

Painting New Opportunities

The Art of Recovery Gallery



By Rosanne McDowell
Photography courtesy of South Carolina Department of Mental Health

Ina McKenzie Mims – "Trashy Bird 1"

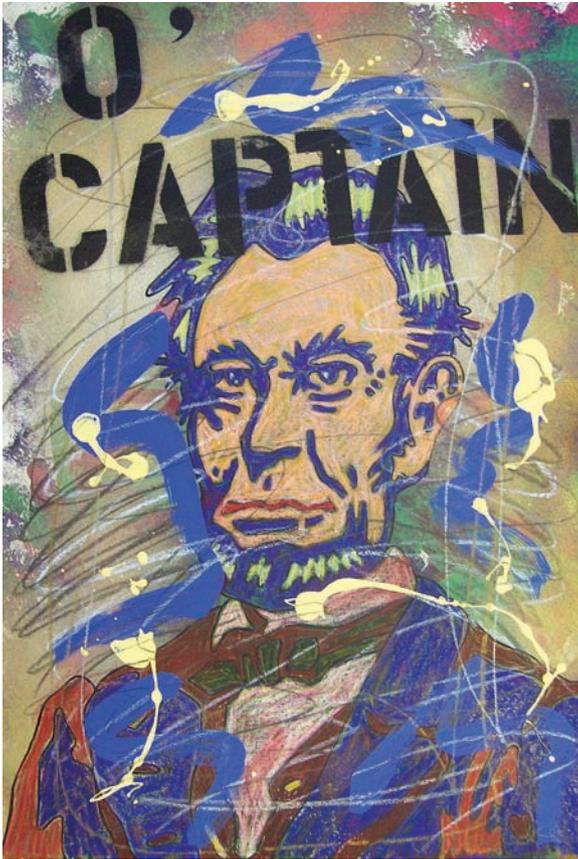
Is that an art frame shop in the middle of the S.C. Department of Mental Health building in Columbia? Yes, and for a good reason. It serves the Art of Recovery Gallery, a project featuring works of art created by individuals who receive care through the department's system of inpatient facilities and 17 community mental health centers.

Got to Have That Color

"We frame our clients' artwork for exhibit," says Sue Perry, director of community resource development for the department, "and for that we need room for work, framing supplies and

equipment." The department believes in the value of the Art of Recovery Gallery so strongly that it has given Sue, who runs the program, the space in a space-challenged agency.

Since 2001, the Department of Mental Health has sponsored the Art of Recovery Gallery to recognize the talents of people who live with mental illnesses and to show the role of creative outlets like art in the recovery process. Artists' works – photography, oils, watercolor, acrylics, mixed media, masks, etc. – are rotated on a biannual basis, creating a living gallery at the agency's central administration building in Columbia. Growing respect for the program has led to a broadening of its canvas. Since 2005,



Matt Van Buren – "O'Captain"

selected works from the Art of Recovery Gallery have been exhibited annually at the Columbia Museum of Art and the Wachovia Gallery at the Richland County Public Library, and in 2006 pieces were displayed at a one-day event at the Meridian Building.

Snapped Up — Just Like That

Sue chuckles as she recalls one artist's reluctance to exhibit his work: "One artist didn't want to send in his artwork because he didn't think it was good enough, but we convinced him that it was and talked him into submitting it. His piece was among those chosen from our Art of Recovery Gallery to go to the Columbia Museum of Art, where it sold quickly – just like that. He took home a check and now plans to enter more pieces. This kind of response has been a real source of satisfaction and pride to program participants."

Sue's greatest satisfaction has been seeing the program win the Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Award in the government category. "It's the highest award the state gives in the arts," she notes, "and receiving it has given the gallery an acceptance from the art community that is truly encouraging to our artists."



Richard Stabell – "Twin Towers Spectacular"



Robert Stanley – "The Block"

How the Program Works

At the Department of Mental Health, the program holds two rounds (or galleries) every year – one in May to spotlight Mental Health Month and another in October to coincide with Mental Illness Awareness Week. In preparation, Sue sends out a call to the program's artists, who range from self-taught individuals to professionals with advanced degrees. In the largest response to date, 200 paintings were submitted for exhibition this past May.

Artists create their submissions at home and purchase their own supplies from sometimes limited incomes. This is why Sue and her volunteer staff help by matting and framing the artists' works with funding from corporate grants. "We

encourage private individuals to support the program as well,” she says. “We’re always in need of funds for frames, other art supplies and artist receptions for gallery openings. We would love to have more local gallery space if any gallery owners would like to feature our artists’ works.”

Gala Opening

When a new gallery opens, judges from such organizations as the S.C. Arts Commission and the Columbia Museum of Art choose first, second and third-place winners. A gala reception for all the artists follows, with winners receiving gift certificates and induction into the program’s “Order of the Brush,” an honor earned so far by 21 artists. Some artists put their work up for sale; others prefer to keep their creations but allow them to remain on display for the season.

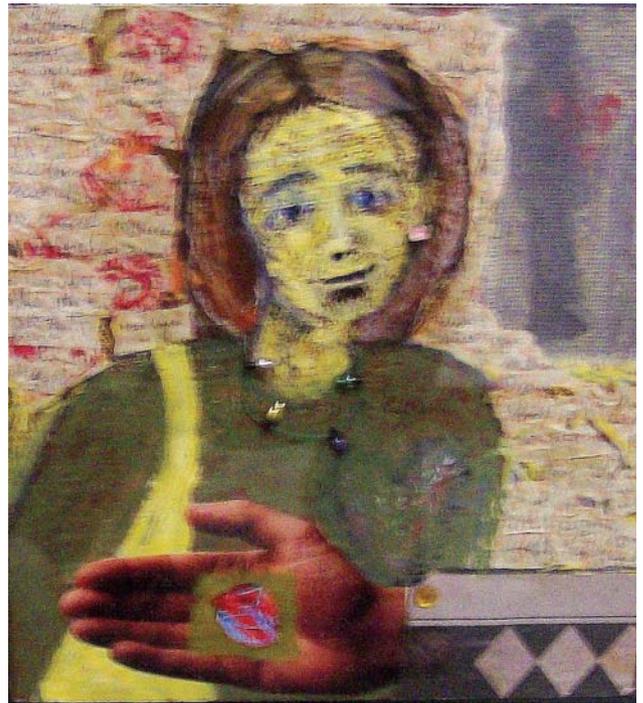
Artful Observations from Behind the Easel

Among those who have sold pieces is Ina McKenzie Mims, the creator of charmingly quirky “trashy birds” that have quickly caught on with the buying public. “Some art lovers who purchased from her have commissioned her to make additional pieces for them,” Sue recalls. “Her birds are abstract, very brightly-colored and very cool. She named them ‘trashy birds’ because they’re made from shredded paper, and she has done very well with them.”

Ina has strong feelings about the program: “There’s a list put out about great people with a mental illness which includes Van Gogh, Lord Byron, Keats and others. I’m not saying everyone with a mental illness will be great like these men, but if you’ll look at the work of artists participating in the Art of Recovery Gallery, you’ll see that people working through mental illness have something to add to the world of art. The greatest artist of all – God – has given mentally ill people gifts, also. The Art of Recovery program has brought out the artistic gifts God bestowed on me and many others.”

In agreement with Ina about the program’s value, professional graphic artist Matt Van Buren has submitted paintings and mixed-media drawings to the gallery since its inception. He says, “At first, I exhibited with the gallery to help Sue out because back then nobody really understood what she was trying to do. I found I could relate to the artists in the Art of Recovery program because they had the same kind of struggles with mental health that I did. I’m very impressed with the quality of the gallery’s artwork.”

Matt, who recently had his own show at the Wachovia Gallery, frequently does historical portraits



Terry Howard – “My Heart’s Not Broken, It’s Just a Little Bent”

and is searching for a coffee shop to host an exhibit of some work he did last summer.

It’s hard to see the Art of Recovery Gallery without feeling like a kid in a toy shop who wants to grab with both hands. One visitor says, “I’ve simply got to have this ‘trashy bird.’ It’s just the right whimsical touch for that bare spot on my bedroom wall. Can you believe what Ina Mims can do with shredded paper? And what about that growling tiger painting for your Clemson-fan husband or that great piece of ‘jazz art’ by Matt Van Buren over there? Yep, it just dances and would look marvelous in your den ...” Follow the example of this art lover: bring your wallet to the Art of Recovery Gallery and prepare to be hooked!

To contact artist Matt Van Buren, call (803) 791-1581. To reach Ina Mims and other Art of Recovery Gallery artists, call Sue Perry at the S.C. Department of Mental Health in Columbia at (803) 898-8582. To view a sampling of current artwork, visit

www.state.sc.us/dmb/smoothgallery/images/round_x/index.htm

“The Art of Recovery Gallery has given our clients tremendous satisfaction and self-confidence. Their loved ones are in awe at what the program has done for their family members.”

John Hutto, Director
Office of Public & Legislative Affairs
S.C. Department of Mental Health