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Blind painter shares 'vision'

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By Matthew **Zabel** Staff Writer

Caption: University of North Texas student John **Bramblitt** works on one of his paintings Nov. 16 at his home on Hickory Street.

It's all about perceptions

Several pairs of eyes stare down from the living room wall in John Bramblitt's apartment.

One pair belongs to a woman, and a lock of her black hair dangles between her eyes.

Another pair belongs to a wide-eyed baby, **Bramblitt** said, though some have thought it was a frail old man's.

A third pair of eyes belongs to a woman and features a lot of color.

In his studio at the back of his Denton apartment, **Bramblitt** paints another set of eyes, the next addition to his series called Perceptions.

"When we see something with our eyes, we think we understand it," said **Bramblitt**, 35. "I wanted people to think about how people perceive things. We all know that we all see things differently."

Bramblitt has never seen his own work.

He is blind.

He lost his sight six years ago after a series of seizures that had plagued him since he was a child.

About 3 1/2 years ago, **Bramblitt** picked up a paintbrush and began to paint, his way of "shoving my disability right back in the face of God or nature or whatever."

But instead he found that painting helped him cope with his disability.

"When I first lost my sight, I was angry," **Bramblitt** said. "Until I started painting, I didn't even realize how angry I was. Painting was a way to get my vision back."

Bramblitt paints with oils because he can tell the colors apart.

Oil colors each have a different consistency, **Bramblitt** said. White is thick like toothpaste; black is thin. Differences among the colors in the middle of the spectrum are harder to describe, he said, but he's learned to tell them apart, too.

"One day I went to the art store and felt them all," he said. "I started with white, black and red and learned those well."

Then he added more colors as he could.

He begins by drawing an outline of his subject with puffy paint, which leaves raised lines on the canvas. When that dries, he can feel his way around the canvas as he paints between those lines.

His work requires intense concentration, so much so that he sometimes breaks out in a sweat.

"When I started painting, I didn't think anybody would see my painting," he said. "I didn't want people to know I was blind because that would color how they looked at my painting."

"But to hear that people liked them, that still blows my mind."

When he is not painting, **Bramblitt** is studying at the University of North Texas. He plans to finish his Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences in May. Then he plans to go to graduate school at UNT to study English.

"I'm a nerd. I love to read, so school is usually pretty easy," he said. "I just enjoy it."

To help him study, **Bramblitt** has some bells and whistles on his computer. One software program reads aloud what's on his screen. Another allows him to scan in notes, and his computer reads them back to him.

It was during his second year at UNT when **Bramblitt** went blind, though he had been losing his sight for several years.

The semester before he lost his sight, he took an astronomy class.

"I saw Saturn and its rings and Mars; one semester later, I wouldn't have gotten to see that," **Bramblitt** said.

Ron Venable, UNT's director of disability accommodations, said more than a dozen UNT students this semester are totally blind and more than 50 are legally blind, meaning their vision is worse than 20/200.

Painting is only one hobby blind people can pick up, he said. Others have picked up video games, or a contact football game called "beep ball."

Venable has known **Bramblitt** only two years, but he said **Bramblitt** has coped with his disability as well as anyone could.

Bramblitt is upbeat and a joy to work with, Venable said.

"He's got to be one of the most outstanding advocates we have," Venable said. "He says to people, 'Maybe I don't have the sight I used to have, but look what I can do.' We're very proud to have him at UNT."

Bramblitt plans to marry Jacqi Serie, his girlfriend of more than three years, on March 17.

She said living with someone who is blind is not as difficult as one might think.

Bramblitt has memorized his way around his apartment, so at home it's hard to even tell he is blind.

When they are out at the grocery store or other places he is less familiar with, she has to help guide him more.

"It's a good excuse to constantly hold hands," Serie said.

Serie, who holds an art degree from UNT, said **Bramblitt** has developed his own artistic style even though he has not been to art school.

"In his work, I can almost see a geographic mapping of each composition he is trying to portray," Serie said. "The blocks of color almost make it like an aerial photo."

While painting has helped him cope, **Bramblitt** is anxious to help other people cope with their disabilities, too.

He's trying to revive a local committee on disabilities to help address the needs of people with disabilities in Denton. And meeting many of those needs doesn't have to carry a high price tag, he said.

For example, just keeping sidewalks clear is a big help to blind people and people in wheelchairs, he said.

He also has workshops where he shows sighted children how he paints. Then he lets them try it blindfolded. After only a little practice, some of them get very good at it, he said.

"I believe everybody is disabled in some way," **Bramblitt** said. "Disabled just means there's something you can't do. Everybody has something they can't do."

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