

The Artist Behind the Wheel

CTA Bus Driver's Self Expression Lands a Museum Spot

By Alexis Maislen

He's painted more than 100 paintings in his 13-year career as a self-schooled artist. He's even depicted a piece of Chicago history, the time the water main broke, flooding the Loop in 1992.

It all started in 1989 with a trip downtown to Toys R Us with his three-year-old daughter, Philanese, to buy a giant sketch pad and art supplies.

For South Shore resident Phillip Stokes, 43, the process of painting with his daughter led to a spiritual experience and the development of an avocation—which has begun to profit on the side.

"When my daughter and I got home from the store," Stokes says, "we both started drawing. When I looked later at the painting I had made, it looked almost professional. And, the process felt right. It was very spiritual for me, though I can't describe the feelings well. So, I just kept painting, evolving into canvas and oils."

Stokes' calling is part of a genre that has become quite popular, beginning with Jean DuBuffet's "art brut" collection and used today in self-help and art therapy circles—Outsider art. This is art

by people working independently of the art world, creating as they go along, untrained by conventional art schools.

"The intuitive art movement follows the school of thought that says anyone

Inside-Outsider art as it is also called.

Stokes, a slight African American, donning a clean-shaven head, grew up on the West Side near Roosevelt and Avers. He watched his brother go to college and then on to achieve a P.h.D. at the University of Illinois, while he never studied past high school, graduating from Tilden High School, 4747 S. Union, in 1978.

"I'm a bit of an unorthodox learner," he says. "I always had difficulty chaining myself down in one direction or another."

He never went to college, choosing instead to work odd jobs to get by. He married and became a father. Finally in 1988, he was hired by the CTA to drive the city bus.

Photo by Kamau Kadirifu

In early 1990 after a year of painting, Stokes set up an appointment with the School of the Art Institute in Chicago.

"I had all these hopes. I thought that they would bring me in on scholarship," he says.

While the administrators were impressed with Stokes' samples, they felt that he wasn't quite ready for art school. In their critique, they says his drawings had, "unusual color and texture combinations."



Phillip Stokes, 43, and his daughter Philanese, display some of Stokes' recent paintings. Mostly self-taught, Stokes, who works during the day as a CTA bus driver, has scored a coup: his work is being displayed at the DuSable Museum of African American Art.

can be an artist, anyone can find and follow their creativity," says Jeff Cory, executive director of the Intuit Gallery in Wicker Park. Cory called it, "art that does not know its own name."

Although Cory hasn't seen Stokes' work, his gallery exhibits work by artists that started off in the same place as Stokes—unschooled, untrained, often creating for spiritual or therapeutic reasons. Through July 12, the gallery is showing the works of people in an Austrian psychiatric hospital, among other examples of Intuitive art, or