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Young Cancer Patients Draw Their Fantasy Worlds

By Lena Smirnova

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The kids' painting shows the "Two Moods" outside their hospital window. **Lena Smirnova**

There is something visibly odd about this painting. It is clearly the work of a child: There are rainbow colors, amateur strokes and skewed proportions. But the painting shows a hospital room, and on it glued the sterile reminders of medical treatment, syringes and pill cases.

The nine artists who drew this painting range from three to 17 years old. They are also all undergoing cancer treatment.

This painting is part of the "Vidimo-Nevidimo" (Visible-Invisible) exhibit, which was organized by the Podari Zhizn (Give Life) foundation and features works by other young cancer patients.

But contrary to first impressions, the works in this exhibit are not sad. They are optimistic.

"If contemporary art by adults reflects all the problems and concerns of our world — despair,

anger, fear — our little artists show all of its best sides and opportunities. We see here love, kindness and joy of creativity," said Dina Korzun, actress and co-founder of Give Life.

Art volunteers first approached the Give Life foundation 10 years ago and proposed to hold a grown-up exhibit of the children's art. The idea seemed impossible at first, but this year there were so many pieces of art that they barely fit on the walls.

The exhibit features more than 250 works by children who are undergoing cancer treatment at seven of the largest local clinics. The children work with art volunteers to bring their ideas to the canvas, though there are sometimes moments when they cannot participate in the lessons because they are undergoing extensive medical treatments or are too weak.

There are not just paintings, but also photographs, videos, mosaics, collages and installations. These works illustrate the children's wishes of walking their dogs, playing games with friends and drinking tea with biscuits.

There is a city made out of yogurt containers and a tree covered with flowers with Chupa Chups centers whose hollow a child can enter to write a message. In the next room a ship with sails decorated with colorful butterflies is getting ready for a journey. And be sure to watch your feet or you may stumble on one of the remote-controlled mechanical hedgehogs zooming around the floor.

The artwork, though done by children, impressed even the most seasoned artists.

"These works are unique!" said famous sculptor Zurab Tsereteli. "Lift the spirits, exercise and create artwork. This will save Russia."

Some of the children who wandered around the exhibit at its opening on Friday did not seem sick at all. Like any child, they were laughing, pointing curiously at the drawings, writing messages inside the tree hollow and playing with the papier-mâché hedgehogs.

But just a few meters away, in the lobby, a young mother was answering a hospital's phone call about her son's medications, and outside the museum's doors an organizer discussed the logistics of getting a child in a wheelchair to the exhibit opening.

The personal stories of the young artists are at times tragic, but also full of hope.

They have multiple talents and take part in various activities, including dancing, gymnastics, skating and swimming, though some have had to abandon their active lifestyles after they were diagnosed with cancer.

Some, such as Nastya Kamanina, have studied several languages. Kamanina, 14, went to a specialized language school and took music lessons on the cello and accordion until her illness was discovered. She is now almost completely blind and undergoing grueling chemotherapy sessions, though she still continues to smile, listens to audiobooks of Anton Chekhov's works and paints bright pictures.

"As the fox from 'The Little Prince' said, we can't see the most important things with our eyes," said Yekaterina Margolis who came up with the idea for art volunteering. "Thanks to you, we are able to see with our eyes and our hearts these important things that really

should not be expressed with words."

The exhibit "Visible-Invisible" runs until Mar. 17 at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, located at 10 Gogolevsky Bulvar. Tel. +7-495-231-3660. Free admission.

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