

Damien's Story: Breaking Ground

Damien's mother Cheryl wrote Damien's story.

It is the 11th December 2009. We are at Studio 44 at Fingal Head, a magical place on the banks of the beautiful Tweed River in Far Northern NSW.

What's the occasion?

It is *Breaking Ground*, the inaugural solo art exhibition for Damien Conte, a young artist from Murwillumbah who has been part of [Ability Option's](#) self-managed program since April 2008.

I find myself stopping to have a 'moment' as I look at Damien's beautiful artworks adorning the walls and watch all the wonderful people that have contributed to this day adding the final touches before the official opening time. Damien is seated on the couch—he knows this evening is for him—we have talked about it for so long, and yet he doesn't really know what the evening will bring—his excitement is obvious.

The journey to Studio 44 had been both exhilarating and challenging, exactly what you would expect from a young man who left school at the end of 2007 with hopes, dreams and desires for his future. Except that Damien has autism which severely limits his ability to communicate verbally or interact socially. And so began a journey that for me, his mother, has been my great privilege to travel with him.

But where to start?

Fortunately Damien had the opportunity to attend a series of creative workshops facilitated by artists from [Crossing Divides](#), a Gold Coast based arts organisation whose vision is to promote economic and social inclusion for young people, including those experiencing disability and disadvantage, by developing skills through innovative and creative programs.

What Damien and I discovered was that Damien loves to paint—he loves everything about it—the colours, the textures, using brushes, fingers, whatever, to create. He gets lost in his work while painting, his focus is dedicated to bringing the creativity from within to the canvas. He also enjoys music and using clay. So we began to seek out the artists that would mentor Damien to develop his skills as a painter and sculptor. Everyone we approached was really keen to facilitate Damien's journey as an artist and all have shown an unwavering belief in Damien's abilities.

One artist in particular, Jhana Bowen, was so taken with Damien's passion for art that he organised Damien's exhibition at Fingal Heads. He did this with assistance from [Accessible Arts NSW](#) as part of the *Don't Dis My Ability* events being organised in conjunction with the International Day of People with Disability in 2009. And so here we are; Damien's first solo exhibition.

The musicians arrive and start to play. People arrive, look around at the art, have a drink, stop to listen to the music. The atmosphere is relaxed and happy, people are

really enjoying themselves. Damien is also enjoying himself in his own way, he loves the music and the praise that he gets from random people stopping to tell him how much they admire his art. People are asked to write their comments and from these a poem is created:

*Through inspiration every moment
A journey to the real world
Surprised at how each piece is different
Beauty expressed from a genuine place of soul
Colour, movement, connection unique
I'm lost in the depth, the place is cosmic
Disability is not a lock but a golden ticket to express the creator and artist within
The love of art reflected vibrantly on canvas is truly unique and special
His work is deep-seeing, far-seeing crossover between art and freedom
Giving his gifts for all to share
Canvas and sculpture to this exhibit he brings
Keep doing your thing
Red, golden orange and pinky bronze,
Metallic biology it keeps going on
Cellular Memory, the Sunkissed Land
They are winners; they resonate from where I stand*

Breaking Ground was a truly magical and successful exhibition, which Studio 44 went on to hang in the Tweed library for the following three months.

Some of Damien's work can be seen at his [My Space page](#).

When he's not creating, Damien enjoys horse-riding, bike riding, going to the gym and swimming at the aquatic centre. He also enjoys his weekend job feeding the animals at a farm school.

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