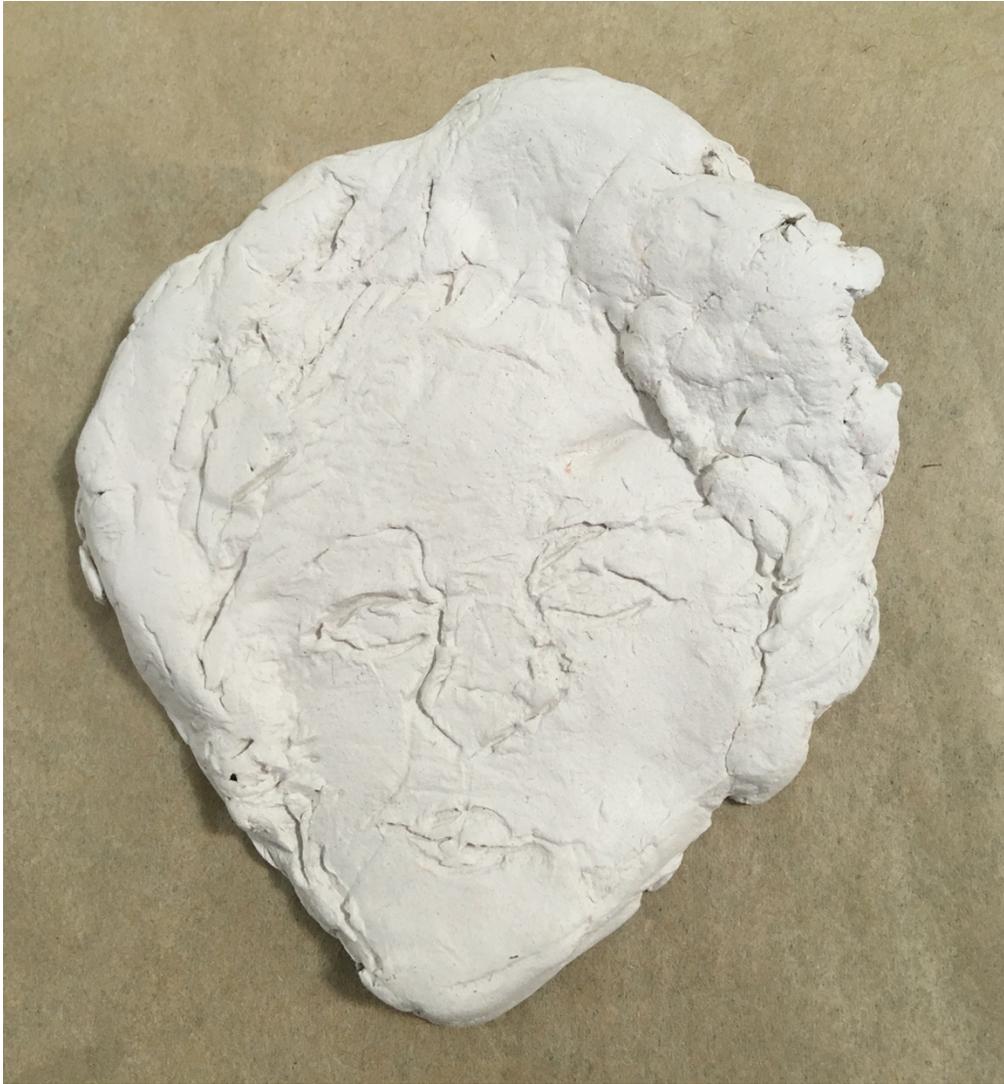


# Making more than Art Accessible

By Jennifer Vignone



Bev - Self Portrait, Plaster, 2019; photo: J. Vignone

Bev and her daughter, Nancy, make the trip every third Sunday to the museum. Each stand about 4 foot, 6 inches or so. Bev, the mother, would be taller than Nancy except for how age has curved her body into an apostrophe. She has been through a great deal in her lifetime. And she still has a lot to manage with Nancy. They come for the Special Needs Workshop.

The workshop is different each time, with educators who guide an open-ended drop-in studio where visitors can participate to whatever degree they are able in the art project that day. Typically, parents or guardians bring the children in. For many parents, this accessibility is a welcome respite. Once their children — who range in age five through 40 — are settled in, the

parents can be found sitting in chairs in the Cafe, or on benches in the Atrium, eyes closed, resting, getting a break from their uniquely emotional routine.

At first, it appeared that Bev and Nancy had the same degree of challenges that brought them into the program. They would emerge from their cab — with wheeled tote bags and heads down — check in at the front desk and then trundle up to the studio. A few hours later they would come back down, wait for their cab, and we would not see them again until the next workshop. They rarely missed one.

After a couple of months of working at the museum, I started to converse with them — just “Hello”, “Good to see you”, “Nice day” — the usual chatter. After a while, they started to respond. Nancy came in one day to talk excitedly about her new phone. Bev said “hello” but not much else. Nancy clearly was the louder, chattier of the two. Visit after visit over the period of months, Nancy shared more about her phones (she had an ongoing love-hate relationship with cell phone technology). Bev remained cordial, but distant, allowing Nancy the opportunity to talk.

One day, Bev appeared behind me. It was only midway through the workshop and I was startled. I asked if everything was okay, as Nancy was not with her. She said she had something for me. It was a holiday greeting for Christmas. She made a few and one was intentionally for me. I was surprised, touched, and honored. When I thanked her, she explained the significance of the imagery to me and how she did it and why. Little by little she would stop by and just say hello, tell me a bit more about herself, and show me her artwork. She had a twinkle in her eye.

I realized something. “Special Needs” had a different meaning than the usual with her. Bev’s need was not just to get Nancy to the workshop, but to have more interaction and contact for herself. She wanted it known that she was ‘Bev’ — a singular person — a woman with her own story and life outside of the once-every-three-weeks half of Bev and Nancy. Her artwork meant a great deal to her. She told me one day that she “saw things” that came out through her work that she could not express in any other way. She loved faces and drawing them. One day she presented me with a plaster cast of her face. I could see how important these pieces of her were. Eventually she told me about the struggles in her life and her many years of supporting the two of them on her own. One day she shared that at times on the street with Nancy they would fall prey to people who treated them poorly, rudeness, insult — and pushing through her fear to stand up for herself. I learned about all the medical conditions she now had and how that compromised her physically and how it also affected how people perceived her. Their impact was plain to see. Being Nancy’s mother was also challenging. There were times, as with any parent, that she needed her own space. But it was hard for her to get that. The workshop was one of the only times where she could emerge as herself and create.

At times I would see them at a neighborhood market. They would be either shopping in an aisle or getting into their cab. I would say “Hello ladies!” When I would next see them at the museum, she would make a point of telling me why she might have been struggling with something, not

that attentive, or looking a little more fragile than other times. It was important to her that I know these nuances.

One Sunday she came down in the middle of the workshop. She said she needed time from Nancy who was driving her crazy. This was the bluntest she had ever been. We looked at her drawing of portraits and she explained the expressions to me and her creative process. She started to walk away and then came back to say, "And another thing about me...I have a bachelor's degree...I studied education and special needs..." And it all came together for me. I was humbled by this woman who had a life of dealing with so much. And I saw how much this outlet meant to her. Art for her was the release of the everyday into her creative soul, allowing all that was bottled up inside of her to come through. It was pieces of a life that she had not gotten to live, perhaps, the way she had once dreamed that she would.

Art and making it accessible on whatever level it can be brought to each person for them to experience in the way most beneficial to them is a critical part of an individual's growth and survival. It needs to get to those who struggle on levels most of us will never be able to comprehend. Not all art is great. Not all of it will endure like a Matisse, Picasso, Rembrandt, Frankenthaler, Soutine — whoever speaks the most to you. But it allows the mind to expand and connect and reach into the universal. And this keeps us alive, lets us tell our story, reminds us of our humanity, ultimately connecting us all.