

# A PART OF...NOT APART

J.A. Tan

The journey of becoming a part of any group isn't simple. There are many parameters that must be followed for one to be accepted as part of a group. And for a person on the autism spectrum who has challenges in his or her social skills, the journey becomes more difficult...but not impossible. There are bridges one seeks or encounters to help in the process of becoming a part of society....

This painting depicts my journey of becoming a part of the world I find myself in....

The journey, like the painting, is not simple. There are many layers and textures on this painting which emphasizes the fact that becoming a part of society is not simple. But it is possible...a bridge makes it so.

(Partial artist statement of painting)



“A Part of...not Apart” , 24” x 24” , acrylic on canvas

.....and with the aid of this artwork I created and others I have painted through the years, I would like to show the many elements on the bridge I took and still am taking to allow me to be A PART OF...Not APART...



First, I need to introduce myself so all can see how I got to find my “bridge” and cross it.....

I am J.A. Tan, a “multi-textured” artist



“Behind this Mask... A Self-Portrait  
Oil on canvas Diptych  
36”x24”, 2007

- Behind this mask is an artist coping with the many challenges of the art world and other environments I find myself in.
- Behind this mask is an artist that paints, draws, and collages from small images and ideas to build a unified whole.
- Behind this mask is an artist who, through his art, would like to make the world less of a mystery and less scary for everyone.



I painted this piece, “Life on Earth”, while thinking about the earth and its surroundings. As an artist with autism, I tend to compartmentalize things I observe and experience. Thus I look at the world not as just one whole entity but instead I see the many environmental elements that make up our earth. So I started this painting of the earth as a grid with many different elements. I painted sunlight so that the elements are visible and the viewer sees the earth for what it is. I painted rocks, helm grass, moss, lakes, trees, sand, grass and pebbles. I used acrylic paints, and thin layers of glazes over another to create depths. This is life on earth...with different elements to allow anyone to create his own universe.



“Piece by Piece...”, acrylic on canvas, 20” x  
16”, 2010

I am an artist and I want to make a difference. Through my chosen profession as a visual artist, I hope to be able to create images of how someone like me thinks, feels and interacts with people and the world around.



BUT....it isn't  
easy...it never was  
and I know there will  
be many more  
challenges along  
the way.....

I was born and raised in the Philippines - a developing country. I lived here till I was 19 years old.

- My country was, unfortunately, way behind in so many aspects of life which included health and education.
- At 2.9 years old, in the early 1990's, my delayed speech and preference to read "Childcraft", a children's encyclopedia rather than play with toys and other kids, was attributed to my being a boy.

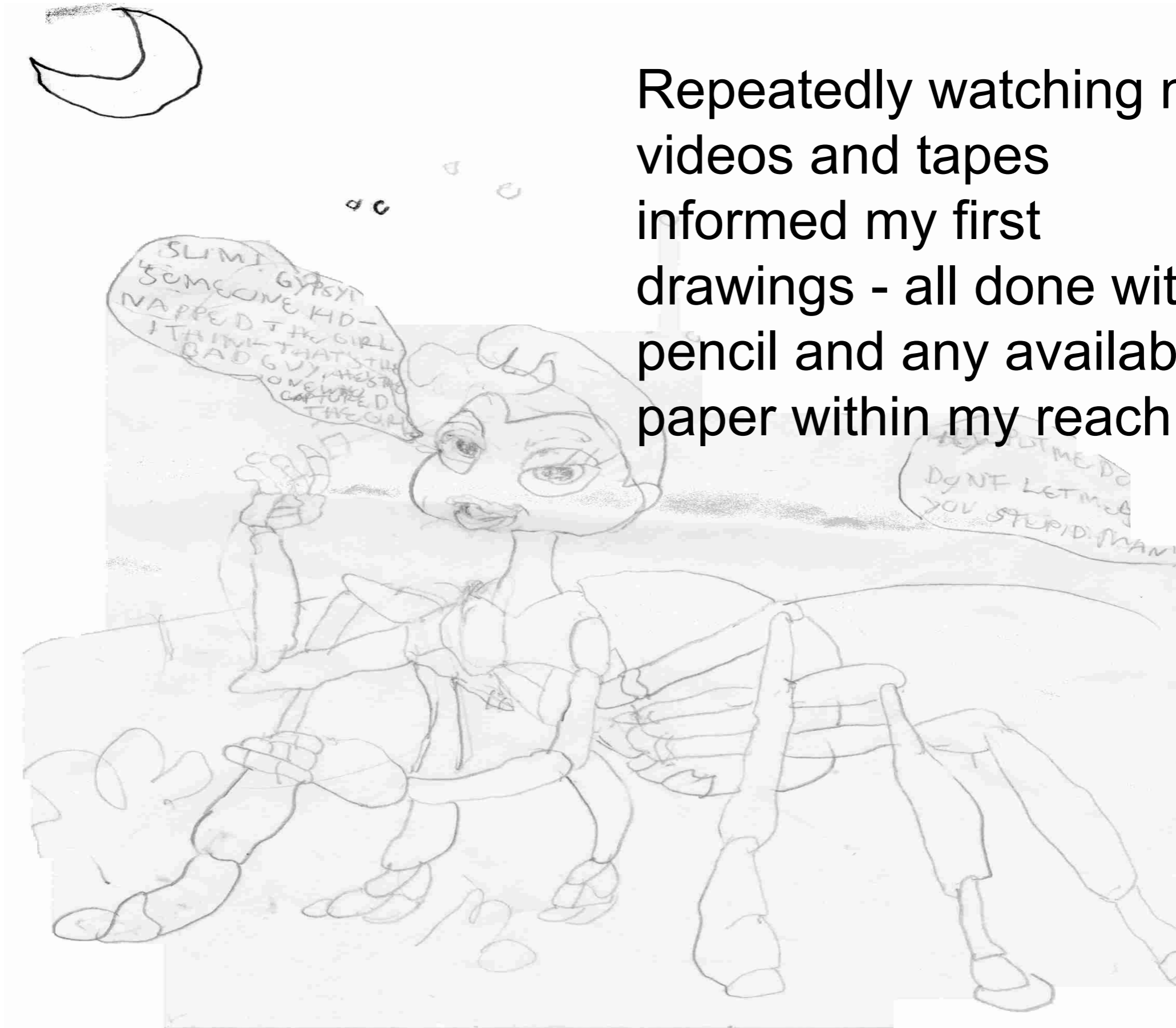






\* My favorite toys were pencil and paper, Encyclopedia Britannica, a personal computer, and the constant re-winding of betamax/vhs tapes.





Repeatedly watching my videos and tapes informed my first drawings - all done with pencil and any available paper within my reach.



\* Because my country did not have the necessary support systems in place for children on the spectrum in the early 90' s, my family had to provide that system.

\* Diagnosed as a “high functioning autistic”, the best advise my mom received was given by Dr. Magda Campbell of the Bellevue Hospital, New York, who told her to enrol me in a Montessori school and supplement this with all the therapies I needed.



My staple food - Mcdonalds burger and fries!!!  
I now know better...



....and that is what she did.

After a long search, she found the “International Montessori School” who was willing to have me in school provided mom would be active in supporting me in my educational requirements. I was their first student on the autism spectrum.

So my routine for most of my primary years was: school, speech therapy, play therapy, occupational therapy, behavior modification, and reading therapy. All of which had to be paid for by my parents. In Canada, these are part of the educational benefits of all citizens.

\* When I was in school I was not spared the bullying of some of my classmates who called me names and made fun of me.

\* However, I was lucky to have teachers who understood me and did their best to have my classmates do the same.

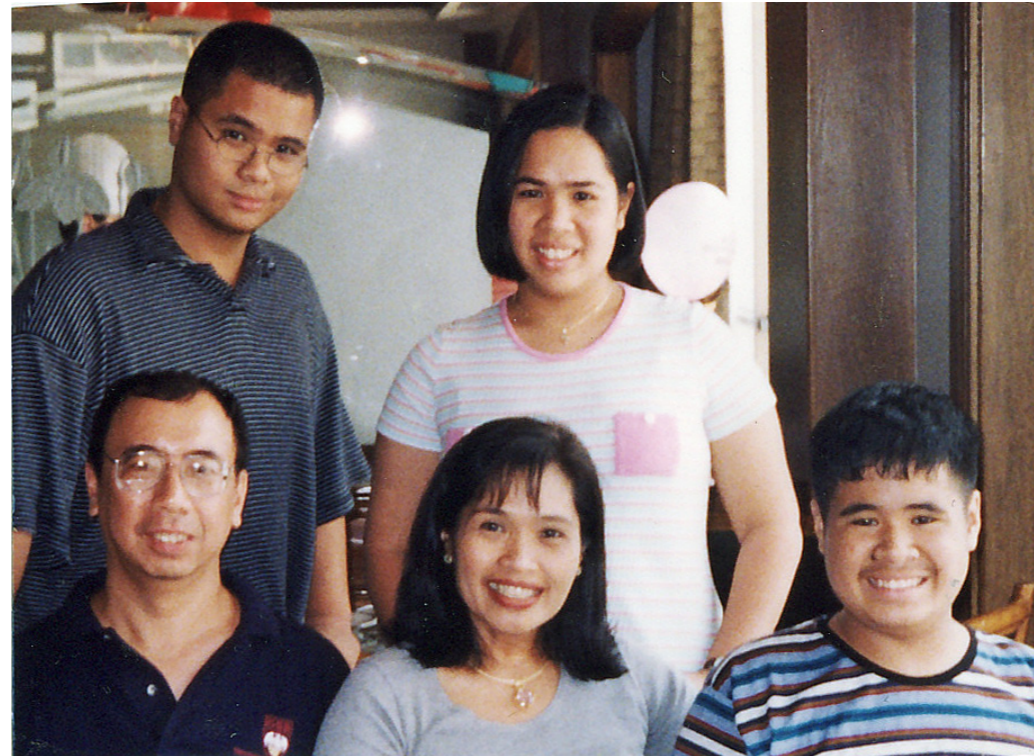
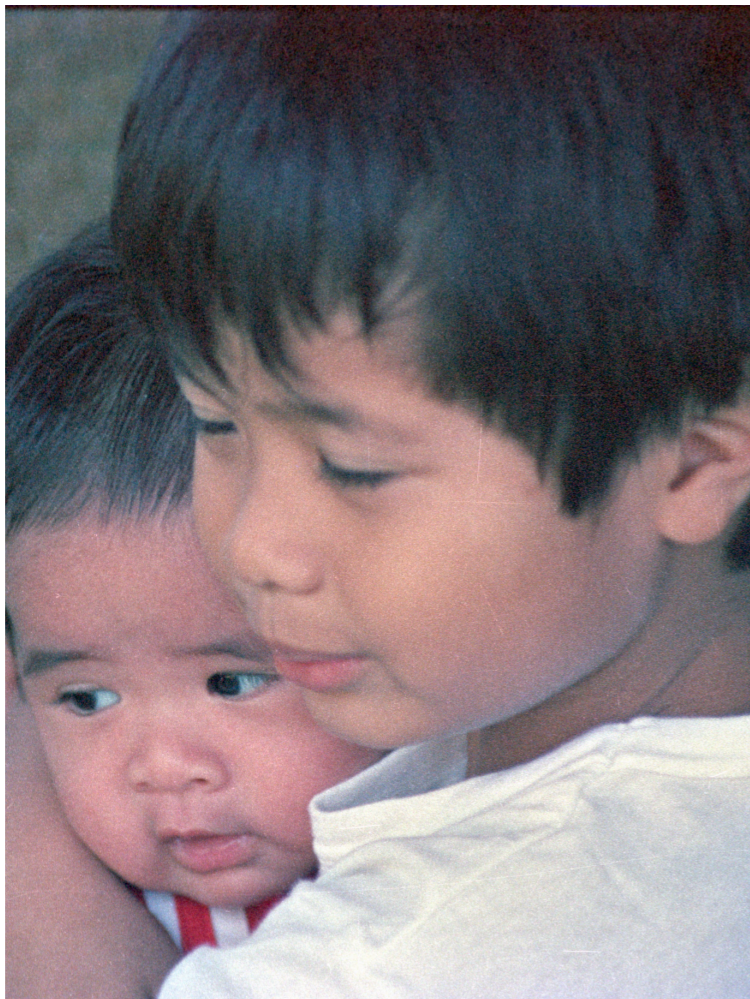
\* I found comfort in my pencil and paper and computer programs that allowed me to express what I felt and thought by writing about it, composing music through computer programs I had, and drawing on paper that was always available for my use at home.

\* This painting I did a year after I graduated from high school - middle school - speaks of the pain, both physical and emotional that I felt during these times.



“Painful Situation”, acrylic and ink on vellum, 26” x 24”, 2006

- \* All throughout this journey filled with challenges, my family was always there for me.
- \* I was always a part of all family activities both in the Philippines and whenever we went abroad.



\* After my four year high school, I needed two more years of schooling to get into a university in Vancouver where we immigrated to in 2006.

\*I completed an Associate Degree in Fine Arts from St. Scholastica's College in Manila.







- \* It was here where I developed friendships that have lasted even after I left for Canada - with the help of skype and facebook, of course.
- \* We also always meet up during my yearly visits back to Manila.
- \* These visits have helped me cope with the challenges I faced in a new country.

But all these were not enough to prepare me for life as a productive adult.

So, as my painting shows, the lower part of the painting still has dark colors and rough, textured surface. This represents the period of my life in the Philippines.

There was a lot of help for younger children on the spectrum but hardly any for adolescents and young adults like myself.

# Our move to Vancouver, Canada...the beginning of brighter colors in my journey.

- I speak in colors -each color has a specific meaning in my works.
- In this collage, the lower portion with my picture as a young boy is not only darker but has an assemblage of pieces with no specific order. Even the brushstrokes I used go in all directions.
- The challenges I had in the Philippines were truly difficult ones and the absence of a support system outside of my family and the specialists helping me, was a real problem.
- In fact, the lack of knowledge about autism by society in general and even educators was disheartening.



- But life got brighter for me and there was more order when we moved to Vancouver.
- In this collage, the colors begin to brighten and the pieces are now seen moving upwards in one direction where I have my photo as an older person.



# AND.....

.....slowly the painting brightens and a bridge, almost like a rainbow, can be noticed by the viewer. The colors are not only brighter but glaze has been applied to bring out a glow on the many shapes on the bridge and the colors on the upper half of the artwork. Now I feel a part of the world...and this was made possible as my family and I encountered the bridge of opportunity for growth and development when we immigrated to Canada and I continued my education here.

The journey, like the painting, is not simple. There are many layers and textures on this painting which emphasizes the fact that becoming a part of society is not simple. But it is possible...a bridge makes it so.



But this move to a new country with a lifestyle different from what I was used to and without my small network of friends and my extended family was not easy!

\* Rain, snow, hailstorms, sunshine...I had to walk to school carrying all my art tools.

\* Even if I spoke English since I was a little boy, during my first years in Vancouver, I had a difficult time understanding how some of my teachers and classmates spoke. And this confused me.



\* Cleaning our car and doing housework were tasks I had to do while keeping up with the many schoolwork we were given from the first day of school.

\* Yes, I did get depressed especially during the cold winter days when the sun set early and wished I never left the Philippines.

BUT....here are some of the reasons why the different shapes and elements on the bridge glow...







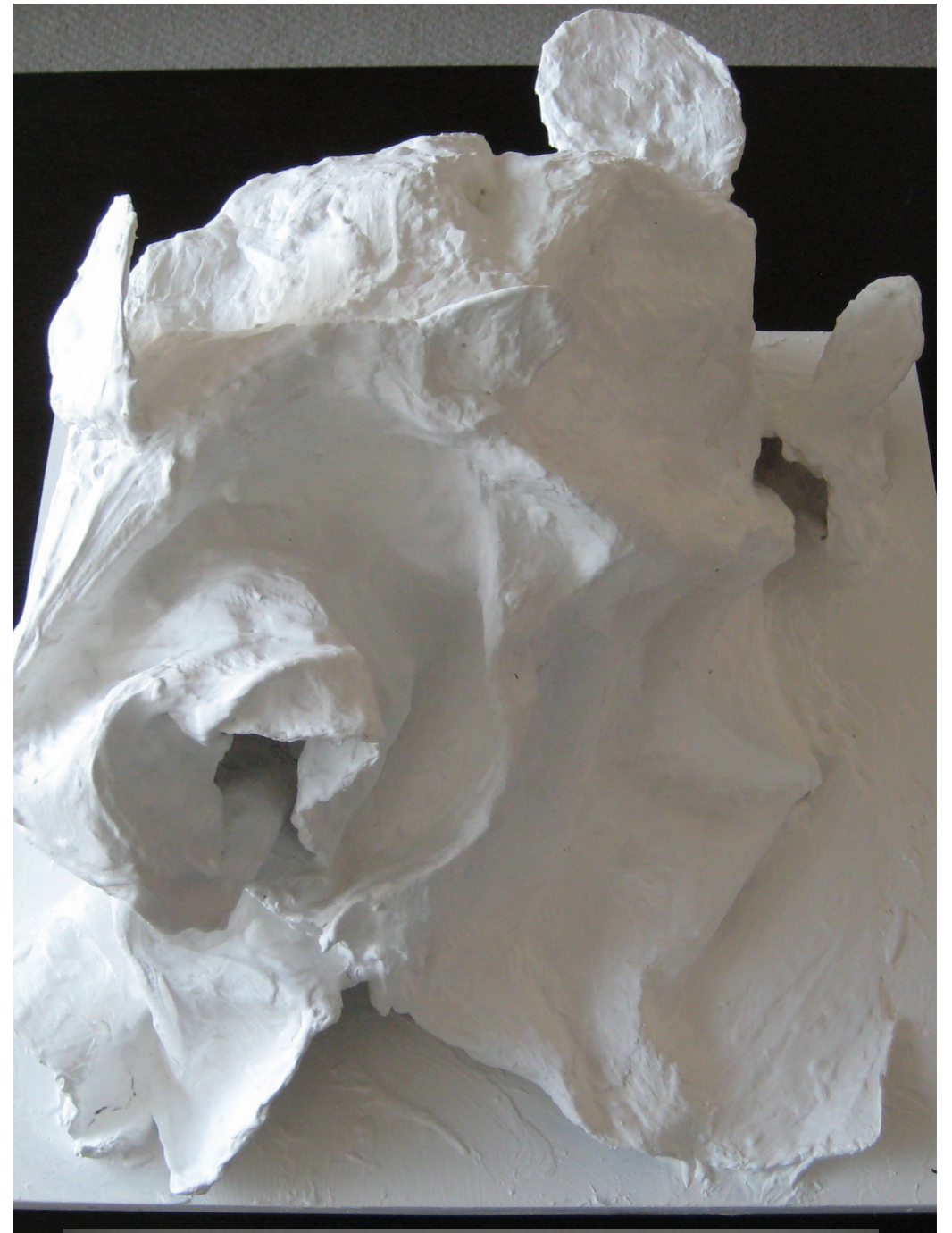
..... the Emily Carr University of Art+Design (ECU) was the bright yellow peeking out from behind the dark colors beneath the bridge on my painting.

...and here is why....



- \* ECU, as a university focused on art and design, allowed me to understand the dialogical relation of art to life that gave me a chance to enter more deeply into life.
- \* My ideas and visions were given a chance to develop and become real as it came in living contact with another person's thought or idea.
- \* We were encouraged to release our creativity in whatever form or manner. For example, as in this photo we were asked to create wearable art with recycled paper. In another class we were asked to "bring a dragon into class" and show the class that it really was present.

- Creating pieces in whatever form or manner was the expectation and not the exception. These pieces are part of my series called “Paintura”. This is a word I made up by putting together painting and sculpture as these were made by applying many layers of paint on molded mesh and gesso. For me it was not a sculpture but it was more than just a painting as it was at the edge of a 2D and 3D piece.



- There was a support network in place in the school. ECU had a Disability Coordinator who interacted with me all throughout the school year. Heather Mitchell, a warm and soft spoken person, was there to help me navigate the many aspects of university life. She was like a bridge for me and my instructors - I went to her when I needed help to reach out to an instructor and they too went to her if they needed help in reaching out to me.
- At the beginning of each school term I signed a form that allowed her to let my instructors know that I had difficulty in things like: verbal language but not written language; that I needed more time in writing my exams; that I needed a quiet place to write these exams; that often times instructions had to be repeated for me to fully understand; and my fine motor skills made by handwriting difficult to decipher.

- In big seminar classes, the Disability Coordinator arranged for a note taker for me. I never knew who that was and that person never knew who he/she was taking notes for. This was a big help!
- I was also provided with one-to-one tutorial sessions for certain subjects that I had difficulty understanding on my own e.g. Art History, Critical Thinking, Professional Practice. These were big classes and oftentimes the number of people in class was a distraction to my thinking on my own.



But more importantly, I had professors who were willing to adjust and accommodate my special needs. They showed much compassion and understanding towards me.

Some of them, like John Wertscheck, Rodney Konopaki (above photo) and Landon Mackenzie (right photo) continue to follow my development and visit me at my studio and keep in touch through facebook.



\* The supportive environment of ECU allowed me to explore the mystery that is autism and use my art to show what it is I see or discover.

\* Through the artworks that I was encouraged to create, the world around me made sense as I could break it down into images - something very useful for a visual person like me.

\* This piece, Essence of Granville, is an example of how, through a mixed media collage, I managed to make sense of the “new world” I found myself in.



•Early on during the first couple of years in Vancouver, I would create mixed media collages to analyze my experience of the world.

\* Why collage?

\* I see the whole, I break it up into pieces then I put it back into a whole piece once more – a whole-ness that I see and understand and am contented with.

\* This piece, “Untitled” is another example of how I coped with my life experiences and environments.

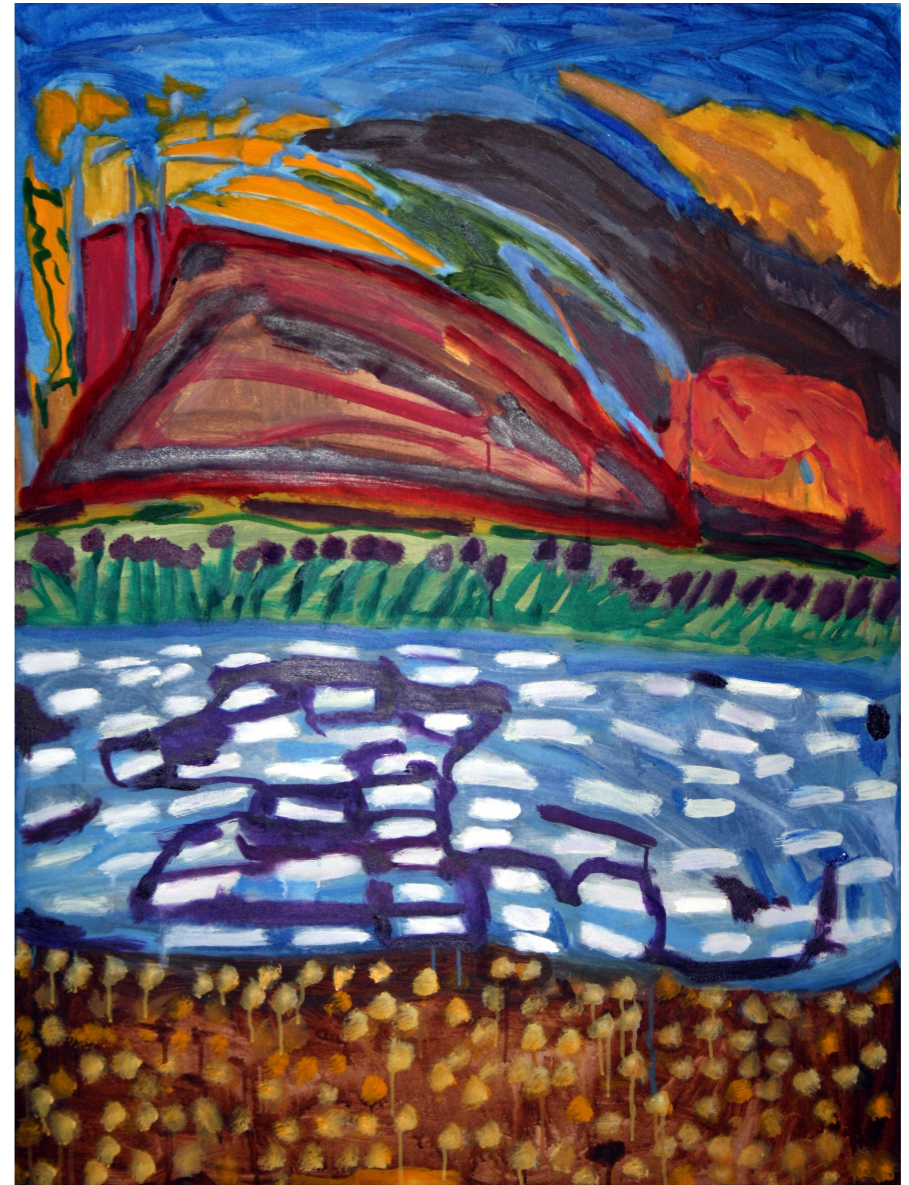






Term after term we were encouraged to use our art as a vehicle to delve deep into our creativity to express our thoughts and emotions.

These two paintings “Ondoy Depression” and “Twilight” are works informed by two different environmental conditions. The above painting is a reaction to the devastating typhoon that affected the Philippines. “Twilight” on the otherhand is inspired by that time of the day when the world seems to settle down in peace and calm.



\* The role of the arts in the growth and development of Vancouver has also informed much of my art practice.

\* The parks, open spaces, and community environments have a very distinct and strong artistic flavor. Everything, even graffiti is considered a form of art here.

\* In fact, I enjoy living in a strata that is painted in bright red, yellow and blue - not the usual drab white.

\* Here in Canada, the arts have a major role in identifying the country as one that supports the arts in all its forms and genre.





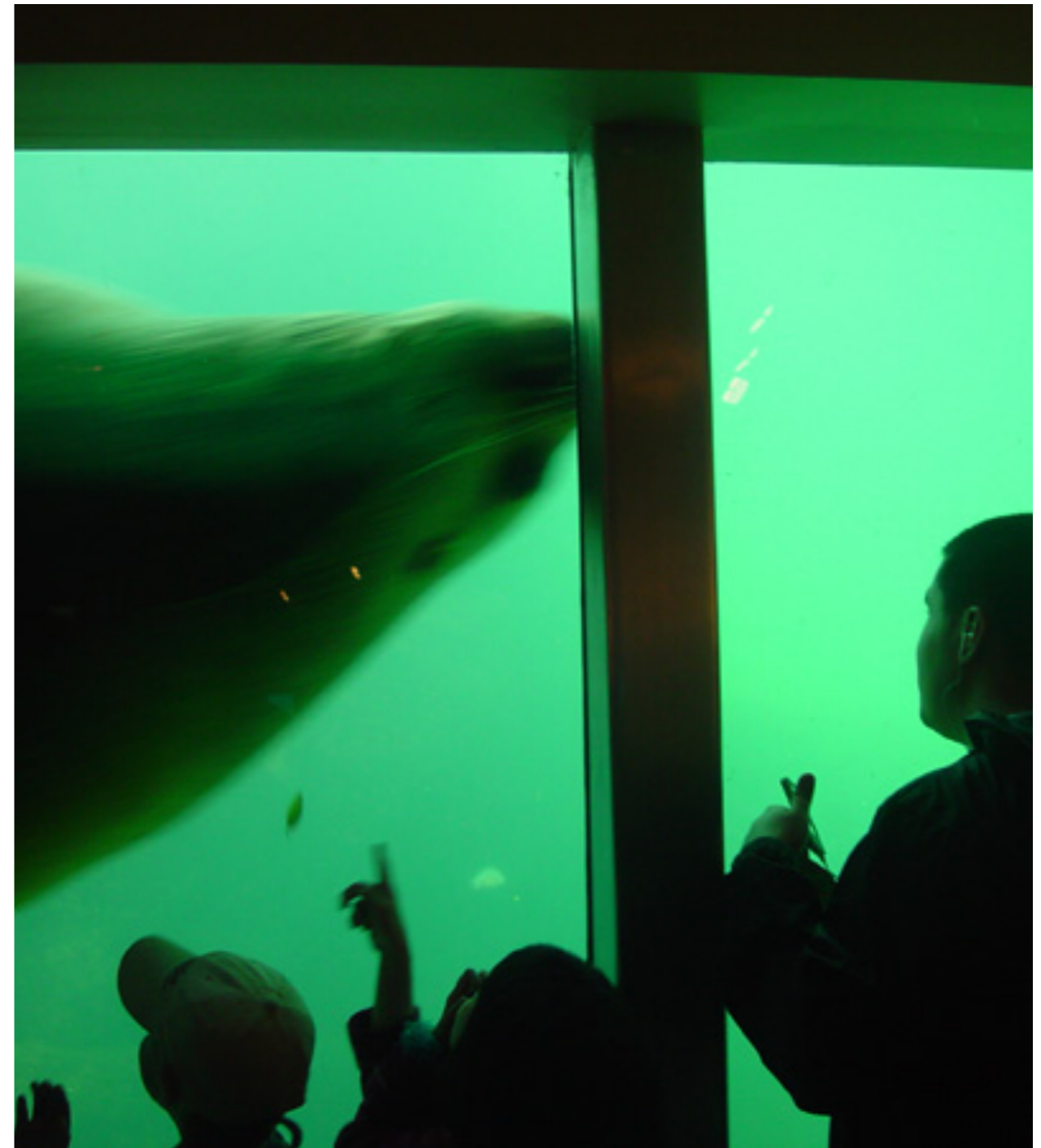
*Emerging artists like myself were always given a chance to exhibit their works in regular open calls.*

*In May 2013, my piece, “Free at Last” was part of the “Generation One Art Exhibition at the UBC. This is the third year that I have been asked to be part of this exhibit by Asian-Canadian artists.*



*From January 8 - February 2, 2013, my piece "Life on Earth" was part of the show "Earth: the annual juried "Discovery" exhibition for new and emerging artists" held at Seymour Art Gallery in North Vancouver*

- Vancouver provided me too with places where I could feel safe and comfortable. For instance, when we just moved here, I found respite in the aquarium watching Tag, the sea lion quietly and rhythmically swim. I would sit and stare at Tag and find solace in the “communication” we had through the glass of his pool.
- I painted the piece below titled “Tag” after he passed away because of cancer.





Vancouver also gave me the opportunity to build my self confidence, discipline, and perseverance through taekwondo conducted under the guidance of Master Michael Sirota, seen on photo at left with me. Sirota Alchemy in Steveston, Richmond provides a very caring and understanding environment so that people like me with challenges in gross motor skills are able to engage in a discipline we may not have been able to do without the belief and passion of Master Sirota.

Through training in this martial arts school, I garnered the gold medal in the recent National Taekwondo Championships for my level in the Para taekwondo field this January.



With my buddies Andrew and Resh I go swimming at the Aquatic Center every Tuesday night. And on some days, they bring me to meet up and party with other friends.

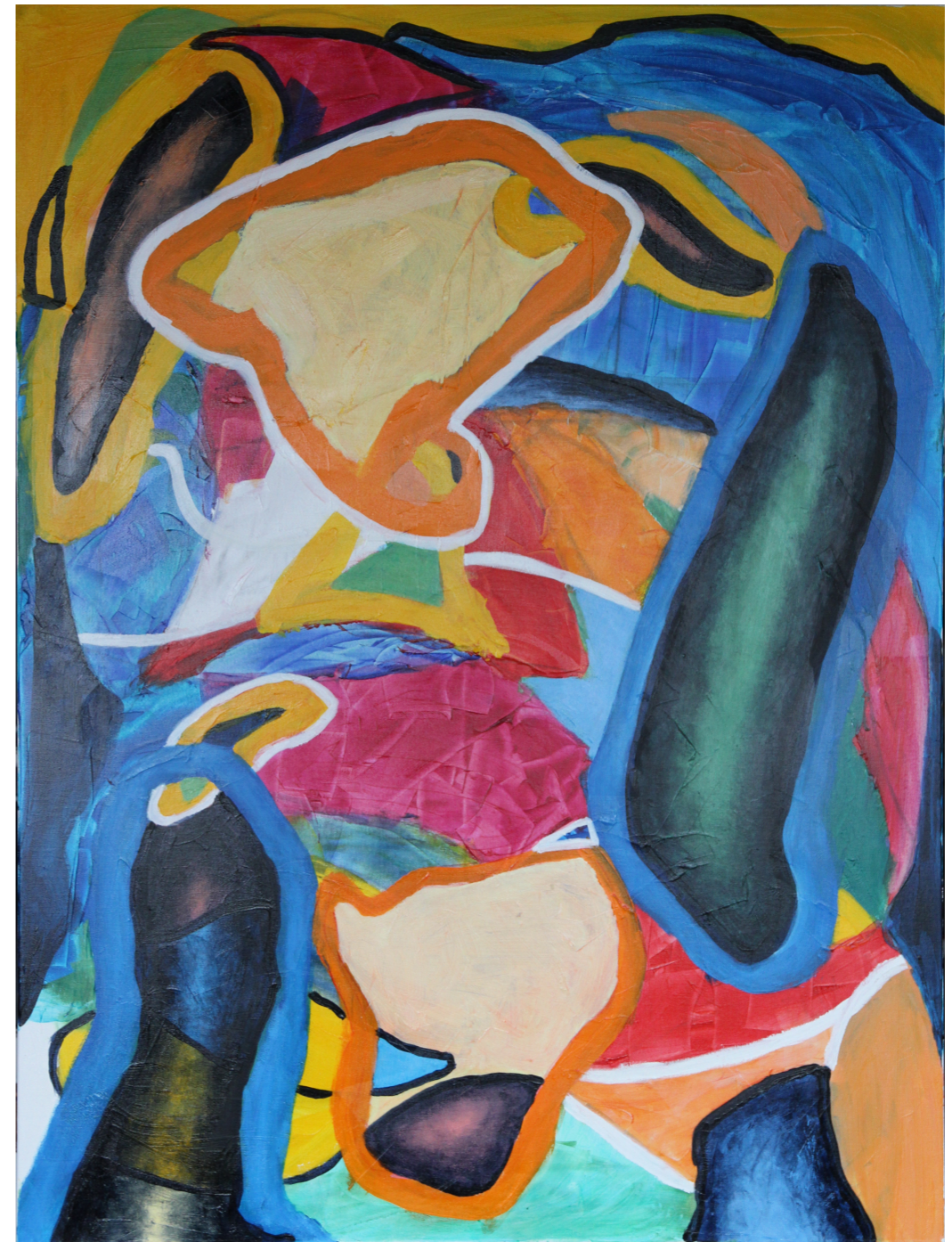
For both my hobbies, Taekwondo and swimming I can now take the public transit by myself to go to and from the places I have to be at.



And like many events that happen in my life, these two activities have also inspired me to paint the following pieces :



***“Dynamism of a Martial Arts Athlete”***, 48”x36”, acrylic on canvas, 2012



***“Dynamism of a Swimmer”***, 48”x36”, acrylic on canvas, 2012



Oh yes...on the daily living activities, aside from using public transportation by myself and going off on my own for errands around our community, I have finally conquered my fear of flames and so have learned to bake and cook.

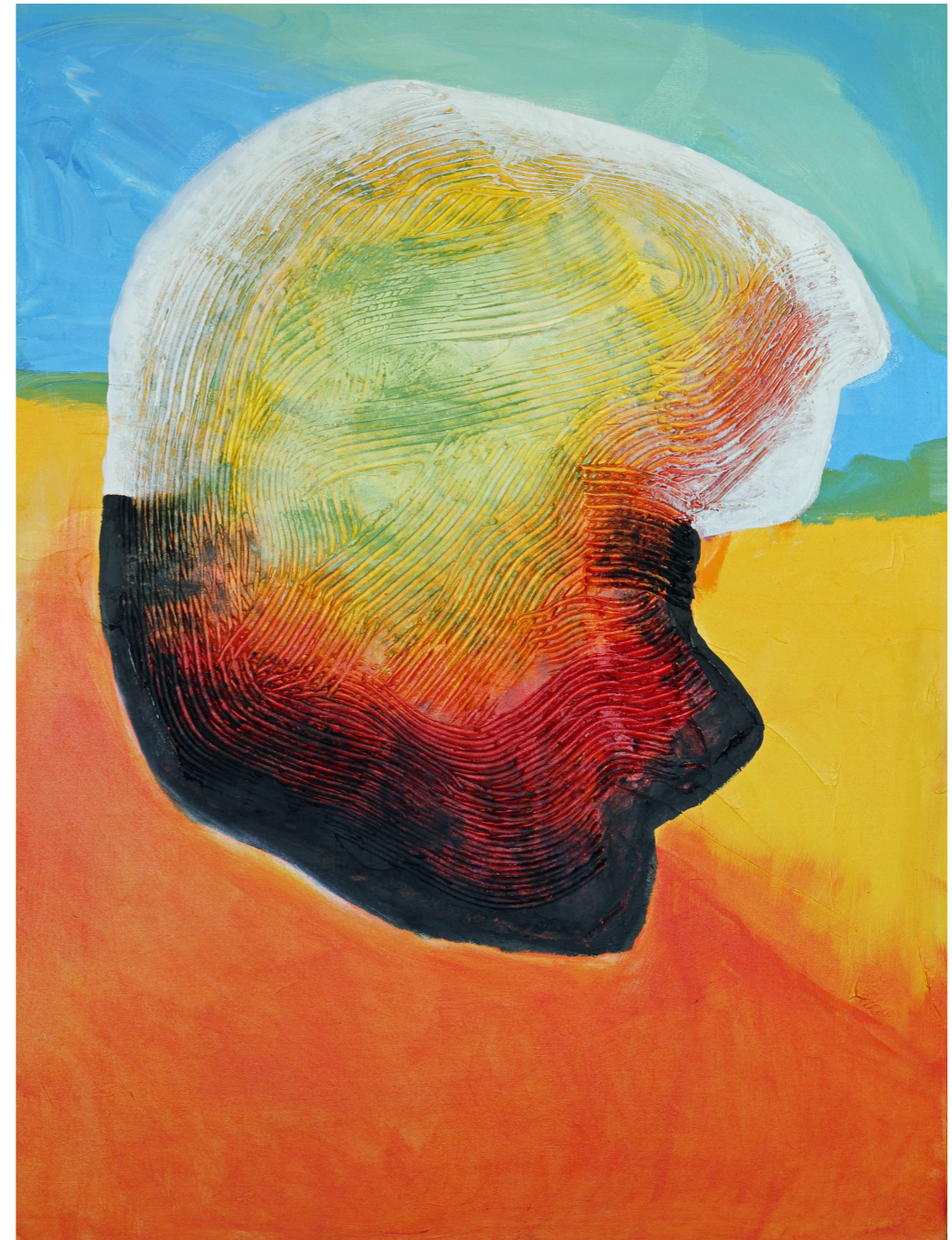


Bruno Latour has said, “Alas we cannot do anything without image! Fortunately, we cannot do anything without image.”

## **I AGREE!!!**

The images of my art is my medium to communicate with “others” what it is like in the world of differently challenged people like me.

\* My creativity is my voice, my reflection, my shout so that the world becomes big enough for everyone to fit in.



“Critical Thinking”, mixed media acrylic on canvas, 40” x30”, 2012

The previous slides have shown some of the many elements that are depicted on the bridge that got me to where I am now. And there are still many more, some of which are....



- \* working in my own art studio on Granville Island
- \* my first solo show in the Philippines in 2010 after graduation
- \* winning first place for a province wide art competition "Budding Picasso" for my piece on the left "Coming into Fall"
- \* winning "People's Choice Award 2011" for my piece "The Forest Again" on the right



- My art, like my life, is a journey... a continuing journey of exploring new worlds and new territories.

Through my art practice, piece by piece, step by step, the world around me and in me makes sense.



“The End of the Journey”, 24”x24”,  
acrylic on canvas, 2012

- Through my paintings, drawings, and writings, I have been able to express my feelings and thoughts. Through my creations I am able to communicate fluently what is difficult for me to put into spoken language. . .





“Homesick for Manila”, triptych acrylic mixed media on canvas, 40”x90”, 2009

- The chaos I perceive around me is balanced by the peace and harmony I find as I work on my creations. Through my art practice I have found a way to bridge my inner experiences with the outside world I live in.



“Piece by Piece ...”, J.A.Tan  
acrylic on canvas, 20”x16”, 2010

- As an artist with the opportunity to break out of the silence of autism, I believe I need to continually “uninhabit” this silence.
- Through my art I slowly unveil the mystery of this condition for myself and others.
- Thus, I “retain my humanity” and allow myself to continue to grow and learn by allowing others to listen to my silence through my art.

Being A PART OF, instead of apart, is possible through the gift of my creative process informed by the numerous elements on the bridge that I continue to journey on.

But, in this short life of mine, I am joyful that slowly I am seeing myself as a visual artist with a global practice that knows no boundaries.

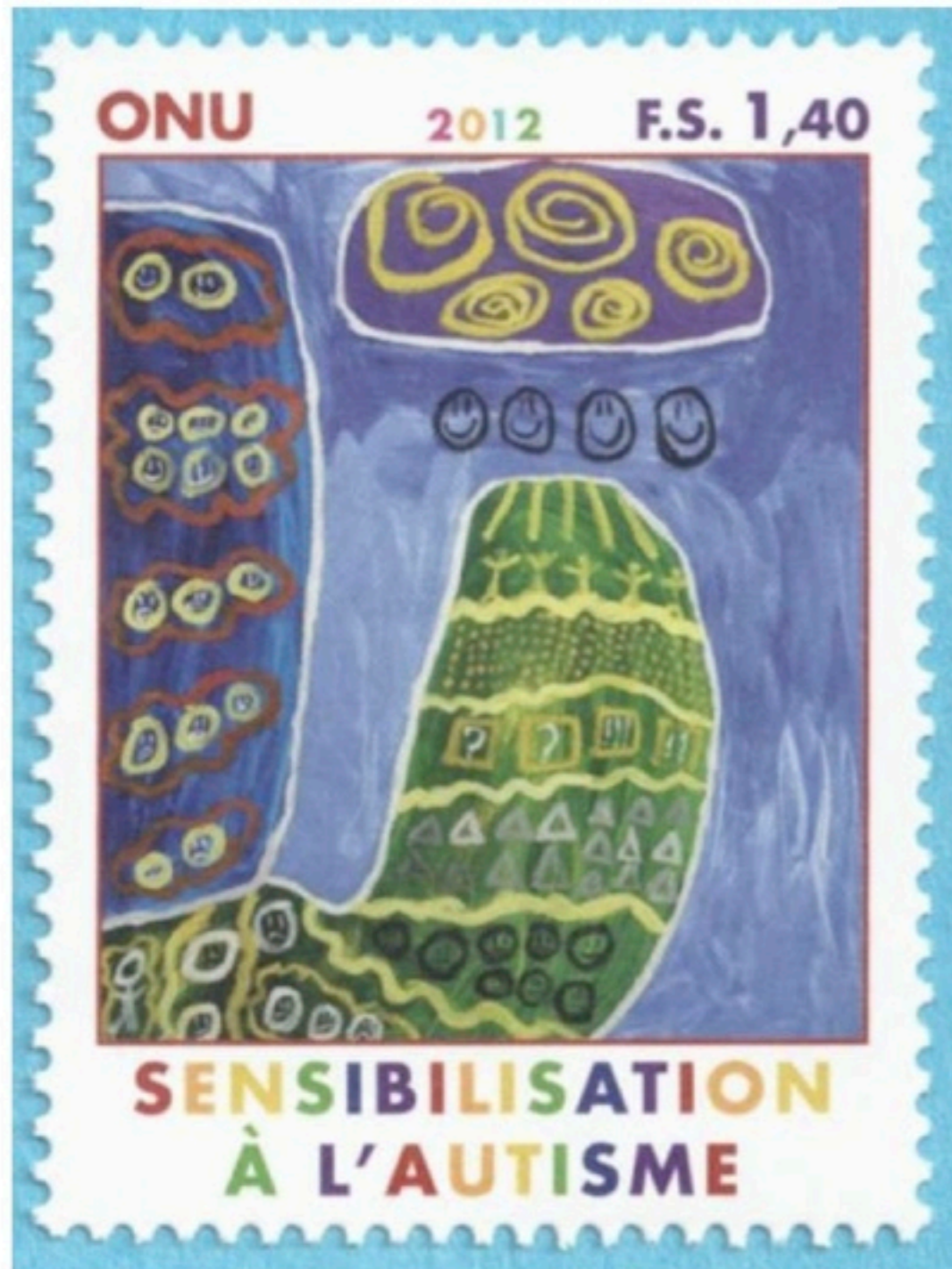




And I would like to share with you the piece that has brought so much pride for me and my family. My work “Victory” was issued as a United Nations Stamp last April 2, 2012.

# AUTISM AWARENESS

United Nations  
First Day of Issue: 2 April 2012



One young boy negotiating the world in a way he knows. One young boy listening to a different tune as he makes sense of the world around. Not an easy task as he perceives the world differently from others. He is met with confused looks, angry looks, disturbed looks, happy looks, questioning looks ... so many questions but no one answer. Yet this young boy continues on his journey never giving up ... until ...

Supported by his immediate family - all five of them always a strong presence in his life - friends, and professionals this young boy today has claimed victory over the many challenges of his life. Today, with happy faces around him he shows the world the "victory" of an artist with autism achieved with patience, discipline, perseverance, love, and a positive attitude.

J.A. Tan July 2011

With gratitude to everyone, especially you all patiently listening to my journey, I would like to leave you with a short video written and directed by someone who was witness to the creation of this “bridge in my journey of inclusion” - my brother, Thomas Tan.



