

ell
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By Luke Hendry
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When John Granton felt it was time to start showing his artwork in public, he decided to start at the top.

The Belleville photographer has two images hanging in the National Gallery of Canada as part of Mindscapes, a national exhibit by artists with mental illnesses. It's the second year Granton's creations have been displayed at the gallery.

Now a resident of Palmer Road, Granton grew up in Toronto, where he took photography in high school and later photographed rock concerts.

After moving to Belleville in 1993, he continued shooting, and studied photojournalism briefly at Loyalist College.

When that didn't work out, Granton sought the advice of local photographer Cyril Sharp, a veteran shooter and master printer. In Sharp's studio, then housed at Century Place, Granton received tips on technique and printing and the encouragement he needed to keep shooting.

Since Sharp began mentoring him, Granton has been receiving more and more recognition.

One photo was given an honourable mention among the 14,000 entries in The Toronto Star's annual photo contest, and was displayed in the city's yearly Contact photo show in 1999.

In 2003, his photo "Diving off a cliff" — shot from a canoe bobbing on a lake — was accepted into Mindscapes: Visual Art and Mental Illness. The National Gallery's exhibit was a collection of works by artists with mental illnesses. The show was organized by several mental health organizations.

This year, two more photos by Granton were accepted into this year's Mindscapes.

One of the visitors on opening day earlier this month was federal Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

The two spoke briefly. "I felt pretty honoured," he said. "I was

excited.

"I figured God had blessed me with my talent, and He was taking me places I never thought I'd go."

Granton prefers not to disclose details of his personal condition, but says facing such challenges is about achievement, not limitations.

"It's not what you can't do — it's what you can do," he said. "I figure I can contribute to society."

His acceptance into a national exhibit was validating, he said, and pushes him to improve his photography.

"It took it to another level," said Granton. "It means I want to strive to get better. It makes it seem more important; it gives me inspiration to carry on."

Using his manually-operated film camera, Granton photographs his friends, landscapes, public events, and anything else he can find.

"Pictures can move people," Granton said. "I try to shoot a variety of things and express different emotions in my pictures ... The reward is when you capture something the way you want it."

He also helps others through his photography, taking pictures at Maranatha Church, where he's a member of the congregation, and The Light Magicals, a Brighton-area black-light theatre company.

"I'm very proud of him; he's come a long way," said Sharp.

"He has an approach that most of us would never touch, but for him it works," he said.

Though many photographers shoot their subjects by lighting them from the front, Granton often shoots backlit subjects, Sharp said. And while some plan photo trips with certain images already in mind, Granton frequently improvises with found moments and scenes.

"He's versatile; he's spontaneous," added Sharp.

Granton's now focusing on getting his work on display and selling prints whenever possible.

"I'm trying to get my name out there so people can see my work," he said, adding he has a few prints on display at Quinte-area offices.

The Sparks Street gallery, near Parliament Hill, remains the only place in which his work has appeared as part of an actual show.

"Other than that, I haven't really displayed my work," he said. "But that's a pretty good place to start."

Mindscapes runs until May 30. A virtual tour is available on the Canadian Mental Health Association's website at www.cmha.ca.

"I don't know what he's going to do now to top himself," Sharp said, "But somehow he will do it."

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