

Exhibit showcases painter who uses art to help cope with mental illness

Leef Evans says painting has saved his life by helping him battle severe depression

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Vancouver expressionist painter Leef Evans sits for in his chair, seemingly in high spirits, as he eagerly explains the process behind his artwork, but it took him hours that morning to work up enough energy to chat with *The Outlook* at a coffee shop in Deep Cove.

Evans, whose real name is Eric Howker, has depression, a debilitating mental illness that forced him to quit university half way through third year, eventually leading him to a hard life in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. After graduating from high school, the skilled athlete went to South Carolina on a soccer scholarship, where he quickly became "king of the school" landing on the dean's list for earning top grades. Then a serious bout of depression hit, one that he wasn't prepared for, but, in hindsight, had all the tell-tale warning signs before it quietly snuck up.

After leaving university and spending time in different hospitals, he continued to experience episodes of deep depression, eventually losing his home and car and winding up homeless on the streets of Vancouver.

But times changed when Evans started taking painting classes through Coast Mental Health seven years ago, a decision he says saved his life by helping him battle his daily struggle with depression.

"I don't know where I'd be today if it wasn't for art," says Evans, standing outside the Seymour Art Gallery in North Vancouver, where his paintings will be on display alongside other formerly homeless artists until Sept. 2.

Evans says he hasn't suffered a major attack of depression since he got in touch with his creative side, although he has to constantly deal with the mental illness, carefully taking one day at a time.

Fighting with art

Evans is like other formerly homeless artists who have found a way to cope through art, says his art instructor Jeanne Krabbendam, who organized the exhibit and is also showing her artwork.

"Transitioning from living on the streets to an apartment can be very difficult. I've heard of quite a few times

when people who used to be homeless sleep on their balconies at night because they're not used to being inside." Krabbendam tells *The Outlook* at her painting studio on Granville Island, filled with abstract paintings and sketches.

Krabbendam, who has volunteered with Coast Mental Health once a week for eight years, picks up "Through the Keyhole," a painting that is now hanging on the wall at the exhibit in North Van.

In it, a homeless man's face is gazing through a large keyhole, unsure if he'll be able to survive living in a tidy, small apartment, living quarters most people take for granted, but somewhere he is no longer used to.

"They've told me they have to sleep on their balcony — it's what they're used to — but they also say it's the first night they've been able to keep their eyes and ears closed," says Krabbendam, who was started to see how people lived in the Downtown Eastside after emigrating from Holland 12 years ago.

Like the two other once-homeless artists in the show, Evans says his life is back on track, at least compared to the way it once was.

He likes to paint the mundane and arbitrary, ordinary sights most people are quick to overlook, around bustling downtown Vancouver, often featuring apparently rough and unpleasant areas that aren't usually captured in art.

"I'm not looking at anything new, I'm just seeing it in a new way. This is our job," says Evans, as he raises his hand, motioning how he paints with a large brush and quick strokes.

The key to Evans' success is using brushes no smaller than his thumb, which help him overcome a tendency to obsess about making paintings perfect. Before he discovered this technique, he once spent a month on a single painting, carefully making each line precisely straight, but in the end didn't enjoy the frustrating process.

Now applying blobs of paint with long strokes and quick flicks of the wrist, Evans enjoys painting and is much more pleased with the end result.

"If I make a mistake, that's fine. Some of my best art is made from a mistake," says Evans, who is also critical of his own work, adding that his paintings were "awful" when he first started because he didn't know how to mix colours.



ART THERAPY - Artist Leef Evans (top) and his art instructor Jeanne Krabbendam (above) have works on display at the Seymour Art Gallery until Sept. 2.

Michaela Garstin photos

"I take horrible photos," Evans confesses, "but it doesn't matter because all I'm looking for is interesting compositions. If I can get this right, I'll use the photo as a guide to start painting."

Evans' paintings, along with his instructor's work and multimedia art by two other men coping with mental illness, can be seen at the Seymour Art Gallery from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week until Sept. 2.

For more information about the exhibit, visit seymourartgallery.com.

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