

# What Makes a Child an Art Prodigy?

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## *The Atlantic:*

Stand before any abstract painting—try a Jackson Pollock or a Cy Twombly— and it’s inevitable someone will say: My child could have done that. For many, the dripping splatters or scribbles seem haphazard and simplistic, not unlike something an average toddler might do with a set of finger paints. And as contemporary art becomes more conceptual, it’s harder to know what makes a piece of art great: the object itself, the story behind it, or both? Seven-year-old Australian abstract painter Aelita Andre, whose latest exhibition opened in Manhattan last week, embodies what one art historian calls the “my kid could do that” impulse. Once again, the media seems taken with the idea that a child’s art may be a joke on a self-important art world.

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“On the surface, abstract art by painters like Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly might look similar to child art or art done by monkeys and chimps,” said Dr. Ellen Winner, chair of psychology at Boston College and senior associate at Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero, a research group that studies the nature of intelligence and creativity. But in a 2011 study published in *Psychological Science*, Winner found that adults, untrained in the visual arts, were able to distinguish abstract work by professional artists—vetted by museum curators and art history textbooks—from “strikingly similar works made by untrained children and nonhuman animals” like elephants. While participants did not select the professional artist 100 percent of the time, people’s correct choice of adult or human work was significantly above chance—challenging the common claim that abstract art is no better than that of an ordinary child.

Winner is also the author of “Gifted Children: Myths and Realities” and more than 100 articles about child psychology and cognition in the arts. And while all children might make “beautiful art,” a child who is a prodigy has what Winner calls a “rage to master,” an obsession to conquer the craft and spend hours honing his or her skills. Typically however, child prodigies draw realistically, not abstractly, and they don’t have any interest in sharing their work.

Dr. Jennifer E. Drake, an assistant professor of psychology at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and Dr. Winner’s co-author of the *Scientific American Mind* article “How to Spot Artistic Brilliance,” describes a seven-year old drawing prodigy she studied. “Prodigies have an intense drive to draw. They want to draw the minute they get up and the minute they get home from school,” Dr. Drake explained. “They don’t care about showing their art.” One seven-year-old drew “complicated transformers” in a highly realistic manner on a white board, and then simply erased it and started all over again, propelled by some internal drive.

Read the whole story: [The Atlantic](#)