

Asperger's Syndrome: The Art of a Paraorder

By Mitchell Van Duzer

It was spring of 2007, and at the time I was a student at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. I lived in a small secluded apartment on a quiet street just two blocks away from campus and less than a block from Sarasota Bay.

It was late in the evening, and I had just had dinner after a long day of class and work in the computer labs. That night as I sat watching *Scrubs* and trying to force myself to stop worrying about the millions of things I had to do the next day, something about the TV show piqued my curiosity. The episode I was watching, I later found out, was titled "My Roommates". I had seen the episode before, and had never picked up on it. However, this viewing of this particular episode proved to be fateful. The thing that intrigued me was one of the subplots, wherein autism was mentioned.

At the time that I watched the episode, I'd heard the word "autism" before, but I really wasn't sure what exactly it entailed. So I looked it up on Wikipedia. As I skimmed the list of symptoms, a flash went off in my head, and a warm feeling seemed to permeate me. "Hey," I said to myself in a moment of sudden startling revelation, "these symptoms seem kind of familiar."

I remembered talks that I'd had with my parents, about what seemed to be abnormalities in my development as a child: how it took me longer than most kids to learn to speak, but when I finally did it was in complete coherent sentences; how I could read kindergarten level books at age 3, and blew people away with language skills and knowledge that seemed freakishly pedantic for a little boy my age; how I'd never learned to ride a bike, and put off getting my driver's license until I was 20. Suddenly it clicked. If my assessment was right... I was autistic, and had been for all my life without even knowing it.

That Friday, I went to my therapist as I did every Friday. I'd begun seeing him the summer before, determined to figure out why I was so miserable with my life. Right away he had diagnosed me with a form of depression called neurotic depression. That week, I asked him if, according to my description of symptoms, I might be autistic. He said it was a distinct possibility and referred me to a psychiatrist, Dr. Barker, for a second opinion.

I couldn't get an appointment to see Dr. Barker until after the end of the school year. By that time I had hit a dead end with my animation major and decided not to return to Ringling the following fall. I wasn't cut out to be an animator, I figured. The stress was way too high, and I no longer wanted anything to do with a career in the film industry. When I finally saw Dr. Barker, I told him all about myself, all of the developmental issues, all of my insecurities and idiosyncrasies, and finally I asked if I was truly autistic. I can remember him answering back, in a thick Spanish accent, "Yes, well... from what you've told me it seems obvious to me that you have Asperger's Syndrome."

And that's how it happened, honest to God. That's how I found out I had Asperger's. I was 21.

I was absolutely shocked. Asperger's. Of course, my next question was, "What's Asperger's Syndrome?" Dr. Barker invited my mother into the room, and he explained his diagnosis to both of us. Asperger's Syndrome is, he told us, an autism spectrum disorder, and is less outwardly apparent than autism proper. It is characterized by delayed

development, tendencies toward routine and repetition, obsessive fixation on esoteric subject matter, and awkwardness in areas such as physical coordination and social interaction. Patients have difficulty reading body language, maintaining eye contact, and deciphering unspoken social cues. Depression is frequently comorbid, as it was in my case, due to the immense feelings of alienation that come from social awkwardness. All of this, it seems, stems from abnormally high or low levels of sensitivity to sensory stimuli like sounds and tastes— i.e., hyper- or hyposensitivity. AS was first observed clinically in 1944 by an Austrian pediatrician, Dr. Hans Asperger, but it was another 50 years before his findings were acknowledged by the psychiatric community.

Dr. Barker told us to read up on the disorder and report the findings back to my therapist. So I did. It felt as if an immense weight had been lifted off my chest, and like the pieces of the scrambled jigsaw puzzle that had been my childhood now finally fit together. I now had an explanation for that unnamed feeling that had haunted me my whole life, that everything was *off* somehow.

It was shortly after my diagnosis that I moved to British Columbia, determined to start with a clean slate, far from the South where I grew up and armed with my new knowledge. Over the course of nearly three years, I have learned what it means to be an Aspie, as people with Asperger's are called. Initially, I wasn't sure how to handle it; at the same time that I felt released from the unknown, formless specter of inadequacy, I was now confronted with a known cause, which nevertheless felt, at times, like a sentence to solitary confinement, or even exile on a foreign planet. With time, however, I began to reach out to other Aspies, and through discussion with them and my own research on the subject, I began to feel less that I had been condemned, and more that I had been given a great gift with some minor drawbacks on the side.

What I believe about Asperger's now, and what informs my artwork, is that it is not really a disorder at all, in the true sense of the word. The word "disorder" explicitly indicates a lack of order—but this is not so in the case of AS, for there is still order to everything I do, even despite it seeming chaotic or illogical to outside observers. Instead, I prefer to use a term of my own invention, that term being "paraorder"— not a lack of order, but a *different* order, on a parallel to the widely-accepted social norms.

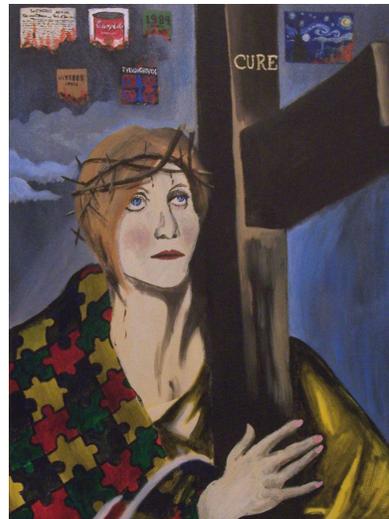
It is this resolve— to embrace my idiosyncrasies, to accept my paraorder for what it is, and to work toward building a less simplistic and one-sided social discourse about autism—that drives me as an artist. In my work, I use symbols and visual metaphors to make my perspective on various aspects of Asperger's more easily perceptible to viewers who have no experience with the spectrum. For example, in the painting *The Interpretation of Signals Has Never Been a Strength of Mine*, I conceptualize my difficulty reading social signals as a stop sign, with the word GO in place of STOP. By juxtaposing the two opposing signals, it is my intent to create the confusion I experience when trying to read what I see as conflicting social signs.

The Passion of St. Jenny is a parody of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, produced around 1580 by El Greco. In this case, the figure is the American anti-autism activist Jenny McCarthy, who is largely seen by the ASD community as one of the key disseminators of oversimplified or inaccurate information on autism. Here I criticize her for what I see as her exploitation of autism for her personal self-promotion, her advocacy of controversial autism treatments, and her failure to acknowledge the diverse concerns of the autistic community.

In my two panel drawing *A Rock Feels No Pain*, I acknowledge the repetitiveness, obsessive interests, and the social disconnect inherent in Asperger's all at once. Through my personal obsession for the structures of languages, alphabets and codes, I have produced my own code and used it to translate and repeat key phrases from Paul Simon's song "I Am a Rock" which speak of isolation.

Finally, in the companion pieces entitled *DSM-IV* and *DSM-V*, I use different shades of the color orange as a metaphor for autism in all its various forms, and examine the ways in which ASDs are categorized by the psychological reference text known as the DSM. Upon its publication in 1994, the fourth volume, the DSM-IV, was the first volume of the DSM to acknowledge Asperger's Syndrome; for its next major revision, the DSM-V, coming out in 2012 or 2013, it has been proposed that the diagnostic section for Asperger's would be completely placed into the catch-all category of the autism spectrum. It is a decision of which I am very critical, not because I do not acknowledge Asperger's as being part of the autism spectrum, but because it manifests differently than other forms and benefits greatly from having its own specific diagnostic structure. The orange panels of my work serve as a symbolic comparison between this specificity and the proposed vague generalizations of the new system.

In conclusion, I believe it is important to acknowledge how diverse the spectrum is. It is easy for outsiders to use the word "autism" to categorize a large subset of people—but it is important to recognize that it is a spectrum. Although there are some symptoms which appear commonly, there are as many different forms of this thing we call "autism" as there are people who have it, and they range in intensity from the very apparent to the very invisible, with Asperger's most often falling toward the latter. It is my hope that, through my art practice, I may make Asperger's more visible, and that I may also encourage everyone to embrace one another for his or her neurodiversity.



Top – Left: *The Interpretation of Signals Has Never Been a Strength of Mine* (2008)

Right: *The Passion of St. Jenny* (2008)

Center: *A Rock Feels No Pain* (2010)

Bottom: *DSM-IV/DSM-V* (2010)