

## VISIONARY ART

## The Art of Anthony Newton

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Anthony Newton divides his time between working part time in a music studio and painting in his own studio.

"Usually, I have a sketch on a small piece of paper, and I take it to the canvas, and then I sketch it out on the canvas or I paint it directly," said Mr. Newton, who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder with schizoaffective disorder.

In 1997, he joined Fountain House, an organization dedicated to providing a community-based, restorative retreat in New York City for its mentally ill members. The organization's Fountain Gallery has displayed and sold Mr. Newton's work since 2001.

"I love what I do," he said. "When you love what you do, you don't think about it being a struggle."

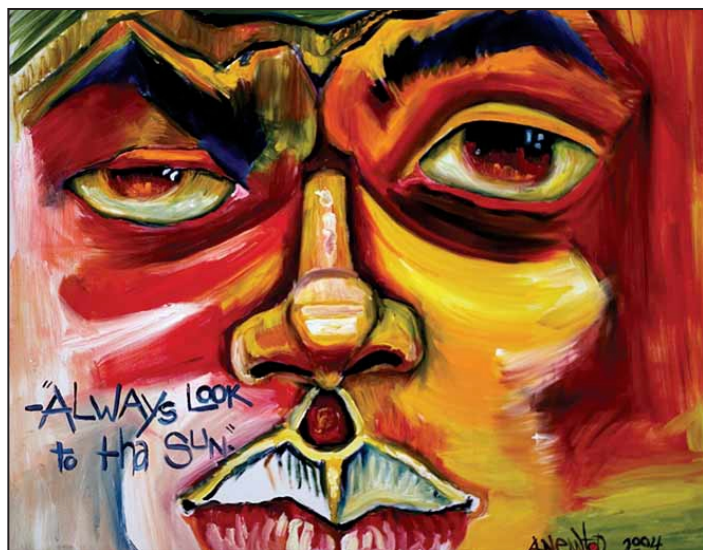
Mr. Newton's paintings depict

people who are much like he: a young man who relates to the hip-hop culture. Bold, vivid colors bring his work to life.

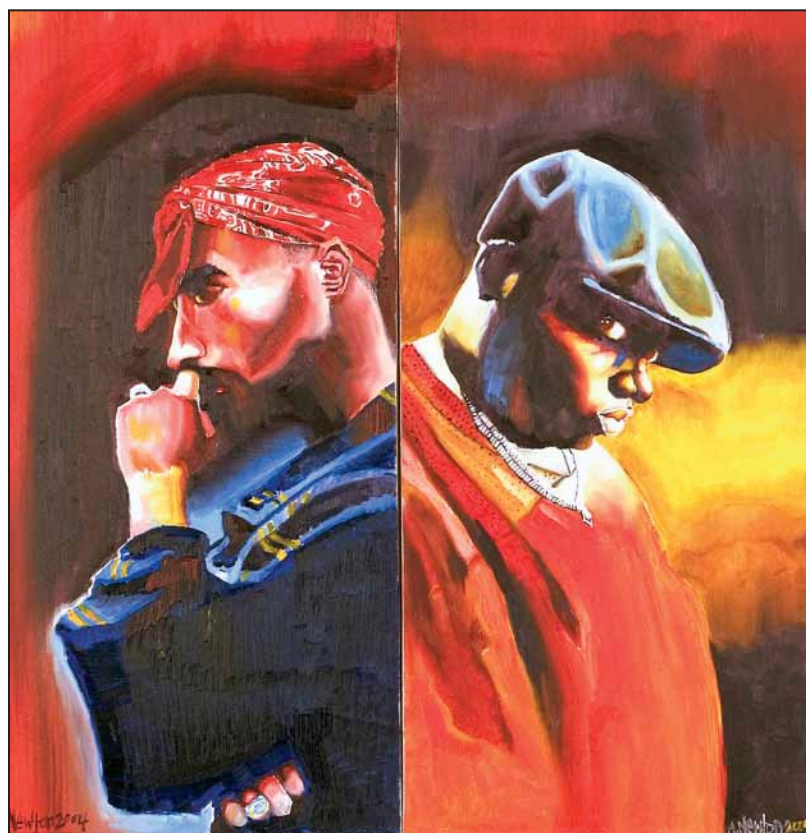
"As a young African American, my subject matter is usually young African American males," said Mr. Newton, who is 33. "Often, I'll exaggerate on the lips or the nose to test white America and their fears of black people. I want to show that, even though we have different features, we are all still beautiful and there is nothing to fear."

He's been exhibiting his work since at least 1988, including in group shows at the Art Culture Center in Brooklyn, the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, and the Deshong Museum of Art in Chester, Pa.—where he attended high school.

Mr. Newton also has a Web site, <http://anewtonpaintings.com>, displaying his art while a hip-hop soundtrack plays along. ■



Self, 2004



Tupac/Biggie, 2003

## The Artist's Reflections

**My parents separated** when I was a small child. My mother had four children and remarried my stepfather, who was in the service. We traveled throughout the United States and overseas. I got to see a lot. I had a better education than if I had stayed in one place, like a ghetto or urban area. But because we moved around a lot, I didn't have the friends I should have. I was so alone. After watching me take paper, draw and cut out action figures for hours and hours, my stepfather bought me an oil painting set. I just got into it from there.

**I was always doing art.** I won a lot of contests overseas, and a lot of contests in school. High school was easy; in elementary and junior high, I did really well. I was on the honor roll or honor roll mention, and I worked part time. But when I got to college I struggled, and it was intense. I couldn't afford the books. I was always in conflicts with professors and other students. I was developing these negative patterns. I was struggling. I couldn't find the answers to anything, and I was always blaming it on racism.

**I attended FIT** [the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City]. I was studying general illustration, because I like clothes, too. I tried to go home for a while. I tried to get my degree and work part time. It was during FIT that I had a breakdown. I didn't really understand what was happening to me. I just couldn't understand why it was all so hard. I blamed it on the city being so tough. My academic adviser at FIT encouraged me to see someone for a diagnosis, and I did.

**I work from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.** at Warner Music Group through [Fountain House's transitional employment program]. I do beverages. On each floor they have kitchens for the employees, and I put in coffee, spring water, napkins, and things of that nature. I fill them up all day. After I leave work, I go right to the studio and I paint. That's my second job.

**My studio is above** the recording studio. It's at HeavyTone records, and the owner and everyone are very nice. It's kind of a Motown environment. They have everything there. They have recording studios there; they do shoots there, graphics, photography. I'm a new type of talent for them. I'm kind of like a separate entity there. My bio on their Web site says I'm a "hip-hop surrealist."

**I play music**—hip hop in my studio. I play Nas. Usually, I play his first LP called "Stillmatic," 'cause I can relate to it. It reminds me of when I went back to Chester, Pennsylvania, and I had to go back to the projects. And it just reminds me of that time. It was a very special time of my life: living life and painting, struggling, going to school. I was just growing up. It was very rough—with drugs and crime. I smoked marijuana, and I drank. But nothing stopped me from my art.

**This hip-hop movement**—I'm going to paint it. I'm capturing it on canvas, and I'm kind of the only artist doing it right now. There is another artist out at Yale doing this, but he's also painting urban images, too—not the way I'm approaching it. My approach is a lot more personal, 'cause I was homeless at one time. It came about because my nervous breakdown. I think I've always had mental illness, but I didn't know it.

**Before my diagnosis,** I kept trying to work, and was getting part-time jobs here and there. But I was lousy at the jobs. I had been working since I was 12. But when I got to New York and worked, I just couldn't hold on to the jobs. Despite my diagnosis, I still felt pretty normal. I've never accepted my illness as a handicap. I don't have to look like I'm insane or incapable. I went to several physicians before I was diagnosed. Of course, it took a lot of dialogue on what drug was or wasn't working. I do a lot of reading, too, on my own, on dieting, eating, and spiritual beliefs.

**I'm taking Effexor and Abilify,** and one other drug. I feel fine. I'm not saying they're the miracle cures. I have to do a lot of work on my own. I do a lot of reading and affirmations, and positive thinking. Whenever I feel negative thoughts coming on, I change them. I read this somewhere. Let's say I hear my mother saying something negative, like I can't do this or that. I'll say I can do this. Or I'll say "I am special" or "I am beautiful," and I'll say it to myself 25 or 30 times in my brain. In other words, I'm controlling my thoughts. It works.

**I see a therapist/social worker,** and a nurse practitioner who works with a psychiatrist—who prescribes my medication. It took about 5 years to get everything in place. I saw a lot of students or psych residents at St. Luke's [Roosevelt Hospital Center in N.Y.]. I went through a lot of psychiatrists. I became friends with them, and then they would leave. Now I have talk therapy and medication. It's just the right mix.

**I'm engaged.** We haven't got the ring yet, though. My fiancée, Rebecca, is a musician. She does fusion-rock. She also does rhythm and poetry, and she sings and acts. She's very talented, and she inspired my latest piece.

**That painting, which I call "Rebecca,"** is more abstract. I was just trying to do something that was a masterpiece—to me. A lot of other stuff I did, I didn't think were masterpieces. The Biggie and Tupac paintings are masterpieces, too, but commercial ones. I define "masterpiece" according to the effort I put into a piece, and the time, the dedication, the feeling, and the response I get from people. I'm going in a new direction. I think you'll see more ability and fewer strokes. I try to make my pieces hypnotic.

As told to Decanna Franklin by Anthony Newton.