

LEAH POTTS' FIRST STEPS ON AN ADVENTURE IN *Visual Arts*

Composing a Concerto for the Left Hand

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PHOTOGRAPHY HANNAH CONDON

In September, Leah Potts sat at an easel at the Art Base in Basalt wielding magenta and turquoise pastels with ease. She worked fluidly: There was no trace of the struggle it took to “walk” into the classroom, drawing herself forward on a cane, her right foot dragging. No trace of the hesitation she might well have felt after a 17-year hiatus from art. No trace of awkwardness as her left hand moved across the canvas, despite the fact that Leah was born right-handed.

Leah Potts was three months out of college and interviewing for graphic design jobs in Boulder, Colorado, when she was in a life-changing skiing accident that left her instantly paralyzed from the neck down. At 23, she was confronted with no use of her hands or legs. The doctors gave her little hope for improvement, telling her that she would never walk, hug, or draw again.

Upon hearing that, Leah became determined to overcome and to heal. Today, she not only walks, she also teaches spinning classes to able-bodied athletes, travels the world, cooks, and enjoys outdoor activities such as scuba, horseback riding, and skiing.

And now, nearly two decades later, she's not only making art again, she's also launching a long-deferred career as an artist. In October, Potts finished and delivered her first left-handed commission, the 18" by 24" oil pastel shown on this page. A friend had asked for the painting as a birthday gift for his wife, Janell, who is a dancer. When he received the painting, he texted Potts, saying, "We just got home and she opened the box. OMG! It is absolutely gorgeous! Wow wow wow! I could not have hoped for better!"

A commissioned Potts portrait created as a birthday gift for a dancer

“I was never a professional because of the accident,” says Potts. For years, healing demanded all of her focus. She did not have the energy or ability to create art.

To help her restart her artistic endeavors, Potts took a two-week workshop at the Art Base taught by Meridy Volz, an expressionist painter from California whose work can be seen at MeridyVolzArt.com. While walking around the studio, viewing works-in-progress, Volz told students that all works of art are, to some extent, self-portraits of the artists.

The faces that Potts drew in the class speak of introspection and a note of melancholy. But they also radiate the joy that comes from being fully present and glad to be alive. A strong chin line communicates determination.

Leah met many challenges while learning to draw again. Before the accident, Leah was right-handed, but during her recovery, she had to learn to write again using her non-dominant hand. At first, she had difficulty applying enough pressure to produce a mark on the page. Leah doubted that she would ever create the same quality of line that she once drew. Now, she can write with both hands with equal agility.



Potts with the two faces she created during the Art Base class



Potts working at the Art Base

As Volz noted during the Art Base class, experts authenticate works of art by looking at an artist's stroke directions. Every artist develops distinctive stroke movements that are tied to the way that artists inhabit their bodies and how their minds work; their strokes are as individual as handwriting. For artistic reasons, some artists, including both Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, taught themselves to be ambidextrous. It's an advantage for an artist whose hands may tire or who may need to work at a particular angle.

While taking Volz' class, Leah was pleased to discover that she could use her left hand to create the beautiful, fluid lines she drew with her right hand before her accident. But getting to that discovery required courage and determination. The first day of class was daunting. “I was ready to run,” says Leah. “I was completely out of my comfort zone and afraid.”

However, after receiving personal attention from Meridy, Leah was able to confront her fears, pushing herself to learn how to make her left hand and brain work together again.

Creatively, Potts is not alone in confronting the loss of a right hand. Famed Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein had to have his right arm amputated during World War I and devised many novel pedal and hand-movement combinations that allowed him to play chords previously regarded as impossible for a five-fingered pianist. Several famous composers, including Benjamin Britten and Richard Strauss, wrote works for Wittgenstein to play with his left hand. Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand is probably the most famous of those works.

Potts found that working with her left hand opened some new creative territory. During the class, Potts experienced a shift from left-brain to right-brain processing that art teacher Betty Edwards describes in her book, “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.” That shift is characterized by a sense of flow, losing track of time, a lack of mind chatter and words, and a different way of processing thought—an intuitive sense that involves accepting errors and risk, and a willingness to go where creativity leads.

“I know that feeling,” says Potts. “Your brain is turned off. It's a rest, and the worry side is shut down.” Getting into that zone during Meridy Volz's class “was freeing. I didn't know if I would have the control or ability to work with my left hand, but I did. It was a way-better experience than I expected. During the class, I was in the zone, in the flow. I didn't even hear the voices of others in the class. Figuring out an alternative such as using your non-dominant hand can set you free.”

During the workshop, Leah produced portrait drawings featuring electric colors and sophisticated line work. She formed friendships with classmates. “Meridy's class was perfect for me. I had taken other classes in other places, but they didn't click like this one. I felt supported and found community at the Art Base. That feels like a real gift.”

Leah Potts invites queries about commissions; she can be reached by emailing: Leah@MotivatedWellness.com.