

ROBERT AND HIS DRAWINGS

— *a study of a boy with autism* —

Robert and his drawings

A study of a boy with autism

Bibi Lovell and Eva Ullstadius

This text is a case study from a more comprehensive research project. The aim of the project was to study and support creative art in children and adolescents with autism. Today, very few studies of the topic have been published. Eleven boys (age 7-20 years) had three years of training in drawing and painting with the artist Bibi Lovell. The activity was continuously documented and analysed. Robert, whose pictures are presented here, was already painting with Bibi when the project started, and was therefore followed for a longer period than the other participants in the project. He produced a substantial number of interesting pictures. The text is written for everyone interested in autism, teachers, pedagogues, and parents to children with autism, as well as for professional experts.

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Introduction

Robert is now twenty years old. He lives with his parents and older sister in a suburb of Gothenburg, Sweden. Shortly before two years of age, after a long journey, the family noticed that Robert had ceased to talk. He developed autistic traits and six months later, he was diagnosed with Infantile Autism.

Robert lives in his own world. He does not converse but answers with words to questions. On the other hand, he can quote whole sequences of dialogue from his favourite video cartoons in Swedish and English and read the Swedish subtitles.

Generally, Robert is content with his daily routines. Growing older, his habit to hurt himself by biting his hand in discontent or frustration has gradually diminished. He was overly sensitive to particular sounds such as lawn mowers, ambulance sirens or church bells for some time. After a ten-day treatment of Bérard's AIT (Auditory Integration Training), these discomforts practically disappeared.

Robert likes music and plays the piano by ear. He often hums to himself and tries to pick up melodies on the piano. He has a good memory for songs and pitch. He does not understand competition in sports but enjoys swimming, archery and bowling. When at home, he watches cartoons and draws his favourite cartoon characters.

Robert started to draw quite late. At eight years of age he drew his first version of Charlie Brown in profile with a baseball cap. From then on he continued to practice drawing favourite cartoon characters like Snoopy and friends, Alfie Atkins, the Barbapapa-family and of late Garfield the cat.

Project

Robert has been one of the participants in a research project we have carried out to study and support visual art among children and adolescents with autism.

People with autism have difficulty understanding speech and expressing themselves verbally (2,3) but at the same time quite many of them have a good sense of visualisation and can develop a way of thinking in images (1,4,5). In special education, this visual inclination is seized upon, and tools based on highly stylized pictures or icons have been developed to facilitate communication for people with autism. The pictorial medium also serves as a way of making sense of the world and opens up possibilities of communication other than verbal ones. However, in order to function as a common system of signs, the icons used in special education are highly formalized - therefore there is little room for personal expressiveness. An important aim of the project has consequently been to examine the possibilities for children with autism to develop a visual language of their own as a means of communication.

Creating pictures involves the visualisation of events and occurrences in the world, as well as early memories or more abstract thoughts and feelings. All visual art requires a conceptualisation and a transformation of the thought into an image. The least complicated are the transformations needed to render a two-dimensional model. The degree of complexity increases if the task is to depict a situation from life, especially if it includes movement. Translating personal experiences, thoughts or feelings into an image is a special challenge.

Several artistically gifted autistic individuals have stunned the world with their advanced drawings, especially those who have had great difficulty in other aspects of life. Nadia (6) who drew moving horses in perspective became famous, as well as Steven Wiltshire whose amazingly detailed drawings of London buildings have been widely renowned. This

remarkable talent has been explained starting from the concept of visual realism, which means that these gifted children draw what they see and not what they know, as other children do. Most children drawing a dog, for example, will draw what is included in their general conception of what a dog looks like, and will rarely check to see if the image resembles the dog in question. Children with autism who have difficulties in forming concepts will instead draw what they see. Artists often try to regard the motif in a similar way, as patterns, colours and forms.

Pictorial creation can be studied focusing either on the picture's contents and individual personal expressiveness or on the prowess shown in making use of form, colour and composition. The choice of motif shows what is being emphasised as important and interesting, and the personal expression is made evident by use of intensity, rhythm and tempo. The possibility of expressing oneself with pictures increases as the pictorial language is mastered.

In the project, different works of art were shown to Robert, as well as exercises in observing and rendering everything from still life to "reality", both directly as in what there is to see and indirectly, as in episodes from memory. He was also given the opportunity to try a variety of mediums and techniques with the purpose of both widening his possibilities for artistic expression, and making him familiar with treasures from our common artistic heritage.

We have selected the pictures in the book to give a wide idea of Robert and his pictorial creativity. We have added short field notes to the drawings together with analyses of them.

ROBERT PAINTS • AUTUMN 2002

Robert sits a long time painting with gouache. He picks up a new colour on his brush, paints a daub or two, rinses the brush, and chooses another colour, over and over again. There is some great satisfaction in putting paint on the brush, feeling, smelling, seeing and experiencing. Occasionally he almost pokes his nose into the paints. Robert is usually happy and content when he paints, singing or humming to himself. There is a balance and symmetry in his paintings.



We are painting in the classroom. Robert and Mattias are sitting opposite each other. Mattias is soon going to travel, and draws an aeroplane. Robert draws his usual characters, Alfie Atkins and Snoopy. He continues painting over the figure until all that remains is a blob of paint. Robert also draws a large black craft hovering above the picture. All the students are restless and execute their tasks in a hurry. I am sitting alongside, encouraging them to continue and finish their pictures.

In many respects this is an interesting picture. It seems that Robert imitates Mattias' drawing of an aeroplane. Some of his favourite cartoon characters appear, but also real objects, a swing and a slide, from a playground that Robert used to visit. There is a tendency to coat the drawings with paint, a tendency that is frequently observed in autistic children's pictures.



I show Robert the previous aircraft picture and ask him what the black object is. "Aeroplane", he replies. I ask him to draw a new picture. He draws Alfie Atkins together with a boy. He paints grass, first a surface in green crayon and then draws the blades of grass in pencil. Above Alfie he draws the aircraft, and above it a red star and a red planet in the middle of a blue sky. He adds a green line, one of the lines that are so typical of Robert's drawings.

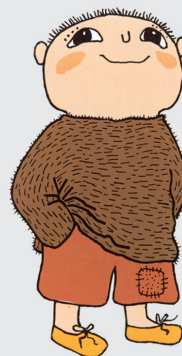
Here, a smiling boy with closed eyes accompanies a slightly sad Alfie Atkins with large eyes. The black aircraft has come up again, this time together with a red star and planet. The picture is well composed and very expressive.

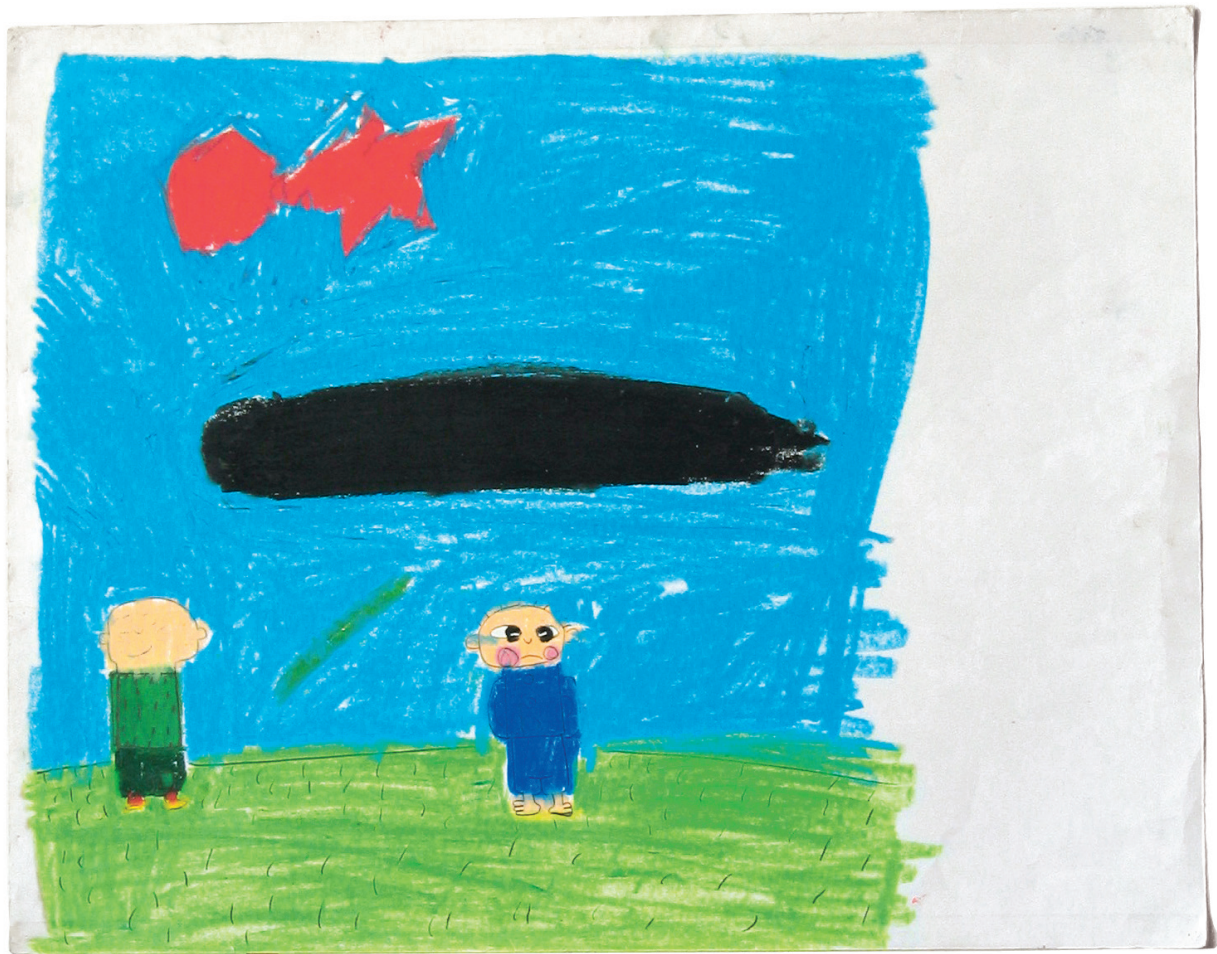
We showed this picture to Gunilla Bergström, the author and illustrator of Alfie Atkins books. She also has a child with autism. The following is an excerpt from her commentary of the picture:

"I sat a long time looking and looking at the picture. It's a GOOD picture! Close to the model. Robert absolutely has a feeling for shape and colours! A good observer.

- But what had the deepest impact on me was: his figure has such a touching expression. There is no doubt here, he has definitely drawn a sad face. Many parents of autistic children wonder about their children's' feelings... Do the children perceive feelings?

- Yes, Robert certainly does. A sad face has the corners of the mouth turned down, and large, bewildered eyes. The character's posture also gives evidence of being distraught – straight, stiff, dispirited."





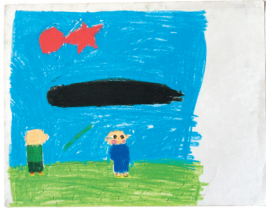
"I don't want to go back to school. They're mean to me. Not my friends", Robert says when he comes. I tell him to draw a new picture starting from the previous aircraft picture. He draws a crying boy, turns the paper over and draws a larger boy with red lips and blue dots. I ask if those are tears, if the boy is sad. Robert turns the paper over again and points, poking at four lines on the right. He then puts the paper away. I ask if he'd like a new one. "Yes please". I tell him again to draw a new aircraft picture. He draws a boy. "Who is that?" I ask. "Robert", he replies and draws a little red jacket. Then he draws a small rectangle with letters in it, which is later discovered to be the paper with the students' table placements, which is tacked to the wall next to the picture of aircraft 2. Beside it, he finally draws a small drawing of the aircraft picture.

When Robert at this third session is asked to draw a new aircraft picture he draws a crying boy. This could be associated to the sad Alfie Atkins on the drawing, but could also have something to do with his words about not wanting to go back to school. Robert then draws what he sees on the wall, including the table placements and the aircraft picture.



I show Robert the aircraft pictures and ask him what it is supposed to be. He talks to himself, saying things like “The childrens”, “Come back!” and “Aeroplane”. I tell him to make a new picture. Robert draws a small aeroplane. At the bottom he draws Snoopy in the shower and colours him pink. Above the little aeroplane he draws a larger one and paints them blue. I ask him to fill in the windows, which have been obliterated. He colours them black. Finally, I suggest that he should colour around the planes. I want him to draw a background on the paper, but Robert takes special note of the word “around” and paints a red oval patch. Meanwhile, he speaks in English, saying things like “Look out!” and “Oh no!” He gets up and turns off the music, which has been playing and says: “Ready”. I tell him to continue and he draws a new plane, red this time.

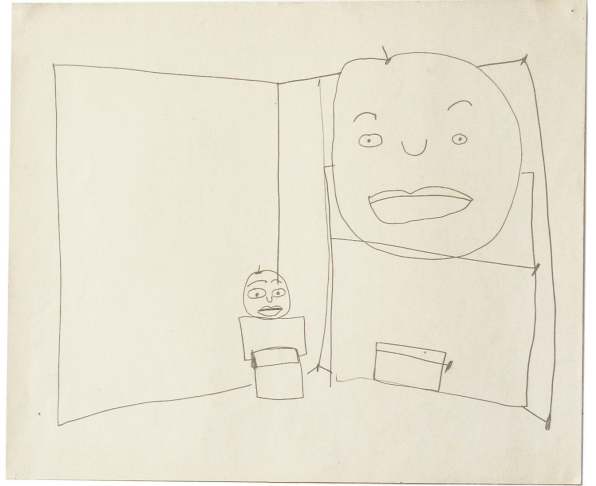
The series of pictures of aircrafts is the result of trying to offer Robert an opportunity to develop and refine the motif of previous drawings. With this drawing he leaves his sad theme and instead starts to address the aircraft, which is here clearly shaped like an aeroplane. Apparently, he has lost interest in the theme.



STILL LIFE WITH A MASK • SPRING 1998

I have arranged a still life with yellow cloth, a red and a green box, an orange and a mask. First, Robert draws the still life in pencil, and later draws another one in oil pastel crayon. Robert is interested and involved, making up his own compositions stimulated by the arrangement.

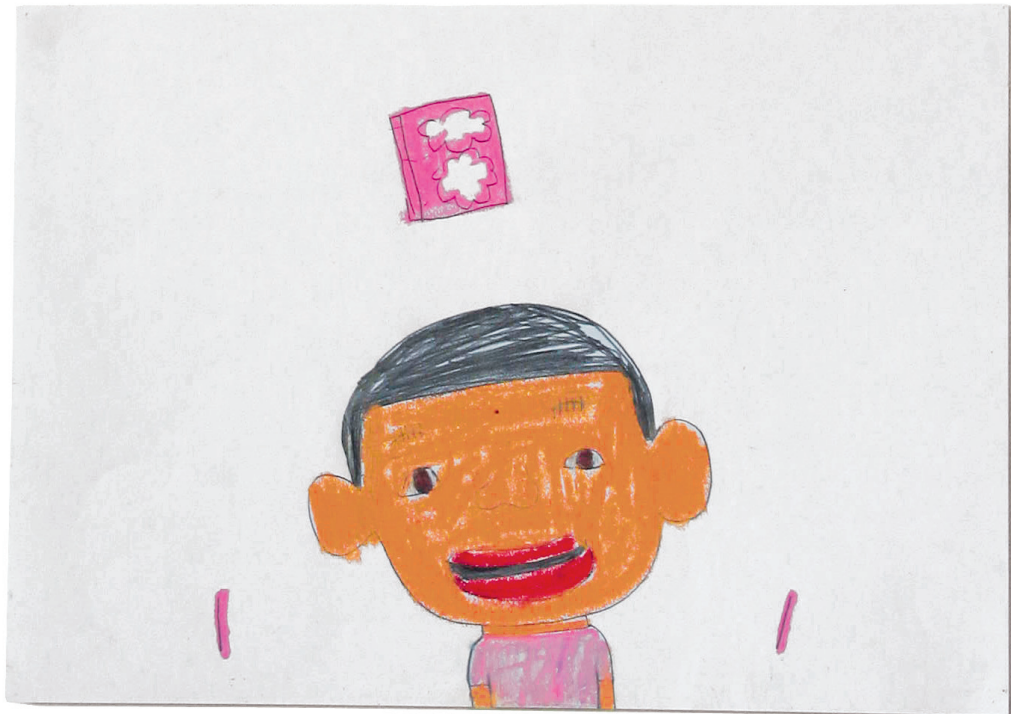
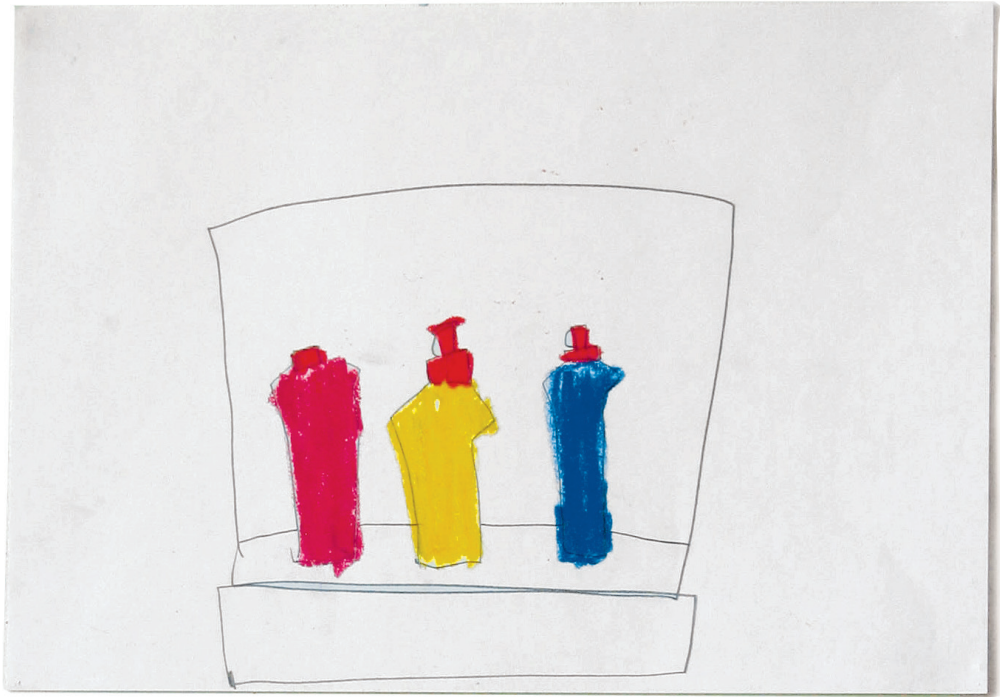
Robert captures perspective and depth, especially in the first drawing. He modifies, adds and excludes details. The mask, for example, has open eyes in the first two pictures. In the last drawing, he has created a clown-like figure with an expressive face, built from the different elements in the still life. One picture leads to the next and they become increasingly unconstrained and personal in relation to the original arrangement.



First I put three coloured bottles against a white wall. Robert draws the bottles quickly and with poise, exaggerating their form. Then I place a mirror behind the bottles and ask him to draw a new picture of them and what he sees in the mirror. He draws a large picture of a face and adds his smell-book¹ and two pink stripes.

Robert's special way of acknowledging and exaggerating shapes is evident in the picture with the bottles. In the second drawing he doesn't draw the mirror image that he sees, i.e. his own face behind the bottles but a self-portrait surrounded by some of his "trademarks", the smell-book and the pink stripes.

¹ The "smell-book" was for a long time one of Robert's favourite objects



Robert is given a mirror and asked to draw a self-portrait, as he has done a few times before. He looks in the mirror a long time, carefully observing, before drawing himself in the usual way: large ears, a giant red mouth, black hair. I ask him to draw happy portrait showing his teeth. He grimaces in front of the mirror a long time, and then draws a new picture with a wide-open black mouth, teeth and a tongue. His next task is to draw himself when sad, but he turns out another “happy” portrait. Robert’s teacher enters and helps him holding the mirror. “Draw a picture of when you’re mischievous”, she suggests. Tilting his head, Robert puts on a naughty smile and draws a portrait with this expression.

Robert has a clear idea of how to draw pictures of people that correspond to words like “happy” and “sad”, and usually he draws these facial expressions in a schematic and stylized way. This time, however, he observes the mirror image thoroughly before creating a picture with an entirely new expression, resulting in a nuanced and lively face. At no time before or after does Robert achieve a portrait like this.



Robert has been to the Philippines during Christmas, and when we meet again after the holidays I ask him to draw the airplane he flew with. Robert does so and also writes the names of the others who came along. Beside, he draws a drop of water and a pond. Then, on a new paper, he starts drawing an oval, lines and palm trees, which he colours. A beach with palm trees ensues and a pond, in which he draws circles. He adds two more oval forms which he colours blue. In these he draws two identical figures which he colours red and pink. In between the palm trees he draws the pink smell-book.

When we showed the picture to Robert's mother, she told us that both Robert and his father wore red swimming trunks when they bathed in the Philippines. In this remarkable picture, Robert has apparently used art to relate a personal experience. Interestingly, he doesn't draw the bathing scene from his own point of view, but rather from that of an observer. He has drawn his father and himself without an upper body or feet, standing in the water or perhaps diving?

This drawing can also be interpreted as a face with the two upper water puddles as eyes, the lower one as a mouth and the smell-book exactly where the nose should be.

Vatten



PICASSO: THE PAN-PIPES • AUTUMN 1998

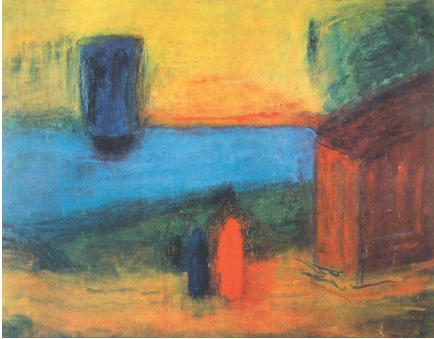


I show Robert a picture of Picasso's "Pan-pipes" and tell him to make a drawing of it. Robert is captivated by the picture and quickly draws a picture of it. He responds to Picasso's exaggerated forms in his own fashion.

It is the shapes in themselves - not what they convey - that seem to interest Robert. The proportions of arms and legs are exaggerated and great attention and emphasis is paid to details such as stomach muscles and the thumb of one of the men, while the loincloth of the other man hovers partially in the air. Robert captures the composition and the bright colours, while shadows and highlights and the volume of the bodies are ignored.

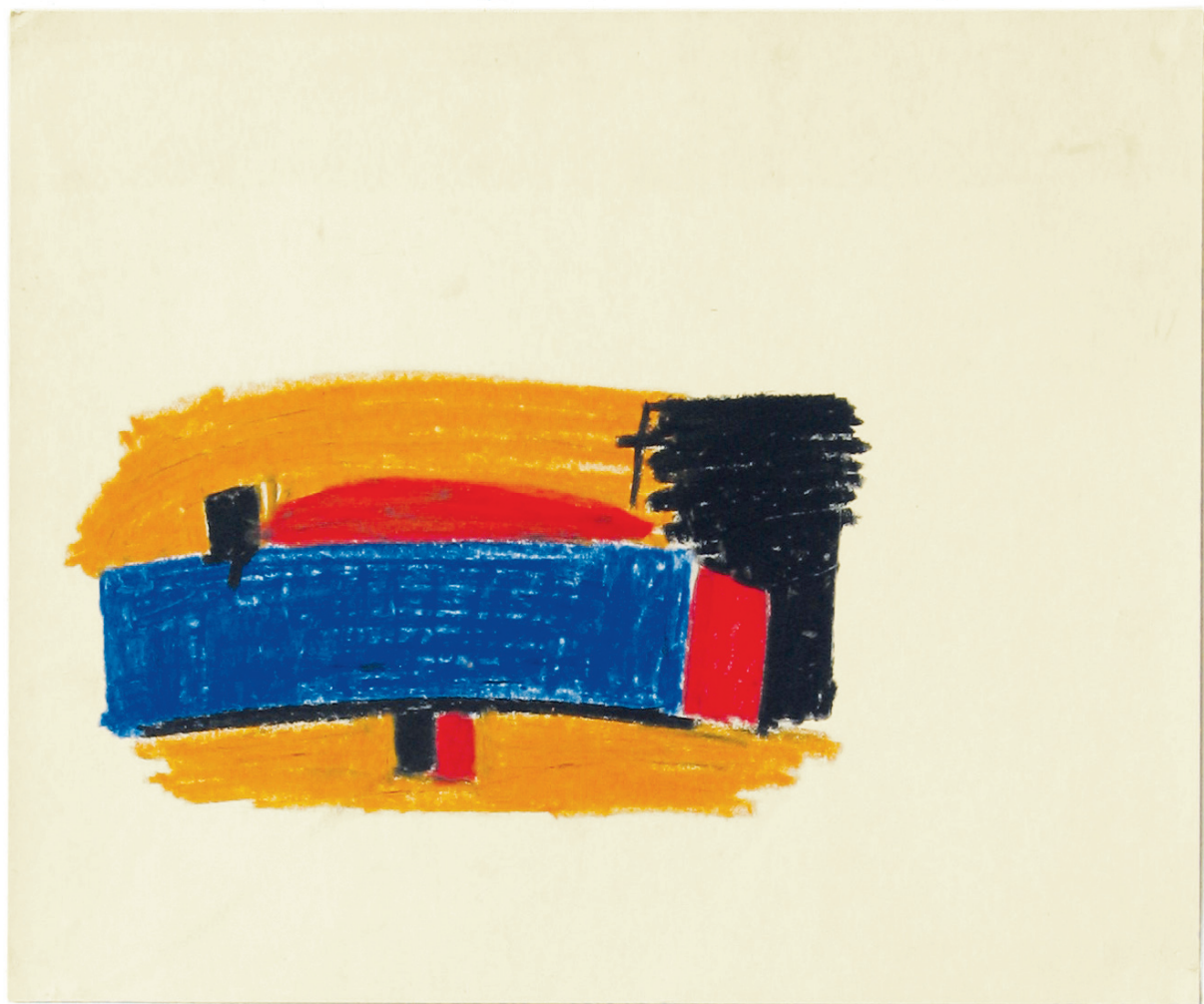


KYLBERG: WAITING • SPRING 1999



I have brought with me a picture of a scenic and romantic painting by Carl Kylberg. Lacking defined and clear shapes, I wonder what Robert's reaction to this picture will be. Robert begins by drawing Snoopy in the shower. I let him finish Snoopy and a baseball picture before removing the paper and marker pens. Then he starts to draw Kylberg's painting. First he draws a blue rectangular surface to represent the sea, and subsequently builds up the picture bit by bit.

Kylberg's painting expresses an atmosphere with finely tuned moods. In contrast, Robert paints a neutral and formal picture in a matter-of-fact manner. In his own style, abstractly, elegantly and with a good sense of form, Robert, however, renders the motif.



“Today we’re going to draw the autumn”, I tell Robert. It is a grey and cloudy day and through the window you can see the trees standing there, with a few leaves still left. Robert draws two trees in charcoal and paints yellow leaves on the branches. I say, “Oh, here comes the sun” and Robert draws a white sun and a grey sky around it. I ask him what other colours there are, but he continues adding grey to the sky. Then he covers the sun with the grey paint. I give him a black crayon to fill in the charcoal contours, which has almost disappeared. He colours the ground green and accentuates the blades of grass in black.

Robert creates a picture based on the autumn landscape he sees outside the window. He captures the cloudy day with an overcast sun. The naked trees are highly stylized and his typical stripes also appear. These ritually repeated stripes seem important to Robert, but their meaning remains unclear.



I have bought new watercolour paints and I ask Robert to paint a sun and a sky. He starts by painting a yellow sun and then spends much time painting blue around it. I have to remind him to go on. On his own initiative he paints the ground green and adds brown trees and finally some red details. This is a picture different from those Robert typically makes.

The following session I show Robert this picture and ask him to do another one. I give him yellow paint first and he starts by painting a sun, then he paints the ground, trees and sky. I tell him to draw the landscape when it is winter and snow and give him white paint. Robert paints a white sun and a grey line for the horizon and spends a long time painting the white snow on the ground. I ask Robert to paint yet another picture, but this time at night with darkness and a moon. The result is a winter picture with a moon and falling snowflakes.

Robert's painting has been at a stagnation point for some time. Now, he is given the chance to try a new medium and apparently he responds positively to the suggestions. With previous pictures as a starting point and concrete directions to draw a sun, a sky, winter, snow, darkness and a moon, and with support, guidance and encouragement, Robert can keep working on the theme.



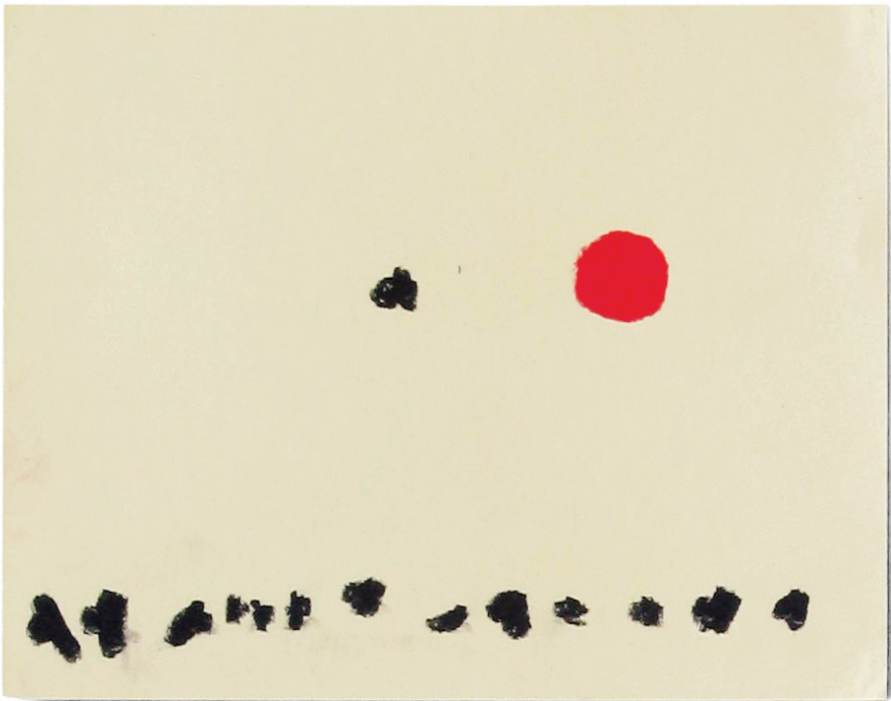
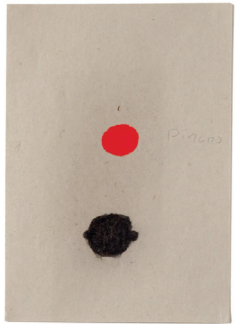
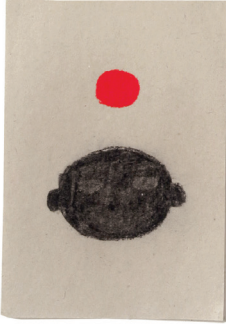
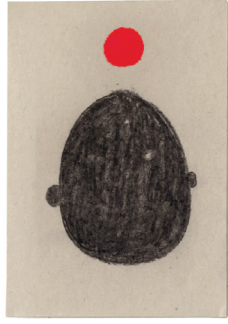
I suggest to Robert that he draw a picture (picture="bild" in Swedish) in charcoal and then paint it. Robert writes LÄGG AV ("knock it off" in English). After erasing it, I repeat my request to him to draw a picture (bild). He writes BILD. When I instead tell him to paint a picture he paints vertical coloured stripes around the word BILD. Finally, he covers the word with paint.

In order to let Robert find his own style in painting he has been painting freely without set assignments for some time. However, he gets easily stuck in a fixed way of working, usually resulting in coloured stripes. Robert seems to be fascinated by the sensual experience of the paint and of the act of painting, rather than actually creating a picture. The unspecified suggestion to draw a picture and the abstract word "bild" leave him without any images. Rather, the word BILD as text appears to him.



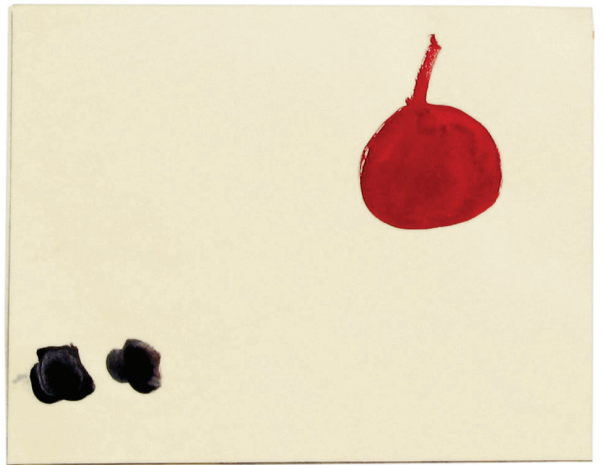
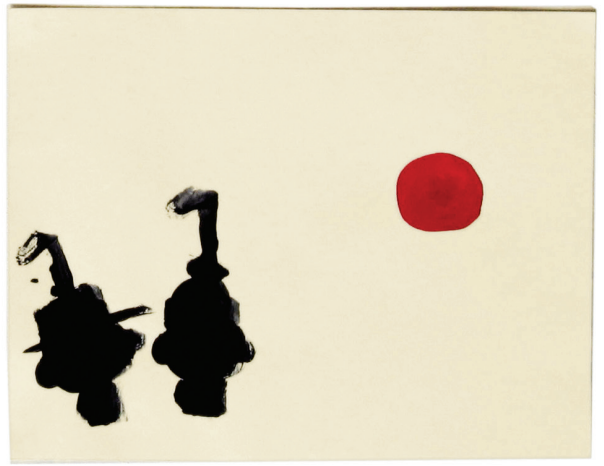
For a period it was difficult to find peace enough to work at school and therefore I tried to have Robert to come and work in my studio. This time Robert is given charcoal and a sheet of brown paper to draw a self-portrait. He starts outlining the shape of the face and continues with the eyes, mouth and nose. He then covers all of it with black charcoal. I give him cotton tops and tell him how to fill in the eyes and mouth. He does so, and paints a red circle above the face. I ask him to draw his father and the rest of the family. He adds a red circle above every one's head. After this he draws a picture with a series of black characters at the bottom of the paper and a red circle at the top.

Changing to studio appears stimulating to Robert and the calm helps him to concentrate. Here, he draws creative and fascinating pictures with a strongly graphical effect. One can wonder what he associated with when he drew these figures. Robert's father tells us about one of Robert's favourite Snoopy cartoon video in which Snoopy and Peppermint Patty are ice-skating. Ten boys arrive wanting to play ice hockey, and trouble arises. One of the boys says, "We have ten hockey-sticks telling you to get off the ice." In the film, the boys are seen as black silhouettes. In another scene, the red sun is visible, but this time it is Peppermint Patty and Marcie who are silhouetted. Robert apparently borrows details from different film sequences, which he later puts together into one picture. Perhaps, Robert associated with the film when he filled in the first face with charcoal so that it resembled a shadow. According to his father, Robert occasionally uses the phrase, "We have ten hockey-sticks telling you to get off the ice."



Robert paints four pictures with two black heads and a red sun. One of the heads has a hat on, and the other a winter cap with a pompom. Behind the two heads, a hockey stick appears. With each picture, the figures become smaller and smaller.

Here Robert takes up the theme from the previous session. In both sequences, the heads become smaller and smaller. They resemble the frames of a comic strip or a film showing how something moves further away. However, there is no such scene in the film. Perhaps the inspiration lies in the small heads from the previous picture.



FOTÖ • AUTUMN 2002

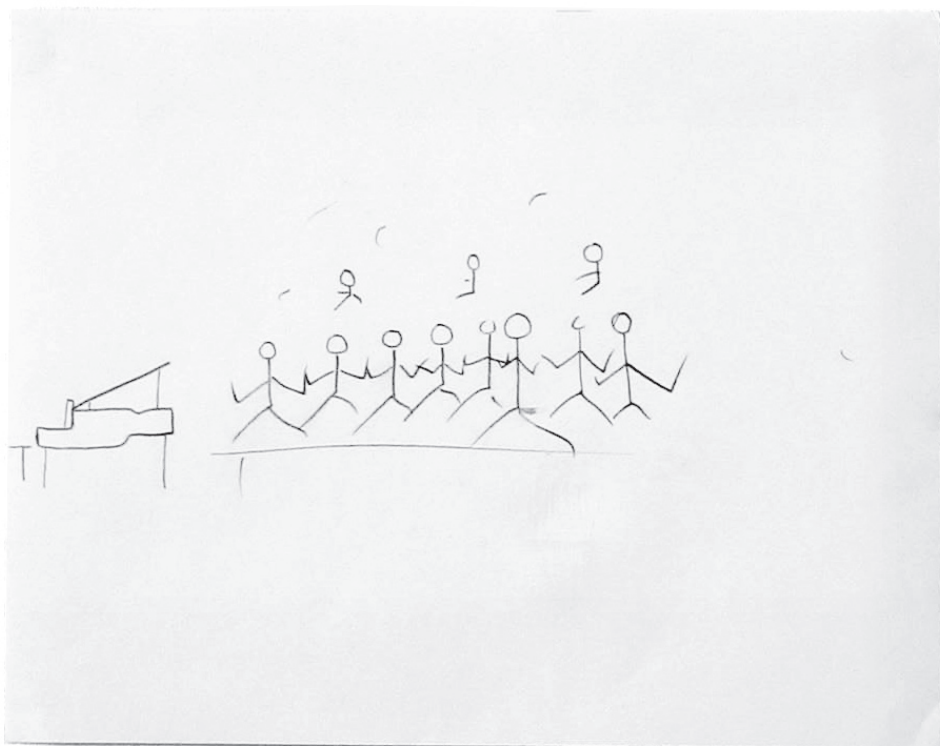
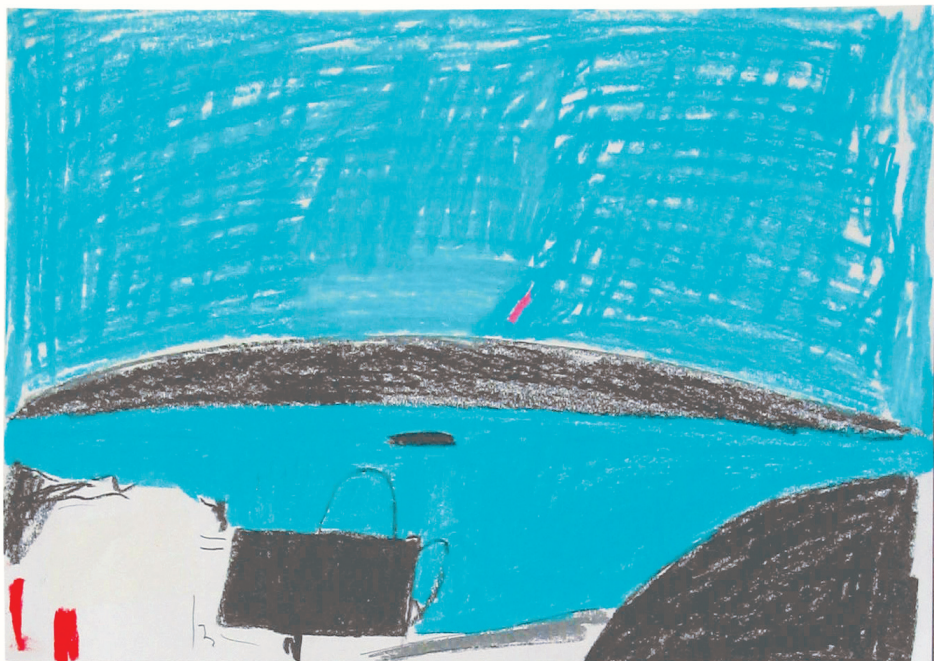
I have started to commence each session asking Robert to draw something he's experienced lately. This time, I have learned through Robert's parents that Robert and his classmates have slept over at his teacher's summerhouse by the sea. I ask Robert some questions about this, and then tell him to draw a picture of the island. He draws a house, rocks, water and a jetty. I have to remind him to continue several times. I also suggest that he paint the area above the island. He paints the sky. I show him how to mix blue and white pastel crayon to get a lighter shade for the sky.

Drawing a personal experience requires images to be called forth from memory. This is difficult for Robert and he needs guidance in order to keep on. He draws a stylized landscape.

CONCERT • SPRING 2003

Robert and his class have been to a concert and I want him to draw a picture of this event. First he draws a row of equally large circles, then some smaller ones above them. He adds lines to the circles so they become stick figures. I ask which instruments they played: violin, piano, drums, guitar? Robert draws a grand piano.

Robert has a musical talent. Here he has created a picture in which both movement and musicality are evident. He uses highly simplified forms and represents the audience as rhythmically spaced musical notes. The pictorial and musical form merge. The grand piano is recognizable from several Snoopy cartoons.



THE SWIMMING BATHS • AUTUMN 2002

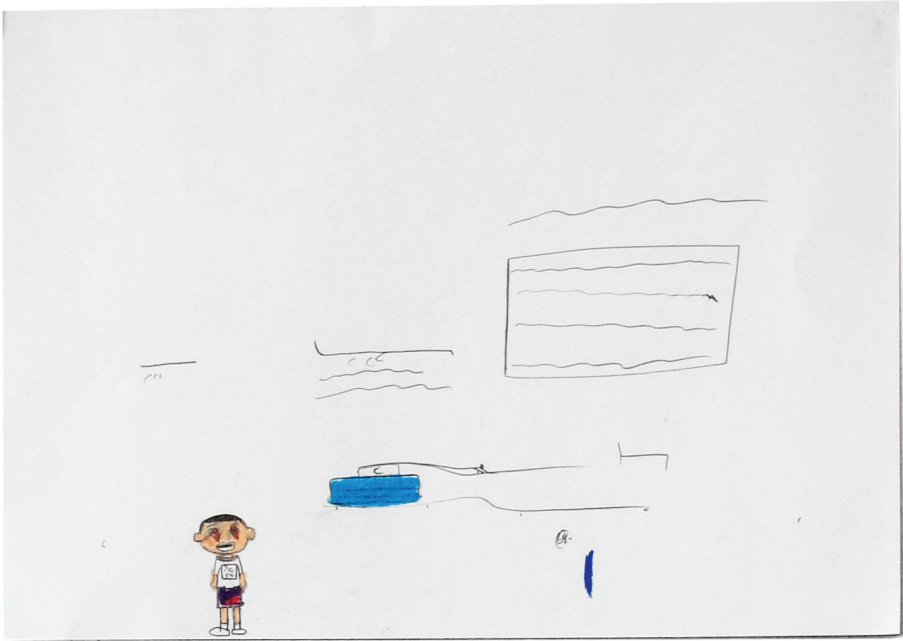
Robert's sister accompanies him to the studio today. Robert has been to the swimming baths with his class. Robert's sister and I ask Robert questions about what they have been doing in the swimming baths and if they have visited the gym, and if he can draw a picture to show it. Robert draws the swimming pool, the rowing machine and himself in his gym clothes.

Robert draws some details of his visit to the swimming baths. He knows how to draw himself, but has to find out how to form the different apparatuses. In spite of scattering the objects all over the paper Robert manages to create a well-composed picture, however differently balanced compared to his otherwise proper and symmetrical style.

GRILLING SAUSAGES • AUTUMN 2002

During the mid-term holiday, Robert and his class have been to picnic in the woods grilling sausages. I suggest Robert to draw a picture of this. He draws three fir trees. I ask who was there. "Robert and Mattias", he answers. He draws Mattias and himself and the sausage grilling, quickly and with no particular interest.

Robert often has difficulty finding solutions that interest him, resulting in quick, simplified and symmetrical pictures such as this one.



BIBI WITH COLOURED STRIPES • SPRING 2003

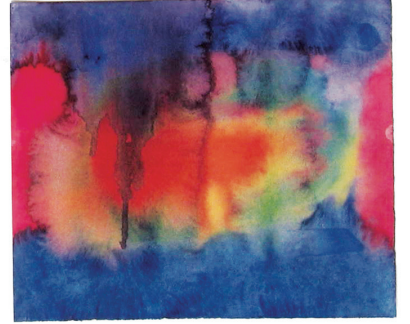
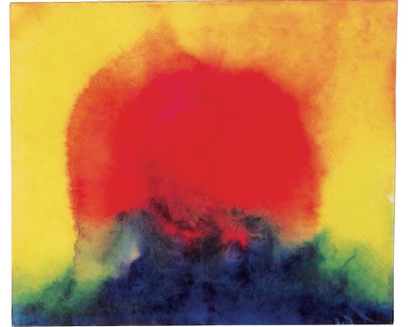
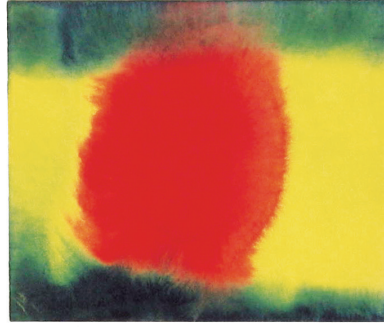
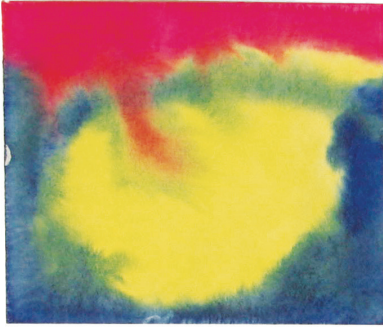
Robert is painting in poster colours on a large piece of paper. He mostly paints stripes. I tell him to draw a portrait of me. He draws a large, smiling face with earrings and continues to paint stripes around it.

In this picture Robert combines the strict stripes with a stylized face in a well-balanced and powerful manner. The regularity in and the repetition of coloured stripes from previous pictures brings thoughts of ritualistic sorting and order to the mind.



I have bought new paper and bright, new watercolours in yellow, blue and red. I show how to wet the paper, and take yellow, then red, then blue paint. Robert does the same. We are sitting opposite each other, painting. Robert cannot fully control the water colour, but has to follow its flowing.

Facing a new technique or task, Robert sometimes imitates others. Generally, he is not interested in what people around him are doing. With the wet-in-wet watercolour technique Robert finds a new pictorial language with new, expressive shapes without symmetrical coloured stripes. He also fills the entire paper with paint.



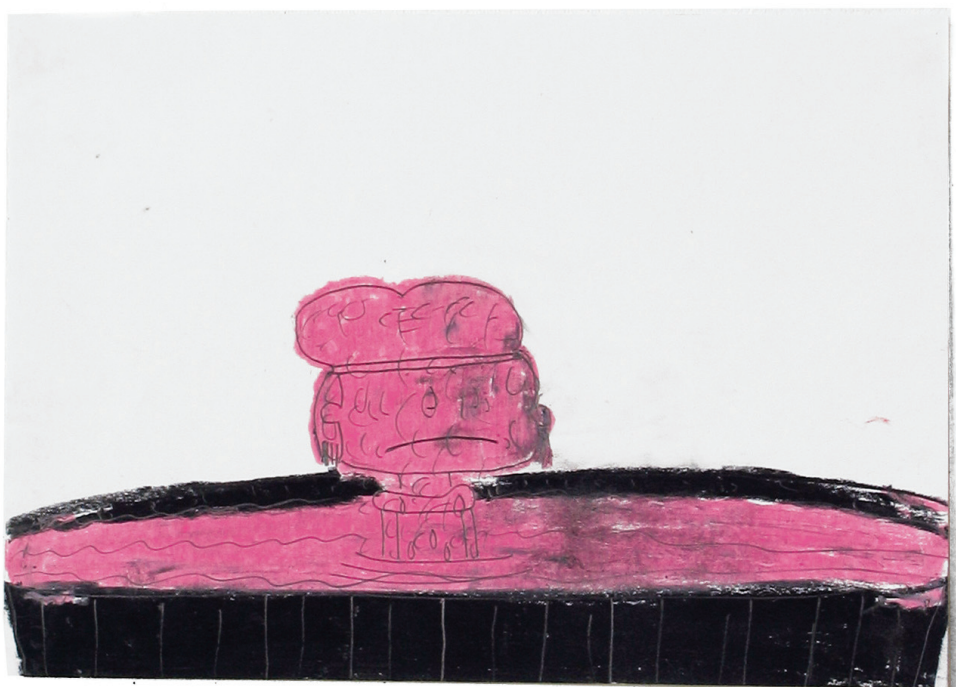
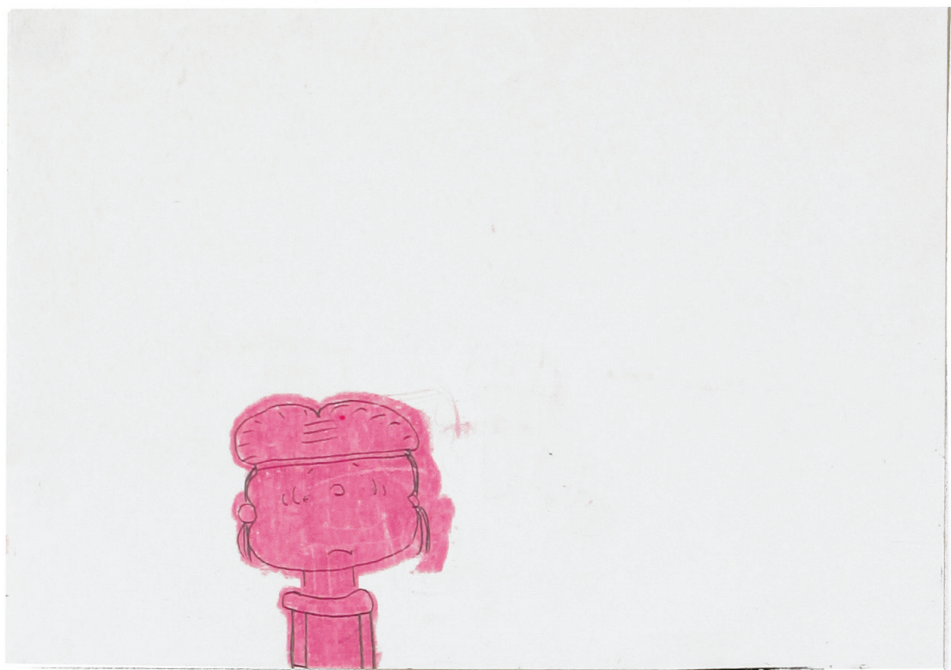
We continue with watercolours. The paper must not dry up, because then the paint stops flowing out and Robert begins to paint stripes again. Robert is concentrated and completely absorbed in his painting. He sits calmly sometimes humming to himself.

Robert makes another expressive watercolour painting here, reminiscent of a work of art. The dominant red portion forms an animal-like shape that is dissolved, yet clear. The dark portion at the bottom gives the picture density and the yellow gives it depth. Robert is absorbed by the sensual aspects of watercolour painting - everything from the tactile sensation of the brush strokes in the different colours to the smell of them, their movement and the changes that occur when they flow into each other. The lack of control doesn't seem to bother him.



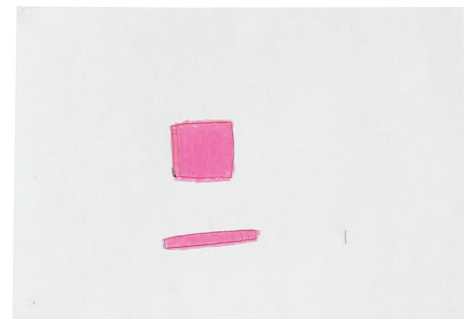
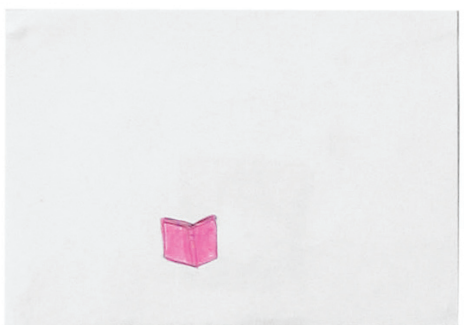
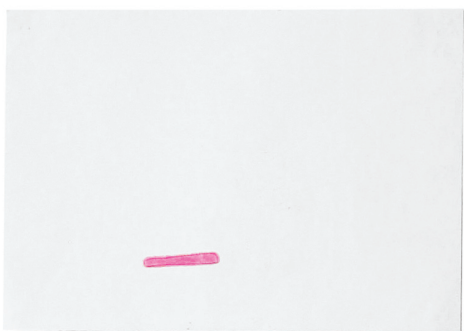
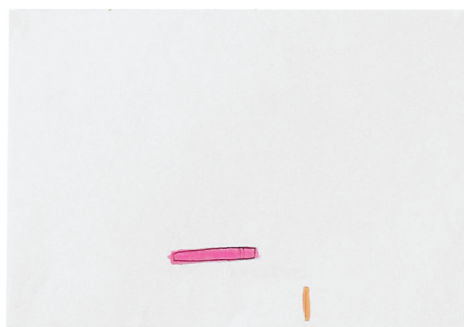
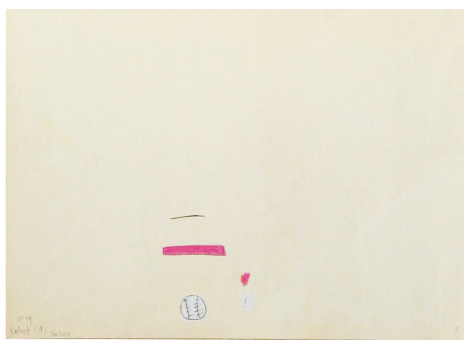
Robert picks up a crayon and draws “Lina Rosa”. First he draws the character in pink and then he fills in the details with pencil. This might seem to us a backwards way of drawing but it is one that Robert often uses. Then he draws a new picture where Lina is sitting in a tub. He works on this for a long time. Pink and black. Lina in the tub, looking angry.

This meticulously rendered motif is something Robert returns to often. The picture can be found in the video cartoon “Life’s a Circus, Charlie Brown”, in which Snoopy performs in a circus together with a small poodle he has grown fond of. Miss Polly, whom Robert sometimes calls Lina Rosa, has prepared a dye-bath in a tub and seizes the little poodle to dip her in the pink dye. Snoopy attacks her to save the poodle. A fight ensues, ending with Miss Polly falling into her own tub of pink dye. This scene, and the one with the ice-hockey players (page 37), is two of the most dramatic events in the film. They are both marked by threatening, aggression and violence, but end with Snoopy conquering the adversary.



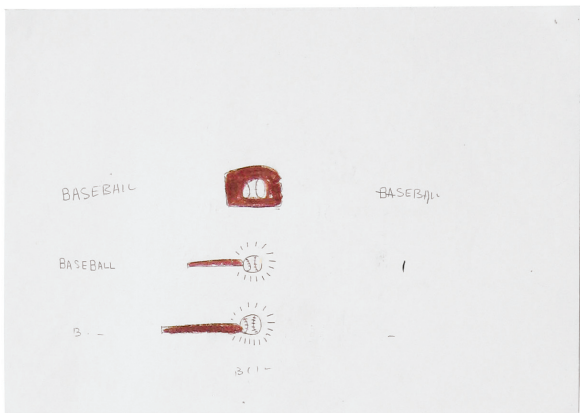
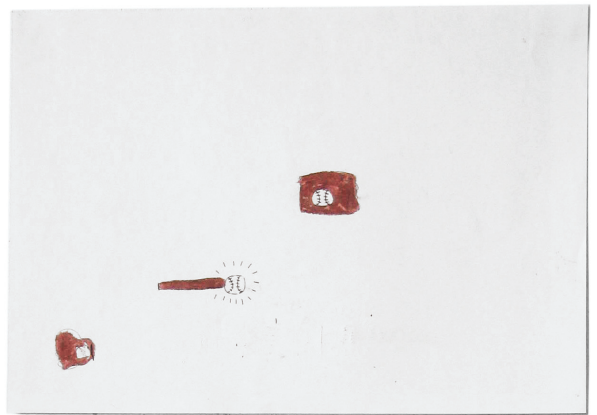
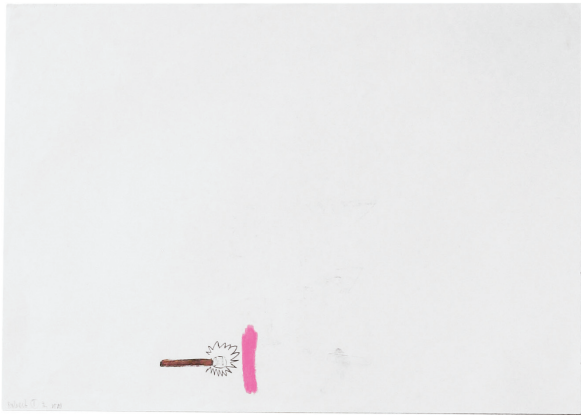
For several years, Robert has drawn a short, pink stripe in crayon on paper after paper. He often turns the sheet over and draws a small baseball on the back. At one point, he draws a small pink book with white clouds in his drawing book. I ask his teacher if she knows anything about this book, and she tells Robert to show me. In his bag, Robert carries a small pink book with white clouds on the cover. The pages are scented to smell like candy. Robert smells the book.

Robert draws the pink book in several different ways, often in the form of a small pink stripe alone on a large piece of paper, but he sometimes includes it in other pictures, such as the picture from the Philippines (page 23) and the still life with bottles (page 19). Here Robert is not directly absorbed by the sensuous qualities of the paint. Rather, by drawing the book, he can only indirectly associate to the scent of it or to pleasant memories connected to it. Robert's smell-book finally got worn out and stopped appearing in his drawings.



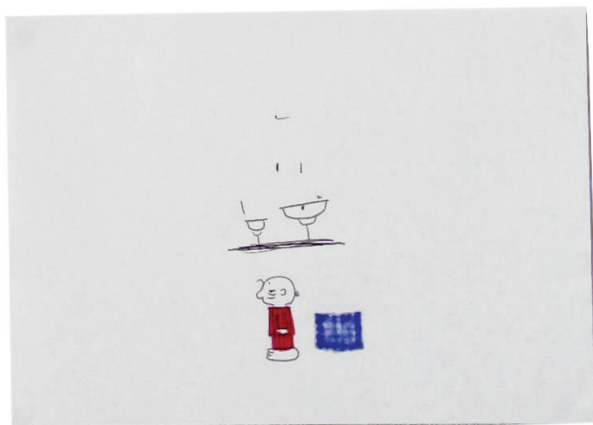
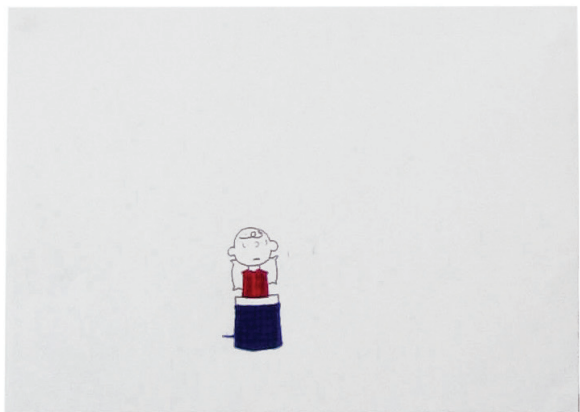
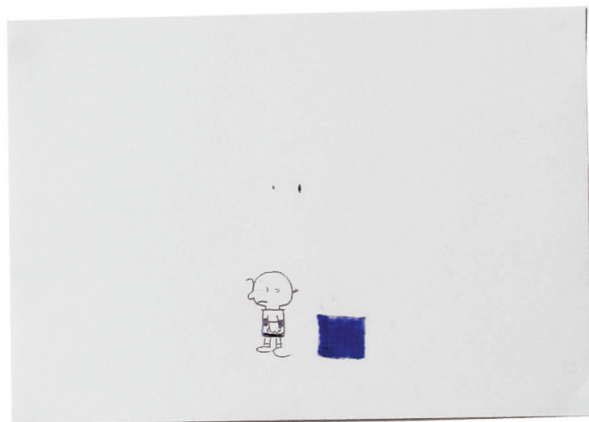
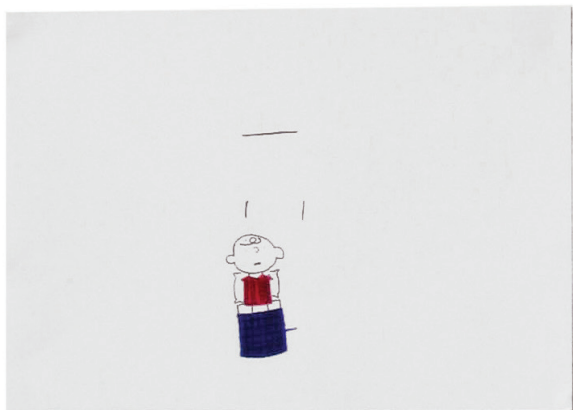
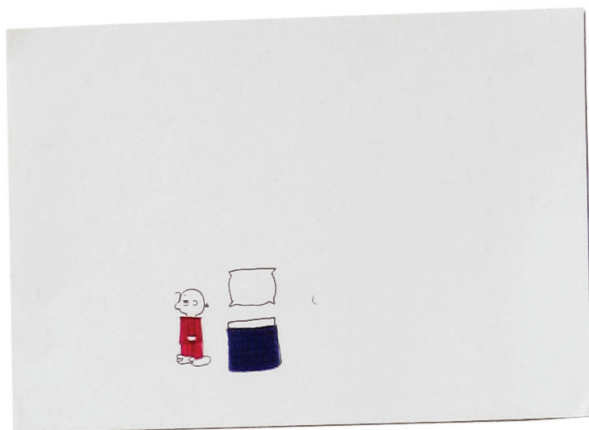
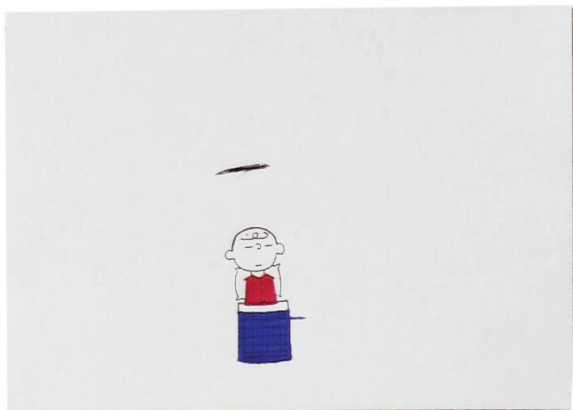
Robert periodically draws this little ball over and over again. First he paints a ball in white crayon, and then he fills in the details with pencil. Several times when I suggest something for him to draw, he will instead draw the baseball. Most often he only draws the ball, but sometimes he includes the bat or the baseball glove catching the ball. Wanting him to elaborate on the picture I frequently tell him to draw the boy who is playing. Occasionally, he will then draw Charlie Brown.

When Robert was nine years of age he made his first drawing that clearly resembled Charlie Brown in profile. The little ball on the pictures appears together with the bat and baseball glove in a cartoon film with Charlie Brown as the baseball team captain. During the years that Robert was involved in our project, he made hundreds of drawings of these objects. The attempts to elaborate on these repetitive pictures rarely succeeded. We have been unable to find a reasonable explanation for Robert's fascination with this motif, which has followed him through life.



In a period Robert has repeatedly been drawing pictures of Charlie Brown sleeping in his bed, awakening and getting up. Robert draws this motif meticulously and in great detail with pencil and crayons.

Robert draws these pictures in connection to a journey. After having slept in different places and having just been given a new bed at home, he has been uneasy and hasn't slept well. Robert's situation can easily be associated with his pictures of Charlie Brown in bed. The original scene is found in the film "Life's a Circus, Charlie Brown!"



Roberts mother lent us this picture. During the family's latest journey to the USA, Robert's uncle mentioned that he thought Robert was angry with him. The uncle had told Robert, or told him off, rather, about not closing doors all the time. He had later found a post-it note on his desk. On the note, Robert had drawn a small, angry head in a tub. Robert's mother immediately interpreted this as Robert not only being angry with his uncle, but trying to show it to him, too. For the first time, Robert had made a clear point using his drawing to communicate his feelings. Robert's mother and uncle showed Robert the note and asked him whom it was. "Robert", he answered.



Different meanings of the creative activities

Robert's drawing can be regarded as separate activities with different function, content and meaning. He prefers reproducing scenes and characters from the animated video-films that have followed him since early childhood – copying cartoons seem to be deeply meaningful to him. However, not only cartoon characters but also some of his favourite objects appear in his ritualistic drawing, e.g. the pink scented book. These motifs are drawn with great precision and seemingly endlessly. Apparently, creating order, stability and consistency in life is significant for Robert in this activity.

We have been able to trace the source of some of Robert's pictures. Many motifs are found in Robert's favourite video-cartoons. He has thus selected the two most dramatic scenes, the one with a gang of ice-hockey players and the one with Lina Rosa (Miss Polly) in the tub from a video-film about Snoopy and Charlie Brown. It appears to us that Robert sometimes uses cartooning as a way of formulating important events and that he reproduces these scenes as a means of coming to terms with feelings and conflicts. Moreover, it appears reasonable to relate the drawing of Charlie Brown lying in bed with Robert's own situation at the time that he was fascinated by this motif. The little post-it note to uncle Rolly, showing Robert in the tub, marks a great step in the development of communication. Here Robert is not only trying to reproduce an event but also to relate an experience to his uncle. However, the meaning and importance of the ubiquitous lines and other often repeated pictorial elements remain unclear.

Creative art can also in a more direct way be considered a meaningful activity to Robert. Painting has a strong sensual quality. He cannot only see, but also feel and smell the paint while working with the brush on the paper. His need for order is demonstrated in the symmetrical compositions of thick strokes in bright colours. However, Robert also enjoys

painting with fluid watercolours and engages himself totally to the experience of paint. As a contrast to the furious tempo with which he often draws, painting seems to be calming.

Robert has responded to the various exercises in the project with pictures of great diversity, several of them showing deftly captured motifs. However, he has only been able to demonstrate this deftness and variation together with Bibi in a pedagogic environment of guidance, encouragement and support. When left alone, Robert persistently copies his cartoon characters without tiring. In contrast, repeating an art exercise often results in Robert losing interest and getting bored. Variation, surprises and challenges are required to keep him interested and to develop his skills. Several of his most intriguing works have resulted from the presentation of a new task or from an unfamiliar situation in which he has not been able to fall back on routine solutions. In such situations, he sometimes follows someone else's example, such as Mattias' airplane in Aircraft 1 and Bibi's method in Six Watercolours. During the long period of painting together with Bibi Robert has developed a trust in her that has been crucial for his willingness to participate in challenging activities.

We consider the expression of personal experiences in drawings especially important when language fails, so we often encouraged Robert to illustrate events from his everyday life. It can be difficult, however, to find pictorial solutions to experiences, and Robert depends on being able to recall a sufficiently intriguing and concrete event depict. The unique painting from the Philippines relates such an event, which has been special to him. The four pictures Fotö, The Swimming Baths, Sausage Grilling and Concert are examples of some of his other solutions. Details and objects from his everyday life, which are important to him, have appeared several times in his pictures, e.g. in the first picture of the Aircraft.

Pictorial language

All of Robert's pictures have a distinctive expression. He has a personal pictorial language and a characteristic style of composition, shapes, lines and choice of colours. Traditional works of art as well as cartoons can serve as models for Robert's pictures and the simple and well-defined forms of cartoons are apparently appealing to him. He can capture, simplify and exaggerate forms in a way, which emphasises the character of the model, while ignoring the emotional atmosphere in a picture, such as in Kyhlberg's painting. A perspective is indicated in some pictures, especially in *Still Life With Mask*. Robert is also able to translate direct observations of landscapes into pictures with the sparse and simple style, which is characteristic of him. When he paints watercolours, the sparseness gives way to more liberate, yet still well-composed and expressive images. Robert has since early childhood been fascinated by his mirror image. He carefully studies various facial expressions and deftly captures them. The self-portrait and the Alfie Atkins picture both have a clear emotional expression. Many of his pictures show an air of lightness and elegance.

Language and communication

The project offered a possibility to study the relationship between verbal and pictorial language. Robert demonstrates with his pictures how he interprets verbal suggestions or instructions, what he associates words with and how he expresses his ideas. An unspecified and abstract word like bild is associated with the word BILD written out, but also when it comes to more concrete objects, for instance a ball, the word can lead to Robert writing out the word BALL. Sometimes the emerging picture can also steer his association paths, for example as in the series with the family and the red sun. Words, writing and pictures seem to be closely associated for Robert.

In many cases, Robert's meticulous reproduction of cartoon scenes seems to have a definite purpose. The uniformity of some figures in the pictures lends them a sign character. This applies to the oversimplified pictures he often draws of people, but even more so to the ritualistically repetitive lines and details. Robert often seems to be carrying on a kind of conversation with himself, aided by these sign-like figures. Besides, he uses echolalia, repeating phrases he has caught from the TV, imitating the intonation as well. These phrases appear to be related to the current context or situation, as a kind of comment. In other words, Robert seems to be borrowing phrases and, perhaps more importantly, pictorial form elements, as he has a difficulties finding his own expressions and formulations. Even when the meaning of Robert's echolalia and pictures seems obvious, it remains unclear whether he actually wants to get a message across or if he is merely chiming in to an impersonal message. The example with uncle Rolly is, however, an exception. Here Robert clearly demonstrates his ambition to express his anger towards his uncle.

Several of the cartoon scenes that Robert reproduces are dramatic and emotional. He paints and draws plenty of motifs with sad boys and angry girls, and in the sequence of self-portrait he paints pictures with different facial expressions. In these pictures emotions are mirrored and conveyed to the beholder.

Autism and image creation

Many peculiarities in Robert's artwork can be seen as typical for autism and be related to theories of autism. He often interprets words literally and in a concrete manner, for example the words "paint around" resulted in an oval shape in Aircraft 4. Small and seemingly insignificant details such as the little baseball and bat are matters of great devotion, and he draws them carefully and exactly. He has a well-developed sense of form, but ignores emotional atmosphere in a picture. These mannerisms can be explained within the framework of the theory of insufficient central coherence (2, 3), i.e. difficulties with forming abstract concepts from context. Normally, drawing a picture of an object is based on the concept of the thing, on all that one knows about it. Robert's pictures, however, often demonstrate visual realism (1, 5, 6). He draws what he sees and, like a trained artist, he perceives his surroundings as pure forms and colours. Frequently, he also starts colouring the image before drawing contours, as with the baseball pictures - an unusual method. In the concert picture he begins drawing a series of circles, which become heads that are finally provided with bodies, instead of drawing each character separately.

There are, however, several contradictory elements in Robert's artwork. He shows repeatedly that he is able to capture the characteristics of a motif and simplify it. When he draws pictures based on direct observations, such as his still life, landscape and self-portrait pieces, he creates a complete composition, which apparently requires some kind of "central coherence". The preoccupation with details and accuracy is not as absolute as it may seem. Robert selects his figures and objects, but re-shapes them, puts them together in different ways in new compositions. Autism makes communication between people difficult. The lack of shared meaning of words and actions is a challenge to us to not only understand the deviant, but also to realise, accept and respect the unknown. Robert's artwork obviously has an important function in his life, and he has, with the aid of his pictures, contributed with a hint about what living with autism might be.

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