

NOURISHING TALENT

AT CREATIVE GROWTH

BY CHERYL KOEHLER

With a very sure hand, artist Cedric Johnson traces the complex contours of a partly shucked ear of corn onto the paper in front of him. His felt-tipped pen then follows the ruffled frills of a lettuce head, the spiny geometry of a pineapple, and the smooth swells and folds of a red pepper, exuberantly filling the page in a single strong and continuous line.

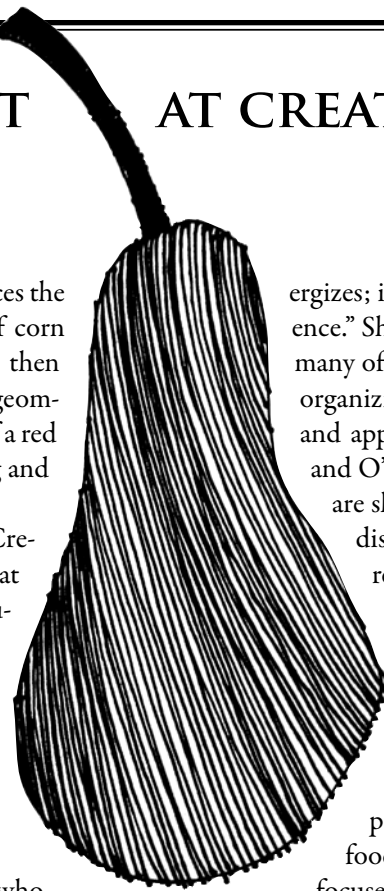
After 23 years of daily art practice at Oakland's Creative Growth Art Center, Johnson doesn't recall that anyone in particular taught him how to draw so beautifully. Joann Biagini, the art teacher hired by the Center to lead a food and cooking program for the artists, points out that one of her fellow facilitators probably gave a lesson in contour drawing many years ago. Johnson has been drawing this way for so long that he knows it only as his personal and distinctive style.

It's much the same with the other 90 to 150 artists who practice at the studio five hours a day, five days a week, year after year—most are not capable of discussing their influences, backgrounds, credentials, and accomplishments with any reliability. In fact, some are practically mute. These artists are adults with physical, mental, and developmental disabilities, who range in age from mid-20s to mid-60s. Like Johnson, many of them have spent their days as clients in the Creative Growth program for more than 20 years.

But step into the Center's gallery in the adjacent storefront, or ask to see portfolios of work by Johnson, Olga Bielma, William Scott, William Tyler, Jorge Gomez, Kerry Damianakes, and scores of other Creative Growth clients, and it becomes clear that these artists are as accomplished as many of their conventionally abled counterparts who are succeeding in the national art scene.

"When we open the holiday show, the line stretches around the block," says Jennifer O'Neal, the Center's curatorial manager. She flips through catalogues from the hundreds of shows that have been mounted in prestigious places like the SF-MOMA; Art en Marge of Brussels, Belgium; the American Visionary Art Museum of Baltimore; the American Primitive Gallery in Atlanta; White Columns, New York City; and L'Aracine Art Brut Musée, Paris. Books and documents at the gallery's counter attest to the dozens of important awards and commissions that have come to this non-profit organization and its clients.

Last spring in their own gallery, the Center created a show of work depicting food and the food experience, which apparently is a common topic in the program. "The artists draw and paint about things that are in their daily lives," says O'Neal. "Food en-



Pear

by William Tyler, 2007

ergizes; it's a universal pleasure and a common experience." She adds that in the institutional settings where many of these artists have spent their lives, food is an organizing factor to the daily routine. But healthy and appealing food is not the norm in institutions, and O'Neal talks about how more and more studies are showing that poor nutrition affects those with disabilities and may even be implicated in the recent surge in autism.

Some of the artists in the Creative Growth program live with a fair amount of independence, so they can choose their own meals and perhaps cook for themselves. That means of course that convenience and junk foods are a constant lure, just as they are for people in the general population. The weekly food and cooking class offered at the Center focuses on vegetarian and ethnic meals made with fresh ingredients—foods that the clients learn are good for their health. "We don't do much baking, since a lot of them have sugar problems," says Biagini.

The artists work together in a group during the cooking class, so they get practice in cooperation and sharing. "People get very focused when they're cooking," says Biagini. "People like Danny Miller, who is easily agitated, will get very focused on the process."

Miller, who is a friendly and courteous greeter of anyone who steps into the studio, makes his drawings with lightning speed—



'Cooking Class' by John Martin



Cedric Johnson at work. Underneath his pages are two drawings by Dan Miller, the artist whose pear drawing graces the cover of this issue.

perhaps so he doesn't have to take his attention away from a single social opportunity. If a visitor comes up to him while he's drawing, he asks how to spell the name of the food he's drawing and then he scribbles the word into the composition.

Adding words to the artwork on the page is very common among artists at the Center. Artist Kerry Damianakes, who O'Neal says was institutionalized for much of her life, loves to read cookbooks and is taken with the beauty of food on the table. She often depicts whole meals in her luscious, colorful style, and she writes the menu or observations about the food into the border around each of her paintings. An example of her work can be seen on page 20.

Artist Jorge Gomez tends to populate his vibrant food paintings with animals. He says that the cooking class has helped him get over his fear of cooking. "I was always burning things up." Gomez is very excited about the new Whole Foods Market opening around the corner, since it means the class will get to shop together for ingredients. He already knows the rules: "Greens need to be dark, the pepper has to be . . . [he pauses to think] not squishy. Corn has to be yellow. You touch the vegetables to see if they're good." His instructions for cooking are to add salt and pepper, and put a little oil in the pan so things don't stick.

During a recent visit, the kitchen was still under renovation, so the cooking class was relegated to simply drawing the beautiful fruits and vegetables arranged on the worktable. Biagini says the staff is looking forward to an upcoming class when Patricia Curtan, the illustrator of many Chez Panisse cookbooks, will work with the artists. There are plans afoot to have chefs from local restaurants lead the cooking sessions.

Since 1974, when Florence and Elias Katz first opened the doors at this now-renowned program, Creative Growth has become a model for an effective way to bring people with disabilities into a productive and successful relationship with their community. It almost seems like a privilege for those who have the opportunity to spend their days here. But according to the Center's executive director, Tom di Maria, "it turns the idea of privilege on its head."

"They are not privileged," he says, "but it's the paradox of Creative Growth—they get to enjoy freedom from the limitations that held them back in the past."

*Creative Growth Art Center
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www.creativegrowth.org*

WHEN TO VISIT

Friday, November 9, the public is invited to join The Collage Party at Creative Growth Art Center. There will be music, food, and art supplies for all who want to participate. The exhibition opening for The Collage party will be held on Wed., Nov. 15, 6 – 8 p.m.

The Holiday Show, which opens Friday, December 7 from 5 to 7 p.m., will be themed *Ice Land: Get it before it melts!* It continues with hours on Saturday, December 8 and 15 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.