

Arts



Artist Alder Crocker in his studio, where he created, from top right, “Mad Hatter,” “Serendipity and “Treasure Islanders.”

ACCIDENTAL ARTIST

COULD ALDER CROCKER’S LIFE-CHANGING INJURIES EXPLAIN THE AMAZING PAINTINGS THAT FOLLOWED?

By Joel Lang

In February, Alder Crocker had his first-ever exhibit as an artist at the Rene Soto gallery in Norwalk.

In May, Crocker achieved another first, when two of his carnival-bright abstract paintings were accepted into the juried “Shutdown Throwdown” online show at the Rowayton Art Center.

The busier of the two paintings titled “Mad Hatter”— it has cryptic dates and hieroglyphic squiggles that swim in shiny pools of blue, green and orange — appeared with an autobiographical caption:

“I am a tetraplegic and these are visions I have had after an accident two years ago when I first started painting.”

The artist’s opening disclosure, that all four of his limbs are compromised, is such a surprise that it can undercut the equally surprising closing fact, that he’s new to painting. The greatest surprise though is only implied, that his accident and accomplishment are linked.

Crocker, who is 56 and lives in Fairfield, believes he is the beneficiary, if that’s the word, of what psychiatry calls a savant syndrome. “It’s like ‘Rain Man,’” he says, except different. Savant talents typically arise from autism, as the movie depicts. But a traumatic nerve injury can lead to an acquired savant syndrome. A prodigious talent erupts from nowhere.

Since learning of the condition, Crocker has been in touch with at least two other artists who likely have it. One lives in Wilton. Crocker says they are in the process of forming a Savant Artists Collective that may one day stage exhibits. They are also in contact with Dr. Darold Treffert, a psychiatrist associated with the University of Wisconsin Medical School who has published papers on savant syndrome.

In Crocker’s case, his prior artistic aptitude was nil. “The last time I did anything for myself was in fourth grade art class,” he says. “I didn’t like art at all. So I became the class joker.” He exercised some creativity during his career in marketing, but he himself was limited to stick figures. He was head of marketing for



Ward Leonard, an industrial technology company in Thomaston, at the time of the accident.

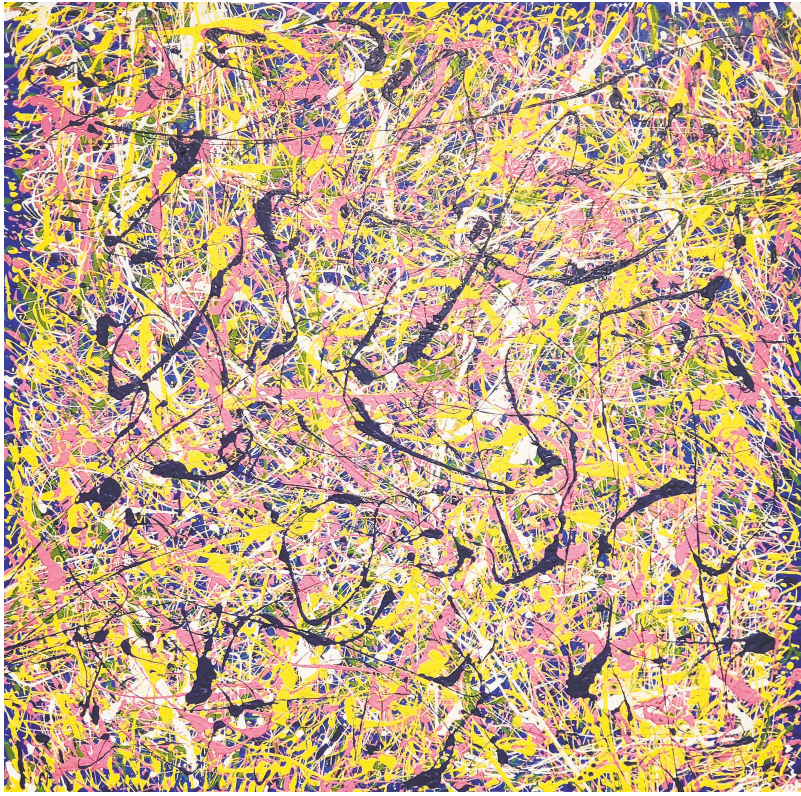
The date was May 15, 2018 and Crocker was vacationing at a Mexico beach when, jogging into the water, the sand gave way under his left foot. He tripped, tucked his head down, and fell in six inches of water. He says the sound of his neck snapping was so loud people heard it on the beach.

“I found myself face down in maybe a foot of water,” he says. “I couldn’t turn over with my legs. I couldn’t breathe. Nothing happened. I thought, ‘Oh my god, I’m paralyzed.’ I had use of my arms, but not my hands. So I pushed myself up as well as I could and I grabbed a breath and I held it.”

He was saved from drowning by his wife, Erin Peterson-Crocker, who would also help save him during the long recovery that followed. He spent three weeks in intensive care in California and 10 weeks at the top-rated Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in New Jersey. He says he never felt depressed and went into “competitive overdrive” during his rehab.

“Every day, I made sure I did something new and better. So if they said, ‘Alder, do 20 of these,’ I’d do 30. My motto, going back to being in the water, was: Be Strong. Be Strong. For Erin, for my family, for myself. I didn’t want people to see me broken.”

At Kessler, Crocker signed up for a weekly art therapy class and found himself liking it more than



expected. He could still move his arms and wrists and was able to grip brushes fitted with rubber tubes. He began to feel good painting. But when his instructor told him, “Whoa, these (paintings) aren’t so bad,” he says his skeptical response was, “Yeah, thanks a lot.”

Still, after a couple of months back home, he resumed painting. He got out kits he’d been given and also briefly took lessons from an abstract artist. He didn’t much like what he produced, but kept on, encouraged by his mother, who told him he might as well try emulating Jackson Pollock.

“I went to Home Depot and got some latex paint. I got some wooden sticks and basically started slopping paint out of a can. Then I started to do circles and moving paint around and drawing stick figures. All of a sudden I started to develop an appreciation and enjoyment for what I was doing,” he says.

He began doing a small painting every day, then moved to larger canvases, “flinging paint on Pollock-esque,” he says, and loving it.

Weakness in his arms and torso made painting at an upright easel difficult. So he invented what he came to call his “four corner” method. He lays his canvases flat and rotates them, working quadrant by quadrant. He says he probably averages five to 10 full turns for each painting.

Two operations last summer to remove calcium build-ups on his hips interrupted his progress. But he went into painting overdrive after Nancy Breakstone, the curator at the Rene Soto gallery, came to look at his work last October and judged it exhibit worthy. A friend of Crocker’s who knew Soto had sent her an email with images of his paintings.

“I was not that impressed with the photographs, but I was very interested because of the situation,” Breakstone says. By the time she visited a month later, Crocker had much more for her to look at.

“When I walked in, I was just blown away by what the had

done,” she says. “When you see him in a wheelchair, you don’t even think he’s in a wheelchair. He’s just the happiest person. But if I had walked into his house without meeting him and knowing the situation, I still would have had the same impression of his work. It was joyful.”

Ultimately, Breakstone decided to turn the whole Soto gallery over to Crocker’s paintings. There were 35 in the exhibit. Joyfulness aside, she says his method makes his work extra impressive. She likes to guess which parts came first.

“It’s not like you have a canvas on an easel and are looking at the whole picture. He’s working one section at a time. He has to think so much more about every stroke that he makes, because making a stroke is not easy for him. It’s more impactful.”

Even with the success of the exhibit, Crocker was already moving on. He had come to feel his style wasn’t truly his own. If his earlier paintings resembled Pollock’s in their mesh-like density, the new ones, both he and Breakstone say, are closer to Kandinsky’s, brighter and more open.

To do them, Crocker uses both hands to squeeze paint from plastic bottles. The paintings in the Rowayton show are the second and third he did. The other painting, titled “Swashbuckler’s Delight,” has elements that suggest a musical score.

Crocker says he felt justified in calling himself an artist from the moment Breakstone offered him an exhibit. “I was looking for value and purpose. Right then and there I got a warm rush over my body. I thought I found it,” he says.

“I think this accident, this situation, put me on a more publicly successful trajectory than I was before. I was a happy guy. I had a good family, a good job. I was okay with that. But for some reason I have been given this gift. I just want to make one more person smile when they see my painting. And that’s the God’s honest truth.”

Joel Lang is a freelance writer.