



LIVING ART: Romano Johnson and Lance Owens have forged a strong collaboration at ArtWorking (above left); Michael Jackson is a favorite subject for Johnson (above).

ARTISTIC OPPORTUNITIES

Two Madison-based organizations use art to help people with disabilities unleash their potential

BY KATIE VAUGHN

HOLDING A PAINTBRUSH IN HIS HAND, Romano Johnson stands up from his desk. He pivots to his left and approaches a large sheet of paper hanging on the wall. He pauses, then carefully applies red acrylic paint to the mouth of the man he's starting to create, a super-strong guy with muscles rippling under his dark skin.

When Johnson turns from his work in progress, he reveals his T-shirt covered with red marker lines, jeans covered in a vibrantly painted design and crisp zig zags cut into his hair. Johnson not only makes, but also wears and lives his art.

And the place where he creates much of it is ArtWorking, an organization that provides mentorship, training and studio space for artists with cognitive disabilities. It's a signature program of Work Opportunity in Rural Communities, Inc., a nonprofit employment agency that places people with developmental

disabilities into jobs in Dane County.

Lance Owens, director of ArtWorking, started the program nearly ten years ago out of a desire to give people with disabilities a chance to work in the arts, instead of in jobs helping out in kitchens, cleaning bathrooms or filing mail.

"Sometimes their skills in art are transcendent," Owens says. "Mano is a better painter than I am."

What's unique about ArtWorking is that the organization helps artists launch and sustain their own businesses making and selling their work. "I'm not aware of another in the country like us," Owens says. "We have an emphasis on art as employment, as microenterprise."

A giant production grid hangs on a wall of the ArtWorking building in Monona, a rambling space that hosts two large community rooms, eight semiprivate studios and shelves stocked

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INCLUSIVE CREATING:
VSA Wisconsin makes art making available regardless of ability.



Disability Pride Festival, Orton Park Festival and Art in the Park in Paoli. They also have a permanent display at Lakeside Street Coffee House and representation—with biographies, slideshows of artwork and videos—on the ArtWorking website.

Over on Madison's north side, VSA Wisconsin has also found success providing opportunities in the arts to people with disabilities. The statewide nonprofit, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2015, works to “expand the capabilities, confidence and quality of life for children and adults with disabilities by providing programs in dance, drama, creative writing, music and visual art.”

“Our mission is to provide arts programming for people with disabilities,” president Kathie Wagner says, adding that they served nearly two thousand people ranging in age from children to seniors through its 120 programs.

VSA Wisconsin contracts with professional artists to provide programming and residencies in schools and other organizations and offer classes in their own onsite art center. An artist might use poetry to help a child with literacy skills or adapt an instrument so an adult with limited mobility can participate in music making.

“People who have been told they should be spectators don't have to be,” Wagner says. “We take people from where they are, how they come to us. And we take them some distance to help them be sing-

ers or performers or visual artists. It's about the process, not the final product, in many cases.”

But sometimes the final product is pretty great, too. That's the case with *Visual Expressions*, VSA's annual exhibition of art made by adults and children with disabilities from around the state. Each spring, the juried show turns VSA's headquarters into a vibrant gallery, complete with an awards ceremony and ten works selected to join an exhibition that travels the state for three years.

Wagner's favorite part of the exhibition is seeing the artists feel confident and proud—and the artists' loved ones view them in a different light—because of what they've created.

A similar sense of purpose is fostered when the VSA Community Choir performs at Overture Center or a Madison Mallards baseball game. The artists feel good about what they're offering to the audience, Wagner says.

“They get recognized for what they can do,” she says. “They get to feel like they're contributing to the place where they live.”

Phil Porter, a well-known local painter with a developmental disability who works with ArtWorking and sells some paintings at VSA's gallery gift shop, says making and sharing his art has changed his life.

“I originally felt like I was an outcast to society,” he states on the ArtWorking website. “Now I feel like I'm part of society and make contributions like others, selling my art. I feel like my art is part of me and lets people know more about me.”

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EVERYONE IS WELCOME: VSA Wisconsin is a statewide nonprofit set on Madison's north side.

with paper, pencils, paints and other supplies. The grid keeps tabs on the projects the organization's twenty-seven artists are working on at the moment, assisted by seven staff members.

“The atmosphere in the studio is extraordinary,” Owens says. “It's laid-back, it's silly, it's not institutional. By and large, there's not a lot of pressure. People flourish.”

“A lot of the artists have done really well this year,” says Amy Elmer, looking up from a spreadsheet on her laptop. She handles all the bookkeeping for about eighty percent of ArtWorking's artists.

Some of Johnson's paintings can fetch as much as \$2,500, especially the large, glitter-embellished pieces that have become the thirty-six-year-old's signature, while the embellished clothing he sells can be a more affordable way for someone to start collecting his work.

“He's got a career ahead of him,” Owens says. “That's a career with a capital C.”

Some of the ArtWorking artists showcase their work at the MadCity Bazaar,