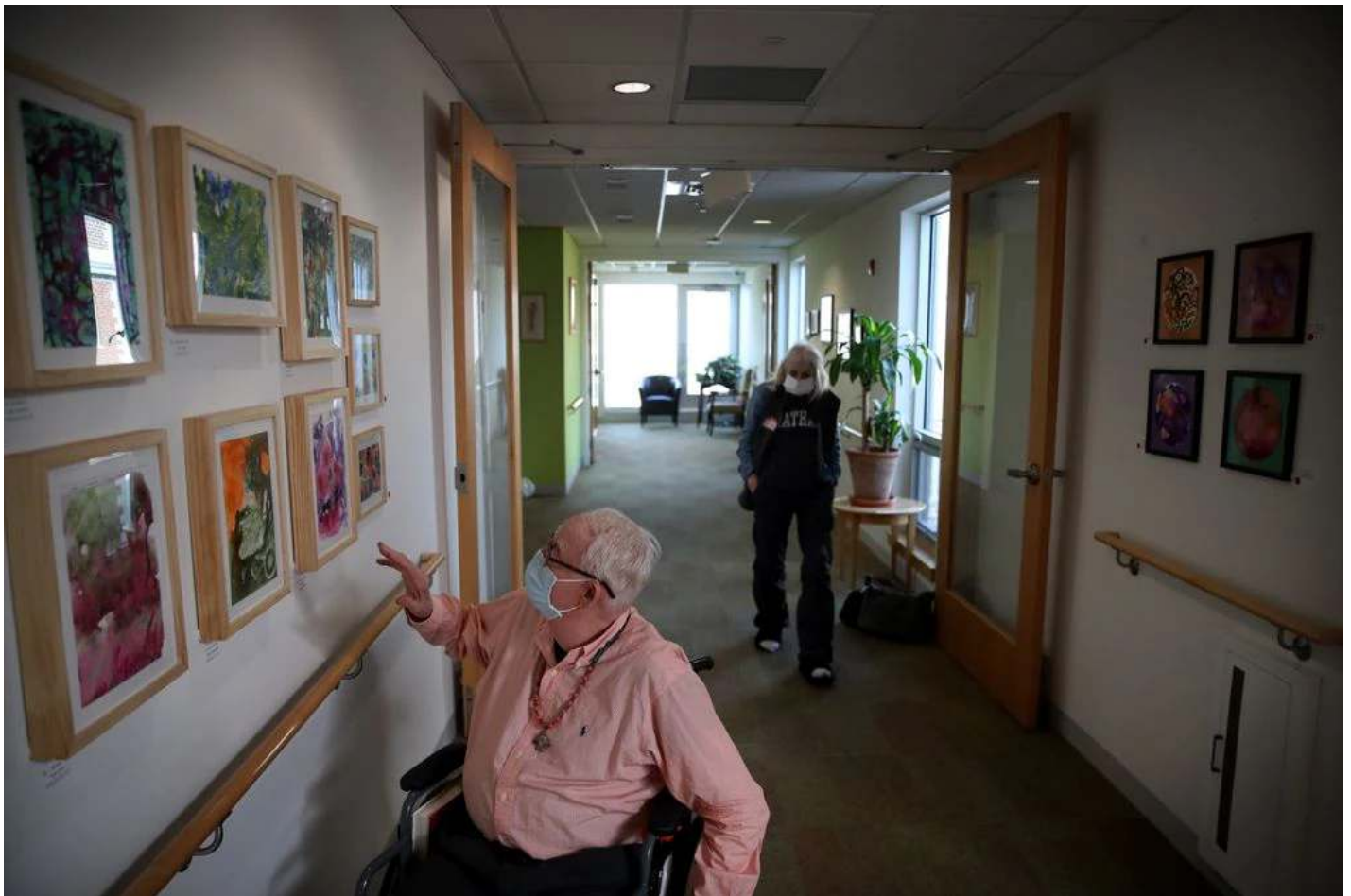


Originally designed for dementia patients, Opening Minds Through Art program broadens its reach in Boston

Seniors at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain have an art exhibition on view through April 29.

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 13, 2022, 1:04 p.m.



Ed Jacobson admires artwork displayed in the Opening Minds Through Art exhibit at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. Jacobson is a participant and resident. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Last Friday afternoon, seniors at [Mount Pleasant Home](#), a nonprofit residential care home in Jamaica Plain, gathered around a kitchen table and painted watercolor on

paper. They blotted it with another sheet, then added texture with plastic wrap and glitter.

Afterward, Edward Jacobson showed a vibrant blue artwork, which he made in tandem with Olivia O'Neill, another Mount Pleasant resident, to a visitor.

“You see things in abstract art that others may not see,” he said. “The title is ‘The Sea.’ And as you can see, obviously the color of the sea, but also the waves, foam. You can see whatever you want.”



“The Sea,” created by by Ed Jacobson and Olivia O'Neill at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Jacobson, a former MIT administrator, is participating in [Opening Minds Through Art](#), a program presented at Mount Pleasant by [Goddard House](#), a nonprofit eldercare facility in Brookline. Each artist, working with a volunteer, creates original abstract art. An exhibition is on view in the hallways of Mount Pleasant Home through April 29. Proceeds from sale of the art will support the cost of supplies for the OMA program

there.

“We do one step at a time,” said volunteer Marge David, a retired nurse. “We only put out what we need for that step, and then we remove it, so there’s no confusion about what we need to use or what’s going to be next.”

OMA was originally designed for dementia patients by gerontologist and artist [Elizabeth “Like” Lokon](#). Goddard House has expanded it into other populations.

“We realized it’s not just for people who may not have physical or cognitive mental capacity, but for anybody,” said Christine Nagle, Goddard House’s director of community partnerships.

It’s not the first time OMA has been applied outside the box. A group in the Netherlands used OMA with children who have autism, Lokon said in an email. And COVID-19 has prompted a new approach.

“Since the pandemic, we have expanded OMA programming to include older adults without cognitive impairment in order to address isolation and loneliness associated with the pandemic,” she wrote. “I am glad that Goddard House is doing the same thing. I believe this is the future of OMA.”



Christine Nagle displays recent works in the Opening Minds Through Art program at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The close work with volunteers is key.

“When you run other art programs in different facilities, not everyone has someone beside you in your corner while you are making art together,” said OMA facilitator Silvina Ibanez, a visual artist and expressive therapist who specializes in using a range of creative arts in therapeutic settings.



Facilitators Silvina Ibanez (left) and Ginny Mazur display artwork at the Opening Minds Through Art exhibit at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Goddard House expressive therapist Ginny Mazur trained as an OMA facilitator in 2016. OMA is based at the [Scripps Gerontology Center](#) at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The program is designed for nursing homes, though Goddard House is not a nursing home: It's an assisted living facility with a memory care area. In 2017, [LeadingAGE](#), an umbrella organization for Massachusetts nonprofit eldercare agencies, awarded the Goddard House program an [Innovation of the Year Award](#).

“I worked in art as an art therapist and expressive therapist for many years at Faulkner Hospital, working in psychiatry and with older adults. I knew that there was something missing in our field,” Mazur said.

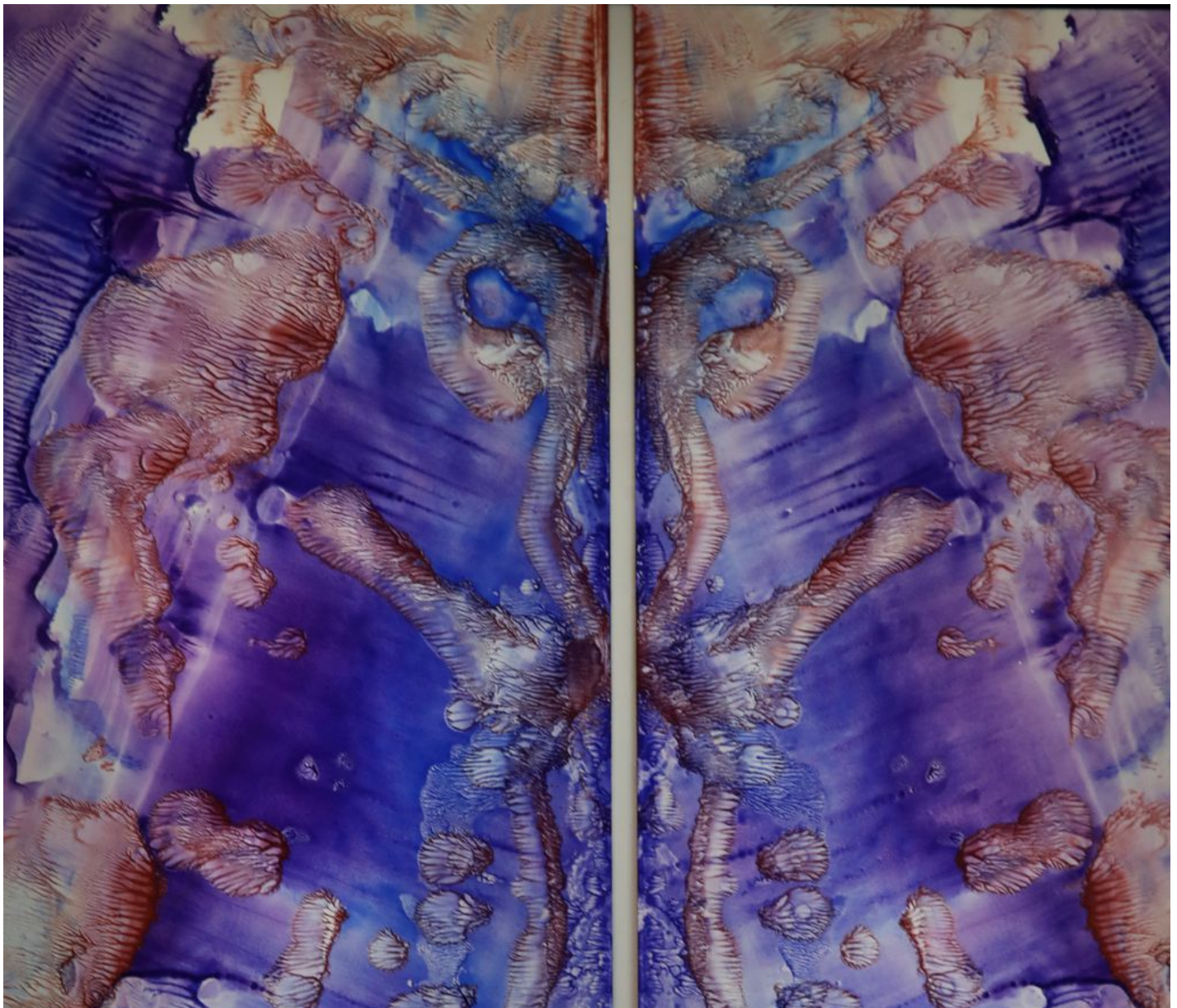
Music programs are commonly used with dementia patients, but art programs are less

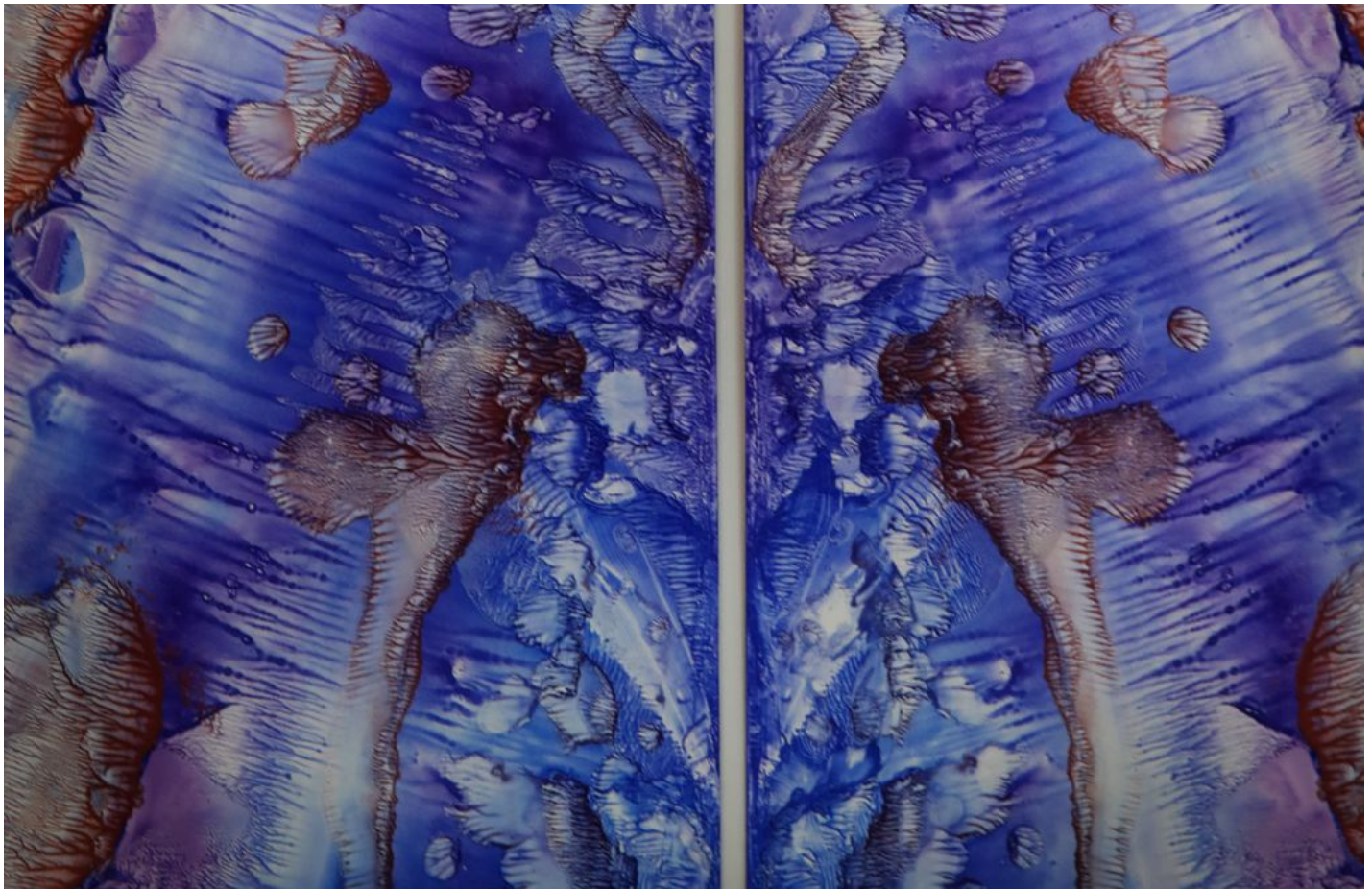
common, she said. OMA is effective, she added, because of the step-by-step approach and the one-on-one engagement.

And while OMA is not considered therapy, “it’s healing, and I think it is therapeutic and it’s fun,” Mazur said.

Representational art can be challenging for people with cognitive deficits who may have trouble thinking sequentially to draw something familiar, Mazur said. Abstract art is another thing entirely.

“Many people can’t remember your name,” she said. “Yet it’s because of that presence right in the moment that they’re so open to create.”





"Cool Cat," by Opening Minds Through Art participant Betty White, made at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The art looks dynamic. “It has a leveling effect across all cognitive abilities,” said Mazur.

Now Goddard House is bringing art-making to other older adults with its OMA in the Community pilot program. The focus is to reach seniors with a wide range of physical and cognitive abilities who have been isolated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last spring, Mazur and Ibanez brought OMA to Mount Pleasant Home. They’ve been running eight-week sessions there ever since, working with about 25 of the 60 residents. The program will wrap in May, but Nagle said there are plans to return in the fall.

“It was great to have something to look forward to every Friday,” said Jacobson, who had never considered himself an artist.

Cheryl Saunders, another resident and OMA participant at Mount Pleasant and a former human resources professional, said she has always loved art.



Cheryl Saunders (left) shares a laugh with Isabelle Olsson at the Opening Minds Through Art exhibit at Mount Pleasant Home in Jamaica Plain. Olsson is an intern in the program and bought the painting at center by Saunders, an OMA participant. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

“My aunt was an artist in New York. Even when I was little, I used to do art stuff,” she said. “It’s very relaxing.”

Volunteers range from college age to retired. David, the retired nurse, has been helping out for more than four years.

“My mantra is to bring joy. And this program couldn’t fit that more perfectly,” she said. “I get the joy of working with artists and then seeing the joy they get from the art they produce.”

Mazur and Ibanez have expanded on the OMA exercises just as Goddard House’s programming has pushed the limits of OMA’s original target population.

Nagle said they hope to take the plan to other Boston-area eldercare facilities.

For Jacobson, who has never considered himself an artist, it's opened a new window in his life.

“It's amazing what we end up creating,” he said.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmccq](https://twitter.com/cmccq).

[Show comments](#)