

Voices

Show and tell

Manic-depressive painter Mark overcomes stigma and prejudice by proving himself through his achievements



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MARK STEVENS has his own way of dealing with the prejudice and stigma that comes with his condition.

"If you want to get acceptance, the best thing to do is not to tell people, but to perform first. Once people have acknowledged that you perform well, then you say: 'But I'm sick'," the 39-year-old says, smiling from behind his cup of coffee. "And then they must acknowledge that you can't be that bad."

Mark is manic-depressive. He is also a talented painter, a qualified engineer, a former polytechnic tutor and an avid player of the guitar. The Australian expatriate has lived here for over 10 years and met his wife while teaching at the Singapore Polytechnic in 1991.

Mark started to paint seriously in 1997, concentrating mainly on figurative painting. He has held exhibitions at The Substation and The Wine Gallery, and his works feature at the Singapore Indoor Stadium and in private collections here and in the United States.

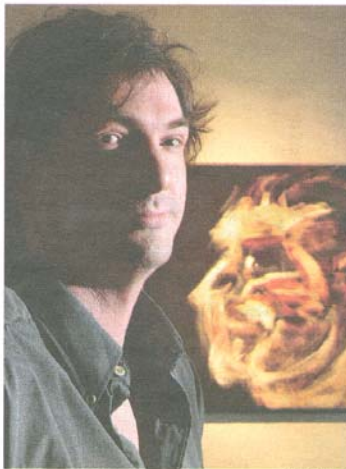
Painting began as a release for him, but it hasn't been an excuse to go off medication.

"When I saw my psychiatrist and he knew I was a painter, he asked if I wanted

(to stop taking) medication because it may have stopped me from being creative," says Mark. "I said no because (without the meds), I can't work. If you're depressive, you can't get out of bed. When you are manic, you can't stop, you do too much. So if I want to paint and I'm depressed, I wouldn't make one stroke. If I was manic, I wouldn't stop and it would ruin the painting."

Mark has also had to deal with derogatory attitudes, but he feels it's not unusual.

"It's not so much social stigma as the way society looks at everything. They stigmatise people who aren't attractive, or wealthy, or those with bad habits. But men-



THE MIRROR HAS TWO FACES: The artist poses with his work at his exhibition, *Reality of the Image*.

tal illness is more of a worry, because the severity of the reaction can be very bad."

But is this negative perception of the mentally-ill rooted in Asian culture, where saving face is paramount?

Mark thinks the answer is no.

"Asian society has just not spent as much time with mental illness, that's all. It doesn't mean they stigmatise it worse, they've experienced it less. It's been clinically treated for much less time (in Asia) than in the West. So your grandparents may not understand, but my grandparents will."

Time and exposure is what Silver Ribbon (Singapore) needs to address misconceptions of mental health and prejudice against those with mental illness. The newly-formed non-profit organisation aims to integrate people with mental disorders back into the community, and Mark's talents as a painter will help their campaign. He is holding an art exhibition at the SG Private Banking Gallery, Alliance Française, near Newton MRT, until Jan 24. Admission is free.

Silver Ribbon's support of Mark's exhibition aligns closely with his view on how society can overcome the stigma of mental health. Achievements must come first, and then the revelation that one does, in fact, have a mental condition can follow.

"That would be a lot more powerful," he reflects.