

# Portrait Oil Painting Workshop for Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Salma Ragheb



For my 2022 Laidlaw Summer Leadership in Action 6-week project, I led an oil painting workshop in the Daniels Building at The University of Toronto for young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from ages 15-25. I had 3 groups, and each group had 2 classes per week with each class lasting 2 hours. Each student completed a painting of Jim Carrey that I had painted a week before the workshop with the same materials we used in the workshop. To give the students an idea of the final product, I had documented individual steps of the painting process.

I picked oil painting for a couple of reasons. First, it is what I practiced and what I felt competent teaching. Second, oil paint dries very slowly (ranging from a couple of hours to days), which makes it conducive for learning because marks on a canvas can be “erased” with turpentine and a cloth even after a couple of hours of having been made. Also, the color is modifiable, which means that if a color is on the canvas, and you decide it is more crimson in your reference image, you can go in with crimson or make an

(0) Set-up with main color-wheel, paint chips, and Jim Carrey portrait I made for reference. The opposing wall had many more paint chips.

entirely new flesh tone and mix the new color into the color you had laid down on the canvas previously. In short, when using oil, there is room for mistakes and for overshooting because these mistakes are so easily fixed, even when noticed later; so, there is no need to be tense or conservative when applying color.

What we achieved together per week varied from person to person. Initially, I had planned that on week one, we would gesso the canvas. As we wait for the gesso to dry, we would learn about the color wheel, analogous colors, complementary colors, value versus hue, local color, color context, and color constancy. Then, we would tone the canvas with green or blue acrylic. Then, as the acrylic dries, each student would select some paint chips and try to match the paint chip color with just the primary oil paints: titanium white, cadmium yellow light, permanent alizarin crimson, French ultramarine, and burnt umber.

Gessoing the canvas gets rid of the crisscross lumps of the fiber threads that make up the canvas and provides a smoother surface to paint on; the paint glides on the surface and less paint is used as a consequence.

In the color wheel, the primary colors are blue, yellow, and red. The secondary colors are green, orange, and purple. The color wheel features the 3 primary colors in a triad and the secondary colors (ie. colors made by mixing 2 primary colors) in a triad. An analogous pair of colors refers to colors that are directly near each other on the color wheel (e.g., yellow and green). A complementary pair of colors represents colors that are directly opposite each other on the color wheel. For example, red and green are complementary; purple and yellow are complementary; and orange and blue are complementary. Complementary colors dim each other down. For example, for a dim or muddy green (ie. an olive green), we add very little crimson. When complementary colors are added in critical proportions, they make brown. All the primary colors mixed make brown, and so if we take a complementary pair (e.g., purple and yellow), we can see that mixing yellow and purple (red + blue) is fundamentally mixing all primary colors together. This information was in a color wheel interactive sheet I had made for each of the students, taped to their easel as per a parent's advice; this is separate from the main color wheel in *image 0*.

The value of the color is the lightness or the darkness of a color. The hue of a color is whether it is red, green, or purple, and how red, green, or purple it is. When matching a specific color, it is more helpful to focus on matching the value first before matching the hue. When adjusting value, we add yellow or white or both to make a color lighter, and blue or brown or both to make a color darker. When adjusting a hue, to make our color less intense, we add its complementary; we call this dirtying a color or toning it down. If a color is too gray, it means there is too much blue. If it is too brown, it means there is too much orange.

Regarding local color and color context: getting the comparative value relationship between local sections in a picture is more important than precisely achieving the individual colors. Neighboring colors are selfless; they compromise their individuality for collective cohesion; how we surround color is more important than the color itself. This works because of an ability we have called color constancy which is our ability to infer the true color of something even when it is bathed in colored light. A great example is a Rubik's cube bathed in green light: we are still able to identify which blocks are red, which blocks are blue, yellow etc. If all the areas of an object are shifted by the same-colored light, it is the relationship of the neighboring colors to each other that allows us to determine the true color of each square. This applies in painting too. If your palette is off, if all the colors you make are too cool, it is okay as long as the value relationship between neighboring colors is honored.

We tone the canvas because in real life, colors are rarely surrounded by white like that of the canvas; colors applied on a toned canvas gives us perspective and are truer to how colors will show next to other colors. When colors are applied to a white canvas rather than a toned canvas, they appear darker than they really are because our eyes compare the applied color to white as opposed to a more toned color.

For week 2, we would be penciling out the sketch of the portrait with burnt umber. For week 3, we would match and lay down the color in the most important areas: the cheeks, forehead, chin, and start with the eyes. For week 4, we would cover other areas, fill in between the gaps between forehead, cheeks, and chin, we would accentuate previous sections, and start adding the darker areas and the relatively lighter areas in the hair. For week 5, we would build onto flesh tones, start blending to smooth out edges, start the mouth and teeth and the shadows. For week 6, we would start to add glazes (ie. thin down a color with turpentine so it is a transparent tint over a dried opaque color), do hair highlights, and do a quick suggestion of the clothes.

This was all my initial plan, but overtime, I found that this very structured, linear timeline was unrealistic, and it didn't account for the different skills and abilities of each of the students, so I had to tailor the structure for each student's skill and their corresponding progress. In general, the first week went as planned; we gessoed and toned the canvas, learned about the color wheel, practiced matching colors and using the palette knives to pack and mix colors. However, from weeks 2-6, every student went at a different pace.

Another thing: I found that the slideshow I had prepared about the color wheel, hues, values, color context, color constancy, why we gesso or tone a canvas was not useful because it was very theoretical, and a lot of the

students relied heavily on visual cues and progress pictures instead. In general, students preferred to understand why we do something while they were doing it, not before.

To demonstrate how I had to change each class for the student's pace, I will talk about particular students and how I had to tailor my course-plan based on their abilities and degree of patience.

### **Student 1: BR**

BR wanted to paint himself, and he had painting experience with acrylic before, so he had some level of confidence in his skill. And because he had practiced color mixing before, he was so proficient in matching color that he would match a paint chip's color in minutes. The principal difference between acrylic and oil is that acrylic dries relatively quickly whereas oil takes at least a couple of hours. As such, oil painting allows fixing mistakes and requires a degree of patience that BR wasn't used to when painting. Being trained in acrylics, he considered painting was to be done once, and it dried so quickly there was no chance to modify. This presented a problem in our third class (2<sup>nd</sup> week). He quickly got frustrated and agitated when we had to repeat the outline.

BR was confident, so he would often listen to the first part of an instruction and proceed without listening to the rest. He wasn't scared to try (the opposite of the tenseness that beginner painters usually exhibit). Consequently, he would complete the task hastily and sometimes overshoot. You can see this in the outline we ended class 3 with in *image (1)*. The lines are too thick, they're too dark, the eyes are disproportionately big, the ears too big, the face uncentered. I could tell he struggled with controlling line thickness of the brush: thin and thick lines were tricky.

I consulted with his mom, and she gave me some good tips. She said to find a task that is intrinsically motivating for him but that also allows him to practice the skills he needs to apply when he outlines his self-portrait. To practice control with an intrinsically motivating task, in class 4 (2<sup>nd</sup> week), I did an outline in pencil for Disney characters that interested him, and he practiced outlining them primarily with thin lines using a brush and burnt umber (*Images 2,3*). His mother and I also decided that it is a good idea to give him a blank canvas in the last 30 minutes of our 2-hour class, and let him paint whatever he liked, without instructions. This free 30 minutes would allow him to regain his confidence and to paint without the paranoia of waiting to be corrected.

In the next classes, after we had practiced control with characters that he wanted to paint, we started going back to his self-portrait. I made an outline of the reference image in crimson so he could gauge how thin and thick the different lines had to be, and he followed over it with burnt umber and the same brush I had used for the crimson outline (*Image 4*); we did this twice on two separate canvases. BR then colored one of these canvases with flesh tones that he had made on his own. He had incredible intuition when it came to mixing colors, and I felt he needed little to no guidance in this respect. But we needed to practice brush control (even when applying color) more. In *Image 6*, you can see the first outline BR had done entirely on his own in burnt umber; the control he acquired and his inclination to listen to instructions, to be patient, and to try again is remarkable. Compare image 1 to image 6.

In *Images (7,8)*, you can see how he colored the outline he had made: again, with more brush control, more patience for building layers, and more sensitivity to transitions of color in neighboring sections.

In our last week, BR freehanded a new self-portrait (*Image 9*), with listening to instructions, with great patience and willingness to modify and try again. He had finished the hardest part of the portrait: the outline. And I trusted him with the colors. It's his forte.



(1) Initial outline of reference image freehanded by BR



(2, 3) Pencil or (4) red paint outline made by me, and BR followed outline with burnt umber paint to practice line thickness control with brush



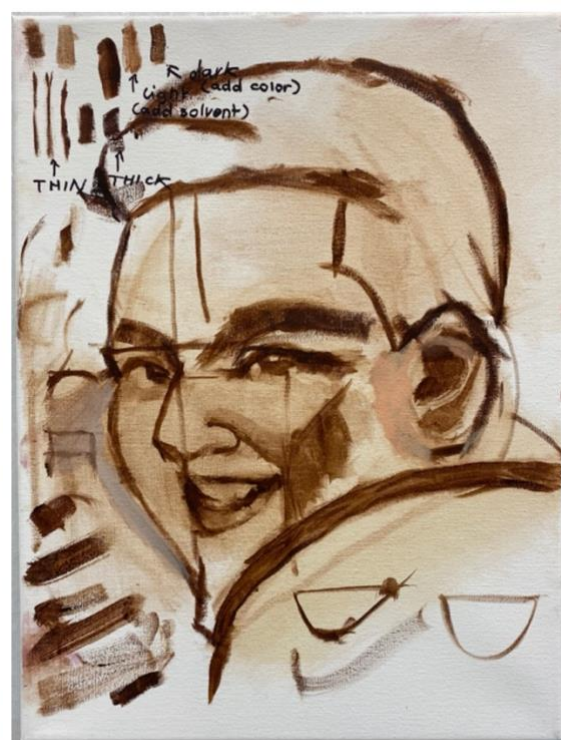
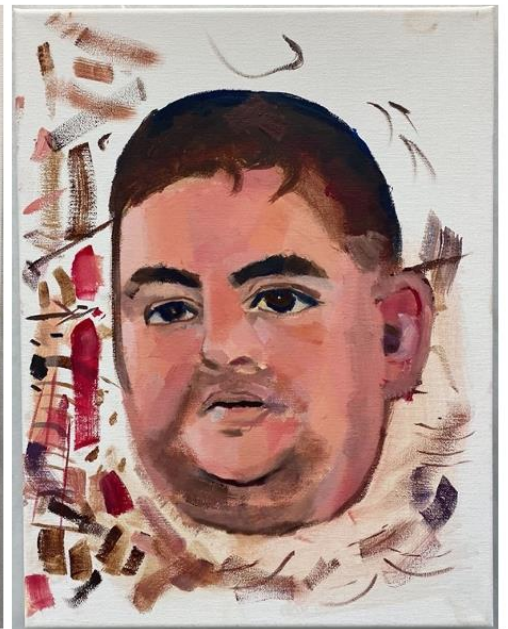
(5) BR's initial color painting using canvas in (4)



(6) Outline of reference image entirely freehanded by BR after practicing line thickness control with brush. Compare with initial freehand outline in (1)



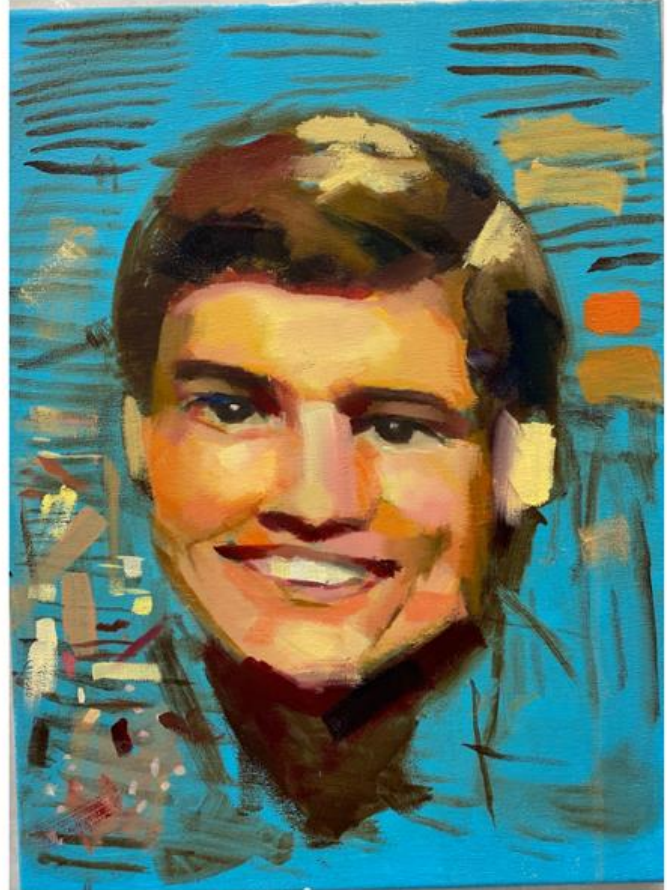
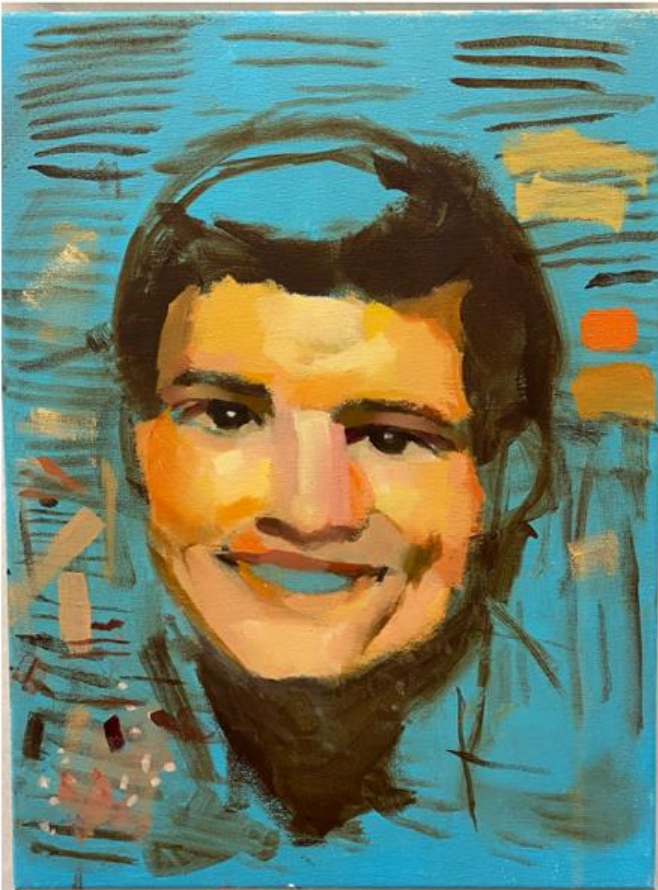
(7, 8) BR's color painting of outline in (6). Compare with BR's initial color painting in (5).



(9) Outline of second self-portrait completely freehanded in week 6 by BR

## Student 2: RPM

RPM had severely impaired motor skills, but he was incredibly patient. He struggled with holding the brush, the palette knife, and applying force to pack a color onto the palette. As a result, he also struggled with brush control. You can see this in the image on the top left in *image 10*, when aiming to paint a very light, thin horizontal line as a guide for the bottom of the nose, it was too dark and thick. But RPM persevered and kept trying until he got it right; the many lines surrounding the portrait are practice lines to do thin, thick, dark, and light lines with the same brush. The image in the middle of the top row shows the stage he finished at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> week. Comparing this to my initial plan of a standardized plan for all students, it becomes clear how each student requires different practice to progress at their own pace. RPM was very communicative and would plan out and vocalize his next step before he executed it. I am impressed with his result, and he too, expressed he was proud of his work.



(10) Progress pictures of Jim Carrey portrait by RPM

### Student 3: RF

RF was meticulous and good at following instructions. He hated messes and liked hard clean edges, so teaching him to blend adjacent colors on the canvas was difficult; he was hesitant to do it, and even tense. But he was very patient, receptive, and willing to repeat stages when necessary. I felt he really enjoyed the workshop and felt accomplished after every stage.



(11) Progress pictures of Jim Carrey portrait by RF

### Student 4: KP

KP had a speech impediment. He had difficulty focusing and understanding theoretical ideas. He was a visual and practical learner. KP was very good at following sequential instructions, and he had a brilliant intuition in mixing color even though he hadn't had previous experience in the matter.



(12) Progress pictures of Jim Carrey portrait by KP

## Outcomes

At the end of this workshop, everyone completed a painting with oil paint. They learned about the color wheel, about complementary colors, about how to make secondary colors, about how to tone a color down, about how to change the value of a color, about how to angle the same brush to paint thin and thick lines. They learned brush control, how to use a palette knife, to pack a color onto the palette, how to thin a color down with turpentine/solvent to make it lighter or to glaze on top of a dried opaque color. They learned how to tone and gesso a canvas, how to gauge the size of a face, how to center the face, how to gauge the size of the features relative to the rest of the face. They also learned that when painting a portrait, you rarely make one skin color, but each patch of skin has a different color based on its depth, angle, and how much light it receives. I felt an important outcome regarding aversives like getting paint on their hands and being so bothered that they had to clean their hands immediately; I noticed that over time, some students overcame this aversive, to some degree, and could go longer in the session without cleaning the paint off their hands right away. When consulting with their parents, I learned this was an indication that they became increasingly engaged in class as they developed confidence in their skills such that they didn't think about the paint on their hands as much. At the end, upon completion of the course, each student got a certificate of completion signed by me, by the current international scholarship advisor and manager at the Centre for International Experience at The University of Toronto, and by the current program coordinator at John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at The University of Toronto.

## SMART goals

I think many SMART goals could be applied to this project. **Social & Cultural Intelligence & Awareness** is one of them. During this project, I learned some of the language and communication appropriate in the ASD community. This awareness of the language and of how to be confident and considerate when referring to or interacting with neurodivergent people is an important piece in becoming a better teacher or just an empathetic person that could reach a wider range of people, not exclusively neurotypicals. I think I learned to gauge my students' abilities, their level at painting, and when they were demotivated. Another SMART goal is developing **Leadership Abilities** that extend to other communities, beyond a community I am used to interacting with.

Two goals that I think go hand in hand are **Collaboration and Team Working** and **Resilience and Determination to Achieve**. This project was relatively unpredictable, first, because I had never taught oil before, and second, because I had never provided a service to a neurodivergent community before. But I found much guidance in consulting some parents who gave me advice on how to proceed when I felt like I didn't have the capacity or the experience to empathize enough to deliver a realistic task to the students. Sometimes, parents helped me break down how many steps are involved in something I regarded as one task; they helped me form a more realistic timeline. This goes hand in hand with **Effective Communication**. I think I learned to better communicate instructions and to be as clear as I can; a lot, if not most, of the students I taught had speech impediments so I had to be as concise as I could. I also had to make sure there was no overlap in terms. This happened when I was referring to "thin" lines and "thinning" down a color with solvent to make it lighter; it got confusing, so I used thin when referring to thickness and light when referring to value.

Finally, I think this project will contribute to my **Self-Knowledge and Awareness** because after pushing the limits I have for myself, I think I have gained a better understanding of how I respond to challenges, how wordy and unconcise I can be, how much more accessible I can make my language, and how we sometimes underestimate the complexity of a task we are used to.

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