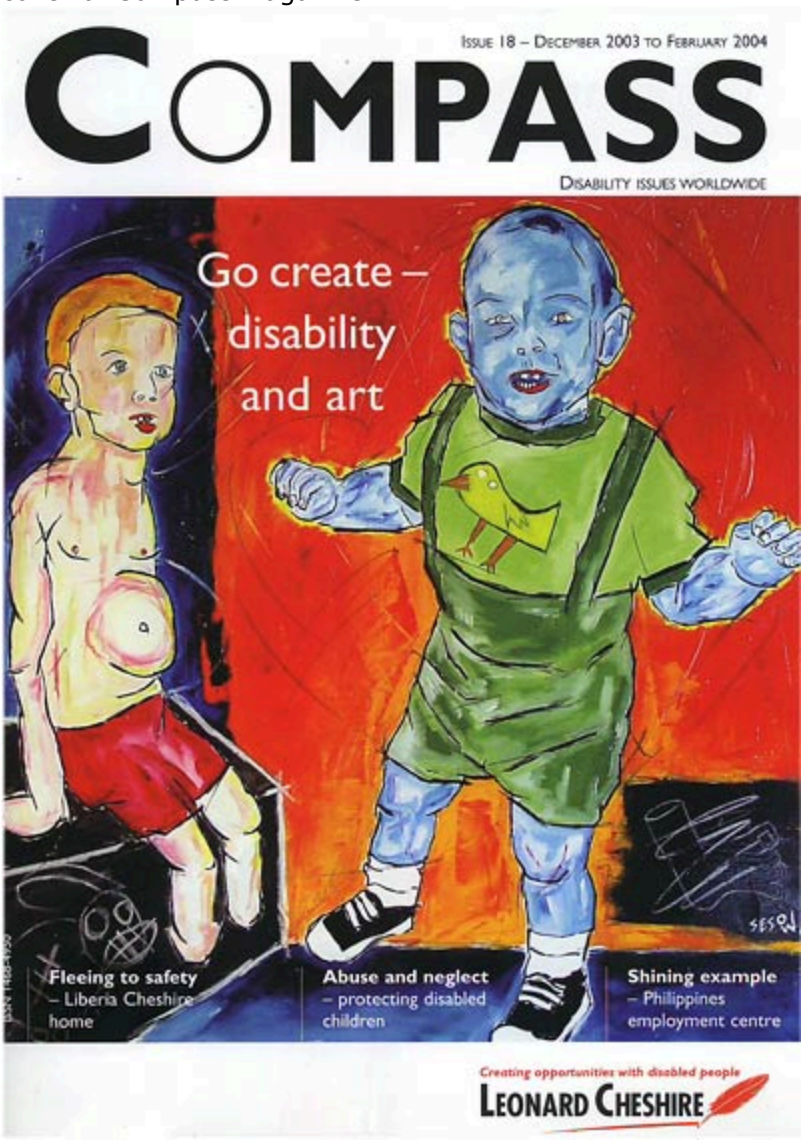
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Matt Sesow in Compass Magazine Article, 2003

December 2003

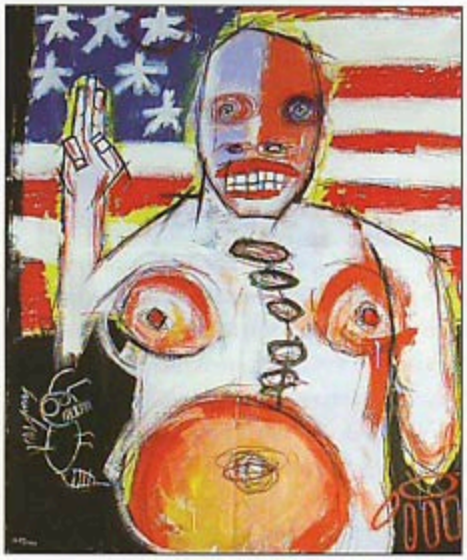
cover of Compass Magazine:



In focus...

A brush with

Three very different exponents of art – a successful individual painter, an art group relying entirely on goodwill and a city's community arts programme - highlight the very complex role art can have in the lives of disabled people



Twisted Spine by Matt Sesow

The assumption often made about disabled artists is that critics approach their work with generosity. For disabled artists, such as award-winning Matt Sesow*, they want to be seen as artists and not as disabled people who can paint. They want their work to be assessed only on its merit rather than be seen as 'good for someone who's lost a limb', says Matt Sesow.

The successful individual

American artist Matt Sesow has found his way into the archives of collectors, curators and institutions across the world. Sesow makes use of intense colour and dramatic rendering to communicate real emotion. His raw, confrontational images of pain, solitude and desire have notoriety, and have allowed him to earn a living as an artist for the past two years.

Matt lost his hand when he was eight years old, the result of an accident while playing with friends near a small private airport in rural Nebraska. The propeller of a landing plane collided with him, dragging him down the runway. While doctors were able to re-attach his left arm, they were unable to save his hand, which was amputated.

Matt started painting a decade ago, when he was 26 years old. With no formal training, he took up a brush as an excuse to socialise and meet new friends. Following a spell as a volunteer in the peace corps and a career as a computer programmer and software tester, Matt became disillusioned with the industry and decided to try painting full-time.

Now resident in Washington DC, he has completed over 5,000 paintings and last year sold over 700 of them, mainly through his website. Of his work, he says: "Painting was something that started for me as a way to express untapped emotions from the accident. And I think I've turned that trauma into a personal accomplishment. I suppose disability defines me, a bit like race, career, family or economic status seem to do so for most people. I don't know if I'm good or bad. I just paint."

The art group

Several thousand miles away from the US, in a different culture and environment, art also plays a fundamental role in the progression and expression of disabled people. During a decade of civil war, the people of Sierra Leone suffered some of the most shocking atrocities in the name of power. But, now, the country is at peace and in a small, dusky shack on the outskirts of a makeshift village near Freetown, artists are hard at work. The Aberdeen camp has provided a beacon of light for some of the displaced disabled people in the city.

When United Nations' staff had completed their research work in the camp, they felt that they had taken much but given

*The front cover of this edition of *Compass* features one of Matt Sesow's striking paintings – 'Baby's first step'


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success

very little back to the community. It was at this point that Hilary Ravenscroft arrived. A teacher by profession and an artist in her spare time, she took on the challenge for the frustrated UN staff and an art project was born. Its impact during the short time it has been operational has been remarkable, believes Hilary.

"Local businesses were approached to provide bits of material for the artists, the nearby print shop donates reams of paper and a local manufacturer supplies the paint," says Hilary. "Although the wounds from lost limbs visibly heal over, internal wounds can take longer to heal. In this respect, participation in the arts and creative media can increase individual confidence and self-esteem. But the painting is not just therapeutic. It is also lucrative."

Within the first three months, 50 people had joined the group and more than 500 pieces of work were created all of which were sold at an exhibition held at the UN headquarters in Freetown. The income gained has made a significant difference to the lives of the disabled people and their families.

The community art programme

Returning to the United States, in Washington DC the WVSA Arts Connection is a far more established programme, that has been thriving for two decades. The WVSA serves disabled young people and combines both art and education, providing tools for success in school, adulthood and life in general.

From modest beginnings, in the basement today grown to be a state-wide multidisciplinary arts programme, employing over 40 staff and operating a variety of programmes throughout the year.



Painting by Winston Byrd

The most successful of the WVSA's programmes is the ARTiculate Employment Training Programme, in which the apprentices work in a fully functioning art studio where they learn art, graphics and technology and social skills and receive employment training. The participants can display their work to the public at six gallery openings throughout the year, where they are able to interact with art collectors, discuss their creations and sell their work.

One of the most prodigious students to emerge from the ARTiculate programme is Winston Byrd. At just 19, he reflects his life experiences in his powerful paintings as well as his interest in nature and human interaction. His schizophrenia causes him difficulties with reading, writing and forming

Web links

- Matt Sesow: **www.sesow.com**
- WVSA Arts Connection: **www.wvsarts.org**
- Disability Arts International:

of a local college with only a few part-time staff and one annual arts festival, WVSA has relationships, but Winston has found a way to express himself through painting. ■

www.ndaf.org

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