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The tin man

Following idiosyncratic muse, foil sculptor finds a livelihood

By DON KAPLAN

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For almost four decades, animals have held the key to Dean Millien's mind; and now with a healthy dose of aluminum foil, they hold the key to his future.

Millien — an artist turned newly minted entrepreneur — has a developmental disability and lives in a residential program in Brooklyn. Yet his gift for turning aluminum foil into high art — specifically animal sculptures — has led to his work being displayed in a Brooklyn gallery and now made an integral part of the décor for the J.Crew flagship store on Madison Avenue.

"Animals are sensitive to a lot of things in the world that people are not," says Millien, 37. "I just relate better to them. They have a spiritual sense about them."



Lorenzo Ciniglio/Freelance
Dean Millien with one of his creations.

J.Crew execs discovered his work at one of several exhibits Millien has had at the Land Gallery in DUMBO, which works with artists who are developmentally disabled.

In a very real sense, Millien is living out his dream of becoming a professional artist, a goal many would-be artisans never achieve.

“I was mesmerized the first time I saw him work,” says Ceicily Williams of the Block Institute, which provides services for developmentally disabled adults. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

It takes Millien only about a half-hour to create one of his works, the bulk of which are intricately shaped animals, from kangaroos to ducks to dogs. While he’s sculpted other things — including city bridges and Manhattan’s iconic skyline — Millien says animals, which he started crafting around the age of 4, remain his favorite. And garden-variety aluminum foil remains his preferred medium.

“Clay falls apart after a while, but foil is easy to manipulate,” he says. “You can tear it and put it back together, and it lasts forever.”

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