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Mackenzie Thorpe's Art "from the Heart"

Once, Mackenzie Thorpe's world felt so small that he couldn't imagine a happy place for himself in it. But at the age of 21, after six years in the workforce, he decided to quit his job as a shipyard laborer in northern England, so that he could pursue his passion for drawing and painting. Although the path was rough, his world expanded at every turn.

Now an internationally renowned artist, he spent much of his childhood and young adulthood battling the humiliation and despair caused by unidentified dyslexia. Like many dyslexic adults of his generation, Mackenzie, who was born in 1956, was ridiculed as a child by teachers and peers as "thick" and "lazy" because of his reading disability. He remembers taking refuge in drawing — "anything and everything." Because his family had little money — he was the oldest of seven children and his father worked in the shipyards — his sketch pads were whatever he could scrounge for free, often cigarette packages.



Sculpting "Lean on Love"

Very much against the odds, Mackenzie's creative energy survived those early struggles. "There's something inside," he says. "I don't know what it is. I believe I've got a job to do. When I was in the shipyards, cleaning out the hull of a ship, or whatever I was doing, I believed, 'I shouldn't be doing this; I'm supposed to be doing something else.' And finally I said, 'I'm **not** doing this anymore.'"

Encounter with a Supportive Teacher

After leaving the shipyards, he attended a local arts-based college that emphasized vocational training. One day, after several months of classes, in a state of exhaustion and overwhelming frustration with his studies, he collapsed at school. "I literally hit the deck," he recalls. "And this teacher found me, and he gave me a cup of sweet tea. I started crying, and I told him, 'I want to be an artist!' Because at this school you had to do everything but art — you made furniture, you made toys, you made films. Everything was geared to getting a job."

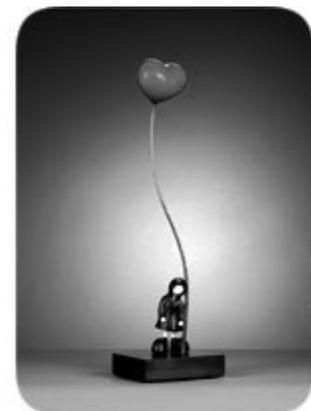
That was how he met the adult who became his "guru" and helped change the direction of his life. The teacher told him to come to his office the next day. "I went in," Mackenzie says, "and he told me, 'There's ten pounds (about \$20). Go get me some fruits and vegetables. There are three canvases over there. [Using the fruits and vegetables as subjects,] I want you to paint me a Degas, a Cézanne, and a Thorpe.'" He gave Mackenzie three weeks to complete the paintings, excusing him from all his regular classes.

Mackenzie worked diligently on the paintings at night after classes were over, and in the mornings between 5 and 9. "He came in when I was right at the end of the assignment," he remembers, "and he said, 'All right, son, there's a college in London (Byam Shaw Art College), the only college like this in the country. You don't have to be able to read and write and speak Japanese; as long as you can draw, you're in.'"

"And he said to me, 'You know, Mackenzie, other people can talk better than you or they can write better. Maybe they can draw more accurately than you can, but they're not going to be artists because they haven't got the imagination. They can't go to that kind of school — and none of them will work as hard as you.' So, he made a massive difference in my life."

Before his artistic gifts were recognized and encouraged by this compassionate teacher, Mackenzie says he often felt almost invisible — as though he had no face. "I used to walk around believing that I didn't have a face, that I didn't have a shadow. And when some people in my life like my wife — she must have been one of the first people — said I had a face, I didn't believe them. It was like I didn't think I was good enough to have one. When you see my work [depicting people] with no faces, that's because I didn't believe I had one."

Not all of the humans and animals depicted in Mackenzie's paintings and sculptures are faceless — far from it. Sometimes bold, bright, and whimsical,



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"Lean on Love"

sometimes muted and somber, his work expresses a full range of human feelings.

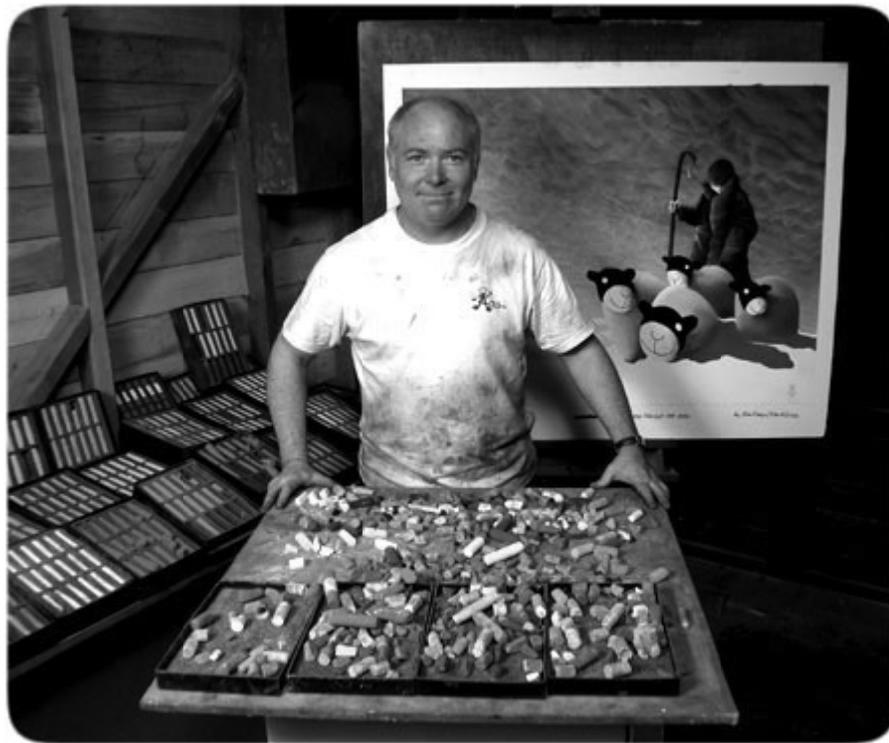
In some paintings, tiny, hunched over people are dwarfed by a smoky industrial landscape like the one he grew up in. In other works, a round, sunny face dominates the piece. The title of a book about his art, *Mackenzie Thorpe: From the Heart*, captures the essence of his work.

Dyslexia — the Family Connection

Mackenzie didn't discover that he was dyslexic until his younger brother was identified with dyslexia in 1972, the year it was recognized by educational authorities in Britain — and the year Mackenzie left school. But, understanding that you have a disability and accepting it are very different things. When his son, Owen, now 21, was identified with dyslexia as a young child, Mackenzie found he couldn't face the problem. "He'd just started school," Mackenzie recalls, "so he was like five or six years old. And he comes home and he doesn't remember his name, doesn't know what he had for lunch, doesn't know what day it is — and they were already calling him lazy and stupid, just like I had been.

"I just felt such a failure," he remembers. "I married a beautiful woman, she gave me a beautiful child, and I made him dyslexic. So I buried my head in the sand." Luckily, his wife, Susan, had a different reaction. "Susan didn't bury her head in the sand because Susan didn't see it that way," Mackenzie says. "She saw, 'My son has a problem, and I'm going to help him sort this out.' So she went in there with machine guns blazing and got things done." Currently, Owen is attending university and competing internationally in martial arts.

Slowly, as his acceptance of dyslexia grew, he realized that both his father and grandfather had probably been dyslexic, as well. "I seldom talked to my dad about it," Mackenzie says, "because the only thing I ever saw in writing from my dad was a love letter to my mom he wrote when he was 20 years old, and it was just a mess. And his dad never wrote at all."



Courtesy of the Chase Group www.chaseart.com

Encouraging Others

Since his post-college days in London, when he had a small studio and retail outlet for his art, Mackenzie has reached out to help children create art. When neighborhood kids gathered outside the London space to watch him work, he invited them in and, eventually, taught them to draw and paint. Using the same standards he sets for his own work, Mackenzie urges the kids he works with to draw and paint "what they feel," not just what they see. He's also taught in settings where helping children discover feelings is the focus, and creating art their means for doing so.

In 2004, he traveled over several months to Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the U.S., offering art classes exclusively to children with identified learning disabilities. His hope is to gather and exhibit internationally a collection of

their art from the classes, to demonstrate “how much they have to offer.” “You know,” he adds, “everyone told me I **couldn’t**, and I believed it. It was such a waste. If you tell them they **can** do it, they’ll believe that.” So, he’s made it a personal mission to help kids with learning problems get an early start on discovering, developing, and celebrating their gifts.

“My goal,” Mackenzie says, “is just to go in there and try to give kids that push and say, ‘You can!’”

About the Contributor(s)



Linda Broatch, Writer/Editor, has an M.A. in Education, with a focus in Child Development, personal experience in supporting those who have learning difficulties, and has worked for many years in nonprofit organizations that serve the health and education needs of children.



British artist **Mackenzie Thorpe** struggled with unidentified dyslexia as a child. Now a highly successful painter and sculptor, his work has been praised by art critics worldwide, and has been shown across Europe, North America, and the Far East.

Other Resources Websites

Peabody Gallery, Palo Alto, CA (Displays and sells Mackenzie Thorpe’s work)
www.peabodygallery.com

Mackenzie Thorpe Official Website
www.mackenziethorpe.net