

FILM 'THIS WORLD IS NOT MY OWN'

Story of local folk artist illustrated in quirky style



"This World Is Not My Own," an artful account of self-taught artist Nellie Mae Rowe, uses motion-capture technology. One scene shows an animated Rowe (right) with gallerist and advocate Judith Alexander wandering into the frame. COURTESY OF PETER RINGBOM

'This World Is Not My Own' preview to be part of Atlanta Film Festival.

By Bo Emerson
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EVENT PREVIEW

'THIS WORLD IS NOT MY OWN'

■ 6:45 p.m. April 25. \$20. Hill Auditorium, High Museum of Art, 1280 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 404-733-4400, high.org

Perhaps the most unusual thing about "This World Is Not My Own," the new documentary film about Atlanta folk artist Nellie Mae Rowe, is that the filmmakers have built their own Nellie Mae Rowe from scratch.

With the help of motion-capture technology and the talented actress Uzo Aduba, the movie fashions a three-dimensional digitally animated Rowe and places her in a miniature version of her wildly cluttered house and yard, a house that long ago vanished under the bulldozer's blade.

In place of that house and yard, the moviemakers fashioned a gingerbread-house-sized stage set, in a tour-de-force of the modeler's art, with popcorn trees, Lilliputian bottles made from sugar, diminutive cardboard furniture

and even tiny re-creations of Rowe's own artwork.

"They did a phenomenal job," said Rowe's great-great-niece, Cathi Perry. Perry and her sister Cheryl Mashack consulted with the crew, telling them about Aunt Nellie and offering details on her art-saturated world. "They wanted to know what filled the house, what filled the yard," said Perry, "and we gave them

Rowe continued on C4



Nellie Mae Rowe (self-portrait) expressed joy in her art despite a life of hard labor. COURTESY OF HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

THINGS TO DO

Five key upgrades in Lego Center

Venue has new game, extra toddler space, more master builders.

By Rodney Ho
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Lego Discovery Center at Phipps Plaza recently shut down for six months for a refresh.

The space was about a decade old and owner Merlin Entertainment wanted to incorporate new interactive technology.

Some popular aspects remain essentially the same, such as the 4D theater showing Lego-themed movies with actual wind and water to supplement the films, a virtual reality Lego adventure experience, a pirate-themed indoor playground and Kingdom Quest, a ride that involves light blasters and two riders competing to shoot targets and build points.

Admission tickets start at \$30.99 with new annual pass pricing not yet determined. (People with prior existing annual passes had them automatically extended since the attraction was closed for so long.)

Caroline Ruthven, Lego Discovery Center's marketing manager, said staffers have also been given sensory training for children on the autism spectrum, and each zone will have sensory ratings to help parents navigate what is best for their kids.

Overall, she said, "it's a way more open floor plan."

"I feel we are providing more value and more interactive stuff," added Philip Quinn-Simmons, the lead master model builder. "There's

Lego continued on C2

MORE DETAILS

LEGO DISCOVERY CENTER ATLANTA

■ 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday; and 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday; admission prices starting at \$30.99, Phipps Plaza, 3500 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta. legodiscoverycenter.com/Atlanta

WORKING TOGETHER

Want to tap into your genius? Find a good group to help bring it to life

Oscar-winning director duo provides proof it's not always about the 'I.'

By Laura Yuen
Star Tribune

What does genius look like? A picture of a lone inventor may come to mind, or maybe a poet lost in her head.

Rarely do we think of the kind of collective brilliance that direc-

tor Daniel Kwan described in one of his many acceptance speeches at the Academy Awards, when he paid homage to his cast and crew, his high school friends and his immigrant parents, all of whom he credited with helping him tap into his genius.

"The world is opening up to the fact that genius does not stem from individuals like us on stage, but rather genius emerges from the collective. We are all products of our context. We are all

descendants of something and someone," he said.

"There is greatness in every single person. It doesn't matter who they are. You have a genius that is waiting to erupt. You just need to find the right people to unlock that. Thank you so much to everyone who has unlocked my genius."

Kwan is one-half of filmmaking duo the Daniels (which includes Daniel Scheinert), who won Oscars for directing, writing and produc-

ing "Everything Everywhere All At Once," a trippy, parallel-universe film that my colleague Chris Hewitt called "the weirdest movie to win best picture." Whether or not you are a fan of Michelle Yeoh's and Jamie Lee Curtis' hot dog fingers, you can appreciate that a movie this eccentric doesn't pull off a sweep like this without an impressive jolt of originality.

To hear the 35-year-old Kwan explain it on stage, though, it wasn't the Daniels' uncompro-

mising weirdness that carried the film, but the creative gifts flowing through the "hearts and souls and minds" of the actors and crew. Perhaps it should be of no surprise that Kwan could speak so authentically about the virtues of collectivism. Like me, Kwan was born in the United States to a Taiwanese mother and a father from Hong Kong.

Children of immigrants know

Genius continued on C2

JOYFUL DAILY

How to deal with pain in pursuing your goals

Have you ever set a difficult goal for yourself that caused you pain as you prepared for it? People who are in extreme sports, or even simply working out in the gym, often report that they experience pain on the way to their aspiration. Entrepreneurs, writers and artists often experience this as well.

Why would anyone choose to do something voluntarily when they know it might be painful? Why would someone keep moving forward with an activity if they're already in pain and know there's more to come?

It's because the end result offers a promise of satisfaction, pride and achievement. It helps people realize their capabilities. It teaches you that you can surmount limitations. It



Angela and Dennis Buttmer
For the AJC

can feel incredibly empowering. However, many people don't keep going. They quit. And sometimes this is the right thing to do. Perhaps they were attempting the activity for the wrong reasons. Maybe they realized it wasn't worth it after all. You do need to know when it's in your best interest to stop versus continue.

Whether you decide to continue or stop, make sure it's your decision. It may be helpful for others to weigh in with their opinions, but ultimately this is your decision to make.

If you do decide to move forward with a goal that will cause pain in the interim, how can you navigate the anguish along the way? Here are a few strategies:

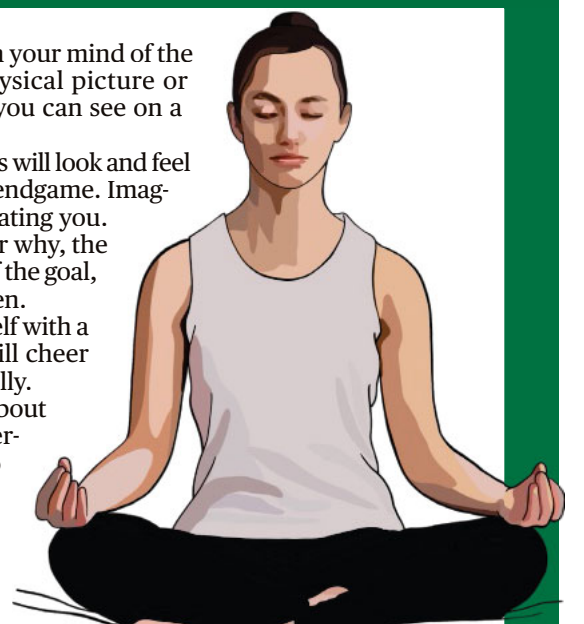
■ Keep an image in your mind of the end goal. Have a physical picture or representation that you can see on a daily basis.

■ Visualize how this will look and feel when you get to the endgame. Imagine people congratulating you.

■ Get clear on your why, the underlying reason, of the goal, and remember it often.

■ Surround yourself with a positive tribe who will cheer you on unconditionally.

■ Watch or read about people who have overcome challenges to achieve greatness in their own lives. Learn from their mindset and behaviors.



INSPIRE ATLANTA

Extraordinary people and uplifting stories that bring out the best in all of us

THE UPLIFT

'World's ugliest dog' laps up his fame

By Andrea Salcedo
Washington Post

Minutes after wrapping up their interview on NBC's "Today" show, Jeneda Benally and her dog were about to step out of the set's backstage area when Keshia approached them.

"OMG, is that him?!" the pop star exclaimed. "Is that THE dog? Mr. Happy Face?"

"Yes," Benally replied that early June morning. "You're welcome to pet him if you'd like."

The singer, who sported a beige cape suit and matching heels, stroked the few tufts of gray hair on Mr. Happy Face's head as the Chinese crested Chihuahua mix, 17, looked her straight in the eyes, the kind of gaze he'd adopted since recently winning the title of world's ugliest dog.

Months earlier, the small canine — with a tongue longer than his head and wispy strands of hair covering his mostly bald skin — elicited strangers' playful characterizations of gremlin, gargoyle, Quasimodo from "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame."

Now the winner of the 2022 World's Ugliest Dog contest has turned into a celebrity with his own Instagram account, trips to live morning TV shows and appearances in dozens of interviews with publications around the world.

"He loves the attention," said Benally, 48. "He actually has learned how to pose for pictures."

If it weren't for her niece who, on a lark, encouraged her to submit Mr. Happy Face's entry for the World's Ugliest Dog contest, Benally probably never would have heard of the nearly 50-year-old competition celebrating the "imperfections that make all dogs unique."

Submissions for this year's contest, which will take place



Mr. Happy Face, 18, the reigning champion of the World's Ugliest Dog contest, is a television celebrity and has his own Instagram account. COURTESY OF JENEDA BENALLY

on June 23 in Petaluma, California, are now open.

Benally met Mr. Happy Face, named Matthias at the time, in August 2021 at an Arizona shelter, she told The Washington Post.

Her original plan was to leave the Yavapai Humane Society shelter in Prescott, Arizona, with a big protective dog, she said, but the animal she wanted had been adopted minutes before she arrived. So Benally asked the no-kill shelter to show her some dogs who were less likely to be adopted.

Cue Mr. Happy Face, who a shelter employee said might be part alien.

Mr. Happy Face, who has some deformities and tumors, hobbled his way to Benally and looked her in the eyes, asking for a second chance.

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Know someone who inspires you or makes metro Atlanta a better place for others? Email us at AJC-InspireAtlanta@ajc.com.

"He had so much hope in his eyes," Benally said.

"He spoke to my heart." And that's all it took.

Twenty minutes later, Benally left the shelter with Mr. Happy Face despite being told that he

probably had only six more weeks to live, if they were lucky.

But they were more fortunate than that.

With time, the dog who could barely walk and who shrieked when touched turned into one

who runs after Benally and woofs in his sleep.

He no longer takes any medication, Benally said over the phone as Mr. Happy Face barked excitedly with his sister, Chaos.

"That's not the bark of a decrepit old dog," Benally said. "That's the bark of a dog who loves life and is so fully loved."

Since Mr. Happy Face won the contest, fans have contacted Benally to say his story inspired them to adopt the underdog, that friend who needs more care than others, senior pets who might not get immediate attention from pet adopters.

Benally, who submitted an entry for Mr. Happy Face on a whim last year, said those interested in participating should view the contest as a celebration of their dog's uniqueness, not because of competition.

The contest, held annually as part of the Sonoma-Marín Fair, isn't intended to make fun of "ugly" dogs, according to its website.

Its organizers hope to teach that all animals can be loved, no matter how they look.

Many of the contestants have been rescued from shelters and puppy mills.

Last year's second place winner, Wild Thang, is a distemper survivor with no teeth.

Monkey, a 12-year-old Blue Factor Brussels Griffon, took home last year's third place. She was rescued from a rough home when she was 1.

Mr. Happy Face spent his 18th birthday as a champion.

He still has the energy to playfully run away when he needs a diaper change and loves going on long trips on his stroller.

"His outer body is decrepit and deformed," Benally said. "But in my eyes, he's absolutely adorable and I can tell that he's happy to be alive and be loved."



This miniature "reimagining" of Nellie Mae Rowe's "playhouse," her art-filled home in Vinings, was created for the film "This World Is Not My Own." The High Museum acquired some miniature sets built for the movie. The High also mounted an extensive exhibit in 2021 called "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe."



Nellie Mae Rowe's "My House Is Clean Enough" expresses a feeling familiar to anyone who has had their fill of housework. The film animates Rowe's colorful paintings and drawings, allowing them to spread themselves across the frame after the manner of the living cornfields in an immersive Van Gogh exhibit. PHOTOS COURTESY OF HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Rowe

continued from C1

descriptions, photographs, everything we had."

Said Mashack, the set builders matched those details, "even down to the pictures on the walls."

The film, which premiered at the South by Southwest festival earlier this year, will make its Atlanta premiere Tuesday, April 25, at the High Museum of Art, as part of the Atlanta Film Festival.

Creating a computer-generated doppelgänger of the subject of your documentary, and placing it in a miniature stage set, is an unorthodox move, but it matches the playful spirit of Rowe, who called her wonderland residence a "playhouse," and who also liked creating miniature people in the form of dolls.

It is also a creative approach to the limitations the filmmakers faced. There were few interviews with Rowe, very little film or video footage, and a pau-

city of photographs.

"There was no archive of her life," said Katherine Jentleson, curator of folk art at the High Museum of Art, which mounted an extensive Nellie Mae Rowe exhibit in 2021 called "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe."

The challenge, said director Petter Ringbom, was "to make a film where her presence is alive and her spirit can somehow be reimagined for audiences who have never met her."

Of Rowe's animated stand-in, Jentleson said, "Nellie Mae Rowe probably would have chuckled at this, and found it fun and true to form."

Atlanta gallerist Judith Alexander discovered Rowe, and brought her to the attention of museums and collectors in Atlanta and New York. In the film Alexander is also re-created as an animated figure. The connection between the two changed both of their lives. "They were yin and yang," said Mashack.

'We wanted something to help us preserve and expand the legacy of Nellie Mae Rowe. We didn't realize how creative (New York-based production company Opendox) would get. We were thrilled with it. It went way beyond anything we had envisioned.'

Judith Augustine
Judith Alexander Foundation director

Alexander became an advocate for self-taught artists, particularly Rowe, and after Alexander's death in 2004, the Judith Alexander Foundation continued that work.

In 2016 the foundation sought suggestions from filmmakers about ways to document Rowe's life. Ringbom and Marquise Stillwell's New York-based production company, Opendox, was among those pitching ideas.

"Seven years ago I had never heard of Nellie Mae

Rowe," said Ringbom. "I immediately fell in love with her art and her story."

"We wanted something to help us preserve and expand the legacy of Nellie Mae Rowe," said Judith Augustine, director of the foundation. "We didn't realize how creative (Opendox) would get. We were thrilled with it. It went way beyond anything we had envisioned."

The film animates Rowe's gloriously colorful paintings and drawings, allowing them to spread themselves

across the frame after the manner of the living cornfields in an immersive Van Gogh exhibit.

The documentary also uses Rowe's life as a lens to view the world of post-slavery Jim Crow Atlanta, discovering remarkable connections between her story and some of the most shattering events in the history of the city, including the Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906 and the lynching of Leo Frank.

Rowe lived a life of hard labor. As a girl she worked picking cotton, shelling peas and pulling corn on her parents' sharecropper farm. Later she worked as a domestic in North Atlanta. There were perhaps only a few hundred residents of Vinings when Rowe moved there with her first husband, Ben Wheat, in 1930.

"It was a small pocket of Black, and everywhere else was very full of white people," said Rowe's great-nephew Ken Brown, who also lived in the neighborhood. "They weren't very

nice."

Rowe's artwork describes and comments on the rapid growth of Vinings, and the conflict that such growth created. Her street became a thoroughfare, and I-285 was carved through nearby neighborhoods. The film opens with a scene of Rowe sweeping her yard as a noisy carload drives past and someone throws a bottle over her fence. She carefully adds it to her bottle tree.

Though her environment was hostile, Rowe never stopped optimistically engaging with those around her. She invited her mostly white neighbors to see her yard and house and collected more than 800 signatures in her guest book just between May 1973 and March 1975.

Her delight in her life, and her pride in her work, are palpable in the movie and in her paintings. Jentleson wrote in the catalog for the 2021 show, "Black joy, rather than suffering, was, by and large, her platform."