

VOGUE

How a 77-Year-Old Disabled Artist Finally Got Her Moment



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by JESSIE HEYMAN



(L) Photographed by Willy Vanderperre, Vogue, March 2016 (R) Illustration by Helen Rae

For nearly 30 years, Helen Rae, a 77-year-old self-taught artist, has started her drawings the same way: by looking for inspiration in the pages of Vogue or other glossy fashion magazines. When she finds an image she likes—a model wearing a floral headdress, a tapestry-covered background, Karlie Kloss posing in a steel mill—she takes out a set of colored pencils and, within a week or so, feverishly, painstakingly creates a new drawing. The end result transforms its high-fashion inspiration into something totally new; in Rae's vision, intricate gowns blur into a brocade of colors, patterns, and prints.



((L) Photographed by Steven Meisel, Vogue, May 2015 (R) Illustration by Helen Rae

Rae, who was born deaf and is completely nonverbal, has lived in Claremont, California, her entire life. In 1990, when she was 50 years old, her mother enrolled her at First Street Gallery, a local program for adults with disabilities, where she developed her drawing skills. Almost no one outside her program saw Rae's art until 2014, when Paige Wery, the owner of Los Angeles's The Good Luck Gallery, came by in search of new talent. "I was going to do a group show," Wery told Vogue.com. "But I just kept looking at Helen's work." Wery soon found Rae's story even more compelling. "I realized how special of an artist she is and how under-recognized she is," she said. "When they said that she was 76 years old and no one had given her a solo show, that was that."

Last spring, The Good Luck Gallery hosted her first solo show. Rae's two live-in nurses escorted her to her opening. She had flowers in her hair and wore a string of pearls. "She smiled the whole time," Wery remembered. Her 15 drawings sold out on opening night. "It was a feeding frenzy," Wery said. "Nobody had ever heard of her; nobody had ever seen this kind of work before." The next day, Wery called over to First Street Gallery. "I asked 'Did she realize that we had this sold-out show?' And they said that she didn't; she just went straight back to drawing."