

# Helen Keller International Art Show

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Since 1995, the Helen Keller International Art Show has provided a venue for children who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind to display their artwork and creativity to a national audience. The annual show is a project of the international Division on Visual Impairments (DVI) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and is sponsored by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Vision Science Research Center and the School of Education.

Each year, a national call for artwork goes out to public, private, home and residential schools from all over the world. Solicitations are also made to national professional and parent publications, state directors of special education, superintendents of residential schools, and university programs that train teachers. Approximately 100+ pieces of work are received each year with 25-30 pieces selected after the judging. Judges in the Alabama region select the exhibit pieces with open invitations to other states that wish to participate. These judges are representatives of art museums, art editors from daily newspapers, teachers of the sensory impaired, other educational professionals, staff, and parents. Students use a variety of materials to create their masterpieces. These include, but are not limited to crayons, clay, wiki tix, glue, pipe cleaners, clay, paper-mache, beads, water color, finger paint, wire, salt, sand, yarn, ribbons, plaster, braille paper. The medium is limited only by the creativity of each student.

After the juried pieces of work are selected, they are framed and make their debut at the annual CEC convention that is held each April. Over the years the exhibits have been displayed at various locations including the Alabama Civil Rights Museum, the Washington National Cathedral, the American Foundation for the Blind, the Virginia Sowell Center at Texas Tech University, Georgia Academy for the Blind, Auburn University, the University of Alabama Medical Center Library and the UAB Eye Foundation Hospital-Low Vision Clinic and Hospital in Birmingham. Each fall, at the end of the exhibition year, the work is made available to a congressional representative from each artist's state to hang in the congress person's Washington, D.C. office. Pieces have been purchased by a number of publishing companies such as McGraw Hill and Hameray for exhibition and for inclusion in textbook publications. In 2007, the Low Vision Clinic of the UAB Eye Foundation Hospital provided exhibit space throughout the facility to display pieces of work on an on-going basis. In 2008, the UAB Medical Center Library announced plans to sponsor a yearly exhibit. These opportunities allow the medical staff and community at large to view the accomplishments of each of these students and to highlight the importance of including arts as a component of an educational program.

The art show is the result of a number of agencies and organizations working together. While the exhibit highlights the artistic abilities and creativity of individual students, those behind the art show hope the work will also encourage all teachers to incorporate visual art into the individual educational plan of all students.

The show has affected the lives of many students. In 1997, one of the Helen Keller International Art Show students was featured on 20/20 with Barbara Walters and Hugh Downs. For the 1998 show, 25 pieces were exhibited at the UPS World Headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia as part of the southeast

regional meeting of the American Foundation for the Blind. Two artists chosen to attend the opening with their families and were recognized for their abilities and accomplishments. An additional highlight of this event was the creation of note cards featuring the artwork of the students. The philosophy of the Helen Keller International Art Show has been that all participating students are considered winners. Press releases are sent to local newspapers in the home towns of students who are in the show and the exhibit travels with a booklet that includes the name, grade and a brief biography for each artist. Students and their parents have been recognized by their local educational agencies at community board meetings. They have been interviewed by their local newspaper and some have travelled to Washington, D.C. to meet and be photographed with their congressman when their art is exhibited in a federal office building. For the last few years, the art work has also appeared on websites making it possible for friends, families, teachers, and others who “surf the web” to see the artwork. Previous exhibits and student registrations forms for future exhibits may be found on the following web sites: <http://www.cecdvi.org/> and <http://www.nationaldb.org/>.

Anyone interested in purchasing pieces of work, supporting the exhibit through donations or needing additional information may contact Carol Allison at [callison@uab.edu](mailto:callison@uab.edu) or Diane Pevsner at [dpevsner@uab.edu](mailto:dpevsner@uab.edu) or UAB Vision Science Research Center, 924 South 18<sup>th</sup> Street, Worrell #110C, Birmingham, Alabama 35294. Phone: 1-866-975-0624 (Voice & TDD)

