



Ping Lian Yeak, now 14 years old, at age 8 began creating multimedia artwork that has earned the attention of art critics. He lives in Australia, and shown above is one of his many cityscapes. Much of Ping Lian Yeak's work is cheerful, with bright colors, such as this painting at left of a trio of dogs.

'Windows of Genius'

Art exhibit showcases work of savants

BY MARY BERGIN
MIDWEST FEATURES

A new art exhibit in Fond du Lac is a stunning reminder that not everything in life can be explained, and it reinforces the notion that miracles exist.

"Windows of Genius: The Prodigious Savant" showcases the work of a dozen people who are both severely disabled and capable of extraordinary creativity.

How extraordinary?

Christophe Pillault of France, who is unable to talk or use his hands to feed himself, paints emotion-charged images on paper and canvas.

Stephen Wiltshire of England, nicknamed the "Human Camera," draws accurate and intricate scenes from memory. His best-known work is a 5.5-foot canvas of Rome, drawn after a 45-minute helicopter ride.

Greg Blackstock of Seattle, known for his orderly and precise drawings of collections, in 2006 had his work published in book form by the Princeton Architectural Press.

Why situate this exhibit in Fond du Lac?

It is home to Dr. Darold Treffert, a psychiatrist and former Wisconsin Medical Society president who is a global expert on Savant Syndrome, in which severely disabled people demonstrate "pockets of genius."

Treffert gained national exposure in 1983, after an interview on "60 Minutes," because of an Associated Press story about Leslie Lemke, a talented pianist who has cerebral palsy, is blind and mentally handicapped. The pianist lives with a foster sister in Arpin, Wis., and will give a rare public performance Oct. 8 in Pittsville (www.pittsville-performing-arts.org, 715-884-6502).

Treffert also was a technical consultant for the 1988 movie "Rain Man," which starred Dustin Hoffman and made the world aware of Savant Syndrome.

"This is an educational event as much as an exhibition," Treffert says, of the artistic collage, which can be seen for free at the Windhover Center for the Arts. Videos of the artists at work, Leslie Lemke in concert and researchers discussing the mysterious condition also are a part of the exhibit.

Journalists from as far away



Stephen Wiltshire's intricate drawing of Rome — done on a 5.5-foot canvas in three days, without notes and after just a 45-minute helicopter ride — is accurate, down to the number of window panes and building columns. The autistic and nearly mute man's nickname is the "Human Camera."



MARY BERGIN PHOTO

Dr. Darold Treffert, a psychiatrist who has devoted much of his adult life to the study of Savant Syndrome, holds an expressive painting by Christophe Pillault of France, an autistic man who paints but cannot use his hands to feed himself. The work of a dozen savants make up a new exhibit at the Windhover Center for the Arts, Fond du Lac.

ROADS TRAVELED

THEY DON'T

use models or notes in their work; they see a scene and it's indelible in their mind.'

Dr. Darold Treffert
global expert on Savant Syndrome

as Germany and Korea are coming to see the artwork, Treffert says. They became aware of the exhibit and his work because of the Internet.

"Windows of Genius" includes gifts given to Treffert, who has developed friendships with many of the savant artists.

In a small exhibit room is the work of Gilles Trehin and Catherine Mouet, savants from France who also are a couple. "They're nice people and supportive of each other," Treffert says.

Her meticulous "stratoart" involves elements of both music and mathematics. His "Urville" is a fabricated community of 20

million people, documented by detailed drawings and exhaustive text descriptions/history.

"It's as if you're reading about Paris," Treffert says. "Very believable."

Gathering the works of a dozen savants in one place is unprecedented, he believes, and the artists' ages range from 14 to 70. On the youthful end is Ping Lian Yeak, whose colorful and multimedia drawings and paintings began at age 8.

"There's always a cheerleader — a real believer — behind each of these artists," Treffert says. For Ping, encouragement comes from his mother.

What else do these savants have in common? They don't use models or notes in their work; "they see a scene and it's indelible in their mind," says Treffert, who has studied Savant Syndrome for about 40 years.

The accuracy of the memory is "really phenomenal" and "to some extent, obsession with detail" is evident.

The artists also lack formal training, and "their work explodes on the scene," usually between ages 3 and 8. It is not a gradual unveiling of talent.

Does the "island of genius," as Treffert describes it, exist despite — or because of — the disability? The psychiatrist

favors the latter possibility, but he is the first to acknowledge that many unanswered questions remain.

The Fond du Lac exhibit is in place until Oct. 12. For more about the exhibit: www.windhovercenter.com, (920) 921-5410. The Windhover Center for the Arts is at 51 Sheboygan St.

For more about Savant Syndrome: www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org.

'Outsider artwork'

Other types of "outsider artwork" — that created by people with little or no formal training — fill the John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan until January 2008.

"Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists" includes pieces of collections from as far away as India, but many of the 22 featured artists did their work in Wisconsin.

These artists are not described as savants because no severe physical or mental disability exists.

Scholars and art specialists from Australia, Switzerland, England, Canada, Jamaica and elsewhere will be in Sheboygan later this month, for a

conference about outsider art.

Activity also includes tours of Wisconsin outsider art environments, such as the James Tellen Woodland Sculpture Garden, near Sheboygan, Sept. 27 and Sept. 30; the Painted Forest by Ernest Hupeden and the Forevertron by Tom "Dr. Evermor" Every, Sauk County, Sept. 30; Wisconsin Concrete Park by the late Fred Smith, Phillips, Sept. 30 to Oct. 1; and six sites in southwest Wisconsin, Oct. 18-19.

The tours are open to the public.

For more about the Sheboygan exhibit and tours: www.jmkac.org, (920) 458-6144. The John Michael Kohler Art Center is at 608 New York Ave.

For more about the Kohler Foundation's art environment preservation efforts: www.kohlerfoundation.org, (920) 458-1972.

Roads Traveled emphasizes Wisconsin, its global connections and its border states. Your feedback and ideas are welcome. Write to Midwest Features, PO Box 259623, Madison, WI 53725 or mary@roadstraveled.com, or consult www.roadstraveled.com.