



Sam Gant, *The hand's language*, 1994, tempera, 26" x 31".  
(Courtesy of the National Institute of Art and Disabilities, Richmond.)

## A conversation with Irene Brydon, executive director of Creative Growth

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Irene Brydon received her BFA in painting from the University of Pennsylvania and then spent a number of years struggling to support herself as an artist. Eventually, however, she earned a graduate degree in art education and registration as an art therapist through programs at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

She has worked with Creative Growth Art Center for sixteen years, thirteen of them as executive director.

**Artweek** *During the time you've been at Creative Growth, the art of disabled people has become increasingly visible in the art world at large. How was this accomplished?*

**Irene Brydon** For ourselves, we've placed a great emphasis on excellence, and the work produced at Creative Growth is quality work. We hire practicing artists as staff, and their respect for quality in art has led to a high level of instruction. But yes, when I came to Creative Growth, art produced by people outside the mainstream art world was not considered real art. That was before there was widespread interest in Art Brut, or outsider art of any sort. I think the art world tends to be based upon credentials. Since the people

here not only were untrained as artists but had severe disabilities, the typical attitude was that their production was busy work, not art.

Until we started working with well-known artists, we would have openings at our gallery and only the staff would come. Most severely disabled people don't have a constituency. Many live in board and care homes, and they're at the bottom of the social heap. Consequently, no one cared about their work.

Then, in 1984, Joan Brown approached me about doing a two-person show with one of our artists. That exhibition was a breakthrough. Brown regarded the artist who showed with her as a peer, and she did not take the attitude that she was doing the show

for its social benefit. She loved the work, and thought of the artist as a talented human being with whom she could have an exciting exchange. That was the first exhibition in which we paired a well-known artist and an artist with disabilities. Others followed, and their presence gave a stamp of approval to the art, and brought their constituency, as well.

*Whether a person has a disability or not has nothing to do with their art.*

—Irene Brydon

Human beings have many ways of communicating. Some of the mentally retarded people in the program have a very, very limited vocabulary. They could not discuss their own imagery, much less art history. When they are taken to a museum, however, they display a visual hunger. Often, what they have seen will emerge in their work, so although the influences were not absorbed cognitively, they were absorbed in another way.

For these people, art is more than creative expression. It can become their language. Take, for example, the work of William Tyler, who is a twin. He has done a series of autobiographical fantasy works, drawings in which he and his brother are flying through the sky over various vistas.

He couldn't express his personal struggles to you, but his struggle against loneliness and his longing for a fuller life are very clear in these drawings.

**AW** *For someone like William Tyler, what does it mean to become an artist? Would he identify himself as an artist?*

**IB** One of our artists, Nelson Tygart, who's very exuberant,

**AW** *How, would you say, is the practice of art different for your artists than it is for artists without disabilities?*

**IB** Whether a person has a disability or not has nothing to do with their art. There are differences in the teaching. The artists on staff at Creative Growth have to approach the people they mentor in a different way because many severely disabled people are cognitively disabled. Teaching in other situations is more verbal. Anyone who works here has to do more showing than talking.

will walk up to people and say, "Hi, I'm Nelson and I'm an artist." William Tyler, on the other hand, would never articulate it in that way. He's very reserved. But he had an exhibition with Mel Ramos, and that evening I watched as Mel gave his supporters an informal tour of his art. On the other side of the room, William was also telling people about his work—talking about when he'd made the work, for instance. He'd incorporated the idea of being an artist and he understood that this was something he wanted to communicate to other people. This gets back to your earlier question. Art is the same for all people. Artists are trying to make sense of their own world or the world at large, using a visual format.

**AW** *Whole groups of work have been lumped together, including the art of the insane, the art of children, art of the self-taught, art of the disabled, and others. In one frequent association, the art of the mentally disabled, who are often identified by their mental age—as in "he has the mind of a six year old"—is linked with the art of children. Is this an accurate comparison?*

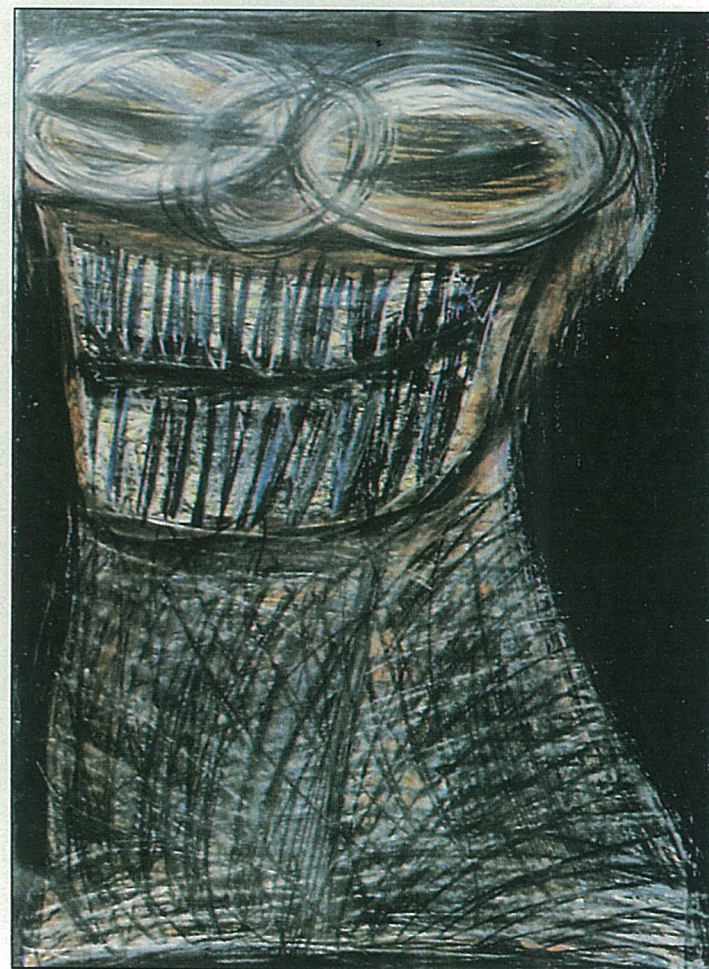
**IB** One of the strengths possessed by both children and our artists is that they work very directly. There is an immediacy to their work. But all artists reflect their own individuality and their own experiences. Chil-

dren's experiences are limited, so their content is different. Children's images also tend to be characterized more in terms of developmental stages. This is something you don't see as often in the work of outsider artists. Many of the artists here develop their own styles very quickly, and they go with it. They're less easily influenced than artists in the mainstream art community. They seem to be able to come to terms with their own way of expressing the world and they stay with it.

**AW** *What does the mainstream art world look like to them? What do they know about it? And do they really care?*

**IB** They're not influenced by the mainstream art world. They do identify with artists, however. They don't see a them-and-us situation. They see an artist as a person who makes art. We've brought in a lot of well-known artists to give slide lectures, and it's interesting to see the reaction of the people from the program. Sometimes they'll say, "Gee, I could do that." They see the artist as a peer. In a way, it's a great freedom, because they're not burdened with the hierarchies of the art world.

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KALW-FM.



Nelson Tygart, *Untitled*, 1993, mixed media on paper, 30" x 22".  
(Courtesy of Creative Growth Art Center, Oakland.)