

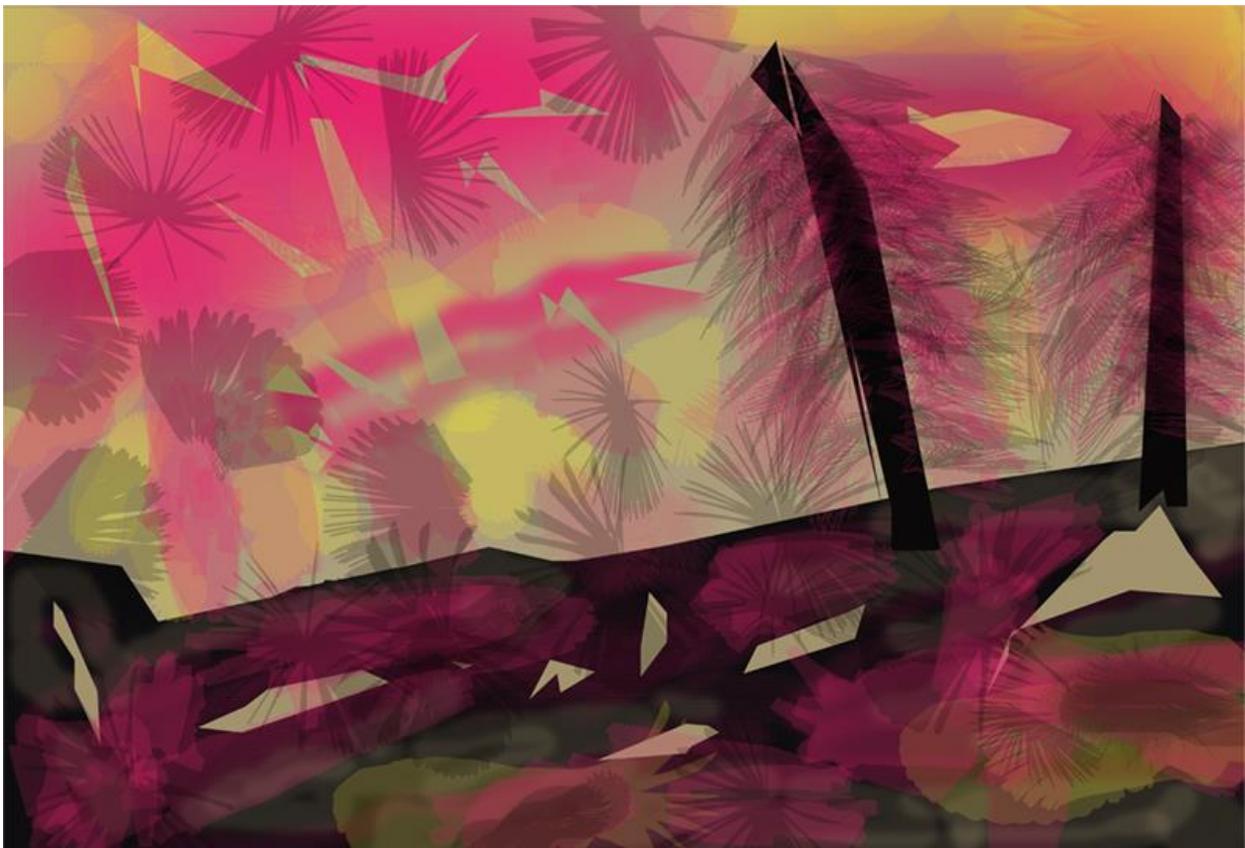
# Artists with disabilities face challenges

## Local organization working to make cultural events more accessible, inclusive



By: [Alison Gillmor](#)

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STEW MCCULLOCH / AANM

Forest Fire, a digital painting by Winnipeg artist Stew McCulloch.

According to a 2017 Statistics Canada study, an estimated one in five Canadians aged 15 years and over has one or more disabilities.

"We're the largest minority," says Jenel Shaw, artist and executive director of the Arts AccessAbility Network Manitoba. "And one that anyone could potentially be a member of."

At this month's First Fridays' Art Talk/Art Walk, we'll speak with Shaw about her organization's work with artists with disabilities, as well as the ways AANM helps to make arts and cultural events more accessible for all Manitobans.

Practical measures might include providing sign-language interpretations for talks at artist-run centres, or livestreaming events for people who can't physically attend. The organization also lends out a temporary ramp that can make venues more accessible for audience members or help performers get onto stages.

Physical accessibility is a common problem for cultural organizations located in Winnipeg's historic buildings. "That's the thing with the Exchange District," Shaw says. "It's difficult. That's just the way things were built back then." She points out that even the AANM offices, located on Cumberland Avenue, have accessibility issues, with the building's front entrance featuring several steps. Visitors in wheelchairs need to use a side-door ramp.



MARIE LEBLANC / AANM

The photograph *On the Edge*, by Winnipeg artist Marie LeBlanc.

Growing out of a 2008 disability art project by Susan P. Gibson, the AANM brings together artists with disabilities, providing resources, education and advocacy to promote full inclusion for all artists in our province's cultural community. While organizations such as AANM are a recent development, artists who deal with disabilities have always been part of art history.

French artist Henri Matisse, who was unable to stand at an easel for long periods of time following cancer surgery, turned to making cut-outs, creating simple, vibrant works that celebrated what he called his "second life." Mexican painter Frida Kahlo dealt with childhood polio and the fallout of a horrific bus accident through her art. Creating frank and often unsettling pieces that used her body as subject matter, she chronicled her experience of living with severe injuries and chronic pain. Canadian outsider artist Maud Lewis was a prolific painter, finding ways to work around severe rheumatoid arthritis.

According to Shaw, who graduated in 2019 with a masters degree in disability studies from the University of Manitoba, the members of AANM are diverse. "You don't have to produce 'disability art,'" she explains. "Just be an artist with a disability."

Some member artists explicitly address disability issues in their work. Some do not. "They draw on their experience the same way any artist does," Shaw says. "Everyone does their own kind of work."

Alice Crawford, for example, who was partially deafened at an early age, often works with letters and typography, examining different modes of communication and exploring the possibilities of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Marie LeBlanc, who lives with multiple chemical sensitivities, creates evocative photographs that suggest an environment blasted and degraded by industrial pollutants and consumer waste.

AANM brings together visual artists, performing artists and writers. Although every member's work is unique, there are recurring themes.



Cheerful Little Spirit by Alice Crawford.

"I find that a lot of our artists are really inventive. They have to be," Shaw explains.

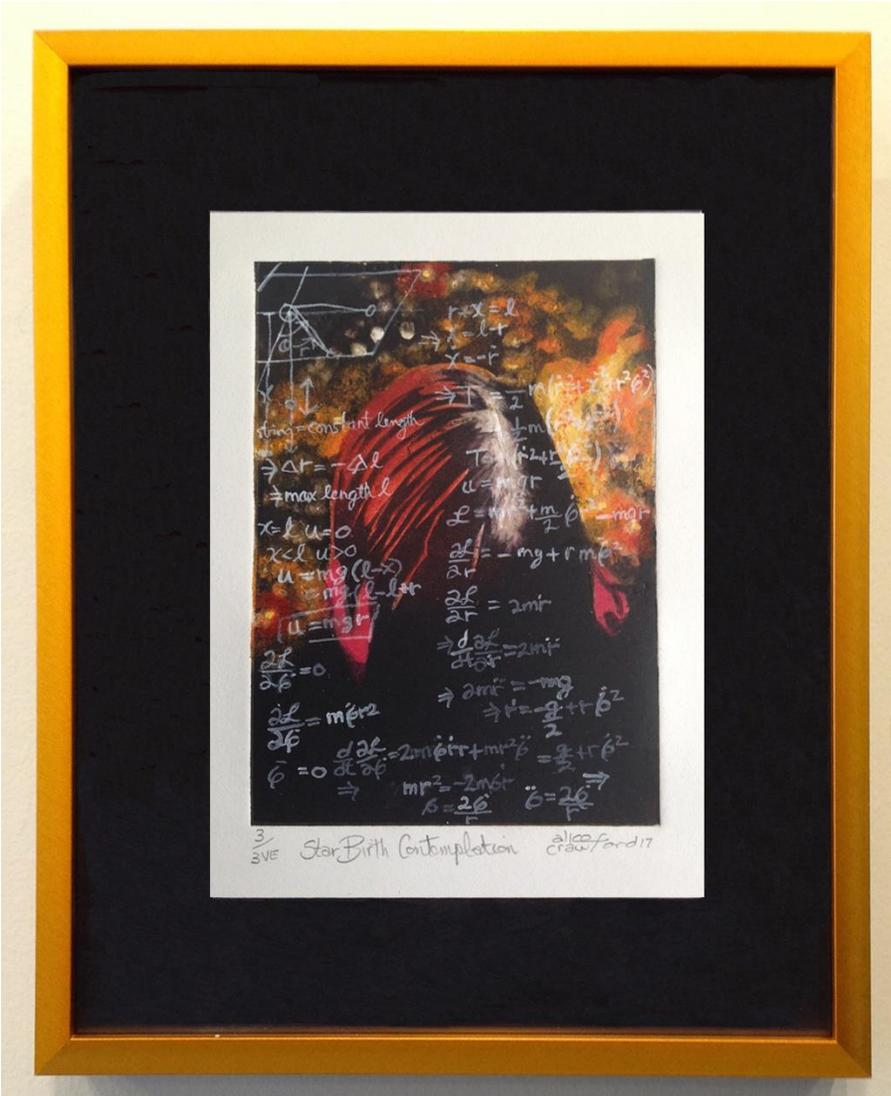
"When you have a disability, you have to accommodate to a lot of different situations. You have to figure out how to make things work."

Shaw cites Stew McCulloch, who, after surviving a stroke and later cancer, found it difficult to continue working in conventional photography. He switched to a digital art practice.

"With a lot of artists, when they make those shifts, they create something even more exciting," Shaw says. "It's a new direction you haven't seen before."

Sometimes the artists make adaptations, and AANM works to modify art-making processes and make them more widely accessible. Printmaking, for example, can be physically demanding.

"We have a partnership with Martha Street Studio, called the Making Our Mark program," Shaw explains. "They did modifications to every single piece of (printmaking) equipment so no matter what your ability, your arm strength or whatever it is, anyone can operate every single machine.



Star Birth Contemplation, a collagraph by Winnipeg artist Alice Crawford.

"It's all about innovation."

AANM has also been working with Video Pool on a digital arts program. According to Shaw, computer-aided art-making is accessible in some ways but not in others.

"Since artists tend not to make a lot of money, and disability artists even more so, it can be hard to afford monthly Wi-Fi, to afford a laptop. We're looking into how to solve that monetary issue — how to reach people digitally and make it affordable."

Shaw also works to bring awareness of disability issues to the wider community. Most people, she believes, want to help make events and institutions more widely accessible. Sometimes they just need more information.

Fortunately, accessibility and inclusion are increasingly becoming part of a larger social conversation.

Shaw herself deals with mental illness. Ten or 15 years ago, she says, there was a lot more stigma. "Nowadays I find that when I tell people I have mental illness, the answer I get back is, 'Yeah, me, too,'" Shaw says.

"The more that one person talks, the more everyone does."

*At this First Fridays Art Talk/Art Walk, we'll be talking with Jenel Shaw about art, accessibility and inclusion. The event takes place at the Free Press News Café at 237 McDermot Ave. on Friday, Feb. 7, at 6 p.m., with a guided art tour of the Exchange afterwards. Call 204-421-0682 or email [wfpnewscafe@gmail.com](mailto:wfpnewscafe@gmail.com) to reserve tickets, which include dinner and cost \$25 plus tax. Unfortunately, the venue is not wheelchair accessible.*