
Monsters as art form at Creativity Explored

By **Beth Spotswood** | October 9, 2017

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It was the magic hour, that moment when the sun had half set behind Twin Peaks and the Mission District dimmed into a homey neighborhood of twinkling lights, when I stepped into the “Bride of Monster” art show reception at Creativity Explored.

Bedazzled mannequin heads hung in the storefront, and a wall of colorful paintings greeted guests as friendly costumed volunteers checked us in. Fifty-six-year-old Richard Wright, one of the show’s featured artists, stood nervously next to a wall of his work and sheepishly asked me, “Do you want to see my monsters?”

Creativity Explored began nearly 35 years ago as an art program for developmentally disabled adults. It now serves 130 artists who work out of two studios, one on 16th Street in the Mission and another in Potrero Hill. A nonprofit, Creativity Explored is a paint-splattered haven for people who are no longer young enough to qualify for the multitude of programs offered to disabled young people. Like much of the art that graces its walls, the art studios of Creativity Explored are sacred space.

Past the small storefront gallery and reception area sat the huge art studio. The studio’s soaring walls, nearly two stories high, were covered in massive art pieces. Any flat space — every table and chair —

displayed drawings on paper and intricate paintings. A shelf of pottery was near a desk that was so covered in paint splatter, it resembled a Jackson Pollock piece. Two members of the band She Mob, both sporting brightly colored wigs, played bizarrely delightful music from a blanket spread on the floor, while guests sipping white wine from plastic cups stepped over them.

Wright walked me across the studio. He wanted to show me more monster art, pieces that didn't make the official gallery show. Wright's voice was nearly a whisper, but his enthusiasm was unmistakable. Glenn Peckman, a visual arts instructor in monster makeup, popped by to check on our conversation, and I understood why. The team at Creativity Explored is lovingly protective of their trusting artists.

I was nervous, too. I didn't want to say the wrong thing, to screw up the privilege of my warm welcome. But when it comes to art, it's easy to talk to Wright — he has dozens (upon dozens) of pieces and a pretty impressive curriculum vitae. Wright's work has appeared in Dwell magazine, and one of his large-scale paintings graces the lobby of San Francisco's Hotel G.

"It's all G's," Peckman explained of Wright's lobby piece.

Wright is not alone in his success. Creativity Explored artists have seen their work end up on everything from CB2 pillows to Recchiuti chocolates. They're turning out salable art and earning income from it — no easy feat for any artist.

E. Francis Kohler happened by Creativity Explored's 16th Street studios 25 years ago, popped inside on a whim. He found the artists within talented and without pretension, which was both understandable and exhilarating.

"It was so refreshing to have someone be excited about their work and excited to show it to someone," Kohler said.

Kohler was looking for a job at the time and felt instantly that Creativity Explored was the right fit. He began as a volunteer before joining the staff. "You had to sort of earn the right to work here," said Kohler.

That peek inside the studio transformed Kohler's life. "Before I started volunteering at Creativity Explored, I had some really not cool misconceptions about people with disabilities," Kohler said. "So much of that misinformation just got kicked out of me so fast."

Kohler used that transformative experience in his curation of "Bride of Monster." The show is the third installment of the 2003 exhibit "Monster," which explored the relationship between monsters and disabled people. This year's show added a focus on the oppression of women, and thus female monsters — with a heavy nod to early 20th century horror films. There are, I'm delighted to report, a lot of brides of Frankenstein in the exhibit.

I said goodbye to Wright and his beautiful wall of werewolves, zombies and ghosts. From the sidewalk, I peered through the window and into the warm glow of the gallery to see Wright bask in his kudos, an unexpected art star. Magic hour might have passed into night on 16th Street, but inside Creativity Explored, it's been magic for about 30 years.

Beth Spotswood's column appears Thursdays in Datebook. Email: datebook@sfchronicle.com



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