

COMMUNITY ARTS PERSPECTIVE: THE INDX AUTISTIC ARTIST EXHIBITIONS¹

Tanea Paterson

When pondering great thinkers, makers and artisans of the past, it is not only their creative mahi that piques our curiosity. For many great artists, tragedy and adventure are woven through their history. Knowing their intimate stories alters how their mahi entwines with our own lives, loves and personalities. Knowledge of an artisan's paths and patterns, ecstasy and angst can influence how their sound and visuals appear to us. Our sensory system becomes influenced at the behest of our thoughts and feelings.

Musicians, artists and influencers of our past are often as interesting for the way they lived as for what they produced. The intrigue of personality can be as big a draw to our curiosity as their artistic achievements. As much as posthumously diagnosing people² isn't ever going to be diagnostically accurate, the wrappings of neurodiversity can be glimpsed within many great minds. Hints of mental health impacting their mahi, whispers of autism are often apparent. Herein lies great potential for challenging the shadowy recesses of stigma that autism carries with it. In these times of social justice, acceptance and intersectionality there still remains a social glitch around people with diverse neurology, as well as other forms of invisible disability and difference.

I have been engrossed in all things autism from the moment I heard about it as a neurotype.³ As it happens, many people close to me, whether by genetics or friendship, are autistic.

My interest leveled up when I received a late diagnosis at age 38.⁴ Through lengthy psychological assessment, a discovery was made – I am clinically neurodivergent as an autistic woman. I hadn't sought out and surrounded myself in autism by blind choice – this was driven by a subconscious neurological connection. I seek solace in individuals who share parts of me – I guess we all do. This is a most human need. "Be around others like you."

My 'diagnosis' gave me a psychological calm – "it makes sense" – presenting me with a unique opportunity to reconnect with my long-lost self. I stopped staunchly defending my 'different' as a rebellious choice. I had for so long hidden my social confusion with rebellion and anarchy – an unfortunate consequence of my life-long "pretendies": internal disconnect from my inner self, rejection of my natural state. I pretended my way of being was all intentional, when it was mostly the scraps of self I was left with after many rounds of faux pas and social errors. The rest was a fairly accurate copycatting of people I admired. I later found as I journeyed deeper into the autism community that this was a typical way for us to navigate the world, and was named variously as masking, mimicking and camouflaging.

However, as part of my discomfort and anxiety to fit in, be normal and functional, I had overridden my natural inclination to think, feel and be in this world abstractly, openly and without boundaries. Acknowledging my autism finally allowed me to embrace my identity. That identity is chaotic, abstract, colourful and unpredictable. The next component that regrew from the ashes of my broken-down psyche was art.⁵

Art was a golden thread, woven together with the people and relationships around me. Art was a buffer to the bane of normality, a visionary theme of freedom. Embracing art became an act of self-agency as I processed my diagnosis, retroactively undertaking introspection of my life up to that point – my 'Reverse Mid-life Crisis,' as my son puts it. Writing, drawing, pouring resin and shaping fabric – however it looked, it was present and visual because of me, not in spite of me.

I had been rummaging around with autism advocacy – workshops, writing articles (all identity-positive) – challenging stigma (oh so much stigma) and doing what I could to change the world's view of autism. I was reaching some, but missing many. I asked: What could I do, now, that includes the autism community in ways that they would enjoy, removing political agendas but somehow still forcing a shift in conventional psycho-social thinking of what it means to be autistic? It was here that the iNDx Autistic Art Exhibition offered me great potential.

I already knew that many, many visual pleasures – via movies, sculpture, music and other arts – had been gestated in the minds of neurodivergent people, whether advertised as such or not.

Using art as a platform to give our group a voice had the potential to be superbly positive. I was also very aware of the size of the talent pool in our community. I had a casual kōrero with Sheryl Davies, our local Parent to Parent⁶ and Altogether Autism⁷ coordinator. We had excitedly discussed the idea of an autistic artists' exhibition. Sheryl subsequently invited me to an Arts Access⁸ meeting to 'pitch' my idea. As fortunes go, this was my lucky day. Rachel Cooper from Otago Museum happened to be present at the meeting. As we bounced ideas off each other, the energy grew. There was a place for us at the stunning HD Skinner Annex, and the museum offered us a team to guide and support us to make this happen.

And so, myself and three others, Tom, Western and Denise, formed the group iNDx Autistic Arts and Culture Aotearoa.⁹ What does iNDx mean? The 'i' stands for identity, 'ND' for neurodivergent or neurologically 'not typical,' while 'Dx' is a play on the medical abbreviation for diagnosis. As opposed to the deficit/disorder view, we support the neurodiversity¹⁰ view as a more humane and inclusive way of looking at autism.

Otago Museum offered us a beautiful space at the HD Skinner Annex not only for our art, but also for community kōrero. We held a variety of open workshops here, venturing beyond an art exhibition to a sharing of insights and ideas. Most presenters were autistic/aspie themselves, and we discussed many topics including Dungeons and Dragons¹¹ as a tool for connection and confidence, "Autism, Sensory and Creativity – Mark-Making as Communication and Navigation," diagnostic pathways for females and "Autistic Identity in Art."

The Otago Museum team were constantly respectful and did not force ideas on us – they gave us the space and time to work it out. Something we really appreciated was the museum team's openness to how we wanted to format the biographies in the exhibition booklet. We wanted to leave the artists' words 'raw' and unedited. This tied in with our ethos as a group – we wanted the artists to introduce themselves as they are, and this became an important way to communicate more about them as individuals.

You will notice that some artists have not included a biography, description of their art, or a photograph of themselves. It is important that each artist can present their work and themselves in whatever way they feel is 'right,' therefore exhibits, biographies and any other information are exactly as the artist delivered them to us, reflecting each artist's unique and wonderful personality.

We understand the format is not 'traditional' or streamlined, however we think that adds to the theme of the Exhibition. Individuality, appreciation for autonomy and a celebration of how diverse and unique Autistic people are. There is also work submitted by several limited speaking Artists, and their support people didn't feel comfortable writing words on their behalf.

We'd rather the artist didn't see a 'reframed' or 'edited' bio and description and feel that someone thought they needed to change in order to 'fit in.' This is the opposite of what our intentions for this exhibition are.¹²

A component of this project that became essential was the museum staff's desire to expand their knowledge of autism. Otago Museum organised 'quiet hours' in the main museum areas to widen access and promote understanding of sensory differences in autism.

Autistic sensory overload is a phenomenon only recently acknowledged in medicine.¹³ For me, this inability to properly filter incoming sensory stimuli forms the basis of many atypical responses in autistic people. We all know the archetype of the autistic child clutching their hands over their ears in a busy setting, or engaging in repeated movements to self-soothe (stimming).¹⁴ These responses may be the key to the intricacies of our minds that gestate much of the power in both our art practice and our art appreciation.¹⁵

The museum's quiet hour would begin at 9 am (one hour before opening time) to allow participants to explore at their own pace. The waterfall in the Tropical Forest was turned off and lights in the Tūhura Science Centre were adjusted so that it wasn't so dark. The sound of the interactives in the science centre were turned down, or off. If someone needed to be accompanied, their support person received free admission. The Special Exhibitions Gallery also ran quiet hours where the background music was turned off and the lights were turned up. This offering also started at 9 am before the public arrived. Both Tūhura and the museum galleries held the quiet hour on Saturdays and Sundays to enable access to as many people as possible.

The quiet hours that ran during the exhibition time were not only useful for autistic patrons, but also constituted an important practice in empathy and understanding of others' needs for the museum staff and the wider public who saw them advertised.

The public workshops that were held created a unique space for deep kōrero. A popular workshop was dubbed Ask Me Anything (AMA), where no question was out of bounds. With an eclectic group of teachers, parents, carers and autistic people in the audience, these quick-fire Q and A sessions were energetic and powerful.

Having art as a basis for connection, action and activity was a gentle act of social infiltration. It constituted a negotiation of accessible social connection – something which is often lost in communication between autistic people and the wider community.

Our two exhibitions included a total of 28 artists, both local and national, as well as a few overseas autistic advocates, who participated by allowing us to screen their films. We proudly turned no artist away. The curators had an unenviable task. They put together a space which honoured our sensory sensitivities with the gentle darkness of a black backdrop, and a display layout that was easy on the eyes.

Many autistic participants, young and old, had never met 'others like them.' Some took the opportunity to ask us potent questions, such as "Am I just naughty?" The AMA was the most emotional session for me, especially due to my own late diagnosis. The 'naughty' question had formed a constant dialogue in my own mind for life. Perception of our behaviour can be so strikingly wrong, and all behaviour is perception. Unique and interesting art aside, THIS was exactly why we created iNDx.

The autistic community has few 'social events.' The entire process can be overwhelming and over-stimulating. We need extra time to prepare and time to recover. There is often a need to have a purpose or a central theme and focus to bring autistic people together. The iNDx art exhibition gave our group that focus. Many participants had never met before and may not have ever had the chance to meet 'in person,' however, we were all connected by being a part of this project.

Art is a positive conduit to deeper kōrero on disability – strong on issues of identity and ownership. Otago Museum is a place of solace for many of us, with historical anchors to our past. iNDx, artists, workshop presenters and attendees became woven into the Otago Museum, the building, the land and its stories. Our voices, our visions, our community.

POSTSCRIPT: WORDS FROM THE OTAGO MUSEUM ART COLLABORATOR

Collaboration, partnership and community – important ideas in a museum setting, and ones which I think we all strive for and need to celebrate when we get them right. It's the small things that matter; and when we each work together on the small things, a bigger and better thing really can happen.

It wasn't huge and fancy, but it was 'theirs' – an exhibition by the community, for the community. A little oasis in the Postmaster Gallery, an exhibition space in the Otago Museum's HD Skinner Annex. We specifically put it there, away from the hustle and bustle of the Museum. A space that is both light and airy in some places, and dark and low-sensory in others.

A call was put out to the autistic community seeking art submissions, and all 28 artists who submitted their work had at least one piece displayed in the exhibition. Artworks ranged from paint on canvas, knitting, poetry and large-scale installations, to photography and vlogs, with the exhibition providing a flexible platform for artists to display their work.

It was important to us that each artist was able to present their work and themselves in whatever way they felt was 'right,' so therefore exhibits and biographies were presented exactly as delivered, reflecting each artist's unique and wonderful personality.

This wasn't just an 'average project' for me. If you met the team and artists involved, you'd soon understand why. It was the most emotionally exhausting yet rewarding thing I've worked on here, and I'm so grateful that the Museum gave us the freedom to make it happen.

A few tears were shed along the way – I remember the day an artist's work was delivered to me. A bright painting of a blue-and-white penguin talking to vivid yellow and orange fish. It was the speech bubbles that really hit home to me – why the voices of these artists needed to be heard.

"I have been called a retard because I am slightly different than the other penguins; because my coordination is not as good as the other penguins, I keep dropping things. When you call me a retard I feel like I am stupid."

"Please stop using the word retard or retarded – it hurts."

A thought-provoking image which, when on display in the exhibition, gave people cause to stop and consider. We hope their voices were heard, and that some power was given back to the artist and community.

From the Museum's perspective, developing this exhibition and its supporting programmes required us to adapt our thinking and planning processes so that the iNDx group felt comfortable working with us.

I'm extremely proud of what our wee team achieved. From the design team being so accommodating, to the iNDx team for letting us in and allowing us to help them, to the volunteers who staffed the exhibition – but most importantly, to the incredibly brave and talented artists for trusting us to help tell their stories.

At first, I didn't tell the iNDx team that we were entering the exhibition into the ServiceIQ New Zealand Museum Awards in the Arts Access Aotearoa category. I didn't want to get their hopes up and, in our eyes, they were winners anyway. So, it was a huge surprise to find we were finalists and an absolute honour to discover we'd won.

The judges noted that "the iNDx exhibition and supporting public programmes brought new visitors to the museum and opened up deep conversations about the lived experience of autism. Throughout the process, museum staff respected the autistic-led kaupapa."

Validation that the voices of the artists were indeed heard.

Rachel Cooper: Otago Museum

INDX ARTIST PROFILES AND INTERVIEWS

Tom Fox

Tom Fox is a Dunedin-based artist and is a member of the iNDx group. A graduate of the Dunedin school of Art, he works in a variety of media including photography, painting and large-scale chalk pastel and paper works. His art practice investigates the effect that trauma and sensory conditions have on an individual's perception of the world. He will have a chalk pastel work in the iNDx show; his chalk pastel works are portrait drawings that are built up using fingerprint, repetitions and distortions.

"Being part of the iNDx exhibition was amazing – it was a fantastic opportunity to work with other autistic people and I was very proud to have my work displayed along with all the other artist pieces. It was a pretty intense process as I was also helping organise the show as well as submitting my own work, but it was also something very special that led to some deep conversations and connections with my community. The feedback I received was overwhelmingly positive.

My art practice is an exploration of my sensory experiences. I use my drawing as a tool to better understand myself, and for me the exhibition helped shed some light on aspects of myself through meaningful conversations with other autistic people and their families. It was powerful to discuss other people's life experiences and find common and unique experiences that gave insights into my own life experiences.

The museum has always been a special place to me so it was pretty incredible to have something I made displayed there, and I would just like to thank everyone involved in the iNDx show – the museum, the organisers, the artists, the speakers and everyone that came – you all made it something rather incredible! Thank you!"



Figure 1. Tom Fox, Disintegration no.22, 2019, ground chalk pastel on paper; 2019.

Kylee Mitchell

Christchurch born and raised until moving to Oamaru as a teenager; I am the fourth of five daughters. I am new to this form of creating – only three years, but I feel my art, like me, is evolving, and I like to explore new mediums as I can afford them, to see what suits me. Colour is energising, and I think this comes through in my art, which is kind of free-form or even abstract, often including symbols. My work often reflects my mood shifts, level of excitement or interest, or insights and discoveries that may come to me – and always from my inner self.

"Enjoyed being part of the Autistic only Exhibition. It was a really enjoyable experience. The Experience of being part of the Exhibition was very Exciting & helped motivate me More in the Art World. Family & Friends were very Supportive and Encouraging. It was great to have the support and Understanding of People. Good to know that I could do it & that other people were interested. I learnt that anything is possible, even with something Small or Big.

Having the Art Shown at the Otago Museum certainly Helped. Was great to have it at a Real Exhibition. Having it being seen by others Outside of local Friends and Family. Was very Inspiring for me, seeing others' work as well.

I enjoyed the experience, definitely been a highlight of Art Journey so far. Encourages me to carry on with My Art."



Figure 2. Kylee Mitchell, *Rainbow Mandela*, 2019, pastel on paper.



Figure 3. Imogene Mitchell, *For Your Glory*, 2019, graphite on paper.

Imogene Maclean

Imogene is a young artist who lives in Dunedin. Participating in the iNDx exhibition last year has given them the confidence to exhibit more work, a collection of detailed graphite and watercolour pieces. Each piece takes several weeks to several months, and is mainly completed in the evening while watching bad cop shows on Youtube.

"Being a part of an autistic-only exhibition was refreshing. The best way I can explain it to someone who isn't on the spectrum is to flip it and imagine that the vast majority of people are autistic, the world is designed for them, and while you may know a few other people who are like you and 'neurotypical,' it is generally very alienating. Then when you do find a group of people like you, with systems designed for you and with your needs in mind, of course that's going to be insanely valuable and special for you. I think that people shouldn't underestimate how empowering it is to be surrounded by like-minded people, especially for people who don't fit into the societal norm.

It was especially empowering to me because being autistic was a relatively new concept, and one that I didn't particularly like. I didn't know anyone on the spectrum well, so I was left with the (mainly negative) stereotypes portrayed online and in the media. Meeting people like me showed me that those stereotypes weren't true at all, and I wasn't as alone as I thought I was.

The fact that my newfound community was centered around something I loved, art, was just a bonus. iNDx gave me confidence to put my artwork into other exhibitions, something that a few years ago I wouldn't have even considered. Without iNDx I definitely would not be where I am with my art, and for that I'm immensely grateful towards Tanea, Denise, Tom and everyone else who makes it possible."

Tanea Paterson is an Autistic woman who lives on the Otago Peninsula with her two sons. She loves delving into research about neurodiversity, being involved in peer to peer advocacy, and she has written for the 'Altogether Autism Journal', and hosted Autism workshops. Tanea previously worked as an addiction practitioner involved in local, and global psychedelic science and research, namely Ibogaine therapy. In recent years she founded iNDx Autistic Arts and Culture Aotearoa - and along with Otago Museum and iNDx teams, orchestrated the award winning iNDx Art Exhibition. Tanea enjoys being engaged with and connecting the Autism community. From very young writing has been a necessary process for her. She utilises words as the mechanism of her art practise, to manoeuvre - as a neurodivergent person, in a hyper sensory world.

- 1 The iNDx exhibitions ran at the HD Skinner Annex, Otago Museum, in 2018 and 2019, with a break in 2020 due to unsettled times.
- 2 Aspergian Nation, <https://www.aspergiannation.com/art-and-autism.html> (accessed 21 April 2020).
- 3 "Sara Harvey: Agony Autie," RNZ, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/nights/audio/2018649852/sara-harvey-agony-autie> (accessed 22 April 2020).
- 4 Tanea Paterson, "Mother and Son's Empowerment Journey," *Altogether Autism*, 4 (November 2016), <https://www.altogetherautism.org.nz/mother-sons-empowerment-journey/> (accessed 19 April 2020).
- 5 The Art of Autism, <https://the-art-of-autism.com/> (accessed 19 April 2020).
- 6 Parent to Parent/ Otago, <https://parent2parent.org.nz/otago/> (accessed 19 April 2020).
- 7 Altogether Autism Takiwātanga, <https://www.altogetherautism.org.nz/> (accessed 19 April 2020).
- 8 Keith Reeves, "Exhibition Sparks Conversation about Autism," *Arts Access Aotearoa*, last modified 17 September 2018, <https://artsaccess.org.nz/exhibition%20sparks%20conversation%20about%20autism>.
- 9 Autistic Arts & Culture Aotearoa, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/iNDxAutisticArtsCultureNZ/>.
- 10 Nick Walker, "What is Autism?"; *Neurocosmopolitanism: Dr. Nick Walker's Notes on Neurodiversity, Autism, & Self-Liberation*, last modified 1 March 2014, <https://neurocosmopolitanism.com/what-is-autism/>.
- 11 Dorothy van den Hoven, "Dungeons and Dragons Provides a Safe, Positive Space for Teens," *Altogether Autism*, 2 (2016), <https://www.altogetherautism.org.nz/dungeons-and-dragons-provides-a-safe-positive-space-for-teens/> (accessed 25 April 2020).
- 12 iNDx Exhibition booklet, 2018.
- 13 Jordan N Grapel, Domenic V Cicchetti and Fred R Volkmar, "Sensory Features as Diagnostic Criteria for Autism: Sensory Features in Autism," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 88:1 (2015), 69-71, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25745375/> (accessed 24 April 2020).
- 14 Sarah Deweerdt, "Repetitive Behaviors and 'Stimming' in Autism, Explained," *Spectrum News*, last modified 31 January 2020, <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/repetitive-behaviors-and-stimming-in-autism-explained/>.
- 15 Sheena Goodyear, "Family Wins Fight to Keep Van Gogh Starry Night House for Their Autistic Son," last modified 21 July 2018, *CBC Radio*, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-friday-edition-1.4731054/family-wins-fight-to-keep-van-gogh-starry-night-house-for-their-autistic-son-1.4731057>.