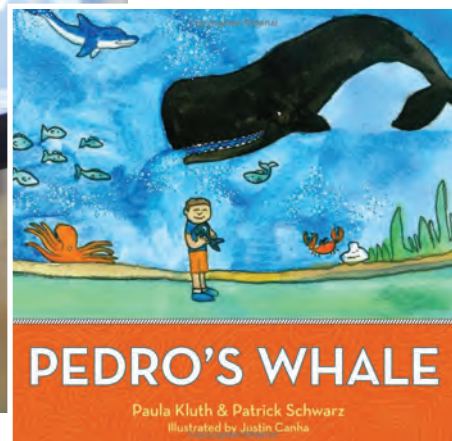


The Artist Justin Canha



Gillian J. Furniss

Justin Canha overcame many obstacles to become an artist, having been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder called Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) at the age of three. His family encouraged his creative abilities by integrating the arts into his treatment. Today, Canha shares his talents and skills with others to influence their understanding of what it is to have a cognitive disability.

An Early Artist

As a young child living in Germany, Canha visited the local zoo every week with his father, resulting in a fascination with drawing animals. One of Canha's earliest drawings is of the buildings at the zoo represented from different vantage points.

Canha's mother used sign language as a bridge between nonverbal communication and speech, and Canha quickly learned the signs for specific animals. Home videos show his mother drawing familiar animals and then, using sign language, asking Canha to repeat her drawings.

Denny Rees, a British speech therapist, worked with Canha from ages four to eight. Rees made drawings and, using sign language, asked Canha to draw the same animals. According to Rees, Canha was able to represent animals in his drawings with "attitude and emotion from an early age."

Lessons in Art

When Canha and his family moved back to the United States, he began art lessons with Denise Melucci. He

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learned oil painting, how to draw with charcoal and pastels, and how to make clay figurines. Melucci taught Canha to represent new subject matter such as people and nature scenes. She also made it possible for Canha to exhibit his work.

At thirteen, Canha began working with Ben Stamper, focusing on scale and composition. Canha preferred to work small, focusing on the figure in the foreground, so Stamper encouraged him to work larger and include the background. Stamper also acted as facilitator when Canha created animation by helping with the storyline and providing music.

Stamper also directed two short documentary films about Canha. *Sidecars* (2007) shows examples of seventeen-year-old Canha's art, his preoccupation with wolves, his gift for teaching animation to children, and his friendship with artist Lyndsey Wilkerson. The forthcoming *Don't Foil My Plans* is about Canha's transition to becoming an independent young adult with autism.

The Adult Artist

Canha enrolled in two animation courses at Bloomfield College in New Jersey, after which he enrolled in Art of the Visual Narrative, an art course on how to make ordinary moments interesting. For this class, Canha


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wrote and illustrated a book he called *I Refuse!*

In 2010, Canha made his publishing debut when he illustrated the children's book *Pedro's Whale*, written by Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwartz. It is the inspirational story of Pedro, a heartbroken young boy with autism who is told to put away his favorite toy on the first day of school. His teacher discovers that the only way to help Pedro do his best school work is by giving him back his toy whale, incorporating his special interest into the curriculum.

Canha is represented by the Ricco Maresca Gallery in New York City. 

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