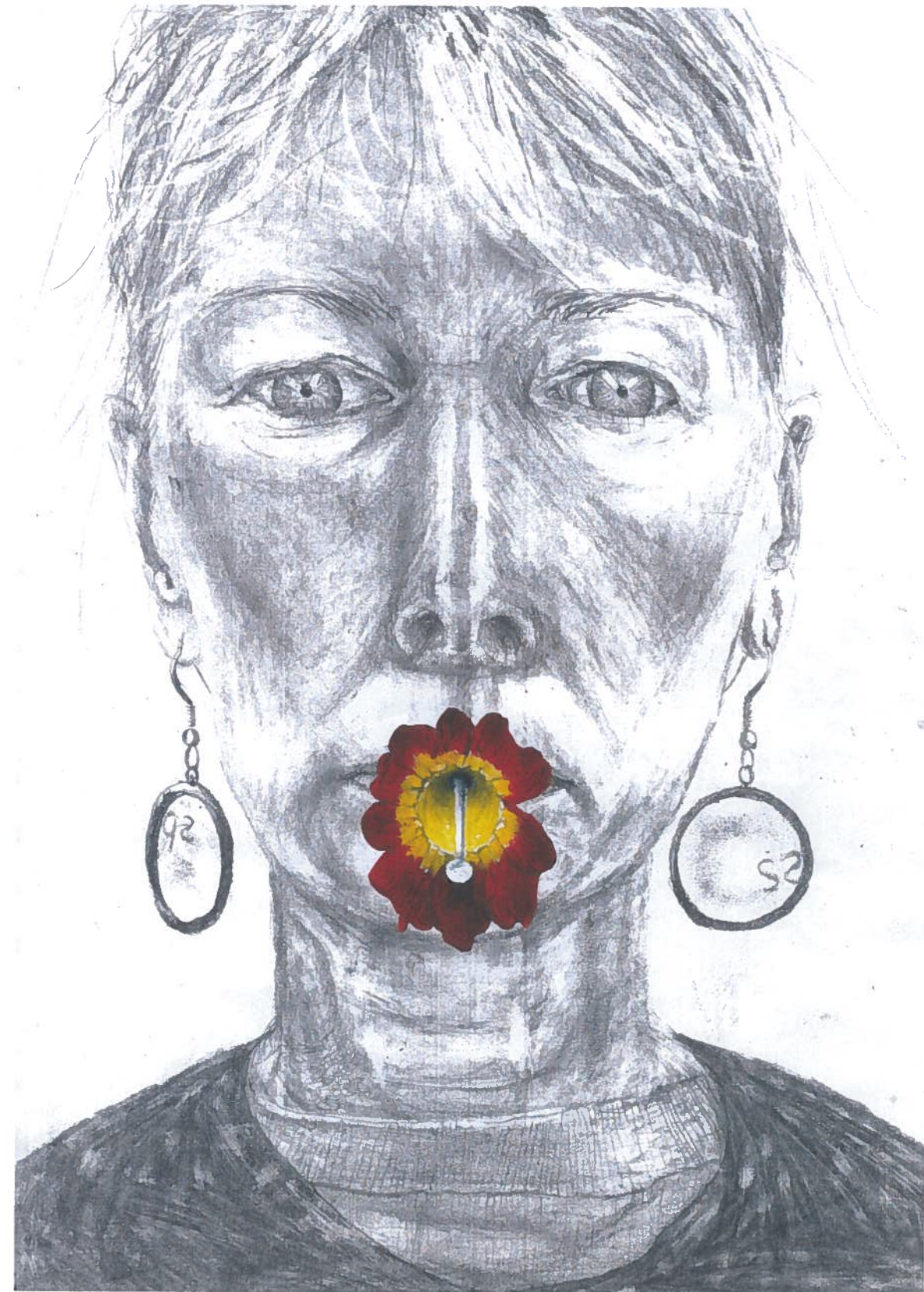
The artists in this book come from all over the world and have had very different experiences. However, there was one common theme despite cultural and geographical differences: many of the artists thrive off of the encouragement they have received from their families and their friends. Art has helped many of these individuals gain confidence that has helped to increase their enjoyment of life. Without the encouragement of parents, friends and teachers some of the artists would never have gained the confidence to even try and create, never mind share their work with a critical world. Fostering and nurturing abilities, artistic or otherwise, despite a diagnosis can help individuals with ASD discover their talents.

I already knew that people with autism can have unique visions inspired by boundless creativity and talent. But in researching this book and looking through stacks of submissions the breadth of creativity overwhelmed me. As can be seen in the chapters to follow there are some unifying themes common amongst the artists, but the message of the book is clear: individuals with autism possess a spectrum of talent as well as a spectrum of creativity.

A note on the captions and text:

The captions provide as much information as possible about each artwork. In instances where certain information was unavailable or unknown the caption reflects that. I have noted when artwork was created by an artist no older than 16.

I have also identified all instances where the artists have not answered the questions themselves.



KAY AITCH: DISTRACTION FROM THE EYES; PENCIL AND INK.