

People



By Veronica Lee

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How Nicholas Kontaxis overcame a brain tumour and childhood seizures to become an artist

Living with the effects of a brain tumour, Nicholas Kontaxis's life is incredibly tough. But his paintings are astonishing and sought after



Nicholas Kontaxis's work is striking, colourful and memorable – words that could also be used to describe his life story

Nicholas Kontaxis's work is striking, colourful and memorable – words that could also be used to describe his life story. Kontaxis, 23, who has developmental problems and needs 24-hour care, has overcome astonishing odds to be one of the most sought-after young artists working today.

In early childhood he was diagnosed with an extensive brain tumour, resulting in tens of thousands of seizures in his short lifetime, which have caused features of autism and issues with speech and motor function. Almost completely non-verbal, Kontaxis uses paint as a way to communicate.

It could have been so different, but his parents – Krisann, his carer, and Euthym, a doctor, decided early on in his childhood that he would not be over-medicated, and instead they were determined to keep him active.

“We always tried to keep Nick moving after the seizures,” Krisann has said. “Do some clapping. Get his hands moving.” They tried various activities with varying degrees of success, but it was painting that interested him and by the time he was 15, Kontaxis was painting regularly. The only training he has had was art lessons at the local high school he attended.

He paints in a garage that has been turned into a studio

The Kontaxis family (Nicholas has two siblings) turned the garage at their home in Rancho Mirage, California into his studio, and within a few years his works were being shown in galleries, and he was winning commissions from restaurants, banks and hospitals.



Get Out Of Town by Nicholas Kontaxis

Using heavy acrylic paints and palette knives, and working mostly on large canvases, Kontaxis paints either standing or sitting on the floor when his energy levels are low.

His works are bold – both in scale and his use of colour – and burst with energy. “Nick is not a drawer. He doesn’t have the ability to create realistic landscapes or figures,” says Krisann. “He’s expressionistic.”

That’s not just a proud mother’s assessment of her son’s work. Steph Sebbag of De Re Gallery in Los Angeles, where Kontaxis’s paintings have been exhibited, says his work is “comparable to artists such as Jasper Johns and Sam Francis”.

Phenomenal use of colour

London art dealer Liam West, of West Contemporary, regards Kontaxis as a young talent to watch. He says: “His use of colour is phenomenal. There is something harmonious yet disruptive about his compositions that mean you see something new each time you look at them.”

Kontaxis has sold hundreds of his paintings, and one of his fans is Roger Federer, who first became aware of him when playing at the Indian Wells tennis tournament near the Kontaxis family home. Federer and his wife, Mirka, who discovered Kontaxis’s work, have bought at least six of his paintings.



One of Nicholas's famous fans is Roger Federer, who owns a number of his paintings (Photo: Elsa/Getty)

Kontaxis has previously exhibited only in the US, but now art-lovers in the UK will be able to see his work close-up, as his first European show opens at West Contemporary in London on Wednesday. Kontaxis won’t be able to travel to the UK as the journey is too taxing, but his parents will attend the opening.

Meanwhile, Kontaxis’s brother, Michael, a film producer, speaks on his behalf when I pose some questions about his art.

“I am obviously connected to him on a fraternal level,” Michael Kontaxis says. “I feel I share a unique understanding of his methodology and intentions.”

I ask him to describe the evolution of his brother’s distinctive works.

Creating art, one slow stroke at a time

“Nicholas’ work has always possessed a specific, positively stirring, earnest quality,” he says. “But as he continues to evolve, his style has grown increasingly complex and more intricately layered.” I ask if Nicholas has any influences in his art, and Michael replies drily: “While many aspiring artists spend a great portion of their day imagining the art they would create, going out with friends and describing the art they plan on creating, taking trips to seek out inspiration for the art they plan on creating, only to never actually create it, Nicholas instead is, one slow stroke at a time, creating art.

“If there is a word that does not describe Nicholas, it is fast. One of the ways in which Nicholas’s brain tumour and epilepsy takes a toll on him is by significantly slowing many of his physical processes down. And yet he is prolific, selling hundreds of paintings in the past two years alone.

“It is a classic case of the tortoise and the hare. In the absence of an ability to work quickly, Nicholas works consistently and deliberately.”

Painting with a carer on hand

Because of the risk of falls, a carer is always present in Kontaxis’s studio. When he does speak, that person makes a note of what he says. Sometimes his utterances are given to the work he is busy on, others are written in a log and he chooses one at a later date to name the work.

The titles are wonderfully witty and expressive; *Whoopsie Daisy*, *Hear the Rain*, *Is Daddy Making Dinner For You*, *Sandwich Please* and *I See You Sitting Up* are just a few. His paintings sell for between \$1,000 and \$20,000 (£16,300) depending on size.



Banana Style by Nicholas Kontaxis

Michael Kontaxis is always impressed by his brother’s positivity. “What’s fascinating to me is how a large portion of contemporary art presents this sort of homogeneously bleak, nihilistically cynical outlook towards the world, while Nicholas’ art exudes a vibrantly joyful optimistic perspective, from an artist who experiences true affliction on a daily basis. Yet all this has failed to make a dent in his joyful disposition.”

He describes his brother’s style of working as “when he makes a decision to stroke the canvas, he commits to it” and explains the London show’s title.

“There is only forward when it comes to Nicholas, never backward. Regression is simply not an option for someone starting from so far behind.”

‘Reach’ is at West Contemporary, 35 Baker Street, London, 4-10 September