

THE UNBRIDLED JOY IN RITA WINKLER'S WORLD AND ART

by ORLY ZEBAK

Rita Winkler holds up one end of her painting, and her mother, Helen, the other. Their screen becomes almost entirely awash in green, blue, and yellow watercolours with three different socks. Each sock is outlined and highlighted with thick black lines to mark their distinct patterns. The first sock is striped, the second, sparingly cross-hatched, and the third are polka-dotted. And peeking out from each side of their screen are Helen and Rita's smiles. Their expressions are matched not only by me, but by Rita's uncle, Mark; joining in from New York. Winkler, who has Down syndrome, created the painting to celebrate World Down Syndrome Day (which coincidentally fell on the day of our interview). Helen remarked that the unmatched socks symbolize the unmatched chromosome Trisomy 21. And to show support to the Down syndrome community everyone is encouraged to wear unmatched socks on the day. Witnessing family members beaming with pride, while Rita showed off her artistic spirit, captured how the family is always working to uplift, amplify, and celebrate Rita's imagination. It was this moment that made me change the course of the article.

Initially, Rita's upcoming picture book *My Art, My World*, published by Second Story Press, was going to take centre stage. Every year, the Winkler's sponsor the bowl-a-thon at Common Ground Co-operative in memory of Rita's father. Due to COVID-19 the event was unable to take place, and Mark decided to make his niece's pictures into a book and donate a portion of the proceeds. When Helen sent Mark a detailed biography of Rita, he decided there should be text to accompany Rita's images. Coincidentally, the sister of one of the owners and publishers of Second Story Press knew of the book and connected with the Winkler's. Getting the publishing house involved helped finesse the relationship between Rita's words and her paintings.

Come October 19, 2021, you'll be able to flip through Rita's paintings and illustrations that, along with the text, let you in on her frank observations. You'll see her take public transit by herself to her job at Coffee Shed in New College at the University of Toronto, part of Common Ground. You'll see the cubism inspired portraits of her friends Sammy and Caroline, and you'll find out how Rita feels about winter, and telemarketers. The text is sprinkled with dry humour, but as Mark and Helen made clear, that sometimes it is just us who find what Rita says funny, she is mostly being serious.

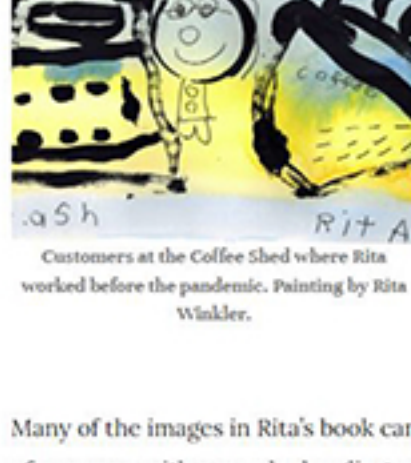
Rita's reflections make the seemingly humdrum events of a day interesting, but I thought every behind-the-scenes tidbit from the Winkler's would take me back to the book. Instead, I was led down an ever expanding road that made me realize the logistics of the book, in the context of this article, is not the thing. Rita, her family—including her sisters Leora and Rachel—and the community they've built are what made the book possible. Rita's art is about her world, and so I present the story of how Rita's 33-year-old life blossomed into what it is today.

Until she was 14, Rita's home was in Calgary, Alberta. In Calgary, Helen shared, Rita was "the first kid to be mainstreamed with an intellectual disability; there was resistance to it, but we were lucky we had the PREP program in Calgary, which was specific to Down syndrome." PREP leads with the mantra "inclusion for life" which is something Rita was able to experience, for a time. Mark reflected that "the mainstream world learned a lot, they learned to be friends with Rita, and how to treat her with respect." But when Rita was in Grade 6, Helen noticed there was "too much of a divergence" between Rita and her classmates, she saw her daughter was "segregated in an integrated classroom, which is often what happens when they're with a teacher's aide, and everybody else is doing something different." And though there was a semblance of inclusivity, Helen told me Rita "didn't have a social life, she didn't have friends, she didn't get invited to birthday parties." That all changed when she moved her daughter to special education. There, Rita was able to make close friends, and because of her experience in both the mainstream and non-mainstream world, she was able to and continues to inhabit both.

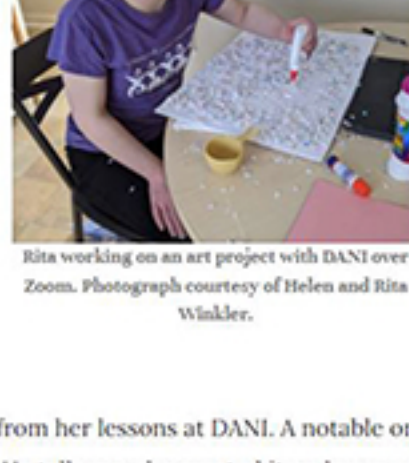
Sadly, when Rita was 14-years-old her father died, and she and her mother moved to Toronto in 2003. Helen's strength to fight for Rita to be accepted continued once they arrived in the city. Rita attended Drewry Secondary School, a school specifically for special education, and continues to go to DANI, an organization in Toronto creating "opportunities for adults with physical and/or cognitive challenges so that they can participate fully as valued members of the community." It is because of DANI's programming that Rita discovered her passion for the arts.

With DANI, Rita not only writes some of their newsletters, but has been part of their stage productions, including: *The Wizard of Oz* (she played the witch), *Peter Pan*, *Shrek*, *The Lion King*, and *Aladdin*. But it is painting she loves the most.

Her day program at DANI includes art, but when everything started moving to Zoom, Helen started "seeing how they [the instructors] were doing it so I was able to facilitate more art at home. I didn't know how to facilitate art with Rita. I always noticed the pictures that they did at DANI were so fantastic, but I never understood how they did them." Helen confessed she, "didn't really know anything much about art." But the skills she acquired over the years in folk dance, and *adapting dances* for individuals with special needs since 2006 at Prosserman JCC, gave her the ability to see it was similar to dance, she simply had to adapt art to make sure it worked for Rita. A poignant reminder that accessibility begins not by thinking about how someone has to adapt but how facilities and programs can adapt to an individual's requirements.



Customers at the Coffee Shed where Rita worked before the pandemic. Painting by Rita Winkler.



Rita working on an art project with DANI over Zoom. Photograph courtesy of Helen and Rita Winkler.



Polar Bears made at L'Arche over Zoom. Painting by Rita Winkler.

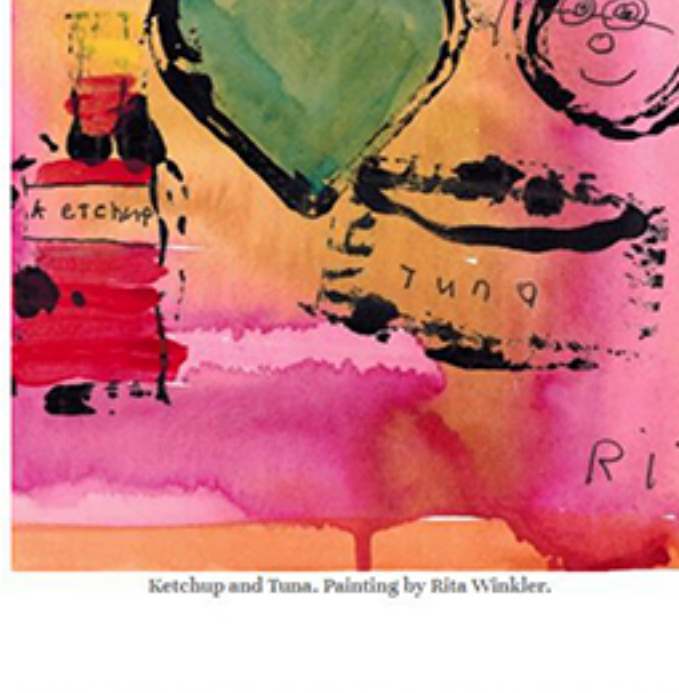
Many of the images in Rita's book came from her lessons at DANI. A notable one Mark alludes to is a picture Rita made of a woman with a purple dangling arm. He tells me, she created it on her own. Though, Helen is quick to point out that this assignment had been to paint themselves as the Mona Lisa. It may not look like the Mona Lisa, but it shows, as Mark said, Rita's "vivid imagination," one "we should learn to embrace." One that moves us past the confines of the literal.

Since the pandemic, Rita also started watercolour classes at L'Arche London in London, Ontario. Rita only started using watercolour this past fall. Helen observed that "watercolours have their own magic when you put them together and they do all kinds of interesting things. . . a person without a disability who is a professional watercolourist intentionally creates certain effects, but with Rita, it's just like, drop the paint, and something happens, it's a different approach to the art." And by approaching art differently, Rita's work, if we're willing, can introduce us to new perspectives.

Rita's book is for ages six to nine, because it is a "beautiful way to show that not everybody sees the same way, and that we should learn to accept and learn how others see life," Mark told me. Adults can learn from that as well. A point Mark emphasizes by sharing the time Rita joined him at Common Ground's annual general board meeting. Rita is considered a partner at Common Ground, and she along with the other partners who have disabilities and each work at a Coffee Shed and in the kitchen, attended. Board members, staff, and other members of the organization were also present. When the executive director asked if anyone wanted to speak, Rita raised her hand. This was the first time Mark had been in a meeting with Rita, and he did not know what she was going to say, and became, "very nervous." It took Rita about two to five minutes to announce the bake sale Common Ground was holding for Christmas the following week, and the executive director thanked Rita for sharing an important piece of news to the room. His response taught Mark a "really important lesson, everybody has a right to have a voice, no matter where they are, and no matter how long it takes somebody to get their message across."

Rita's messages are overwhelmingly celebratory. Her painting *Ketchup and Tuna* is inspired by her love for, well, ketchup and tuna (Helen hopes to continue the series, as Rita loves ketchup on many foods). Her card collection, which she gifts on birthdays and anniversaries, are homemade and have unique cakes on them, complete with a flavour profile. Some of her creations include: a green owl cake, a bubble gum cake, a rainbow cake, a wine cake, and a green orange blue cake.

Additionally, if you send Rita a picture of your dog or cat, she'll create a picture of them. Rita showed me a portrait of Nala, a service dog belonging to DANI staff member, Tammy Greenwald (who gives Rita tuna and ketchup for her lunches). But, Helen added, "drawing is not fun for Rita." What they do to get the outline of the animal is take a photograph and create a template. Rita will then place the paint wherever she wants, and might go back to add in a few brushstrokes to add different patterns.



Ketchup and Tuna. Painting by Rita Winkler.

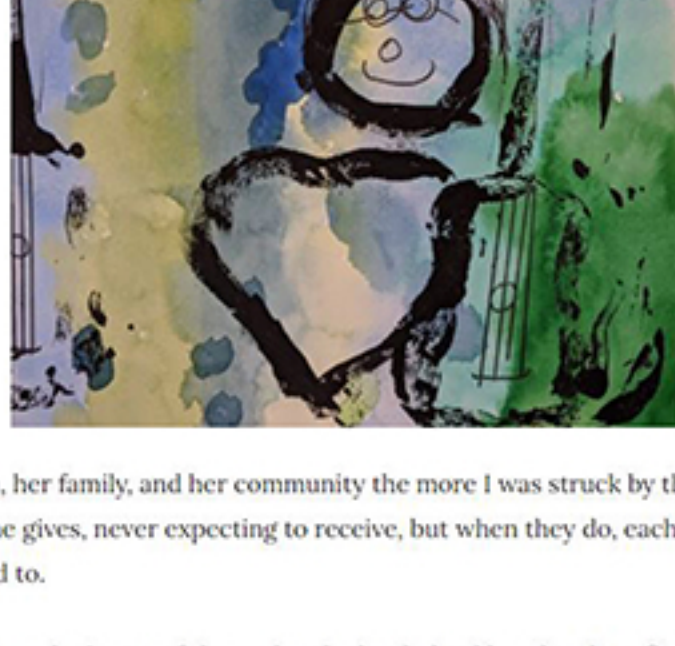


Nala the Dani service dog. Painting by Rita Winkler.

Should Rita, Helen warned, ever sell her art, do not expect to see what she calls "tough mermaids." Rita enjoys making art as independently as possible. And when Helen recently gave her a stencil of a mermaid that had "a lot of squirrely bits of hair" and wasn't coming together properly, she printed a less detailed stencil. Rita, later remarked "I don't do tough mermaids." If she ever sells her art, Helen joked, that will be number one in the contract: No Tough Mermaids.

Along with her painting schedule and practice changing in response to the pandemic, so has Rita's job. Common Ground, Helen informed me, is "strictly a business, it's not a day program. So the job coaches have had to reinvent themselves." Some teach Zumba or baking lessons over Zoom. However, what has maintained itself as a constant presence in both of their lives is Jewish folk dance.

When Rita's father was in hospice in Calgary the folk community banded together to raise the Winkler's spirits. And now, because of lockdown, Rita and Helen's folk dances are on YouTube. They've uploaded them to give their regular participants a chance to see them on their own time. The mother-daughter duo also perform a chair dance every Sunday for Jacob's Ladder's hosted event, Jake's Jam. Jacob's Ladder, The Canadian Foundation for Control of Neurodegenerative Disease, was founded in 1998 by Ellen and Jeff Schwartz a year after they found out their four-month old son Jacob was diagnosed with Canavan disease. To honour their son's love of music, the Schwartz's created Jake's Jam. Unfortunately, Jake passed away in 2019, but a group of between 60 to 70 people meet each Sunday, after one of the participants proclaimed she wanted to keep singing. Helen and Rita's dances inspire other participants as well. They have a huge fan in a boy who has cerebral palsy in all four limbs and who is in a wheelchair; the boy's mother remarked to Helen, he gets so excited that he must rest for a few moments before he can sing.



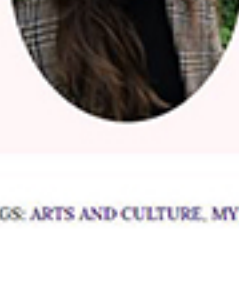
The more I learned about Rita, her family, and her community the more I was struck by the unwavering support they have for one another. Everyone gives, never expecting to receive, but when they do, each voice there is a platform so they can be heard and listened to.

Just as Helen helped Rita hold up the image of the socks, she has helped her daughter find her voice as an artist. It is her "strength" as Mark puts it, that gave her the power to "fight for Rita to be accepted. . . Rita's found happiness in her life and benefits from the environment she was [is] in, which is part of what Helen's created. . . A lot of energy, a lot of emotion, a lot of work—she's given up a lot just to make sure that Rita has the quality of life she deserves. From the outside, it's just amazing."

But what Rita has been able to do is equally amazing. She has inspired people to see and understand the world as she does, in everyday life and consequently in her book *My Art, My World*. We all perceive the world differently, but Rita's approach teaches us to positively revel in our different perspectives, and to learn and celebrate one another's.

To know Rita Winkler's world and art is to know unbridled joy. Her paintings are imbued with an optimism reflecting the love she has for the medium, and for her subjects. Just as her generous brushstrokes spread paint over surfaces and into forms, her pieces are sure to spread a smile across your face. At least, that's what happens to me.

Header image design by Orly Zebak. Photographs (including those of Rita's paintings) courtesy of Helen and Rita Winkler.



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Orly Zebak writes, designs sets and costumes, and makes art in various mediums. Her work seeks to challenge conceptions of female performativity in relation to womanhood, girlhood, and coming of age stories. In her spare time, you can catch Orly gardening—usually in her very comfortable off-brand crocs.

Orly earned her M.A. at the University of Toronto in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies.

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