

FEATURED

CCBC art exhibition sheds light on the darkness of mental illness, addiction

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A gallery visitor ponders the work of the late Elisif Bruun.

PHOTO BY NICOLE RODMAN

It is often seen that those with the greatest creative genius use their art as a way to express, or relieve, the darkness within their own mind.

This phenomenon is on full display in the latest art exhibition now showing at The Gallery at CCBC Essex.

While the works adorning the gallery walls may be bright and colorful, they speak to a deeper pain – battles with mental illness and/or addiction that, for three of the featured artists, ultimately proved fatal.

The pieces on display are featured as part of the New Day Campaign, a 2015 initiative that seeks to challenge the societal stigma placed on those suffering with mental illness and addiction.



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The campaign itself was borne out of tragedy.

On Feb. 11, 2014, 24-year-old Elisif Bruun died of a heroin overdose following a relapse while in recovery at a healing community in North Carolina.

In the wake of her death, her father Peter Bruun, a Baltimore artist, curator and organizer, turned to art to cope with his own pain and bring awareness to the stigma and misinformation surrounding mental illness and addiction.

Thus was born the New Day Campaign, a 92-day initiative featuring 15 art exhibits and 60 public events across the Baltimore area.

The third art exhibit of the campaign, “Touched with Fire: Behind the Curtain,” is on display at CCBC Essex now through Nov. 20.

According to Bruun, the aim of the display is to “humanize, build compassion and generate understanding” of those who suffer from mental illness and addiction.

The exhibition takes its name from psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison’s 1996 book *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*.

In her book, Jamison links mental illness — often leading to substance abuse and other destructive behaviors — with artistic genius.

Each of the artists featuring in Bruun’s exhibition have been “touched with fire,” including his daughter, Elisif, who has five abstract drawings on display in the gallery.



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Other artists include Emily Ruggles Holman, who was a sophomore at Park School in Baltimore when she died from suicide in 2002. Holman created hand-sewn patchwork pouches, nine of which are on display in the exhibition.

Jonathan P. Maser was 20 years old when he suffered his first epileptic seizure. Turning to art as a way to cope, Maser was self-taught, and incredibly prolific, before his death on Dec. 14, 1993.

Two of the artists featured in the exhibition are still living. Chris Kojzar, currently a resident artist at the Creative Alliance in Baltimore, has used his art to cope with Schizoaffective Disorder, while lifelong artist Rob Waalkes embraces creativity in his own struggles with mental illness.

For his part, Waalkes created his three black-and-white sketches featured in the show while taking classes at CCBC.

The work of each artist occupies a wall in the gallery. Juxtaposed with the often-colorful and always-engaging works are quotes taken from journals and other personal writings left by the artists.

Below three tranquil landscape scenes, featuring lush greenery and blue skies, the words of late artist Jonathan Maser stand in seeming contrast: “Maybe the pain never stops.”

On a wall in which the often-whimsical patchwork pouches of Emily Ruggles Holman hang, her words stand – “I will not razor up my arm/Or cause harm, cause harm, harm” – a reminder of the pain that dwelt under the surface.

While the art and the journal entries may, at first glance, seem to be at odds, the juxtaposition speaks to the theme – artists who were “touched with fire” and the art that resulted from the darkness hiding just “behind the curtain.”

For his part, Bruun hopes viewers take the works to heart – challenging the stigmas and judgements each holds against those battling their own inner demons.

“Mental illness and addiction is not about them; it is about us,” Bruun said, noting that these conditions can strike any person or household at any time.


“It’s important to talk about it because only in talking about it can we get over shame and blame,” he continued. “Fear and judgement are the number one obstacles to compassion and acceptance.”



“Something must be done because people are dying,” he explained, “but first you need a cultural shift.”

Bruun hopes to help spur this shift through his art and his work with the New Day Campaign.

He discussed his campaign and the artists involved during a reception for the new exhibition at CCBC Essex last Friday evening.



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During the event, Bruun offered remarks and introduced family members and artists in attendance.

Holman's mother expressed gratitude to Bruun for the exhibition, saying, "Thanks for the opportunity to put her in the world again."

For his part, Bruun acknowledged his own complex feelings upon viewing his daughter's works on display.

"I'm filled with so many feelings standing here with Elisif's work," he said. "I'll figure out what they are later."

Artist Rob Waalkes was also in attendance at last Friday's event.

He acknowledged his own struggles, saying, "I had tough times, but you forget the bad, remember the good, try to move on."

During the reception, acupuncturist and body worker Rebecca Donnelly was on hand to share her own family history of mental illness and offer her services to those present.

The event also featured a table of resource materials offered by the Mental Health Association of Maryland.

"Touched with Fire: Behind the Curtain" is on display at the Gallery at CCBC Essex, located in the Arts and Humanities Hall, 7201 Rossville Boulevard, through Friday, Nov. 20. Gallery hours are Mondays and Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Gallery is closed on Sundays.

For more information on the New Day Campaign, visit www.newdaycampaign.org.

Bio Box

"Something must be done because people are dying."

Peter Bruun

