

## **Sensing the World: Unexpected Ways We Find Art Everywhere Everyday**

By Jordana Mendelson

My son Aedan is ten years old. A few months ago, the most spectacular drawing of a lion came home in his backpack. With an orange fine tip marker, Aedan had drawn a large circle, with protruding stick arms and legs. The lion's mouth was oval, with vertical lines joining the top and bottom lip. The paired round eyes were topped with eyebrows, also adorned with close vertical lines. The outline of the lion's body – the large oval – was pierced with more repeating lines. Next to the lion, a mass of orange ink seemed to encroach and highlight the lion, differentiating the "realistic" figure from the knotted overlay of lines, swirls and cross hatch that usually define Aedan's artwork.



I am accustomed to my son's unique style of drawing. He works through tensile, dense overlays, and thick impasses of finely drawn lines that often push against the page. He always seems aware of the page's limits, never trespassing his paper, whether it is a small scrap or large poster size. His usual style of drawing is abstract, at once meticulous and free-form, attentive to limits while also loose and carefree. He draws with his own set of rules, conventions, and practices, ones that he has devised for himself. If I see tens of drawings at his school, I immediately know which is his. He definitely has his own way of sensing the world, and rendering it.

My husband and I have never tried to censor or redirect Aedan's drawing. At most we pass him a selection of papers and pens. He usually has very firm opinions about what he wants to draw with and when. He often draws while watching a video and seemingly translates out the images and sounds, stories and words he watches into some of the most beautiful, intricate representations I have ever seen. I continue to be amazed at how he can seemingly dictate directly from mind to pen a drawing that he appears to already have a plan for. He can do this in a matter of seconds, or sit for an hour working on the same piece.

For this reason, too, the lion surprised me. It was one of the few times he brought home a drawing that seemed to be of something concrete, and he named it "lion" – I did not. Indeed, if you look at the drawing you may not see a lion in it, but then you realize that the repeated lines that make up the mane, the teeth, and the furious brow embody all that a lion might. That lion is both frightful and wonderful, ecstatic and fixed, calm and ferocious. I love this lion, I treasure it, and yet I don't admire it any more than the more abstract lines that share its page. I have come to realize that when my son draws, he puts on paper what is in his mind,

the rhythms of his thoughts, and the imaginings of his realities, and I am so grateful that he turns to art as a way to communicate.

In our house, drawing is a free zone, a space where everything is possible, nothing is restricted, and he gets to set the rules. It is, in short, the space where the limiting functions of his disabilities – as they might be defined by the numerous evaluations, assessments and tests that he is given (Aedan was born with Down syndrome and has ADHD) – give way to the limitless potential of his imagination. Art does this for him, and it also does it for us, his parents. We hold no prejudice up to his drawing. Instead, through drawing and the many aspects of making art, Aedan's world opens to him.

A disclaimer about the motor that no doubt drives the enthusiasm for our son's drawings. I am an art historian and my husband is an artist. Aedan has been immersed in the worlds of art that intersect our professional and personal interests since before he was born. When I was pregnant with Aedan, I flew to Spain to install an art exhibition. His foot pressed against me in utero during one of my husband's performances at an East Village gallery. He has accompanied me on numerous trips for research and meetings at large and small museums and has been treated to more trips across the Atlantic than most kids his age. He played in a crib during his father's studio open house in Dumbo, and a few years ago he and his dad had their art exhibited together in a show called "Difference Frequencies". He spent the time taking photographs of his friends and family standing in front of his work, while he was also photographed proudly showing off his accomplishments (<https://www.upworthy.com/meet-the-father-son-duo-sharing-their-disability-experiences-through-art>).

Our family values art. I hope we have showed him that we value *his* art. When we hang one of his drawings up on our walls at home, and then he sees that same drawing hung up on the walls of an exhibition, I hope he learns that the value of art, as a means to communicate, to share ideas, is not just an activity to be kept to oneself. The very best part of making art is sharing it with others, allowing others to see you, your ideas, and what you value. At the opening night of his exhibition, one of his classmates stood in awe before one of his pieces, remarking: "You were allowed to use only the color black for your whole drawing, that is so cool." His fellow third grader noticed that Aedan broke the rules, was celebrated for it, and had built a whole repertoire of drawings around it. Instead of being the kid who has an aide, who is a slow reader, whose words are not always intelligible, who wears orthotics, who has to sit in the front of the class, and who gets pulled out of class for therapies, Aedan was a celebrity among his peers, a kind of art-hero, the kid whose drawings were being fêted and admired by his friends and family.

Liking art, admiring artists, and supplying paper and pens, is, however, not enough. Making art just within the confines of our home is not enough.

The other important piece that has helped fuel Aedan's interest in drawing and making art has come from the community and from school. Since he was little, we have brought Aedan to every program we could at local museums and cultural centers, and we are lucky to live in New York City, where there are bountiful opportunities to experience art: the Children's Museum of Art's STRIPES program, the Museum of Modern Art's Create Ability program, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Access program, the Lincoln Center's Passport program, the New Museum's family programs, Daniel's Music Foundation, to name a few. We have also sought out classes at local community centers like the Chinatown YMCA and Gigi's

Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Center. He has been fortunate to be supported by many art and movement teachers, both in the local community school PS3 that he attended for three years, and since at his District 75 school P94, where the visual and performing arts form a central component of the school's curriculum.

A final note about what I have learned about Aedan from viewing and making art with him. The path he chooses to take through a museum, through an adult-lead program, or in response to a prompt from a teacher or a book are often not the ones that I might choose or the ones that are dictated to him. I have learned that he has his own path in mind, his own sense of discovery, and his own finely tuned sense of observation. He applies this not just to drawing, but also to his being in the world, how he interfaces with nature, and how he understands everything around him. He can stand over a pond of water watching it ebb and flow for hours. He can pick up a magnifying lens and track through our apartment and look at every inch of it until he moves on to another activity. He can turn away from the lesson being given by the adult in the room and tune in to any number of other fascinating amusements, from the water fountain with the hidden switch to the cast away materials meant for the trash. His sense of discovery is boundless, and we as the adults around him need to pause, take a minute, and see him not just as a student, but also as a teacher. When I have let his sense of observation and art take over, I have been lead inevitably to new ideas, sometimes uncomfortable and challenging, always surprising.

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