

## **Artist's portraits a glimpse into the world of autism**

By Mary Thomas / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"I wanted everybody to see the child differently than they did the day before."

In Arne Svenson's exhibition "About Face" at The Andy Warhol Museum, the New York photographer takes portraiture to a new level, although that may not be immediately evident. Sensitively conceived, technically superb depictions of middle and high school students make for an appealing show on their own. But learning that the children have autism spectrum disorder adds significance to the images' emotive content.

The large-format photographs are displayed in sets, each comprising an expressionless black-and-white picture of a child, a color picture of the child responding to some stimulus and an image representative of what provoked the response. The viewer first encounters the basic image, which is mounted at a 55-degree angle to the gallery wall. Walking past that, one sees the animated child, and then an image, such as birthday party, superhero, snake or bully. Eight students are each represented in three iterations.

Mr. Svenson was, in collaboration with the museum, artist-in-residence in February 2011 at Wesley Spectrum Highland in Pittsburgh, a private school for students with special needs.

Warhol Museum educators had developed an arts-focused curriculum in partnership with art teacher Lynda Abraham-Braff, whom the National Art Education Association named Special Needs Art Educator of the Year in 2011. The program's focus is to help students interpret and project five emotions -- happy, sad, angry, scared and surprised. Children with autism spectrum disorders (one in every 110 children according to Carnegie magazine) have difficulty interpreting facial expressions.

Mr. Svenson has a background in special education, but he had another credit that would give him an inroad to the select group of children participating. His widely popular book "Sock Monkeys" -- portraits of the beloved folk toys -- was shown to the students, who then constructed their own versions, imbuing them with expression and not a little bit of self-portraiture.

During the semester, museum and school staff had asked the children to think about things that prompted the emotions they had been studying. Mr. Svenson later photographed the students expressing each emotion.

But access alone doesn't make great images. Like every exceptional portraitist, whether he or she works with a camera, oil or another medium, Mr. Svenson gives us a glimpse of his subject's soul. Through "un-covering" rather than discovery, he illuminates that which is intrinsic.

"I try to animate what has lain dormant," Mr. Svenson said, whether "children who are nonemotive on the surface" or a stuffed toy.

"I think it was important to make [the portraits] beautiful for the parents," he said. "Parents, caregivers and grandmothers came [to the exhibition]. They had never seen their children like this and had never expected to see their children like this."

Some families began to cry, museum staff said of the opening.

"I wanted to give these families a moment of respite. Any good portrait shows what can emanate out of that person, and this was my hope for [these images]. It can be very dark and lonely out there," Mr. Svenson said of caregiving.

His experience with life's more somber moments brings the depth of vision that makes his images so arresting. Mr. Svenson worked with developmentally disabled newborns early in his career, and he has photographed forensic facial reconstructions. Making a book like "Sock Monkeys," or "Chewed," photographs of abject pet toys presented at their remnant finest, offers relief (both are available at The Warhol, \$24.95, softcover).

The project has "generated so much good will between the families and their children," Ms. Abraham-Braff said. The children have shown a slight increase in their ability to read emotions, and they've attached to their sock monkey creations.

"Each took them home. They're very special and dear to them," she said.

School speech language pathologist Jan Kustron noted that the children are bonding now, as opposed to the more usual pattern of self-involvement.

Important to Mr. Svenson was that the Andy Warhol notion of being a star permeate the project. "These children are so used to negative feedback. In my studio, they are the stars. They are being themselves -- and they are rewarded for that."