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## medicine and the arts

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Individuals who are physically or mentally disabled can help those of us who are not disabled to comprehend and accept our own fears of being different and of isolation and loneliness. One medium that can facilitate this understanding is the art of those with disabilities. This possibility was revealed to me several years ago when I was invited through a friend to visit the studio of Madile Gardet and her art students in Paris.

For the past ten years, Gardet has taught a cadre of developmentally and/or psychiatrically disabled students to make art as a living. I was apprehensive about the visit, not knowing how I would react to the students or how they would react to the intrusion of a stranger. Also, my ability to speak and comprehend French is not strong. Would I embarrass myself? I nearly convinced myself that I should postpone my visit to some time in the future when I returned to Paris.

Fortunately, I accepted Mme. Gardet's invitation, and what I discovered at her studio was ten artists diligently at work. A calmness pervaded the room. The artists shared and commented on one another's work. The lack of competitiveness was at once apparent and refreshing. Then I noticed one artist working quietly in a far corner. I was captivated by his quiet concentration as he worked. His patience and steadiness at his canvas were immediately impressive. When Mme. Gardet introduced me to Gérard N'Guyen Phu Kai she told me that he did not speak, but he looked up from his canvas, smiled slightly, and then returned to his work. As I gazed at the beautiful interplay of mauve, purple, and subtle blues on his canvas, it suddenly didn't matter that we couldn't converse. It seemed to me that he was a natural colorist, blending many colors in a way that was entirely new and fresh, immediately inviting to the eye and the mind. Further, his art seemed instantly satisfying to him in its achievement. He saw my appreciation and looked pleased. I looked at his large portfolio at the CAT studio and later, at

Mme. Gardet's home and studio. The more I saw, the more Gérard's disability seemed beside the point—he is a true artist.

Gérard and his fellow artists have the wealth of their natural talent, and have helped to break down the barriers that would keep those who have psychiatric or developmental disabilities in a spiritual exile. Further, through their impassioned work they have shown what devotion and diligence can yield. The fact that they have worked together for ten years to develop their talents and also share their art and sell it in public forums and galleries affirms for all of us the character and worth of this endeavor. In fact, these artists have been invited by the Fashion House of Lanvin to create illustrations for the 75th Lanvin Anniversary celebration this month.

Gardet, an artist of distinction in her own right, said that working with these artists has revealed more than she had previously known about creativity: "These artists opened up to me a world I had never known. Their joy and their creativity have inspired me. Their passion and childlike spontaneity coupled with the tenacity of the adult make them unique artists. More than anything I have a profound feeling of admiration for them and enjoy, even envy, their creative undertakings. I have learned much from them. They have given back to me the joy of what it means to be an artist."

### Jeanine Young-Mason, RN, EdD

*Dr. Young-Mason* is professor and director of the Office for the Advancement of Nursing Education, School of Nursing, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and co-director of the Community Arts Health and Healing Project.

### REFERENCE

1. Un autre regard. Artists du CAT des beaux-arts. Resolux Editions. 20, rue Madame, Paris VI.



Artist Gérard N'Guyen Phu Kai is a 52-year-old Vietnamese man who has lived in Paris since he was 8 years old. (Paintings printed here by permission of Gérard N'Guyen Phu Kai.)

Lisa Dittrich, senior editor of *Academic Medicine*, is the editor of "Medicine and the Arts." (Unsolicited submissions are welcome.)

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