

Heartstrings: From Addiction to Art

By Quinn Schweitzer



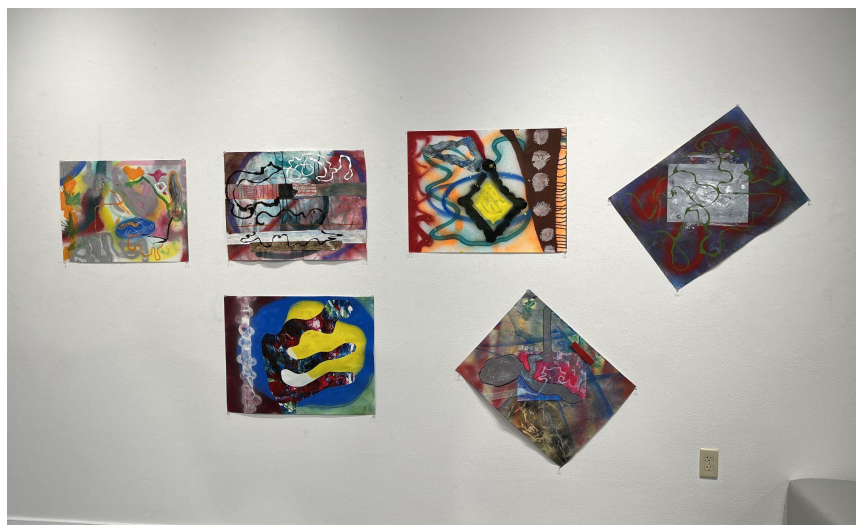
The centerpiece of Owen O'Rourke's art show, an anatomical heart left bound and suspended, created using recycled fabrics and newspapers. Founders Hall Art Galleries, February 17, 2025.

It was the day after finals when Owen O'Rourke, barrelling down a crash course of addiction and self-destruction, found himself at a crossroads where a chance encounter with an old friend would change everything. "I think some of the things that really got to me were... I saw how my self-destructive behaviors affected the people I love and care about. I was like, 'F-k, dude. This is not just me beating myself up. This is me destroying my friendships and relationships,'" said O'Rourke. Owen's story is a testament to resilience, transformation, and the power of support. From battling addiction in high school to finding solace in art, his journey highlights the importance of self-awareness and the impact of meaningful relationships.

O'Rourke's journey to college wasn't an easy one. "I dealt with a solid amount of addiction and mental health struggles in high school. I didn't think I was gonna make it to college, but I beat my addictions and made it possible." Despite having little direction and struggling with personal issues at the time, he managed to pull himself together and forge a path to college. O'Rourke found himself carrying this momentum into his freshman year, recounting it as a time of hope and sobriety. This was until the summer before sophomore year, where a breakup would send Owen into a tailspin of drinking and mental health crises. "That summer... you know was really hard for me," recounted O'Rourke, "I came into my sophomore year really not feeling great. I started drinking all the time, and that led to some bad things. I was really sad, and I wasn't dealing with it. I was just drowning in it."

It wasn't until the climax of his instability when a familiar face reached out, flipping the trajectory of his life on its head. Grace Carson, an old friend from freshman year, had just returned to San Diego. After inviting him and a few friends to her place one night, the two hit it off immediately. Having dealt with her own fair share of struggles throughout her life, it didn't take long for Grace to begin to understand Owen's. "She realized how bad of a place I was in and helped me pull myself out of it. She wanted me to get into therapy and stop drinking. She changed my life," stated O'Rourke. With her support, Owen embarked on his journey towards recovery, finding solace in newfound passions. After taking a few art classes with her at school, art quickly became more than a hobby for Owen; it became a lifeline. Through sculpture, painting, and ceramics, he found a way to express his battles and triumphs. O'Rourke went on to say, "I found love in making art. It's my passion. I'm now a double major in communications and visual arts, and it's been a huge part of my recovery."

As members of the graduating art program, seniors are tasked with a capstone project in which the students fill an art gallery on campus for a week. Through this project, each student is allowed the opportunity to speak to peers and faculty about their work and process. “It’s a big deal, you know, a lot of art shows can take up to a year or more to put together,” said O’Rourke. One afternoon, after seeing that the gallery would unexpectedly not be in use by any other students for the week, O’Rourke reached out to faculty. After scarce communication, he was given an opportunity to take over the space, but with one caveat: he would need to create enough art to fill the gallery in just six days. With this challenge in mind, he committed all of his time to nothing but art, spending around 12 hours a day committed solely to his craft. “While it can only be so good, I was proud of what I accomplished in only six days. It was my first time actually taking painting and my art seriously.”



Paintings by Owen O’Rourke. Founders Hall Art Galleries, February 17, 2025

When asked about his process during the tight timeline, Grace Carson remarked, “I was really inspired by Owen’s creativity—his willingness to experiment and to fail. I am a perfectionist, so those qualities have never come naturally to me.” And so, through his creative process and use of 100% recycled fabrics, newspaper, and paint, O’Rourke went on to create

captivating pieces that exemplified his thoughts and emotions throughout his life. “This whole project was supposed to be a monument to my core self, specifically who I am at my core, the container for my being, and my journey through life.” Onno van Baaren, a close friend of O’Rourke’s had this to say about the exhibit, “I think the shadows and the lighting played really well with the fabric. I found it really interesting how the piece was able to catch certain shadows with the way that it was cut. I think that it really forces the viewer to walk around the piece—to see the different aspects of the sculpture.”

Despite the exhaustion, O’Rourke saw the art show as a turning point, a moment where he proved to himself that he could create something meaningful under pressure. "I learned that I probably shouldn’t agree to do something like that again. It was draining, but it was also a great learning experience." Ambitious to capitalize on his momentum, O’Rourke is currently applying for an artist grant that would make it possible for him to continue his artistic journey through the rest of the summer at The University of San Diego. “To get \$6,000 to do art for the whole summer? It would be amazing to have that kind of support!"

Looking towards the future, “This is just the beginning," said O’Rourke, "The art show was the culmination of so much work, but it was so rewarding to see it all come together, even if it was on a tight timeline. Creating those pieces, experimenting with new mediums and techniques, it was like a form of therapy for me. It's become such an important outlet and way for me to process everything I've been through. I know there will still be ups and downs, but my art grounds me.” O’Rourke’s journey from addiction to art is a testament to resilience, transformation, and the power of support. What started as a desperate fight for stability has transformed into a passion that fuels his future. With a paintbrush in one hand and a vision in his

heart, he's no longer just surviving—he's creating, rebuilding, and redefining himself, one stroke at a time.



Owen O'Rourke with one of his canvas pieces. Founders Hall Art Galleries, February 12, 2025.

Source List

Interviews with Owen O'Rourke, conducted via phone on February 17 & 21, 2025.

Email: oorourke@sandiego.edu, Phone: (202) 748-3266.

The subject. This source provided me with the overall story of his journey and struggles. I was able to structure the rest of my article and interviews around our conversations.

Interview with Grace Carson, conducted via phone on February 21, 2025.

Email: gvcarson188@gmail.com, Phone: (415) 299-8205

The girlfriend of the subject. This source provided me with an insider perspective and a memorable quote that reinforced my subject's story and character.

Interview with Onno Van Baaren, conducted via phone on February 20, 2025.

Email: ovanbaaren@sandiego.edu, Phone: (503) 875-6430

Friend of the subject. This source provided me with a key witness perspective on Owen's art show. Described what he saw and vividly described what he enjoyed about the pieces.

Interview with Allison Wiese, statement taken via email on February 25, 2025.

Email: awiese@sandiego.edu, Phone: (619) 260-7990

Teacher of the subject. This source provided me with a detailed description of Owen O'Rourke and who he is as a student. This enabled me to gain a better understanding of the subject as a student and his process.

Photos of Owen's art show, provided by Owen O'Rourke on February 20, 2025.

Images of the subjects paintings, sculptures and gallery space.