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DC Paper "Northwest Passages" writes about Matt Sesow

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by Matt Swenson

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Disabled artist gains nationwide exposure

By MATT SWENSON
Current Staff Writer

Located on the wall of Matt Sesow's Adams Morgan apartment is a painting of a little girl sitting with her father. A closer examination of the artwork reveals the father is missing his right leg, and that the daughter is keeping him upright.



The point of the piece is that the girl brings balance to her father not only in the physical sense, but also emotionally. It is characteristic of the style Sesow has employed in his paintings for the last eight years.

One glance at the 36-year-old Nebraska native makes it clear where Sesow draws his inspiration for the piece: He has no left arm.

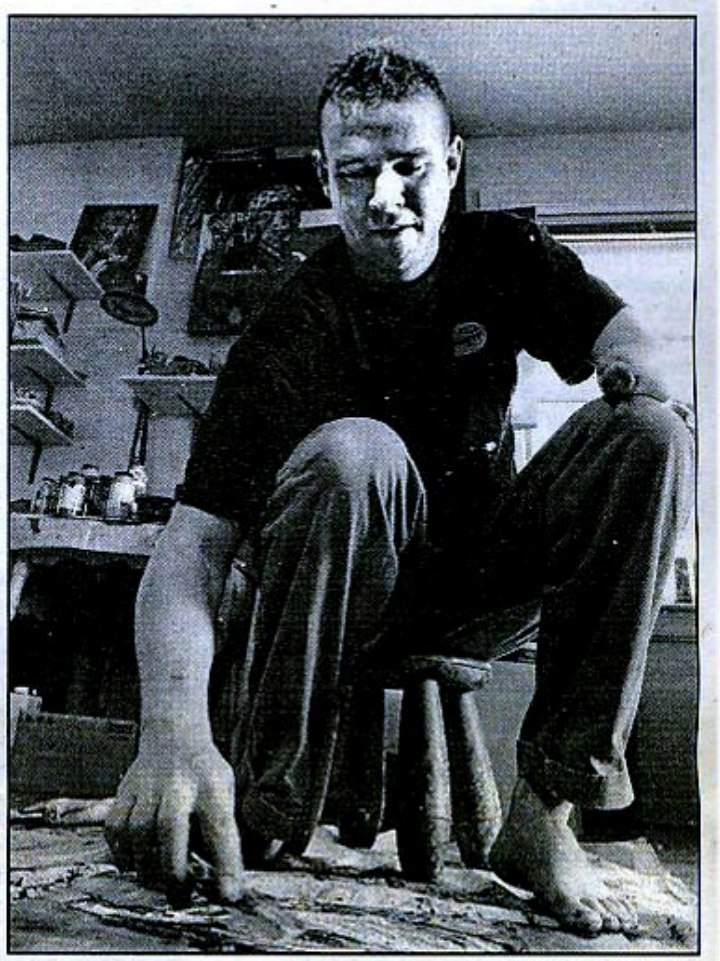
Where his arm would be is the reminder of a childhood accident when a plane's propeller severed the left arm of the previously left-handed Sesow.

Twenty-eight years later, Sesow is at ease with his disability, as he has led a productive life — first in the computer industry and now with his art work.

"The accident was probably harder on my family," said Sesow. "My brother and my sister saw it happen. They had to deal with it." And it is how his family dealt with the trauma that Sesow credits for where he is today — being exhibited all across the country.

"My family was really supportive," he said. "They are the reason I am so well-adjusted."

One-armed or not, Sesow had what he calls "a typical Nebraska childhood," playing on the offensive line of his high school's football team and running track as well. In his spare time, he became the school's version of "Doogie Howser," as he put it, by becoming a computer whiz.



Bill Petros/The Current

Matt Sesow, whose work is currently on display at a Dupont Circle gallery, has a wide range of work, including "Hippity Hoppity," a 2002 oil on chipboard.

Following his graduation from the University of Tulsa, Sesow went to work for IBM, which led him to the District.

"Back then, it used to be challenging to do computer research," said the artist. "It used to be cool when it was hard.

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Now I have a sense everyone is an expert on computers."

While still working on computer software, Sesow picked up painting, teaching himself simply by creating piece after piece.

"It was unique, challenging," said Sesow of what drew him to painting. "If I felt selling newspapers was unique, I'd be selling newspapers."

On the canvas, or whatever other surfaces Sesow was painting on, his thoughts began manifesting themselves in the form of art. Not surprisingly, many dealt with disabilities and childhood traumas.

"That's what set me apart in the beginning," said Sesow, whose work has become part of several Sept. 11-related exhibits because of the themes he broaches.

Physically, having one arm has had little impact on his work, he said, though Sesow admits that he can't draw a straight line and sometimes his apartment gets pretty messy when he paints for his customary eight hours a day.

At a 1995 Georgetown street art festival, Sesow completed his first sale — and finished with 12 sales by the end of the day. "That made me a bit more confident," Sesow remembered. Now, he wins prizes regularly, including second place in the recent Adams Morgan Day art show.

In his early stages, Sesow said, he felt like he was a bit "pigeonheld" as either a folk artist or being grouped in with other disabled artists. But as time has passed — and with Sesow making the decision to go full time with his art 18 months ago — his audience base has grown to include collectors of all sorts.

At the same time the artist gave up his computer programming, Sesow also broke away from his art agent in an effort to broaden his horizons. The decision has paid off, selling hundreds of paintings for prices ranging from $15 to $5,000. Usually, the price is fairly adjustable, Sesow said, noting that "If someone likes my work, I want them to have it."



Matt Sesow's recent works include "Atrophy," oil on canvasboard. Sesow made his first sale at a Georgetown art market.

He has not adjusted his style entirely, though, when it comes to promoting his art. Many of Sesow's paintings are part of America. Oh, Yes Galleries across the country, which highlight the work done by disabled self-taught artists. One such exhibition is running through Nov. 30 in the District's America. Oh, Yes Gallery, located at 1700 Connecticut Ave. in Dupont Circle.

Sesow has not forgotten his computer expertise. He posts images of his paintings on his Web site, www.sesow.com. "The Web site is my No. 1 method of sale," he said, noting that some will just buy paintings based on the images on the site while others will set up appointments upon seeing the Internet collection.

After painting for so long, Sesow rarely keeps his own paintings, preferring that others see them. His schedule is usually dictated by shows, as he produces hundreds of works a year so they can be seen in galleries as far away as Los Angeles.

Many of the artists Sesow met when he first began art have moved on, Sesow noted. "They tell their story and they stop," said Sesow, who has no such plans of retiring his paintbrush. "I think my art is interesting beyond who I am.

"I think people are taking me more seriously now," he said.

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