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“East End Duets” Opens at White Room in Bridgehampton

by Gavin Menu



Will Ryan at work.

By Michelle Trauring

Lying in a hospital bed at Memorial Sloan Kettering last year, Will Ryan’s mind was getting the best of him.

He thought back to the routine physical exam he had in 2014, the abnormal blood test results that started it all. He relived the specialists, the biopsies and the bone marrow tests that would eventually deliver the worst news of his life. A diagnosis that plucked him from his longtime home in Amagansett, his friends and family, and his artistic career, and landed him right where he was in that moment—on the other side of a radical stem cell transplant for a rare and often-fatal blood disease called amyloidosis.

Still in a daze from the painkillers, he started to hallucinate. “I’ve had a really good life,” he recalled saying to himself during a recent telephone interview. “I had great friends and family in my life. I can’t complain, really.”

He was at his lowest, he said.

“At that point, I wasn’t scared,” he said. “I was like, ‘I could let go.’ Then, 14-year-old Will shows up in my head and says, ‘Hey, we’re not done yet.’ He looks me in the face and I look at him. ‘No, man, we’re not done yet. We have a lot of work to do.’”

“I remember taking a big sigh and saying, ‘Yeah, alright,’” he continued. “And that was it. That was the turning point.”

Five weeks of treatment, two months of quarantine and endless support from his family, friends and fellow artists would follow before he could return to the East End. And as soon as he felt strong enough, he got to work.



Work by Gabriele Raacke and Will Ryan.

“What’s very bizarre is about two weeks after my hallucination, my sister sends me a picture of myself at 14, lying on this flowery couch with this grin on my face—and that was the exact face that showed up and talked me into not leaving,” he said. “It was so strange and so funny. I look at that picture every once in awhile. That’s the spirit I need, that positive, optimistic, ‘I’m going to take on the world and do something.’”

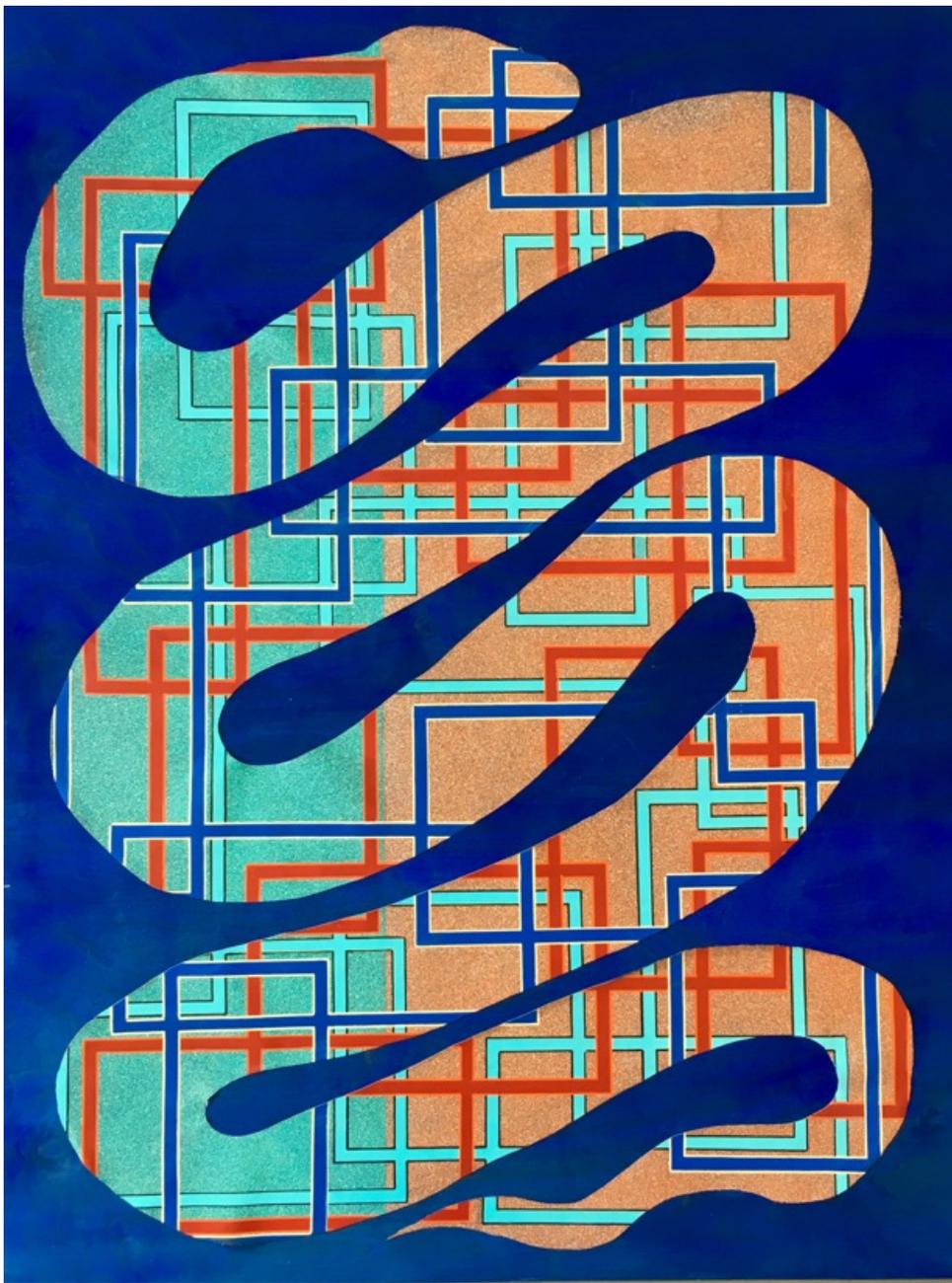
And that is exactly what he did, he said, with the collaborative project “East End Duets,” opening Saturday, September 23, at The White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton. Once he starts talking about the show—in which he collaborated with nearly 40 artists, some of whom he barely knew—he finds it hard to stop, jokingly acknowledging he needs to curb his enthusiasm.

But it’s hard to, he said, especially considering the roster of talent involved—Paton Miller, Dan Welden, Dennis Leri, Eric Ernst, John Messinger, Scott Bluedorn, Darlene Charneco and Janet Jennings, just to name a handful—and the lengths Mr. Ryan pushed himself to collaborate with each of them.

“I’m having a ball,” he said. “I’m working in mediums I’ve never worked in before. I did a piece in concrete with Jeff Muhs. It’s like a giant magnet with all this copper wire that I had for years and years. It’s really groovy, like a giant magnetic field coming out of it. I did steel with Dennis Leri, a glass plate with Gabriele Raacke. That was a labor of love working on that. Her animal spirit is a turtle, so she painted turtles on the border, and my animal spirit is an owl, so I painted that in the center.”

There are more traditional mediums, as well—a watercolor with Ms. Jennings, a painting with Mr. Miller and a mixed-media canvas with photographer Steve Joester.

Until Mr. Ryan drove over it with his car.



Work by Eric Ernst and Will Ryan.

“I took a big chance here,” he said. “He gives me this canvas with photos of Keith Richards and I wanted it to be red, white and blue. The blue was missing, so I drove a blue-painted tire across it. I did a test with a tire that was not on my car, but that didn’t work. It had to be on the car to get it right. I had one shot at it, with some help directing me. I said, ‘Steve, it was so much fun to drive over your piece.’ He loved it, too. What I really love about this whole process is we’re all going to places we wouldn’t have gone on our own.”

He breathed out, his smile palpable even over the telephone. “I’m doing what I love to do, which is make art and I’m doing it with terrific artists,” he continued. “This has been one of the best summers I’ve ever had, and I’ve had some really great summers. I’m feeling good and I’m playing with my friends—old friends and interesting new friends.”

Every day, Mr. Ryan says he feels himself getting stronger. He’s halfway to gaining back the 30 pounds he lost, takes a couple yoga classes a week, and is feeling more inspired, compassionate and grateful than ever. He often finds himself thinking about that younger version of himself in the photograph—and recently realized it was at age 14 that he knew he wanted to be an artist.

“I have to say I’m feeling better than I felt even a long time ago,” he said. “I feel really good, better than I felt 20 years ago. It’s also the gratitude. You wake up and it’s like, ‘Holy shit, I woke up! Great! Lemme meditate and put the coffee on.’”

He burst out laughing, and continued. “Also, I realize that now I don’t want to waste my time. I made that promise to that 14-year-old kid, ‘No, I ain’t gonna waste time. We’re gonna make something.’ I’m not gonna waste time with people with bad energy. It’s not the energy I need. I want to be joyful and I want to spread it. The other stuff doesn’t do any good. I’ve been on the Buddhist path for many years and you hear this stuff all the time, but when you’re in a crisis and shit hits the fan, you realize that’s the last way to think. You have to be the best that you can be in the world.”