

NEWS

# Artist with autism captures personalities on paper

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**Nicole Appel** has a track record of successful exhibitions, sales and a wait list of collectors that many artists would envy, and she is only 26. She also has autism.

Appel works part time at **LAND Studio and Gallery**, an exhibition space and studio in Brooklyn, New York, for **artists with developmental disabilities**. She works there three days a week, spending nearly as much time sharpening her pencils as she does drawing, and carefully collecting the shavings in a Ziploc bag.



**Fine focus:** Nicole Appel protects the finished sections of her drawings with waxed paper.

“My drawings are presents, I make them for people I love,” Appel says. (Appel is verbal, but her use of language in some social situations is limited; her father sent her response via email.)

Appel was diagnosed with autism at age 2. She began drawing after she turned 3, using fat, colored markers to create imaginary friends. “Her drawings were often amazingly detailed,” says her father, Steve. “No detail, however small, was escaping her scrutiny.”

Appel sometimes draws people she knows — for instance, the members of a running club she joined when she was 21. “She was very fond of walking up to these newly found friends, asking

them abruptly for their names, and returning home to do dozens of compelling portraits of them,” her father says, adding that his daughter has a “savant-like photographic memory.”

Her current work is a nontraditional form of portraiture: Instead of drawing people’s faces, “they are drawings of the things they like,” Appel says.

This approach is part of her strength as an artist. “She really thinks about what makes up a person’s personality,” says **Sophia Cosmadopoulos**, gallery manager and client coordinator at LAND. “Her artwork is a way to connect and get to know people.”



**Busy hands:** Appel works on her drawing "Coyote, Cacti and Jackrabbits" at the LAND Studio and Gallery in Brooklyn.

Appel has a boyfriend, whom she met last year at a speed-dating event. He is an avid fan of the Yankees baseball team, so for his birthday, Appel created a baseball-themed drawing for him. The drawing is typical of her work: a collection of finely drawn portraits of baseball players, signed

baseballs and memorabilia, tightly packed in a dynamic economy that fills the paper to its edges.

When she is working, Appel is intensely focused — responding to questions with a ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ But her work speaks volumes. She has gained an international audience through the **Outsider Art Fair**, a highly anticipated annual event that celebrates self-taught artists.

“I enjoy making [drawings] and giving them. Both,” she says. “Giving people drawings makes them happy; making people happy makes me happy.”