

A Different Perception: Artist Continues Despite Growing Blindness

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Published: Monday, January 13, 2014

Litchfield County Times

Editor's note: The following story appears in the Art Space section of the Winter 2013 edition of Passport Magazine.

Standing at the top of the steps leading to his studio in Wassaic, N.Y., Joel Foster cuts an impressive figure. In wrinkled khaki cargo shorts, beige V-neck sweater, tan sneakers, baseball cap covering his shaggy gray hair and anchored down with a pair of cool shades, he is the epitome of the working artist. As he shakes my hand and looks straight at me, smiling, it is difficult to accept the fact that he is blind.

The brightly lit studio itself does not reflect any allowances that have been made for his lack of sight. It is a typical artist's studio—creatively chaotic. Various works in progress, along with finished pieces, line the walls; a center table holds supplies, tear sheets, and a host of inspiration miscellany.

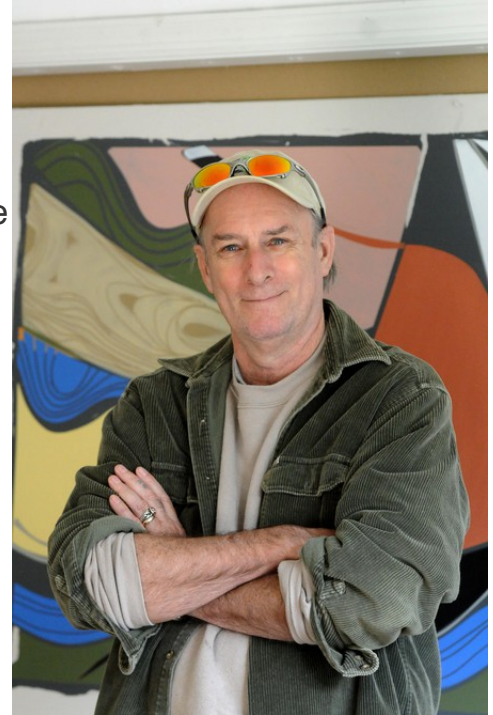
“In the studio my eyesight is not an issue,” he explained. “It’s a controlled environment. I know where everything is. It may be a plus, certainly not a negative. No one moves anything around so I function quite well. At home, where I live with someone else, it’s more difficult because things do get moved around and change is very hard for me.”

Mr. Foster has been interested in art since he was a child. “Early on I wanted to be a cartoonist for The New Yorker. But I’m really bad about deadlines so that wasn’t going to work. It wasn’t until I was in my late 20s that I studied art at SUNY Purchase. In between I had worked as a studio assistant for a sculptor and had also had some experience as a printmaker.”

In between attending college and starting a career, real life stepped in. “I got married, then my daughter was born, we bought a house—so I wasn’t producing much work. I went into the decorating business, working on Victorian houses, painting them and color consulting for both exteriors and interiors. I had a few shows of my work locally, but I didn’t get back into painting until my daughter went off to college. That’s when I took a studio in Torrington where I worked until recently. I would go there on a Saturday and work through until Monday.”

Mr. Foster’s work is totally abstract, lines and shapes meant to represent various things, and created in colors not often seen in contemporary paintings.

“I like to work in series; there may be an idea or a certain approach I want to take and I tend to use the same colors—it’s purely arbitrary. I like unusual colors. I use discarded house paints, discontinued colors that manufacturers are getting rid of or the formula’s gone bad and no one wants them. I call them color orphans and they are usually



colors people hate— weird greens and browns and purples. I can sometimes find the colors and then make them work into my ideas.”

One of his best-known series is his 1620 series, which was inspired in part by his ancestors who settled in Plymouth, Mass. Mr. Foster grew up in that area, near the sea and, though abstract, the paintings all have a nautical theme. From the colors used, one gets the sense of waves and swirling water, as well as the presence of sand and shapes resembling sailing boats and fishing boats. There are about 40 paintings in the series, each approximately 24- by-36-inches in size, and they are painted on chipboard with wall paint, tempera, gouache, and milk paint.

“There is nothing that would tell you the year is 1620. The shapes are really symbols and not meant to be accurate portrayals. The paintings are somewhat nautical even though they are all abstract. You can read what you like into the shapes and see what you want to see.”

The loss of sight has not hampered Mr. Foster’s work. It has been gradual until recently so he has had time to adjust to the changes he’s had to make.

“I have what is called Stargardt’s disease. It’s genetically inherited and is associated with childhood macular degeneration. It’s a loss of the central vision and usually shows up in teenagers, around adolescence. If it was present back then, I didn’t know it because it wasn’t until I was in my 50s that it really manifested itself. It started out gradually so it wasn’t dramatic. It blocks out things selectively.

“When it started in 2005, I could still drive,” he continued. “I could still work part time at an art supply store. Then my sight dropped off precipitously and has been rapidly getting worse. My peripheral vision is still fairly good, but I can’t drive, I can’t read or watch movies and I can’t see faces.”

How does an artist compensate for the loss of sight? To not be able to view one’s surroundings, be inspired by color, by a scene, by the everyday movement of people and the influence of one’s environment is inconceivable to most people. But Mr. Foster has somehow grown accustomed to his lack of vision.

“I am trying to be aware of what is happening and how I am compensating for it. They say that when you lose one sense, others become stronger to compensate for the loss. One obvious change is that I seem to hear better. I am much more aware of sounds around me than I was before. Certain things have become less important, like paper and books. I am in the process of getting rid of things that no longer mean anything to me. The loss seems to have affected my dreams as well. Things like books used to show up and they don’t anymore. I’m sure something is going on subconsciously in my brain.”

And while he has had to adjust somewhat to not being able to do certain things, it doesn’t seem to have affected Mr. Foster’s ability or desire to paint. His mental process hasn’t changed but he has had to adjust the putting of paint to canvas.

“I’ve always used certain devices to create my paintings—for instance, tape. Since I’m not able to see the paintbrush in my hand straight on, I need some way to gauge the space I’m working in. My cousin gave me a whole variety of brightly colored masking tapes in various widths. I can block out areas with tape and paint within the allotted

space. I don't really have to worry about going outside the lines because the work is pretty loose."

He tried to make little drawings when a new idea comes to mind. "They would mean nothing to anyone else. I can't always read what I write, but somehow the notes trigger my memory and then I can incorporate whatever it is into a new piece. My writing skills keep lessening as my sight becomes worse. I can write letters, but I have to write them rapidly and in one sitting. If I start, then stop, I have to try to read what I wrote and that's become very difficult."

He is now thinking of a new series. Actually, it is one based on a series he began at his former studio in Torrington. He is hoping to have it ready for a show that will be part of the Wassaic Project, which presents music, art, dance and film. Housed in a converted grain elevator turned exhibition space, and an auction barn turned studio and workshop, the experience is unique.

"The walls are made of thick maple slabs stacked on each other and that's what I'm basing my art on," Mr. Foster explained. "I'm using a crackle finish that I've used in house decoration. When you apply the final layer of paint, it immediately separates. I then manipulate the crackle finish by changing the direction of my strokes."

Mr. Foster is part of a group called the Blind Artists' Society. It was started as a support group for those experiencing visual loss of one kind or another. There have been several group shows of their work, among them a major exhibition at the Bausch & Lomb headquarters in Rochester, N.Y. In addition to that acclaimed show, he was chosen the recipient of a \$1,500 Artist's Resource Trust (A.R.T.) fund grant from the Berkshire Taconic Foundation to explore new materials—the only artist in Dutchess County to receive such an honor.

As his loss of sight becomes more problematic, Mr. Foster is rethinking the creative process. While he continues to work on canvas, and occasionally paper, he is using more wood and metal. And he is thinking of starting to print again.

"I can't know what my limitations are unless I try everything," Mr. Foster said. "I've done wall hangings out of sheet metal. I use rivets and a drip painting style that is loose and spontaneous. I can feel the rivets and the dripped paint doesn't require much precision. The grant I received will enable me to explore and purchase new materials and hopefully lead me in a new direction."

As one spends time talking to Mr. Foster the idea that he can't see is unimaginable. He is full of energy and spends much of our time together walking around the studio, picking up art, studying it and moving onto something else. He is animated and speaks as though his blindness, while an irritant, is not going to deter him from his work or his plans. Experiments are being conducted on Stargardt's disease and it has responded well to stem cell research.

"While I'm not a candidate for it yet, my doctor is keeping me up to speed on what's going on," Mr. Foster said. Meanwhile he is not sitting still with his disability nor succumbing to self-pity. "I don't obsess over details and when I am working I tend to work fast and without interruption. Because of my eyesight, there's an ongoing discovery every day. And I just do what I need to do to survive and, hopefully, outsmart my disability."