



Maryn Olson: My Story with a Traumatic Brain Injury

- **Opening Reception:**
April 13th, 2024
1:00 – 3:00 PM

Curator's Statement-

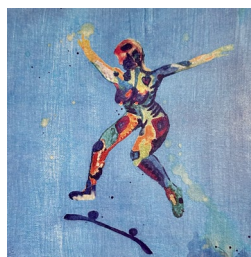
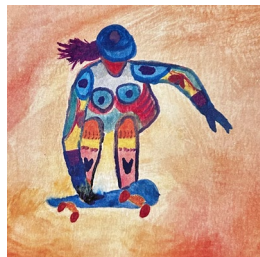
Written by Michael Cagno, *Executive Director of the Noyes Museum of Art of Stockton University*

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) can have profound effects on cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning. Art-making activities, such as painting, can benefit individuals with TBI. Maryn is a prime example of how the arts can have a **holistic healing** approach to those who suffer from TBI. For the past year, Maryn has made miraculous improvements. Her art provides a nonverbal outlet for emotional expression and a space to express her feelings safely and creatively. Through my conversations with Maryn over the past few months, I have recognized a positive change in self-awareness and confidence, but what I love most is her undeniable joy of making art.

Partnership with Stockton University's Disability Studies (DS) Program

This exhibition is produced in partnership with the Disability Studies program at Stockton University. Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability, as a social, cultural and political construct. In contrast to educational, clinical, medical, or therapeutic perspectives on disability, DS focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society.

Detailed List of Works in Exhibition:



Woman Rider Series, 8" x 8" each, watercolor, 2023

Woman Rider Series: They say art reflects life, and it could not be more accurate about these pieces of women skating. When I created these works, I used a picture of myself and other female skaters for inspiration,

then let the colors and feelings flow through me as I made them. My goal when creating this piece was to acknowledge femininity, **mindfulness**, and passion. Women have not gotten as much representation in this male-dominated sport, which also is rooted in misogyny. My heart is in each piece I make; this is for the girls who shred on and off a board. Mindfulness and awareness are significant when skateboarding. You must be fully present to skate and land a trick safely. It requires your full attention and even a positive mindset. When you do not land a trick, you keep trying and trying. It takes determination and self-encouragement. The meaning has shifted as these pieces physically stayed the same throughout the year. A red circle in the mind symbolizes awareness and mindfulness within the act of skating, but it may have symbolized my head injury a year later. I do not believe in accidents or coincidences because I have witnessed things happen, and they will always serve you—even the most challenging struggles and losses.



So Much Beauty in the Dirt, 8" x 10", acrylic, oil pastel, acrylic marker, 2023

So Much Beauty in the Dirt: Amid the chaos, beauty can be found. My traumatic brain injury has brought me the most emotional turbulence I have ever experienced, and some days, it takes more effort to stay optimistic about my new challenges and new lifestyle. This painting represents all my emotions, which fluctuate from the highest peaks to the lowest valleys, all tangled inside me. My paintings are all made in a moment and can never be duplicated. I sit with my supplies and a canvas, and I just put paint on the blank canvas, and after time passes, a painting appears. I usually do not know what it will be until the painting reveals itself through my process. This painting reflects the most brutal battles I have faced and overcome. Nobody knows what it is like on the inside. Yet, with the mixing of emotions and struggles, I am still beautiful and strong.



Weird Girl, 12" x 20", acrylic paint and oil pastel on canvas, 2023

Weird Girl: This painting may be one of the most significant paintings made during my recovery after my TBI. When I was put into a rehab facility, I was made aware there was an art therapist there. This painting was the first thing I created after my brain injury. My mom left the room as the therapist came in. When she came back within half an hour and saw this, she knew that I would be ok. She said, "When I saw that, I knew you were still in there." I had inspirations over the years, but my paintings come from within, and after such a traumatic event, my family was reassured once they saw this painting. In this painting and among the others I have made since then, you can see how my vision blind spots (a result of the **stroke**) affect my drawing because I run off the page or am more asymmetrical than intended.



All of the Things, 8" x 10", oil pastel, 2023

All of the Things: This painting reflects a lot of what it feels like for me for most of my time through recovery. Some eyes appear tired, using organic shapes and cool colors. Some parts of the face are bright yellow, which implies a happier tone. Some faces are lower than others. Twitching may symbolize the high and low moods throughout each day. I feel confused, out of place, or as if I am missing something. In the world of Traumatic Brain Injury, we refer to this feeling as brain fog. It feels like I can be clouded, so I behave in ways I genuinely would not. I feel irritable, overwhelmed, overstimulated, and sometimes crazy. It feels like there are

things inside of me that are missing something, and that could be the neuropathways that were damaged.



The Two Maryns, 16" x 20", acrylic, 2023

The Two Maryns: The Two Maryn's was inspired by the Creation of Adam by Micheal Angelo. This painting was therapeutic in itself because I was able to forgive myself for risking my physical health. On the left side of the painting, there is a broken board, a neck brace, and pill bottle. This hurt Maryn is reaching towards the Maryn in recovery. The Maryn on the right is surrounded by her boards, helmet, and bright colors which symbolize healing energy. My intention with this painting was to

recognize that there are two Maryns within me that come together to heal from this trauma. It has never been clearer that the only person who will be there to help heal myself is myself.



I Remember, 16" x 20", acrylic, 2023

I Remember: This piece was another piece that feels very significant in my recovery progress. This piece was the first piece that made me feel like genuine me, because after my brain injury there were so many factors that made me feel foreign to my own body. For a period of my life, I spent long nights in my studio where I would drive myself there with music blasting, windows down. I would paint for hours where I would reach a state of Zen and flow. I found it so hard to stop painting. It was magical and beautiful. When creating this piece, I was at my sacred barn painting, and I felt that beautiful state of flow where the painting revealed itself to me and even shared with me whispers. I remember and will always have those glimmers with me in my heart.



Joe Buck Park Mural, Millville, New Jersey, acrylic spray paint, mural is 15' x 20', print is 8" x 8", 2023

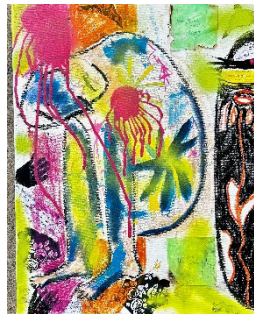
Joe Buck Park Mural, Millville, New Jersey: This mural was therapeutic in the way that I was able to move my body while painting a large surface area. It feels like a dance. It was another time where I was putting the emotions of the trauma I faced into the external world and out of my body and mind. Art is so magical in this way.



Untitled, 8 "x 10",
mixed media, 2023

Untitled: In a state of overwhelming stress, I found a beneficial way to calm myself down. I brought out canvases and started to create using paint, oil pastels and crumbled up paper. Each aggressive line, paint stroke, expressive words and glued down paper calmed me down while releasing negative emotions. My artworks are my journal entries, each piece may hold content about how I was feeling during the time it was created. Some works are not pretty, or they may break the rules of art making but they serve a greater purpose. This piece holds so much meaning and heartbreak.

During the beginning months of recovery, my emotions were deregulated and I felt everything at once. This made me act out and feel uncontrollable but art kept me on the ground. For this, I owe my best efforts to art making and worshipping. Art did save my life.



Untitled, 16" by 20", mixed
media, 2023

Untitled: This was another piece that was created that helped calm me while expressing my grief and sadness. These pieces serve as reminders of my greater goals and purposes. I wanted to share these raw emotional pieces to make others aware of the opportunity to create art to help your mental health. With the right intentions behind the art making process, art can be healing. In this painting, I use drip techniques, I drew my skateboard, and the pink and orange color blocks represent my surfboards. In the middle, I drew myself sitting with my head in between my legs. I drew flowers within me that are blooming.



Soul Collage, 20" x 15",
acrylic paint and paper,
2023

Soul Collage: This collage is a close look to what I love. There is a picture of me catching my first wave at seven years old, a baby picture of me on the left and the picture of me when I woke up from my **cranioplasty surgery**. I woke up from my replacement skull surgery and felt like the happiest girl in the whole world. This memory and this picture are one of the best memories that I've ever experienced. The moment of waking up from surgery felt like I was given another chance to live. The eyes are collaged with pictures of the ocean, surfboards and nature. The lips have a picture of me as a child standing on the Ocean City bridge holding up a peace sign.

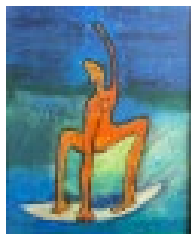


Upside Down Still Shine (collaboration with Gary Lindley), 7" x 10", 2024

Upside Down Still Shine (collaboration with Gary Lindley): This painting is another piece that reflects the turmoil of my brain injury yet expressed through bright colors. If I am expressing my distress and turmoil from my brain injury, why would I use bright colors? These colors are bright all at once maybe even alarming and loud. Yet these colors that may symbolize hardship make a beautiful composition. In a time where I felt like I was upside down, I still shine from within.

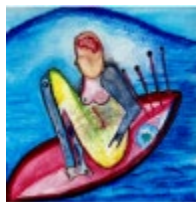


Self Portrait Handstand on Board, 12" x 15", oil pastel, 2023



Self Portrait Surfing, 12" x 15", oil pastel, 2023

Self Portrait Handstand on Board (left) & Self Portrait Surfing (right): These self-portraits serve as a celebration of board riding and soul surfing. These actions require your full attention and awareness. The action which makes you feel like you are soaring. I love to be on a board because nothing else is a worry when you are riding. There is no need to worry because you are soaring and you are in the present.



Free Woman, 8" x 8", watercolor, 2023

Free Woman: This piece was created when I was daydreaming of surfing. I spend a good amount of time just dreaming of when I can get back into the ocean and feel the healing energy of the water. I use bright colors, interesting designs, and symbols to bring the unity of how I feel when I am surfing and in the ocean. Blue is a color that I associate with tranquility and peace. In the head I painted a brain because I have a different outlook on the way I do these extreme sports. A lot of people believe I should stop skating and surfing but there's something that won't let me. I love these activities and it requires me to be safer and think more cautiously about how I participate in them. I am a free woman doing what I love and I should not care about what others think, as long as I am practicing safety and doing what I love. Daydreaming of surfing is one of the things that I thought about daily when I was in rehab. I spent every moment imagining the sun on my skin, the ocean water smell and warm sand on my feet to motivate myself when I was in rehab.



Live Free or Die
(collaboration with Gary
Lindley), 12" x 15", crayon,
pen, and marker, 2023

Live Free or Die (collaboration with Gary Lindley): This piece was created when I was commissioned for the Chalk about AC event in September of 2023. A rain cloud out a halt on our chalk art process so Gary and I found coverage and I brought out my sketchbook. We used crayon, pen and a marker. We just started doodling and ended up making a piece that is very interesting.



Kepra Skull, 4" x 6",
found objects
mounted on canvas

Kepra Skull: When you have head surgery, you are required to take **kepra medication** to combat the risk of seizures. I had two seizures so I was on kepra for around 6 months. This medication had negative emotional side effects such as depression and suicide risks. I felt very low but when I was off of the medication, I made a skull to represent my own skull. There are ribbons coming out from the side of the head and a hole through the canvas. No matter what, you can always release negative emotions in a therapeutic and healthy way.

To learn more about Maryn Olson and her work,
visit her on Instagram at @marynskylar

The Noyes Museum of Art of Stockton University · <http://www.noyesmuseum.org> · (609) 626-3420

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Glossary:

Cranioplasty surgery: A neurosurgical procedure designed to repair or reshape irregularities or imperfections in the skull. Cranioplasty is often recommended following a traumatic injury or to correct a birth defect. During surgery, the skull bones are repaired using either a bone graft or synthetic material. (Source: University of Kansas Health System)

Holistic healing: A form of healing that considers the whole person – body, mind, spirit, and emotions – in the quest for optimal health and wellness. According to the holistic medicine philosophy, you can achieve the best possible health by gaining proper balance in life. (Source: WebMD)

Keppra: Keppra, generic term is Levetiracetam, is used to treat seizures (epilepsy). It belongs to a class of drugs known as anticonvulsants. It may decrease the number of seizures you have. (Source: WebMD)

Mindfulness: A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique. (Source: Oxford Languages)

Stroke: Occurs when blood flow to the brain is blocked or there is sudden bleeding in the brain. (Source: National Institute of Health)

Traumatic brain injury (TBI): Occurs when a sudden, external, physical assault damages the brain. It is one of the most common causes of disability and death in adults. TBI is a broad term that describes a vast array of injuries that happen to the brain. The damage can be focal (confined to one area of the brain) or diffuse (happens in more than one area of the brain). The severity of a brain injury can range from a mild concussion to a severe injury that results in coma or even death. (Source: John Hopkins Medicine)