

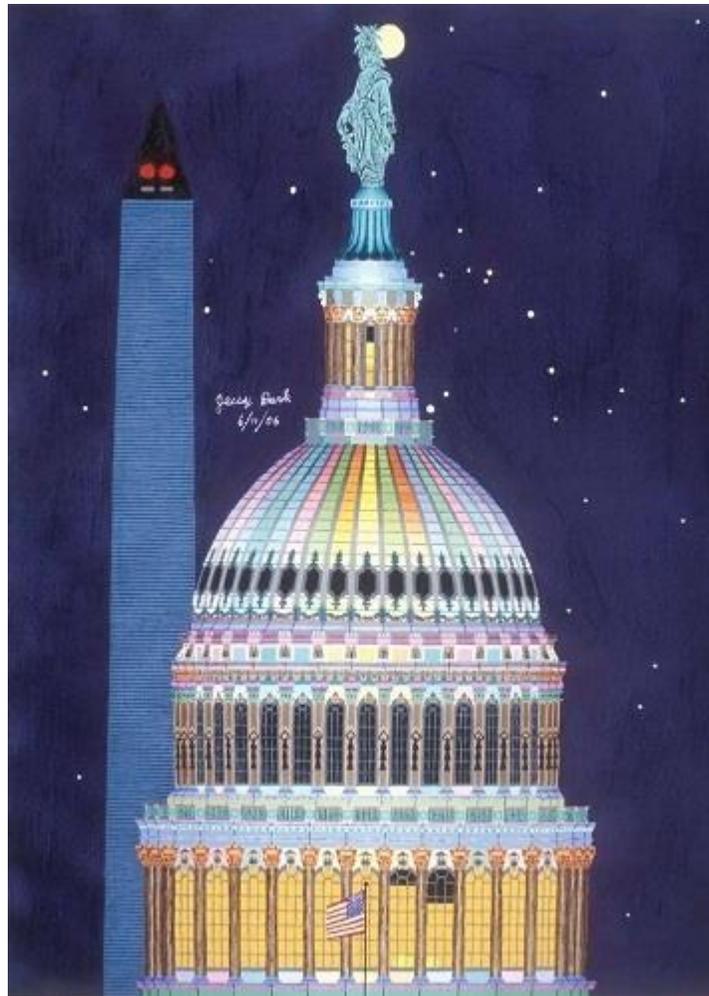


## To the Edge and Back: Jessica Park and Outsider Art

- Tony Gengareilly
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- outsider art

The designation “outsider art” is often perceived as offensive to the artist and degrading to the art. Darold A. Treffert in his book *Islands of Genius* documents a number of autistic savants whose art and music skills are indeed extraordinary. Along with a prodigious memory and ability to mimic almost instantaneously what is seen or heard, these artists are equally inventive, moving from mimesis to improvisation to wholly original works of art.

Treffert feels strongly that such remarkable art should never be labeled “outsider.” He calls this distinction “cruel elitism” and declares, “To me that term is outdated, elitist, condescending and discriminatory.” He goes on to add: “On the trail ahead for the savant artist it is my hope, and prediction, that both the concept and term ‘outsider’ will be discarded. As a result, *savant artists* will be invited into any gallery worthy of their work *on the same footing as ‘insider’ artists.*” (italics mine)



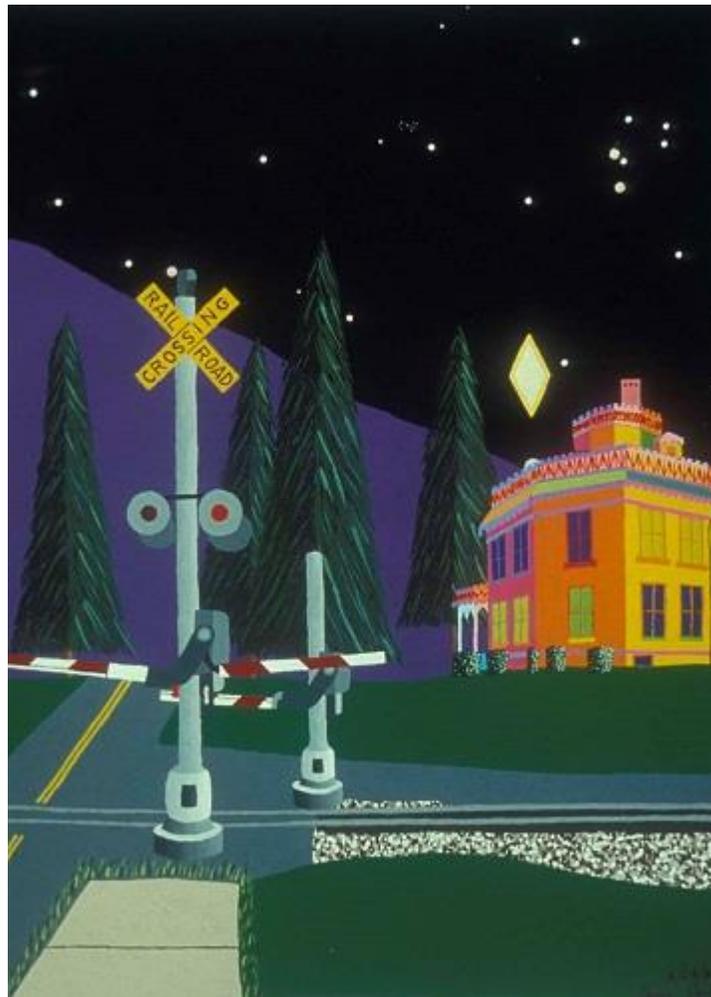
Jessica Park, "U.S. Capitol," 2006.

Treffert's commentary calls attention to the way the word *outsider* can marginalize people with autism spectrum disorders and diminish what they accomplish as artists. I would like, however, to explore the issue a bit further by taking a look at what the term outsider might potentially mean should the pathology originally attached to its origin be set aside with the recognition that a so-called disability can become an ability in the making of art. First, I will briefly touch on an example of how some modern-contemporary art developed outside the cultural mainstream; then traveled into the dominant cultural flow once its unique style and content become accepted and even celebrated by the art establishment. Outsider in this instance is something the artist experienced as a temporary position, part of the process of creating innovative works of art.

For instance, Pablo Picasso, who was academically trained and had mastered classical drawing by the age of 12, disengaged from what he perceived to be the stifling conformity of the cultural center to breathe the fresh air of artistic freedom in early 20th century Paris and Barcelona. Away from his classical drawing classes, Picasso explored a way to make art that was more in tune with his times.

As is often the case, the artist did not travel alone. He found a group of kindred spirits experimenting with post-impressionism and innovative graphic design—artists, philosophers, social critics who debated new ideas born from the urban/industrial world at the turn of the 19th century. Picasso developed radically different forms to express these ideas. His experiments with geometric configurations, shockingly different for the times, were given the label Cubism. Picasso and his art were defiantly outsider.

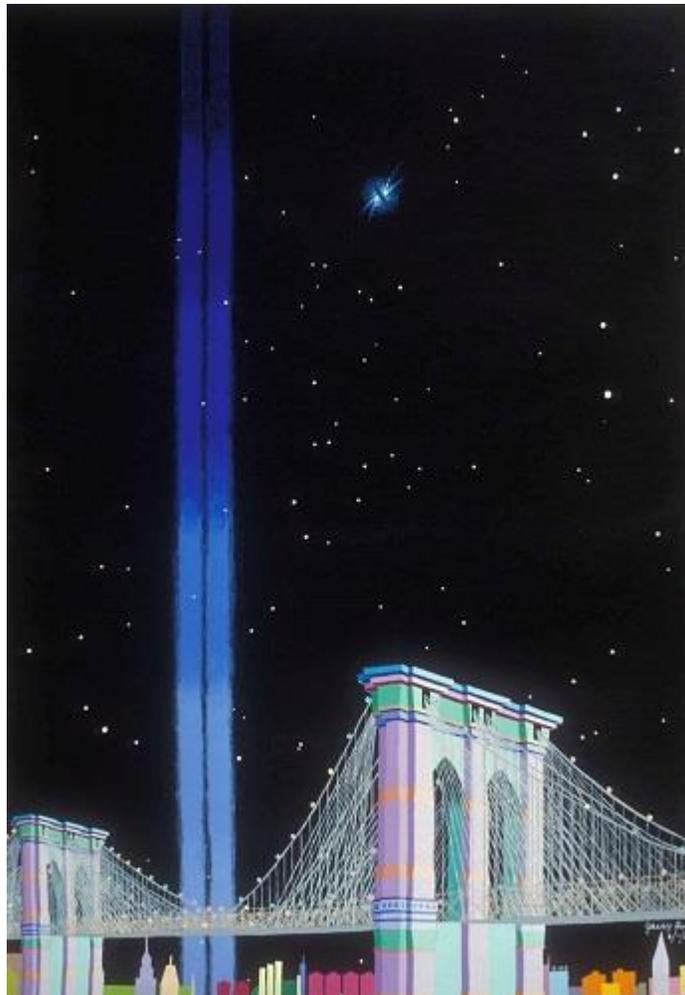
Then, support for his work from insider groups—art critics, dealers, patrons, museums, and eventually art academies and historians—began the flow of Picasso and his innovations toward the cultural mainstream. It accelerated until his *outsider art* became part of the established canon, made its mark on the history of art. Cubism was designated as an important, innovative style. Breaking apart the visible world into geometric shapes is now understood and accepted, no longer looked upon with apprehension and derisive contempt. The negative sentiment of deplorable innovation has been dropped—the term cubist as a useful stylistic designation remains.



Jessica Park, "The Railroad Crossing in Hoosick Falls #2, Nighttime," 1988.

Will a similar evolution embrace contemporary outsider artists and their art? Time will tell, but the remarkable art career of **Jessica Hilary Park** illustrates the journey to a position close to the center of the art world experienced by a number of present day outsiders.

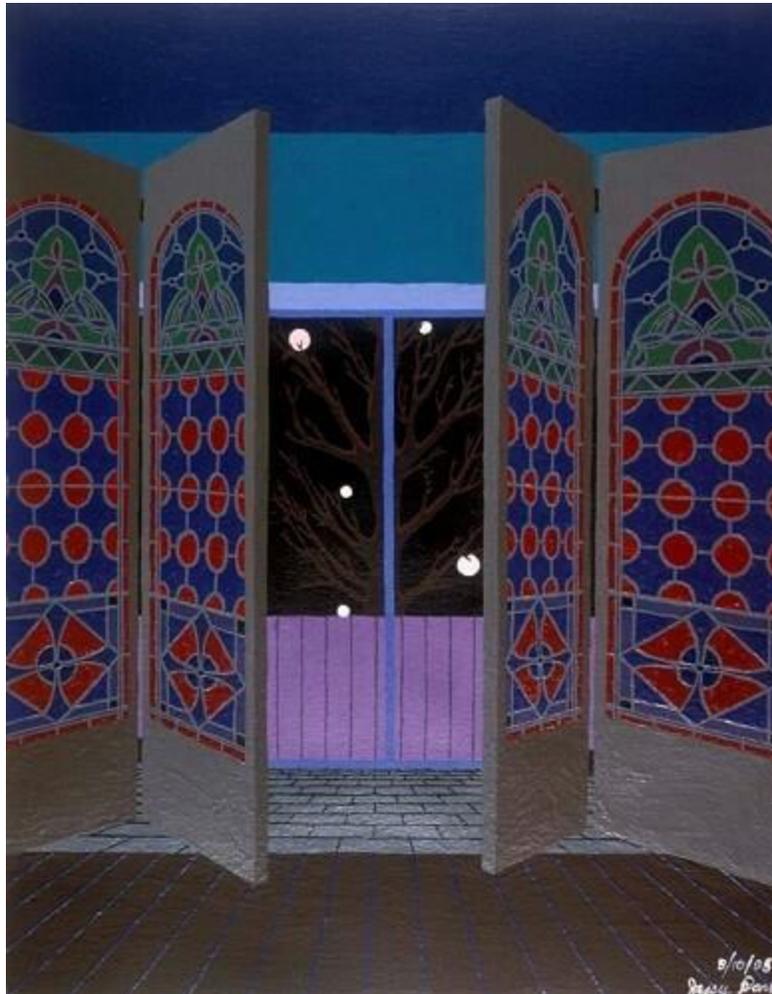
I first met the artist in 2004 when my Museum Studies class at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts did a retrospective of Park's work. Her transformations of architectural structures with a brilliant pattern of colors, set against a background of astronomical displays in a nighttime sky, filled the MCLA gallery where the artist and an admiring crowd stopped to gaze and chat about one spectacular piece or another. Here was the artist at mid-career having already had a major exhibition at neighboring Williams College where her father, a distinguished physics professor, mother, and brother all taught. This artist, with an elite family connection, large retinue of patrons and represented by a New York studio gallery, **Pure Vision Arts**, was no outsider, but the autism spectrum disorder that had marginalized her originally continued to place her work in the category of outsider art.



Jessica Park, "The Brooklyn Bridge #3, with Lights and Twin Light Pillars," 2003.

Park and her art then became a ten year study for me and my Arts Management classes. We learned about Park's mental isolation after she was diagnosed with autism at an early

age, and her struggles to attain basic language skills; how her art sensibility manifested even then and helped through a rudimentary visual expression to bring the artist into the world of shared experience. Park's artistic training was minimal but very significant. She spent several years in high school art classes where she learned to draw. Park had a number of mentors as well, artistically talented young women who were her companions and provided opportunities to practice her emerging skills, while introducing new materials such as the acrylic paint she now uses exclusively for her art. After graduation from high school, Park began to draw on a daily basis. She focused on household gadgets, simply drawn and decorated with her signature color pattern that continues to this day.

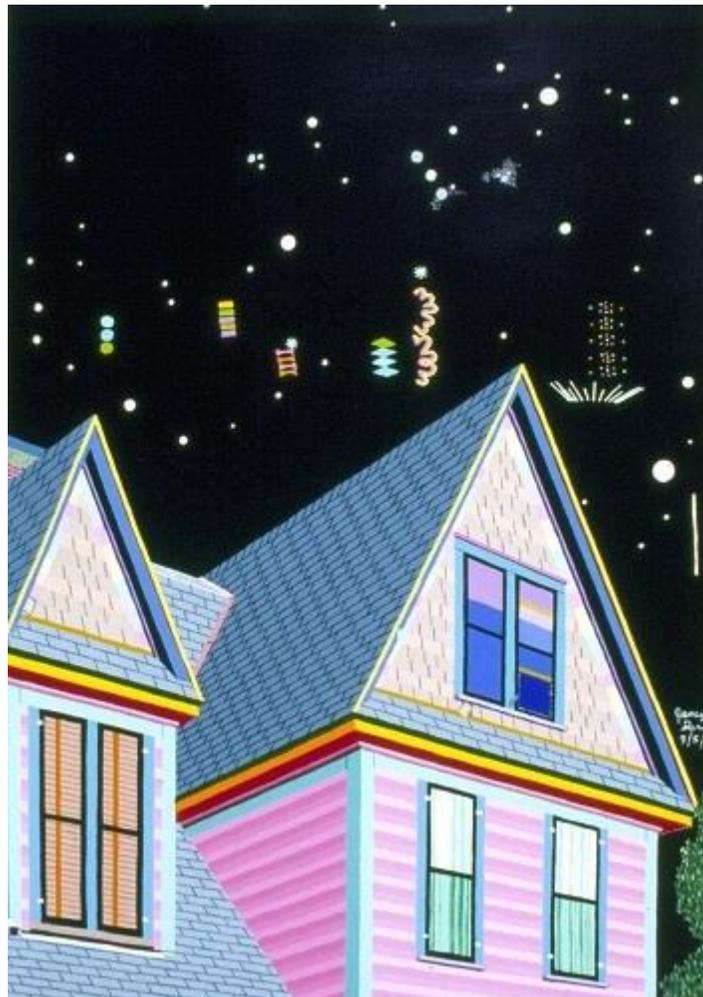


Jessica Park, "The Great Stained Glass Doors #8, in Winter at Night Time," 1985.

Primarily self-taught, Park continued to access her extraordinary talent for color and soon expanded her interests to architectural subjects. She developed a precise naturalistic rendering of the portions of her buildings that she found to be especially compelling—a set of French doors opening onto a porch at her aunt's house in Brooklyn inspired a series of 15 variations exhibiting the budding artist's ability to transform shapes with a visionary sense of color and introduce a variety of backgrounds. Park went on to create an impressive array of Victorian houses and urban monuments, carefully drawn and then

abstracted with the straightening of their lines before she applied her elaborate color palette. Park's interest in background skies—begun with early renditions of railroad crossings, chimneys, and roof tops—developed into a carefully articulated presentation of astronomical phenomena to accompany her color-filled subjects.

And her skill set grew with each new painting as Park exercised artistic choice in rendering her subjects, introduced an imaginative set of complementary objects of personal interest, demonstrated creative organization of her compositions, and displayed a remarkable persistence and dedication to precision that has become the hallmark of her working method. She has refuted the old ghosts of misperception that artists with autism just render what they see, repeat endlessly the same subjects without imagination or creative insight and never evolve as artists. To the contrary, Park's marginalization into a world of neurological non-conformity has been the breeding ground for her craft, nurturing the development of her unique style, and the original content of her paintings. The artist's "disability" has become an ability in the creation of her art.



Jessica Park, "The House on 53 Cole Avenue," 2002.

During our time studying Park, her art career has continued to expand with a number of important exhibitions, publications, and the acceptance of her work into museum collections. Like Picasso and the early modern masters, Park is moving toward the mainstream and, interestingly, it is her position as an outsider that has brought attention to her work, provided her with a patron base as well as a progressive art studio and college program to promote her art.

Her mother's early pioneering work in the field of autism led to two major publications about Park, introducing the artist to a variety of interested supporters. Pure Vision Arts, a New York based studio/gallery providing space and market opportunities for artists on the autism spectrum, has represented Park since 2002. The Jessica Park Project, founded as an educational program at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in 2004, has organized numerous exhibitions of Park's work, published several articles and books about her life and art. The Park Project has also collaborated with partners such as the College Internship Program (based in Pittsfield, Massachusetts with six campuses nationwide), The Folk Art Society of America, the Bennington Museum and, over the past three years, the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center to bring the artist's work to the attention of a wider audience.

Park has found a group of patrons and fellow artists; she enjoys the support of educational institutions, professional organizations and museums. These accomplishments raise the question: is the *concept outsider* applicable to Park and her art?



Jessica Park, "The Epcot Center," 2013.

Park's career to date refutes that idea rather convincingly. She has followed the path of many outsiders such as Picasso: first to the edge (in her case, marginalized by her autism), where her unique vision and extraordinary talent combined to create original and compelling works of art. Then, through a series of exhibitions, publications, institutional acceptance and a growing patron base, Park is now regarded as an important artist and her paintings are valued and praised in many established art circles. Dr. Pamala Rogers, Director of Pure Vision Arts, has commented in *Understanding Students with Autism through Art* that Park's work is "not created by a person with a disability or in spite of it. . . [it is] just extraordinary contemporary art."

Does the *term outsider* still apply to Park and other artists similarly positioned? If so, what value might it have? The term's connotation might well point to the uniqueness and originality that socially and culturally marginalized artists have to offer—the term outsider a useful designation for art from an unusual perspective; its original contributions to the cultural mainstream recognized as "extraordinary contemporary art." As it has been for Park, the outsider category could also be a channel to the inside for artists on the fringe; might well embrace little noticed pockets of creativity and bring them to the fore. Eventually perhaps the *term* outsider will not be freighted with the residual negatives associated with the *concept*, and the designation Outsider, similar to Cubism, might become an established category for new and inspiring forms of art.