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ARTS • EVENTS

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Second sight

An artist's loss of vision brings unexpected freedom in the studio

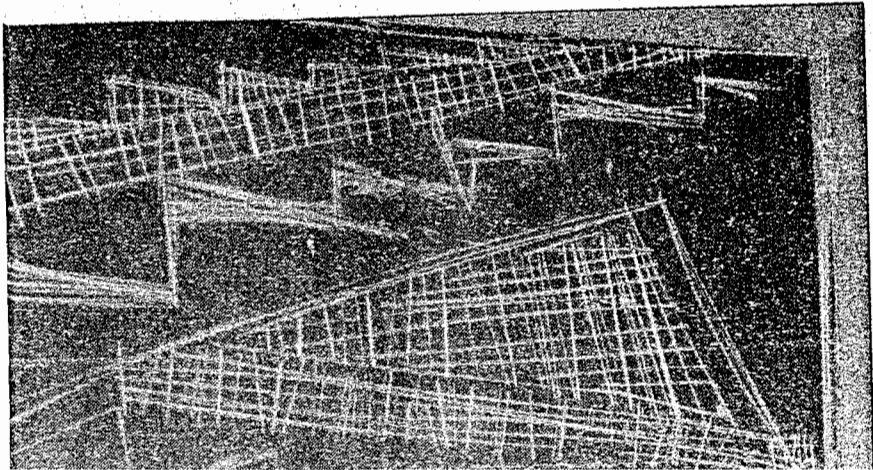


JOEL FOSTER, left, strains to see as he places tape on his canvas to help him paint lines and shapes. Two of his paintings will be among about 60 at the first exhibit of the Blind Artist's Society opening Thursday at the Albany Institute for History & Art.

FOSTER, below, uses binoculars to see small parts of his paintings. He is legally blind and sees only peripherally. He can no longer read or drive. For nearly four decades he has created abstract works, including a series of stairs and ladders (examples below) since starting to lose his vision several years ago to a genetic disease.

PHOTOS BY LUANNE M. FERRIS/TIMES UNION

BY TOM KEYSER
STAFF WRITER



Amenia, Dutchess County

Afternoon sunlight streams into Joel Foster's studio, creating a bright, warm sanctuary. This is his safe place now, his refuge from the world.

It's the one area of his life least affected by his loss of vision. In his studio, he doesn't have to rely on someone to drive him to the store or worry about getting across a busy street with his white cane. In solitude he paints.

"It's something you can control," Foster says. "When you're out in the real world, everything's so out of your control and frustrating. Here you have a voice. You have control. You have an outlet."

Even though he's legally blind and can see only peripherally, he can see enough to paint. It's something he's done since he was a boy, something he describes as his calling, "the heart and soul of me."

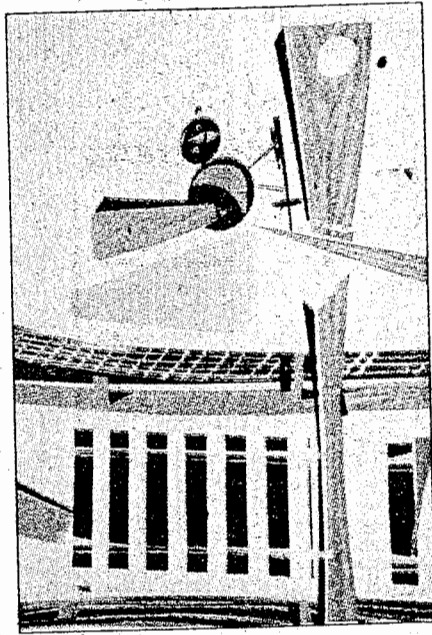
Now 59, he does it partly by rote, partly by feel and partly by sight. Always an abstract painter, he says his work has perhaps benefited from his vision loss. It's gotten bigger, bolder and brighter — out of necessity; he can see it better. And he feels more freedom.

"It kind of takes the pressure off," he says. "I've got an excuse now: 'Oh well, what can you expect? He can't see.'"

Foster laughs, because that's true only to a point. He's reluctant to describe himself as a blind artist. He's an artist. He recently sold a painting for \$2,500 — one done after his loss of vision. It's the most he's ever gotten for a painting.

On Thursday, two of his paintings will be among about 60 works on display when the first exhibit of the Blind Artist's Society opens at the Albany Institute of History & Art. The opening coincides with a gala and fundraiser celebrating the

Please see **SIGHT H2** ▶



SIGHT: Foster painted at Kissinger's

▶ CONTINUED FROM H1

100th anniversary of the Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany. The exhibit closes Sunday.

Dr. Paul Beer, a retina specialist and founder of the Retina Research Foundation in Slingerlands, started the society for visually impaired artists (none is completely blind) in January. It grew from Beer's hanging patients' artwork in his office. He then started an organization with a Web site to encourage communication among the artists and to promote their work.

Foster was one of the first to join — reluctantly, but at the same time eager to help Beer and begin a dialogue with other artists having trouble seeing. Being a member of anything containing the word "blind" is still new to Foster, who lives near Route 22 in the hamlet of Wassiac in the town of Amenia in Dutchess County. Beer diagnosed Foster with Stargardt's disease three years ago. It's a severe form of macular degeneration that's inherited and usually diagnosed in teenagers. Foster didn't notice a problem until well into his 50s.

He'd be driving, and cars would suddenly appear in front of him. He'd be reading, and words would appear cut up, as if parts were blocked out. At first, he thought he needed stronger glasses. But as his vision continued to decline, as lines began looking wavy and broken up, he realized he needed more than a new prescription. His eye doctor referred him to a specialist, and that's how he met Beer.

Now, Foster says, you can imagine what he sees by holding a fist directly in front of your eyes. It's a lot worse than that, he says, but basically he sees only what's off to the sides. His vision is still

deteriorating, but Beer says it shouldn't get much worse. He says that Foster won't become completely blind.

Until October last year, Foster ran a paint and decorating store. He had to give that up. For nearly 40 years he painted and worked as a decorative painter, specializing in Victorian restoration. Foster is too modest to say it, but his wife, Tonia Shoumatoff, will. Homeowners thought

On exhibit

- **What:** The Blind Artist's Society art exhibit
- **When:** 6 to 10 p.m. Thursday and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday, Dec. 7
- **Where:** Albany Institute of History & Art
- **Cost:** Free
- **Note:** The gala and fundraiser for the Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany begins at 6 p.m. Thursday. It's also at Albany Institute of History & Art.
- **Contact:** For information about the gala, call 533-6550 or e-mail BNWELL@naba-vision.org or DrBeer@RetinaConsultants.org. For information about the Blind Artist's Society, check the Web site <http://www.blindartistsociety.com/>.

so much of his work that they waited six months for his services; her husband worked on many famous people's houses, including Henry Kissinger's.

Shoumatoff, who works as the New York watershed manager for the Housatonic Valley Association, has led Foster through the "Byzantine bureaucracy," as she puts it, so he can receive services, training and a monthly disability payment from Social Security. It's enough only to

cover his health insurance and the rent of his studio next door to their house.

"I was freaked out and overwhelmed by the situation. ... It was all very confusing," Shoumatoff says. "There needs to be a guide written called 'What to do when you become newly blind in New York state.'"

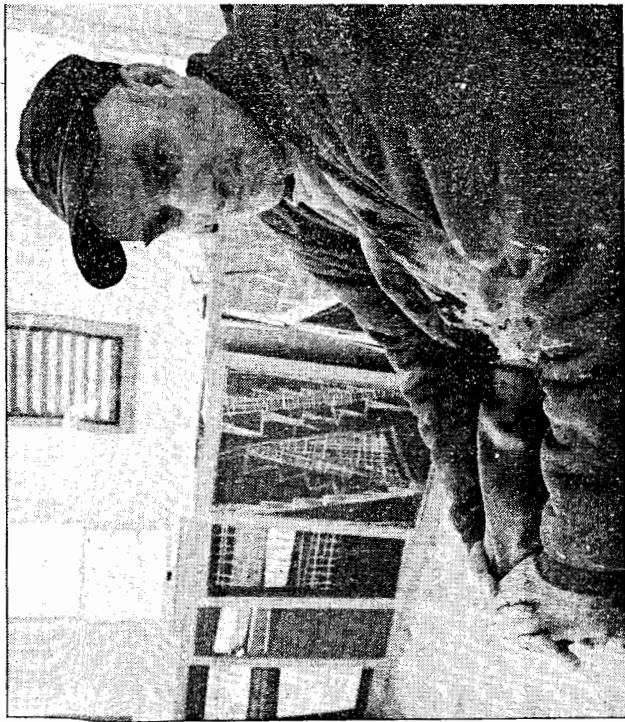
For Foster, life changed profoundly. As the day's last sunlight fades from his studio and he turns on lights, he says what he misses most is reading. He read more books than anyone who came into the Amenia Free Library, says Miriam Devine, the librarian. Now he can't read at all. He listens to recorded books and hopes to receive soon a gogglelike magnification device from the New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped that will help him read, write and see his paintings.

"In my daily life, it's a real drag, a real problem, that I can't see things," Foster says. "But in my studio I've always set challenges for myself. I've always had sort of this inventive mind; I like to figure out problems. Blindness is just another challenge."

It's loosened up his work. He flips through old paintings leaning against a wall and picks out detailed pen-and-ink drawings of a turtle and a series of small cubes and squares. He couldn't do those now, he says. He needs a bigger canvas and bolder lines.

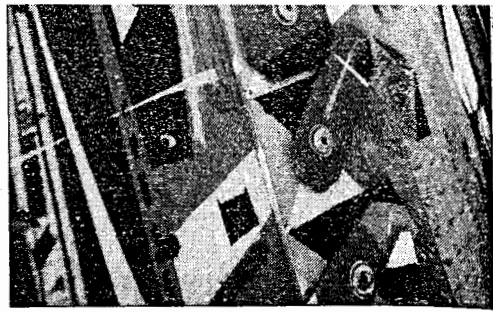
Foster used to paint on, say, 22-by-30-inch canvases. Now they're 30 by 40 inches, or even 6 by 5 feet. He's working on a series of abstract ladders and stairs using blacks, white, yellows and tans.

He applies tape to outline where he wants a line. It takes him hours to decide where he wants the line, to place the tape and to apply the line. At his feet, on the plywood floor, is a pile of used, wadded-up tape.



LUANNE M. FERRIS/THE

JOEL FOSTER'S studio in Amenia in Dutchess County is where his vision loss hit him the least. He paints from memory, feel and with what little sight he still has



He examines small areas of a painting with magnifiers, but when he steps back he struggles to see the overall work. He turns his head to view the work peripherally.

Foster is in no hurry. This is now the only job he's got. It's funny, his wife says. He worked all those years so one day he would have time to paint. Now that he's legally blind, he has all the time to paint he wants.

It's dark now outside his studio. Trucks with headlights beaming streak past on 22. It's cold and uncertain. Inside, Foster turns up the heat in his studio. There, surrounded by his paintings, the lights burn bright.

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