

Art & the Art of Managing Pain

Billy Bob Beamer

Bill speaks eloquently about his art and its role in coping with chronic pain and medical problems, offering a message of hope. His art gives substance to the perplexing phenomenon of chronic pain.

I graduated from college in the early 70s, having completed a degree in sociology, with a focus in the sociology of art. I didn't take any studio art courses, but immersed myself in art history, especially the art of the Middle Ages, and sought to understand how cultural values are formed and reflected by the arts of any given age. Essentially self-taught, I began to draw and paint after college graduation. But I had no idea that one day my art hobby would be as important to me as my 30-plus-year career in the field of social services and social services administration. That is because I did not know then—and didn't know for most of my professional career--what I would one day learn: that I have fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue immune deficiency syndrome (FM/CFIDS). Thanks to art, though, these disorders don't have me.

How it began: In the 70s I became frustrated by the "floaters" in my eyes. Those who, like me, are nearsighted will understand how infuriating these floating cells in the eyeball can be! But I have always found myself interested in most things (and people), even frustrating ones. And that included my floaters—what I later learned are called "entopic" images or imagery derived from the body or body processes when used in art. I began to draw these little floaters, and over time, began to see that they arrived on paper as linguistic signs and symbols. I continued to paint traditional landscapes, portraits, and even abstractions. But I always came back to the "floater drawings," which I started calling "Messages" to reflect what I understood as their linguistic base.

Jump forward 20 years. I had been growing increasingly ill, and was finally diagnosed with FM/CFIDS. Through the years I began to—and continue to—participate in many treatment modalities including medications, osteopathy (OMT), massage, and biofeedback. It was while participating in biofeedback that I learned I could induce a trance-like state by the act of repetitive (some say obsessive-compulsive!) drawing, i.e., my "Messages."

My works visually explore mystical ideas and prayer/meditation/healing processes, as well as my intuitive understanding of string theory, the vibratory interconnectedness of all things, and multiple universes. Like all art, though, the works are ultimately about themselves and the viewer's involvement with them. At this time, I am concentrating on drawing--that most basic mode of communication--in a small format. To paraphrase Blake: "the universe lies in a grain of sand." My best way to realize incalculable enormity is to create its

contrasting opposite, seen in the often faintly drawn, small-to-smallest lines, signs, and symbols. At some point, the viewer needs to see my works through magnification--not a gimmick but a major part of the interactive process. This method becomes a way of revealing initially unseen details in the drawings, as well as random miniscule particles, fingerprints, and detritus--the latter arriving unexpectedly onto the glass and frame surfaces and interacting with the drawings in unplanned, ever changing, interconnected ways.

However, it is the process of creating the ink or pencil messages—the tiny interwoven lines—that causes the trance-state to which I refer. Other pictorial elements are created first, or added later, as suggested by the weaving lines themselves. I have not been involved in active research of this altered consciousness phenomenon, but in discussion with psychologists and others, I suspect that not only am I creating a distraction from pain, but am also affecting alpha waves in the brain. Certainly the creative process of “messages” drawing creates an alert but relaxed state—and, most important, reduces pain.

I have been others the methods of my activities—similar perhaps to knitting, crocheting, etc. Also I am pleased that my work continues to attract the attention of galleries and collectors, which also allows me to share my FM experience.

John Yimin of Outsider Art has written that my work "lies in a world, somewhere between what you see and what you think. The work is extremely difficult to photograph properly. [However] these works are *staggeringly forceful* when in your hand." I don't think I can top that. Those interested in reading about and seeing more of my art from the last several years can go to <http://www.outsiderart.info/>. There, a link is provided to U*Space Gallery in Atlanta, Ga., which is one of several galleries that represents my art in the US.

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