



Courtesy Photo

'Crazy Art' director Justin Rowe.

# Film follows 3 local schizophrenic artists

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Medication might beat back 60, 70 or even 80 percent of the symptoms that pester those diagnosed with schizophrenia, but lingering issues often persist and are dealt with differently by those who suffer from mental illness.

Some self medicate with drugs, while others rely on outlets like art, the chosen avenue for three local schizophrenic artists who are the focus of the documentary film "Crazy Art," which will be shown at 5 p.m. today at the Lobero Theatre.

J.T. Turner, the film's co-producer,

who is also the executive director of Phoenix, Santa Barbara, a nonprofit mental health agency that provides mental health and addiction-recovery services, said he wanted to explore, on film, how art helped the artists grapple with their symptoms.

Art is "a form of aesthetic medication," Turner said. "You take the art, it lasts awhile, the effect of it, then you have to take some more art ... It's not like it's a cure or panacea. It's a way of coping and a way of improving their lives, but it's not anything different from medication."

Turner teamed up with Carpinteria-based filmmaker Justin Rowe, whose

first documentary, "The Aphrodite Project," which was also accepted into the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, was about local cancer patients who used art to cope with their diagnoses.

Among other things, Rowe said "Crazy Art" debunks the common misconception that people who have schizophrenia suffer from multiple personality disorder. Rather, he said the artists featured in the film, Rodger Casier, Lesley Grogan and Trinaty Lopez-Wakefield, hear voices and have hallucinations that they must cope with. The film, he said, documents how each artist utilizes art to live as normal a life as possible.

"The most interesting thing that I

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Leslie Grogan, left, who suffers from Schizophrenia, found a link with art and drawing at an early age. Above, one of Grogan's paintings. Below, Rodger Casier caught the art bug in high school, and was in the process of earning an art degree from San Jose State University until he began to experience schizophrenic symptoms. Courtesy photos.

## FILM

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found out is all three of them use their art to push the voices away and to really create not only a positive identity for themselves but to keep themselves sane," Rowe said.

While the film deals heavily with how the local artists utilize and rely on art to deal with mental illness, it provides a larger glimpse at mental illness in art.

Turner said the film examines some of Vincent van Gogh's work, specifically his "Irisess," and "Mulberry Tree," both of which he painted in 1889 while living at an asylum in France.

The film includes footage from the two museums, in Los Angeles and Pasadena, where these paintings are on display.

We "wanted to see the conclusions between the art and madness," Turner said, noting that he "wanted [the film] to have a base in the history of art."

While the film, which has a running time of 58 minutes, touches on many macro issues surrounding schizophrenia, Rowe said it never was meant to be an educational film, and it isn't. Rather than documenting mental illness through interviews with doctors in white coats, it does so colorfully through the artistic lens of people who live with mental illness every day.

All film's three main subjects have been artists for much of their lives. Rowe said Lopez-Wakefield has been painting seriously for 20 years, while Casier caught the art bug in high school, and was in the process of earning an art degree from San Jose State University until he began to experience schizo-



phrenic symptoms. And Grogan, who traveled around Europe with her family during childhood, found a link with art and drawing at an early age. Rowe said she told him once that, "Her drawing and her pens and pencils turned out to be her most important play things."

Turner said he became aware of the artists about eight years ago through the annual Mental Health Arts Festival. He said none of the artists are institutionalized, and noted that Grogan teaches art classes for the mentally ill.

While schizophrenia has not been completely debilitating to any of the artists, Turner said they still experience psychotic episodes and rely on a combination of support from friends and family and heavy medication to survive.

"They're not out in the clear," he said, adding that some are often too depressed to paint. "It's not like all plain sailing for

them."

Rowe, Turner and the three artists will be on hand for a question and answer session after the screening.

The film had its premier on Monday at the Victoria Hall Theatre, and, along with bringing tears to his eyes, Turner said many other people said the film was an emotional journey.

"It's extremely powerful," Rowe said, adding, the film "also opens up the question, is it merely art or is it just having a passion perhaps that can allow someone to not necessary be distracted from whatever ails them, but allows them something positive that allows you to create an identity that doesn't focus merely on your limitations but allows you to focus on some positive attribute in your life."

Single tickets to "Crazy Art" cost \$14 and can be purchased at the Arlington Theatre box office.