

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Leora Miller

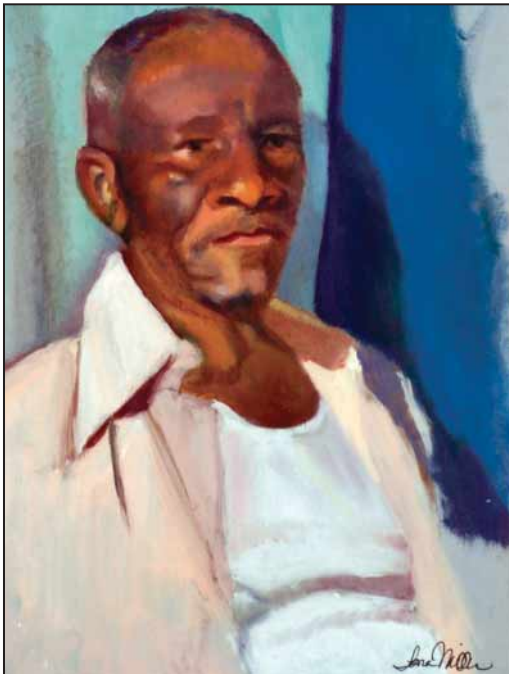
BY DEEANNA FRANKLIN
Associate Editor

Leora Miller derives inspiration for her paintings from the work of 19th and 20th century painters Edward Hopper, Vincent Van Gogh, and especially Käthe Kollwitz. Kollwitz's work depicted the impoverished and working poor of her native Germany just prior to the World Wars. Her unflinchingly bleak drawings proved inspirational to Ms. Miller while she was in high school, trying to cope with adolescence and her own depression.

Like several other artists profiled in this column, Ms. Miller is a member of Fountain House, a clubhouse open to people with mental illness in New York City. She has had exhibitions at the Fountain Gallery and continues to find support and a cherished sense of belonging with her fellow Fountain Gallery artists.

Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Ms. Miller came to depend on her art to help her weather bouts of severe depression. Her work as an artist has sustained her through several colleges and art schools, life in her native Chicago and her current home, New York, and through several employers. She eschewed classes in modern art until she had thoroughly mastered and nurtured the basics of her craft, particularly drawing.

Ms. Miller is also an accomplished photographer, and she uses photographs to give voice to a different aspect of her personality and as another way of connecting with the world around her. Her surreptitious sketches at amusement parks and on subway trains offer another way of studying her favorite subject: people going about their everyday lives. ■



Portrait of a Man, charcoal on paper, 1988



Blonde Woman Against Green, oil on canvas board, 1990

The Artist's Reflections

Everyone who has a diagnosis is different. The way it [mental illness] manifests itself for everyone is different. Certain medications make some people very sick, physically, and do things to your thinking that you wouldn't expect. And other people don't react that way to the same medication at the same dosage, even with the same diagnosis. So I think doctors have to really respect patients telling them, "Such and such makes me vomit, or gives me headaches or clouds my thinking."

I told a doctor, "I think I'm bipolar," and he said, "No, you're not." And he kept me on medications that made me vomit profusely and constantly. I had to leave my job because of it, and I couldn't do my art anymore—I was almost fainting. I was doing theatrical promotions, but I was doing it outdoors through the heat of the summer. I ended up in the emergency room twice in the same week from physical problems from the medication. You have to work with your doctor and keep telling them everything that you're feeling, physically and mentally, so they can alter your medications or change them. The side effects prompted me to leave that doctor. I don't think they can give you a bipolar diagnosis unless they've seen you in a manic state. A lot of time bipolar people won't go to see a psychiatrist when they're manic because they feel great. They don't feel depressed so they're real happy. That was the case for me, but occasionally he did see me when I was up the scale—maybe not psychotically manic, but up the scale. He still wouldn't diagnose me as bipolar, though.

I wasn't able to work when I was in a full-blown mania, but when I was in a hypomania, yes. In fact, with hypomania, I had a different visual take on things. As an artist, you're very visual, and I would notice things like color were much heightened. Maybe I did some of these paintings when I was in a hypomanic state—maybe the ones with the most intense color.

I'm from Chicago, and I came to New York in 1986. I had just done everything I wanted to do in Chicago. The Art Institute of Chicago is my favorite art museum in the world, but I didn't want to study there, because at that time the emphasis there was on very modern art, and I wanted to learn basics. I really wanted to learn how to draw well, and then use the drawing ability to be able to paint, realistically. I think once you can paint realistically, then you can diverge into any style, but you have to have that foundation.

My dad was a commercial artist, and there are several artists on his side of the family. I didn't realize it until later, but he was proud of the art I would make as a kid. His friends would see drawings that I did lying around and he'd say, "Yeah, my daughter did that, and if she decides to become an artist I'm going to break both her arms." He thought he was being funny, but a little kid hearing that thinks, "Oh my God, he's going to break both my arms." So I thought, "I can't become an artist when I grow up because my daddy thinks it's terrible."

I was diagnosed at 19 with clinical depression. I couldn't get out of bed one day, and my parents finally dragged me to a psychiatrist that my dad's sister was seeing. The antidepressants never

helped; I guess, because I was bipolar even then. No one recognized my manias. When I had them they just thought I was really talkative and friendly and eccentric, but not crazy. People often think artists are eccentric and maybe a little crazy, anyway, even if they're not mentally ill.

It's harder to create when I'm on medication, but I stay on it. I don't ever want to be hospitalized again. I don't ever want to get psychotic again. And if I can live the rest of my life without serious depression, of course, I want that. I hate that I'm less creative when I'm on medication. There is a difference in my work—I don't have the same drive to produce, and I don't have the same inspiration. When I was in high school I discovered a German artist, and maybe I was attracted to her because I was very depressed and a lot of her work is very depressing. Her name is Käthe Kollwitz. She created a lot of paintings during the World War II era. Just amazing style and sensitivity, but very depressing. When you're a depressed teenager you're drawn to all of that angst. I thought her work was overpowering, and beautiful, and sensitive.

I used to take photographs of things that might make most people a little uncomfortable, or things you wouldn't see if you lived in the suburbs. I would go to neighborhoods where, being a white girl, I stood out; places not a lot of white people would go. I didn't care, and I would shoot whatever I wanted. I always carried my camera with me.

I love Coney Island. I used to go there a lot to draw because people are playing all these games and stuff. They're not aware that you're watching them. I'd go there with a sketch pad and I'd sketch. It's really good to be able to sketch from life. When people aren't posing you've got to be able to work fast. I used to sketch in the bus terminal when they had an area with a lot of seats, and homeless people would be there, and people waiting for buses would fall asleep. Some times I wanted to be very solitary, but to teach myself how to draw I'd want to work from life. And if you can't afford to pay models, you have to go where you'd find people.

I just do sporadic odd jobs now. I'm trying to get disability, but there's a very, very long wait these days. It's been 2 years since I applied. They are rejecting everyone the first time around. If you don't have a lawyer the first time around, you're not going to get it with a mental illness. I applied on my own, and I got denied and had to wait about a year to hear that. I appealed, and I finally found a pro-bono lawyer. So I've been living on sales of some of my artwork and odd jobs, and working for an old boss who occasionally has some work for me. The one boss that I did tell that I have this . . . you know.

I'm taking a fairly low dose of Seroquel. I begged my doctor to reduce my dose, because I was having very serious cognitive and memory problems, especially with my short-term memory. My memory started to go bad when I was put on Seroquel. I don't think there were any ill effects [from the higher dosing], except my memory hasn't come back yet. I'm taking Neurontin and Trileptal, and I'm taking something for my thyroid, too.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Leora Miller.