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Blind Artist: Believing Is Seeing

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CLAY MODELS: Vincente Paratore shapes strands of clay into outlines of images for his paintings; he’ll trace stencils from the clay figures.

Blind artist: Believing is seeing

At an exhibit that opens Thursday in Providence, Vincente Paratore will explain how he has triumphed over darkness to paint vivid works that he will never see.

By GERALD S. CARBONE
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

Sunny days are gray; cloudy days are a dark gray; nights are black. These are the three shades in the world of Vincente Paratore, a blind man who paints.

Blindness has stolen the lush greens and purples of the vineyards surrounding the Argentine village where he was born; gone too are the peach and blue of sunsets, the metallic green of a mallard’s head. These colors are but memories now, bright visions stored in what Paratore calls his “inside mind.”

Paratore can summon those colors from his memory and splash them across canvas. He has discovered an ingenious method for creating shapes so he can paint people and trees and boats — anything he wants — in bright, vibrant hues.

At an exhibit that opens on Thursday, Paratore will explain how he has triumphed over near-total blindness to paint works that he will never see. The opening — at AS220, 115 Empire St. in Providence — begins at 5 p.m. and includes paintings by Roy Collins, with mixed work by an artist named Astrid.

In a recent interview in the basement studio of his Cranston home, Paratore shared his story — the stroke that pinched his optic nerve, stealing his sight; the resultant dark depression, in which he tried to drown himself in his hot tub; the day that it dawned on him, like an epiphany, that he could indeed shape color into meaningful images on canvas.

“I know this is going to look good, because I believe in myself,” Paratore said while showing a work in progress. “I think: I can do, I can do, I can do. I feel so alive again.”

Life was good for Vincente Paratore before his sight went dark. He owned a big house in the woods of Scituate, a place that he earned by molding clown heads and selling them at Boston’s Quincy Market.

Paratore was a gifted craftsman, a Dedalus who could transform a simple burlap sack into a life-like face. His formal schooling ended in Argentina at age 11, when his father died. To help his family, he went to work in a department store, where his innate sense of color and symmetry earned him a promotion from sweeping floors to building window displays.

He immigrated to Boston at age 23, working first in a shoe...
Painter

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factory then in a large department store, where he fashioned mechanical displays. He spent nearly 20 years creating ingenious window displays before striking out on his own. He rented a booth at Quincy Market and found that thousands, enabled him to buy his window displays before striking out

There was nothing doctors could do for his stroke had pinched his optic nerve. He showered and went to bed.

In May 1987, he mowed his lawn, and the effort left him sweaty. Paratore was surprised at how the whites he looked at his newspaper and

Paratore gathered clay and heavy paper. He rolled the clay into long, thin strands. Then he shaped the strands into lines that he could feel—lines that arced like a boulder protruding from water, lines like arms dangling from a torso, lines that circled like a head.

"Grama, can you do something with that clay?"

After blocking out a clay drawing, he cut around the clay with a razor knife.

"I don't recommend someone who is blind to use the razor blade too much," he says now. "You have to be really careful."