

viewpoint

Reflections on the Historical Narrative of Jessica Park, an Artist With Autism

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Abstract

This viewpoint discusses the history of Jessica Park, a professional artist who is an adult with autism. The narrative was constructed from historical descriptive research conducted by the author using published accounts and interviews with the artist, her mother, and two childhood companions. Examples of artwork produced in elementary through high school reflect the young artist's unique thoughts, feelings, life experiences, and ways of understanding her world. The historical record shows that the ability to establish relationships with others based on the underlying presence of affect, on shared common interests, and on creative activity contributed significantly to the artist's developmental progress as a person with autism.

Introduction

This viewpoint offers reflections on the artwork and development of Jessica Park, an artist who has autism. As part of my doctoral dissertation research (Furniss, 2008b), I conducted unstructured interviews with Jessica Park, her mother Clara Claiborne Park, and two childhood companions who were influential in engaging her in art making. I also examined published accounts of her history written by her mother. Jessica Park is now an adult and an exhibiting professional artist. By tracing her artistic development through the years of her childhood and adolescence, I was able to see how, for a young artist with autism in the school setting, the ability to establish relationships with others based on a shared common interest and creative act was a primary factor in her development. Making art was a way for Park to visually express her thoughts, feelings, and unique life experiences, as well as to find a pathway for new ways of learning and communicating to others. During my interviews, several individuals who had acted as companions and had taught art to Park early in life described how they had established a “bond” with her that was present in all their subsequent interactions. The emotional bond with

these individuals provided the opportunity for Park to generalize her learning beyond the art process to other areas. Although her early school life occurred during the early historical development of the art therapy profession, it is noteworthy that the supportive interpersonal relationship, which was established through shared creative activity and emotional bonding, is recognized today as characteristic of art therapy.

Psychosocial Contexts of Park's Art and Autism

Autism is diagnosed when the following three criteria are present: (a) qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction, (b) qualitative impairment in verbal and non-verbal communication, and (c) a markedly restricted repertoire of activities and interests (Frith, 2003). Autism impacts development and development impacts autism over an individual's lifespan (Frith, 2003). Geschwind and Levitt (2007) argued that autism should be referred to as “the autisms” because it is not a single disorder but rather a neuropsychiatric syndrome or spectrum of conditions.

Due in part to Bettelheim's (1967) influential work *The Empty Fortress*, the general public and helping professionals once erroneously believed that individuals with autism could not be educated and that evidence of their psychopathology was revealed in their artwork. Art therapists of the time, such as Kramer (1993), were influenced to a great degree by Lowenfeld (as cited in Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987), a psychologist who shaped modern art education in the 1970s with methods that emphasized art making as a means of expressing the child's life experience.

Martin (2009), Henley (1992), and others have argued that children with autism are capable of becoming productive artists who can create images of unique expressiveness when supported by a psychoeducational relationship. Because they lack interpersonal skills and are exceedingly sensitive to sensory information, Henley (1992) observed that children with autism often accept the art teacher more as “the giver of materials” than for nurturing qualities; they may be “emotionally primitive” or fail to develop “any sense of ego or object relatedness” (p. 53). Evans and Dubowski (2001) also found that the therapeutic

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tic relationship is as important as the art-making process for these children.

No single academic field alone can adequately explain the atypical artistic development of children with autism. However, two theories can be applied to Jessica Park's early art process. Weak Central Coherence is a cognitive style found in individuals with autism that is biased to local instead of global processing of information, and the inability to integrate pieces of information into meaningful wholes. Exceptional rote memory and visual-spatial skills are characteristics of this cognitive style (Frith, 2003), which can explain why Park did not selectively exclude objects in her realistic drawings as other children might; she included everything within her view. Her remarkable ability to represent with great accuracy the details of objects, buildings, and people in spontaneous drawings is also indicative of this characteristic cognitive style. Enhanced Perceptual Function is a theory that describes the enhanced memory of the surface properties of visual and auditory patterns utilized by persons with autism (Mottron, Dawson, Soulières, Hubert, & Burack, 2006). This theory sheds light on Park's very early use of repeated visual patterns and supports the observation that she did not progress through the same artistic developmental phases as neurotypical children usually do.

My argument is that Jessica Park's early artistic development was strongly influenced by emotional content conveyed through her chosen subject matter that she used to relate to other people. This explanation plausibly accounts for the often emotionally charged aspects of her visual obsessions. Similarly, in the cases of Stephen Wiltshire (Sacks, 1995) and Nadia (Selfe, 1977), two celebrated young artists with autism, a heightened emotional response was evoked by inanimate objects such as landmark buildings viewed during a school field trip organized by Stephen Wiltshire's teachers or the magazine illustrations of roosters, cats, and horses provided to Nadia by her mother.

The art activity itself and the state of positive affect associated with it aids in establishing an interpersonal relationship with a specific person. In Park's childhood, those individuals who taught her how to engage in making art over the years did not incorporate a common and consistent behavioral teaching method. Instead, the most successful methods were developed by trial and error and utilized her teachers' and her companions' own artistic talents and skills, which accommodated and then expanded Park's existing visual repertoire.

The Artist in Early Childhood

Jessica Park was born in 1958, the fourth child of Clara and David Park. Both her mother and her father have written that she was a math savant obsessed with prime numbers (Park, 2001; Park & Youderian, 1974). She was nonverbal in her early childhood, which led to impaired speech and language development. She also lacked social communication skills. However, she scored high on measures for nonverbal intelligence. In her account, Park's mother described her self-stimulatory behavior, such as rocking

repetitively in a chair or repeatedly sifting small pieces of paper through her fingers, and her overall odd behavior, such as becoming highly anxious when walking through shadows (Park, 2001).

I was interested in studying Park's artistic development because her story offers a rare example of a young woman with autism whose exceptional artistic abilities were observed and documented by others throughout her childhood. A greater proportion of children diagnosed with autism are boys (Frith, 2003) and only some children with autism demonstrate exceptional artistic abilities (Furniss, 2008a, 2008b; Kellman, 1999, 2001; Park, 2001; Sacks, 1995; Selfe, 1977). When Park was a child, many children with autism were institutionalized. Her mother stated that there were many misconceptions and the few children with autism who did receive an education sometimes were taught by teachers who were not familiar with this specific population (Park, 1977).

The artworks that Park made at school were, for the most part, conventional art assignments. In contrast, the spontaneous artworks she made at home were unconventional; sometimes she created pieces with special meanings known only to her. Artworks made both at school and at home represented to varying degrees her visual obsessions and sometimes self-created multisensory logical systems. Artists with autism characteristically represent their visual obsessions in their artwork, both frequently and compulsively.

The Artist in Middle Childhood

Jessica Park demonstrated her preoccupation with patterns at an early age when interacting with an educational toy of parquet shapes that she could quickly categorize by shape and then by color. Her mother wrote that Park "could notice the slightest deviation from a pattern" (Park, 2001, p. 13). Many of Park's earliest paintings showed a preference for forms and shapes over representational human figures or objects. For example, "White Enclosure with Shapes" (Figure 1) was made in 1968 when she was about 9 years old and was attending a special education class at a public elementary school. It shows a white organic line that forms an enclosure of colorful, distinct shapes. Her mother wrote that Park would not mix two paint colors to create a new color; rather, she would keep the shapes of individual colors neatly separate but still next to one another in a well-balanced composition (Park, 1982).

"Gus and Ben and the Jet Plane Book" (Figure 2) was made a year later when Park was about 10. Her mother recalled that this simple, nine-page book was made with her special education teacher in a small class for students with cognitive disabilities or behavioral problems. This school art project is an example of how Park's learning in the visual arts was supported by an interpersonal relationship that was established over time. Taking the time to read a story with her before directing her to visually express her understanding of the narrative, her teacher ensured that Park could succeed in a collaborative learning process. In my interview with her, Clara Park recalled that her daugh-



Figure 1 "White Enclosure with Shapes" (age 9)

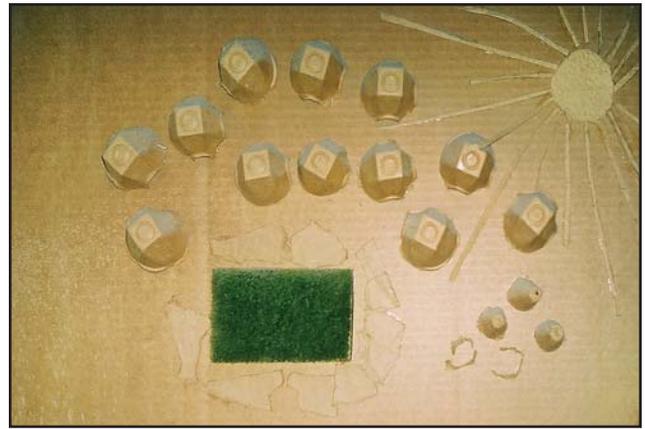


Figure 3 "Aerial View of Landscape with Sun" (age 9)



Figure 2 "Gus and Ben and the Jet Plane Book" (age 10)



Figure 4 "Pipe System" (age 14 or 15)

ter "was, in a way, the star of the class because she was advanced, particularly in numbers but even in letters," far beyond the other students, who were cognitively disabled. She went on to explain that what the teacher seemed to have done was to "read aloud to her from a very simple reading book." He had Park write the words of the story at his dictation, possibly spelling out each word to assist her.

Clara Park noted that in 1969 colored markers were a new art material on the market and her daughter preferred them because markers required less hand pressure than paint and were easier to manipulate (Park, 1982). For Figure 2, Park wrote the text and drew pictures to illustrate the story. For example, the story text reads, "Gus and Ben sit on the bed. Gus has a jet. He gets his jet from the shelf...Ben grabs it...the jet gets a rip in it...Gus sobs." Park drew Gus crying on one page and on another drew a "fix-it kit." The figures are drawn with a genuine sense of movement.

"Aerial View of Landscape with Sun" (Figure 3) is a rare example of Park's collages. Created in 1968, when she was 9 and attending a special education class at a public elementary school, it is a large format piece made out of recycled material. An aerial view of a topical landscape incorporates one of her visual obsessions: a sun with a spe-

cific number of rays made out of cardboard that represent one emotion for each particular day's weather. During my interview with her, her mother said that the green rectangular shape in the piece represents a lawn surrounded by overlapping strips of paper. Although her mother did not know the lesson's objective, perhaps a reason why Park executed the assignment with such mastery was because it allowed her to incorporate one of her visual obsessions.

The Adolescent Artist

Anna and Diana were twins who were two of "the Jessy Girls," as Clara Park referred to the companions she hired to work and play with her daughter (Park, 2001). They were childhood friends who later became Park's classmates in high school. Her mother wrote in her published account that Park's art making at home during this time included portrait drawing with the twins, who taught her a more developed style of "academic drawing" (Park, 2001). Her mother commented, "The twins were concrete, definite; they told her what to do and she did it" (p. 123). During my interview with them, Anna and Diana explained that they had taken art as an elective during their junior and senior years but stayed an extra year in order to work with

students with special needs in the art classroom. The twins acted as peer aides or “interpreters” between Park and her busy teachers (Park, 2001, p. 123).

Anna and Diana described to me some of the teaching methods they used to interact with Park and her art process, including modeling, positive reinforcement, rewards, and verbal prompting. When the twins were gone for extended periods of time, such as when they went to college, Park voluntarily terminated her art making and rarely drew or painted outside of school (Park, 2001). This behavior suggests that there was something intrinsically vital in the intimate relationship between Park and these girls that facilitated her art process.

Jessica Park’s high school art teacher played a major role in her gaining skills as an artist when she enrolled in his regular art class. An example is a large watercolor painting Park made with Anna and Diana in 1972 or 1973, when she was 14 or 15 years old. “Pipe System” (Figure 4) depicts the pipes in the school’s basement. Diana recalled that the assignment was to take Park to the boiler room, “to look at the thousands of pipes overhead, listen to the rhythm created by the machines, and create a drawing that captured the sights and sounds in both the pattern...and color of the pipes.” Park painted and labeled the pipes in different colors. The assigned subject matter supported her visual obsessions with colorful patterns and multisensory systems.

The Adult Artist

Today as an adult, Jessica Park is a professional artist represented by Pure Vision Arts in New York, NY. She also exhibits her acrylic paintings on her own website and in other art galleries. An example of Park’s adult acrylic painting is “St. Paul’s and St. Andrew’s Church” (Figure 5), painted in 1998. This painting illustrates her lifelong obsession with specific weather phenomenon, her hypersensitivity toward color, and her sense of proportion, perspective, and detail when depicting specific buildings. At the time of my interview with her in her home studio, Park was working on a commissioned painting of a client’s house. She told me, “The reason why you ask me to watch me paint while you’re here is because you want to find it interesting.”

Conclusion

In reflecting on the narrative of Jessica Park, I find that there is an urgent need for teaching methods to engage children with autism in the visual arts. As evidenced by Park’s history, one method that seems especially effective is to combine behavior modification techniques with an interpersonal relationship, an approach that also is prevalent in art therapy. Jessica Park’s early art process with multiple interveners over time suggests that intervention should not be a strict template on how to teach art to children with autism but rather a flexible guide that supports the unique interests, talents, and skills of these artists. At the same time, it should consistently support their art process as a fluid and dynamic creative pathway of learning in the visual arts.

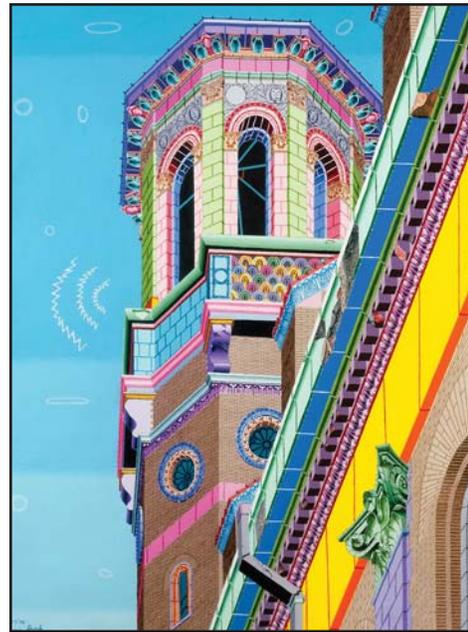


Figure 5 “St. Paul’s and St. Andrew’s Church”

I argue that the interpersonal relationship is a crucial component between art teachers or art therapists who are artists themselves and children with autism who may or may not approach the art process as a preferred creative activity. This intensive social environment ensures a successful artistic experience in which learning in the visual arts can occur over time, with all the depth, layering, and complexity art can provide to innately creative autistic minds. For those children with autism who seek to express visual obsessions in their artwork, it is critical for adults to identify, acknowledge, and appreciate their existing visual repertoire. In this way, a mutual pathway can develop over time to expand their visual repertoire by introducing new art materials, new nonvisual obsessive subject matter, and new settings in which the art process occurs as a collaborative visual dialogue.

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