

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Dr. Leonard Aschenbrand

Dr. Leonard Aschenbrand spends many weekends taking photographs, scouting locations for good shots, and developing the pictures himself.

"Photography is a way of being expressive, and it's relaxing," said Dr. Aschenbrand, who has been taking photographs for almost 40 of his 58 years—since his father bought him a Nikon camera when he was 19. "I took to it immediately."

Dr. Aschenbrand had a busy pediatric practice when he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1995. At first, the mania side of the illness gave him more energy, making it easier to practice with enthusiasm. But by 1999, his illness had become more severe, so he decided to surrender his medical license.

Throughout these challenges, Dr. Aschenbrand's love of photography has remained constant. "My art wasn't affected at all," said Dr. Aschenbrand, who has been engaged in digital photography for the last 6 years or so. "There are many artists, musicians, actors, who have a diagnosis of bipolar who are hypomanic, and they find that the extra energy makes them perform better."

Based in New York, Dr. Aschenbrand is a member of Fountain House, the professional self-help program, run by people living with mental illness. He has sold some of his work through its affiliate, the Fountain Gallery, and through benefit exhibitions.

Much of his work is displayed online, and he enjoys entering it in photography competitions. Dr. Aschenbrand has won peer-reviewed contests on Dailyawards.com and Betterphoto.com. Some of his photographs can be seen online at www.betterphoto.com and at www.fountaingallerynyc.com.

—Deeanna Franklin



Solitude, 2003



Butterfly on Yellow Flower, 2005

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. LEONARD ASCHENBRAND

THE ARTIST'S REFLECTIONS

I vary widely with my subjects—landscapes, people. I have done a bunch of macro photography on insects, and I've done flowers. There's a photo of a water lily at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. I've shot it about four different times. I walk around and just look for something that looks like it would make a good picture. I visualize it. That's the way most photographers do it. I don't do studio work. I don't do weddings. I don't do bar mitzvahs. I'm doing it as a hobby, not as a business, although I've sold some of my work.

Betterphoto.com is a contest, and I've won first prize on that twice. I got a silver medal from them. I've won "Daily" awards at www.Dailyawards.com. The way their contest works is other photographers look at your photographs and score them. If you have the highest score for the day, then your photograph wins that category for the day. I've won a bunch of those. I purposely look for sites where my photos will be judged. I get a kick out of winning a prize or getting a critique or a certificate. Also, I see other people's work and some of it is bad; some of it is good, and some is excellent. I try to emulate the ones I feel are excellent.

I've always had my own darkroom. I did my own developing of both the negatives and the print—both in black and white, and color, which is something most people can't do. I had a lot of hobbies, though. I used to be an amateur radio operator, too. Photography is just one of those fun things. Sometimes you just gravitate to something and find it fun.

Guess who has the most stigma against mental illness? Other physicians. I really think so. This comes from comments that have been made that I either heard of or they were made to me directly. Until the diagnosis had been made I didn't notice the stigma, and even after that nobody else noticed. If you were functioning normally nobody noticed. It's like having anxiety. If you're doing your work and you're doing it well, nobody notices it.

I, as a physician, had the stigma about mental illness in patients, too. It was something that was not an illness like an ulcer or gastroenteritis. I didn't see it as a chronic illness, and that's my fault. I saw it as a weakness, something that you had control over—which you don't. It's not a personal failing. Being bipolar is not the nicest thing in the whole world, not when it's bad. Colleagues didn't understand it. Psychiatrists understand it. The psychiatrist I have now understands it very well.

I've seen people's artwork where I could tell they had schizophrenia. Very, very troubled artwork—by the subject matter and the way they did it. Even if it's something they weren't public about; just by looking at the art work, I could tell. Take a look at my photographs. Does it look like I have a mental illness? You would never know by looking at my photographs. When I was really sick with bipolar, I didn't do any photography. I didn't want to do anything. I was so depressed. When I finally got on the right cocktail of medicines, which is a hard thing to do for people who have bipolar, then I went back to photography. It took 3 years to find the right cocktail for me.

I take Ativan, Effexor, Depakote, and Abilify. Abilify is fine. Everybody talks about having adverse side effects to it, but I don't have any. Matter of fact, if I stop taking it, I notice a difference. There's about a 50% success rate with Abilify and bipolar. I went through so many antidepressants I could not begin to tell you.

The picture I call 'Deep in Thought' was taken at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. I used to go there quite a bit. I took a bunch of photos of the plants, and this one particular water lily that I thought was very beautiful. This lady and a gentleman were sitting at different tables. The photo "Yearn to Read" won first prize in a contest. The lady just seemed so deep in thought, like she had nothing better to do except contemplate the last 75 years. I want the photos to be spontaneous so I try not to let on that I'm taking their photograph, because some people either don't want their photos taken or you lose the spontaneity of the moment.

'Solitude' is of a boat on a lake at sunset. You can see the moon in the upper left hand corner, and it's got the beautiful coloring in the sky. The boat is just floating on the water. I've been accused of putting that boat into the picture, but it hasn't been doctored.

I don't carry a camera with me all the time. I make plans to go out with a camera; mostly on weekends or if it's a nice sunny day, I'll go out. I've seen places where I think there is a picture, and I'll say, "There's a photograph here someplace." And then I photograph it, and I don't like it, and I'll come back with another idea of how to photograph. And lo and behold, you get a decent photograph. Some photos don't work out, and you have to let it go. There's a place around here, Meadowmere Park, which is sort of a boat basin. I thought there was a photograph there somewhere. I took photographs of it at night, day, sunrise, sunset, and it just doesn't work. I never saw the right composition. It never had the feel of a nice quiet marina. I've photographed it at least 10 times already. I will not put up junk in competitions or in displays.

I critique other photographers. I look for composition, color contrast, depth of field, how sharp the photograph is, and whether it evokes some emotion in me. A good photograph can be one that makes you angry, but it has to evoke some sort of emotion. If you just look at it and say "So what," then the photograph has failed. My photos seem to hit those marks. In the "Benefit of Life" exhibitions, the first year I sold six out of six photographs, the second year I sold six out of nine, and this year I sold four out of five. This means other people are spending money to have my photographs.

I've yet to win any money in these competitions, but I've won letters and things of merit. I'm on disability, and photography takes up a couple of days a week, mostly weekends. There's a plant nursery nearby, and I made a deal with the guy that he would let me photograph in the plant nursery if I gave him a copy of the photographs. He put them up.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Dr. Leonard Aschenbrand.