

IMMERSED IN ART

When alumna Elaine Masket and her husband were told that their son Alex had autism, they were naturally devastated. But when he continued to demonstrate a growing facility for creating collages and other large-scale works, they came to realize that his life had fulfillment and joy—the sorts of aspirations that often elude average people.

By Leslie Garisto Pfaff

Alex Masket sleeps in a room with blue wall-to-wall carpeting, an unremarkable oak bedroom set, and tape. Duct tape. Electrical tape. Lots and lots of tape. In soaring swaths of color, it covers every inch of his bedroom walls, forming an emphatic, dimensional collage that's as compelling as a Mondrian canvas. The comparison makes sense, because Alex, 22, is an artist, and, as is evident by this mural-in-progress, clearly has been one for quite a while. Playing archaeologist, his mother, Elaine Masket DC'75, gingerly pulls away a small section of tape to reveal another layer, and another under that, all of them on large sheets of poster board that have been nailed to the layers beneath. "If it sticks, he'll use it," Masket says. "He's Adhesive Man."

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One of Alex Masket's loves is mixed-media construction using paint markers and press-on lettering. The creations in his bedroom, below, feature broad swaths of colored duct and electrical tape. His art will be on view in a one-man show, "Kinetic Compositions," running October 2 through the fall semester at the art library at Voorhees Hall in New Brunswick. Alex's work can also be viewed at the Lawrence Pavilion of the Summit Medical Group, September 24 to January 8 (908-277-8834).

That delight in adhesion is apparent in all of Alex's work, from his most recent rainbow-hued, cut-paper collages to mixed-media constructions using paint markers and press-on lettering. But if any medium defines Alex, it has to be Legos. Since infancy, he's been fascinated with the bright plastic interlocking building blocks. But where most kids stack them to construct castles or pirate ships or blocky fantasy figures, Alex has always evinced a fascination for their graphic potential, using the 10- and 15-inch-square foundation boards as his canvases. Right now, there are two dozen of them on his bedroom floor in varying states of completion: on each board, bands of solid color alternate dazzlingly with geometric patterns and apparently random words: "RADIO," "JOKER," "POTBELLY." It's impossible to view them and not feel a strong desire to get to know the original mind that brought them into being.

That's the conundrum that Masket and her husband, Steve, face every day. Alex—the fostering of whose talent has become something of a second career for them—is severely autistic, with only the most rudimentary

language ability. As a baby, Alex was very happy, "but he just kind of disappeared into things," says Masket. Having worked with autistic children as a psychology major at Douglass College in the 1970s, she had her suspicions early on. Nevertheless, when she got the official diagnosis around his second birthday, Masket was, she says, "shattered." Although her husband quickly recognized their son's interest in color and pattern as a form of artistic expression, it took Masket much longer to come to that understanding.

"When he was four, he used to take Chinese checker pegs and line them up against the wall in the most complicated color sequences you can imagine," she remembers. "Steve looked at them and saw art. I looked at them and saw Autism Symptom Number Whatever: 'lines up objects.'" Eventually, she began to understand that he did, in fact, have a real affinity for art—but "the actual idea of his being an artist didn't really hit me until, shamefully, just a few years ago."

That revelation changed everything for her. Suddenly, Masket understood that Alex could have a future in which he'd be able to do



what had heretofore seemed impossible: express himself. "His language is a visual language," she says, "and it's incredibly satisfying to him."

That's a cautionary tale for the rest of us, who, says Kathleen Hull, director of the Byrne Family First-Year Seminar Program at Rutgers, tend to equate humanity with the ability to communicate verbally. Hull, who first met Masket at a hair salon and then was invited to see Alex's work, thought so much of it that she arranged a one-man show for Alex, opening October 2 at the art library at Voorhees Hall on the College Avenue Campus. His work inspired her to begin thinking about "the way that autism opens up our inquiry into what it means to be a human being."

"Here we have this fellow who can't express himself very well verbally, and he's extremely limited," she says. "But he's producing these pieces of work that are so expressive and evocative."

Difficulty with language, in fact, is a defining characteristic of autism. "The first and foremost sign of the disorder," says Alan Leslie, a professor of cognitive psychology in the School of Arts and Sciences in New Brunswick, "is that the child, from infancy onward, is impaired in his or her ability to communicate socially and relate to others in the kinds of ways that we take for granted and hardly notice: following each other's eye gaze, reading each other's emotional expressions, understanding gestures like pointing, and using language." We're only beginning to understand the causes of autism, though "it's now well established that it has a genetic basis."

What we don't know, except in a very small percentage of cases, is what mechanisms are at work to produce the abnormal genes that lead to the disorder. "We've discovered in the last couple of years that, in a very small fraction of autisms, there is a change in a normal gene to a nonnormal form that is passed on from parent to child," says Jay Tischfield, chair of the Department of Genetics at the School of Arts and Sciences. "The science of genetics has taught us something critical about autism: the most important lesson of the disorder is that, although you may think that there are only a few classes of autism based on clinical criteria, autism is, in molecular terms, many, many diseases."

The idea of the disorder's inherent heterogeneity is an apt one, it turns out, in the conversation about autism and art. Over the past several decades, an increasing number of people with autism have been recognized for their artistic abilities and bodies of work, giving rise to the phrases "autistic art" and "autistic artist." But neither phrase sits well with Masket, who makes a point of saying that her son—a handsome young man with dark hair and a smile that communicates a kind of pure joy in the moment—isn't an autistic artist, but an artist who happens to be autistic. It's a distinction that most professionals in the field would second. Laura Zullo CC'76, a teacher at the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center at Rutgers, works with students with Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism that's generally characterized by higher cognitive functioning. "With regard to art, they're just like other individuals," she says. "Some excel and have an innate ability, and others have no interest or particular talent."

That isn't to say that artists with autism don't exhibit any similarities as a group. Most of Zullo's artistic students work in a strikingly photorealistic style—which happens to be common among many artists with autism. Although Alex's work, which can be viewed online at alexmasket.com, is almost entirely abstract, he does exhibit another common trait: a near compulsion to fill the visual field. "I've seen artists with autism start at one end of the page and just go straight across," says Temple Grandin, author of *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (Vintage Books, 2006), who herself is autistic and will be speaking at Rutgers this fall. Many people with autism think in patterns, she

(continued on page 88)

Autism: Where the Sciences Meet the Humanities

Autism, in all its complexity and mystery, inspires a series of fall events at Rutgers to explore the notion of "neurodiversity."

Kathleen Hull was sitting under the hair dryer at her hair salon when a mutual friend introduced her to Elaine Masket. As she clicked through photos of Alex's work on Masket's iPhone, she felt an immediate attraction to his art. And after seeing his creations up close in the Masket's home, she was inspired to choose one of his highly graphic pieces for the cover of this year's catalog of the Byrne Family First-Year Seminar Program (intimate discussion-based courses, taught by senior research faculty, that introduce first-year students to the range of intellectual endeavors on the New Brunswick Campus).

That choice inspired a one-man show of Alex's work, "Kinetic Compositions," opening October 2 at the art library at Voorhees Hall on the College Avenue Campus and running through the fall semester. Long fascinated by the intersection between the humanities and the sciences, Hull eventually decided to make autism and what she calls "neurodiversity" a yearlong theme at Rutgers–New Brunswick. In addition to Alex's show, a series of campuswide events is planned:

- Byrne seminars on autism with Ann Jurecic (Department of English, "Autism in Literature and Culture," fall 2009), George Wagner (Department of Psychology, "What Is Autism?," spring 2010), and Lei Yu (Department of Genetics, "Opium, Endorphins, and Autism," spring 2010).
- A film on self-taught and "outsider" art by gallery owner, artist, and filmmaker Roger Ricco, followed by a panel discussion and audience participation.
- Two talks by Temple Grandin, an author and a person well known for having autism, on her understanding of the autistic mind.
- A fundraising walk by the Rutgers chapter of Theta Delta Chi, as part of the Central New Jersey Walk Now for Autism (sponsored by Autism Speaks) on October 11, with a kickoff dinner at the fraternity's home on College Avenue (all are invited).
- A fundraising walk sponsored by Douglass Organization for Occupational and Related Educational Services, Inc., a nonprofit group founded by parents of students at the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center, on October 18.

For further information about events, visit byrneseminars.rutgers.edu.

Immersed in Art

(continued from page 49)

says. Although the art they produce is often “like extreme origami, or the tiling patterns you see in some Middle Eastern art,” she suspects Alex, too, may be a pattern-type thinker.

In one of his most striking works, for example, the letters of the alphabet repeat in a series of wavering stacks, except at the very top of the canvas, where an indecipherable jumble of letters seems to be releasing a windswept flurry of vowels. While Alex can’t generate a written sentence on his own, words and letters have always played an important role in his art. His mother suspects this derives from a childhood fascination with television game shows like *Wheel of Fortune*. (When Alex was less than a year old, she remembers walking into the kitchen and finding the word “CONFUCIUS” laid out on the floor in Lego blocks and wondering if it could possibly be the work of Alex’s 4-year-old brother, Will; it hadn’t occurred to her that her 11-month-old might be responsible.) Roger Ricco, a partner in New York’s Ricco/Maresca gallery whose specialty is “outsider” and self-taught art and who also will be speaking at Rutgers this fall, suspects that Alex’s artwork is a visual representation of “an internal world, rather than an observed world.” And that world, according to Grandin, may be very rich indeed.

The area in which virtually all artists with autism are quite similar is the importance art assumes in their lives. “Often, it’s their preferred activity,” Zullo says of her students. “We have to deliberately redirect them away from it.” Masket believes that Alex would likely work on his art 24/7 if someone in the family didn’t stop him occasionally. In fact, the narrow focus on a single preoccupation is one of the hallmarks of autism, and it may help to explain why artists with the disorder tend to possess extraordinary artistic ability. (Among children with any sort of developmental disorder, specialized talent is roughly twice as common in those with autism.) “It doesn’t matter whether you’re on the autistic spectrum or not,” says

Leslie, the psychology and cognitive science professor. “To develop a natural talent into something at an unusually high level requires a lot of time and interest and motivation”—something artists with autism possess in spades.

What art offers to people with autism is, in part, what it offers to any artist: a sense of deep satisfaction, a means of self-expression, and a way of relieving stress. It’s probably no accident that Alex takes enormous pleasure in the physical act of creating his art, tapping the stickers

Activism for Autism

Rutgers students lead effort to raise awareness of autism during fall events.

Autism awareness is getting a boost this fall on the New Brunswick Campus because of the dedication of two Rutgers students, neither of whom knew anyone with the disorder before a small spark in high school ignited their interest. Tal Grebel volunteered with special-needs children through her Hebrew school and “just fell in love with them.” Matthew Cortland had never heard of autism before attending an autism walk with his mother and deciding to make it a personal mission. He founded a high school club devoted to the cause (now a national franchise) and raised more than \$25,000 for the charity Autism Speaks.

The students, who are juniors, brought their passion to Rutgers. Last year, Cortland convinced his Theta Delta Chi fraternity to adopt autism as its cause, and he’s now lobbying to take the campaign to all of its chapters, both at home and abroad. Largely by selling advertising on T-shirts, he and his fraternity brothers raised \$13,000 for autism this year. On October 11, they will participate in the Central New Jersey Walk Now for Autism (for further information, email mattcort@eden.rutgers.edu).

Grebel, a chair of arts and issues on the Rutgers University Programming Association (RUPA) board, is organizing a campuswide autism-awareness campaign. She founded the organization PACT (Peer Awareness, Compassion, and Tolerance) for Autism, which will train Rutgers students to interact with people with autism. On October 20, she will run a RUPA rally featuring a celebrity speaker, giveaways, and an interactive lesson in what it’s like to be autistic (for further information, email talg@eden.rutgers.edu or search Facebook for “PACT for Autism”). Like Cortland, she hopes “to spread tolerance, awareness, and understanding of autism.”

in place, for instance, with an almost musical rhythm and an intense concentration that seems to involve his entire body. “It’s that pressure,” says Zullo. “A lot of my students like pressure; it’s their way of coping: to push.”

Beyond the satisfaction derived from the creative process, art offers people with autism something they might not otherwise achieve: a sense of pride. Grandin, who has channeled her autism into designing humane livestock-handling facilities, clearly understands it personally. “Work is my reason for being,” she says. “It absolutely gives me a sense of pride.” And for people with autism, their sense of pride is generally untempered by that bugaboo of the “typical,” or nonautistic, artist: the need for approval and praise. Other artists, Masket says, often express envy of Alex’s singularity of purpose. “He’s probably the happiest person I know, because he’s pursuing what he loves with no attendant responsibilities whatsoever. Who gets to do that?”

Alex’s art has proved to be a joy for not just Alex but his family as well. His older brother, Will, was a booster of Alex’s talent long before his mother recognized it. “Will has been living around Alex’s art for almost his whole life,” she says. “He stepped on more Legos than he cares to remember. And for the last few years, he has been really encouraging me to treat it as a valued commodity that needs to find its place in the world.” For a second, she thinks about what Alex’s life might be like without art. He attends an adult day program at the Children’s Center of Monmouth County in Neptune four days a week. It’s a wonderful program, she points out, and it keeps him busy. “But when you raise a child this disabled, and you put him in a program,” she says, “you can easily look at it as an end point—and that’s something you never really want to see for your child.” For Alex, art changes that. It gives him a future that’s open-ended, with the potential for continual change and growth.

“The fact that he has this art,” his mother says, “makes me feel that he’s genuinely fulfilled. And, really, what more do you want for your kids?” ●