

‘Hidden Disabilities’ with Jonathan Ash

On Wednesday 13th May 2026 at the monthly u3a meeting at St. Paul’s we heard a talk from artist Jonathan Ash about the hidden disabilities, colour blindness and autism, which have influenced his life and career.

Colour blindness affects, on average, 1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women. The most common type is red/green colour blindness (Deuteranomaly). It is a hereditary condition, carried on the X chromosome received from one’s mother. Jonathan issued us all with ‘3D’ red and blue spectacles so that we could view the colour blindness tests. Those with normal vision could see the hidden numbers, but Jonathan and others with the condition could not. Less common versions of colour blindness are Protonopia and Tritonopia.

Jonathan said that he was diagnosed as colour blind at 6 years old, after a visit to the Science Museum in London, where his brothers and sisters could see numbers and shapes hidden in pictures, while he could not. He said that it has made him see the world differently but that he is still able to live a normal life, including driving.

The second factor in Jonathan’s life is his autism, diagnosed when he was 50. He found the diagnosis reassuring as it explained many things about his life and behaviour. In the U.K. today 700,000 people are living with a diagnosis of autism. It is something that one is born with and manifests itself between the ages of 2 and 5 years old. Level 1 autism (formerly known as Aspergers Syndrome) allows those affected to live a fairly normal life. Level 2 autism requires some medical support but at Level 3 people are non-verbal and need 24-hour support.

Jonathan then told us how he became an artist. He studied French at University and loved French Art, especially paintings by Paul Cezanne and Marcel Duchamp. He only began creating his own art after a breakdown, caused by the death of his father. He took a college course and began drawing pencil portraits but gradually began painting. Initially this was in black and white, because he could not see many of the colour shades he focused on the contrast between light and dark. Gradually he built up confidence to use colour. He showed us examples of his paintings of St. Margaret’s Church and Station Oast House, Rainham and the Guild Hall, Faversham and also portraits of the actor Brian Blessed and singer David Bowie.

To date, Jonathan has had 15 solo art exhibitions and has designed record album and book covers. He regards his ‘hidden disabilities’ as ‘superpowers’ because they have given him a career in art. For those who may wish to see more examples of his work, he is exhibiting paintings at the Medway Open Studios Exhibition at the Oast House Community Centre on 11th and 18th July (10 – 4 p.m.). He also has a permanent base in the Nucleus Arts Studio, Chatham.