

## John Bramblitt

### Visual Artist

*Interview conducted by Kayla Gray and Sharron Gray on July 18, 2018*

Disability Studies Minor

Special Collections and Archives

University of Texas at Arlington

Copyright © 2018 by the University of Texas at Arlington

### Biography

John Bramblitt is a visual artist who spent most of his life in the Dallas–Fort Worth area. As a child, Bramblitt underwent several surgical procedures. However, he lost his vision as a young adult. After graduating from UNT with three Bachelor’s degrees in Creative Writing, Literature and a Disability Studies, Bramblitt pursued a career in painting. He partnered with several charities that support the disability community across the US. As of 2018, Bramblitt lives in Denton, Texas with his wife, son and guide dog.

### Topics Discussed

- Early life
- Early interest in art
- Acquiring vision loss
- Adjusting to life with a disability during college
- Becoming a visual artist
- Working with charities and other organizations

---

### Gray

Okay. This is Kayla Gray interviewing John Bramblitt at his house in Denton, Texas. I am with Sharron Gray as well. Today is July 27, 2018. Okay, so the first question would be, “Where were you born and raised?”

### Bramblitt

<topic>Early life</topic>

I was born in El Paso in a military hospital. But I was raised in the Dallas area. I never even saw El Paso. [laughter] I was just born there. But my family’s from Dallas.

### Gray

Okay, cool. What was your childhood like?

**Bramblitt**

It was great! Which is going to sound different 'cause some of the things don't sound great. But the family and friends are what made it really great. I was sick a lot as a child. I was born with epilepsy. And I had severe epilepsy and it just got worse as I got older. And then I had kidney problems. Had to get my kidney removed by the time I was seven. And then the seizures kept getting worse and I ended up getting Lyme's disease later on.

So I was in the hospital half the time. Even high school. Spend a few weeks in school. Maybe a month at home. Maybe six weeks in the hospital. Two weeks in school. Two months in the hospital. Off and off, but because of the friends I had and the family, I didn't feel different. I didn't feel weird about it or anything. So it was a good childhood.

**Gray**

Oh! Were you homeschooled at any point?

**Bramblitt**

I wasn't homebound where...it's school. The same school you have in school. But they sent a teacher to your home. So instead of it being like homeschool where the parents have the curriculum and you go through the program like that. It's still in the school. That way whatever, I would go back to classes. Just right in line with the other students. So I was still working with my school teachers. And if you go into...if you have an illness where you would have to be in the hospital for a month or two at a time, most of the children's hospitals and different things have classes that you actually take there. So you might go for treatment, you do stuff during the day that's medical and then you go to class. So there's not getting away from homework. [laughter] There is always school somewhere for you.

**Gray**

<topic>Early interest in art</topic>

So when did you become interested in art?

**Bramblitt**

Growing up, I think I could draw before I could walk. For some reason, it made sense to my brain. And I never really thought about art being...I don't know. I mean a lot times, people draw to show it to other people. For me, it's just my way of thinking, my way of dealing with things. I would draw every day. Literally, every day was my way of dealing with. If I was having a bad day, it was a good way to deal with a bad day. And if I was having a good day, the great way to celebrate the good day. And it was just my way of dealing with everything I loved, right? But before I could write a story, I would have to draw it out. So I would do all of these drawings about the story. But it was never something to show everybody. I would get stacks of drawings and use up every part of the paper, front and back all over. And then when the paper was full and the stack got too high, I would just throw them away to make room for more. So I don't have a whole lot of drawings when I was a kid. My mom happened to have a few, but the act of drawing was important. The drawing wasn't, like the actual, physical

drawing was doing it. So it was the act that was important.

**Gray**

<topic>Acquiring vision loss</topic>

Oh, okay. So how did you acquire your disability?

**Bramblitt**

It's a bit of a question, but there's some contributing factors. And I ended up getting Lyme's disease and it went undiagnosed for years. And my neurologists, I was always going to these neurologists and they were great. They were really good doctors, but they were thinking that the problems I was having was the epilepsy going crazy or something like that. I had kidney problems. They were really focused on the kidneys. The kidneys were throwing out toxins and was making the epilepsy go bad. They weren't looking for anything else. And at the time, Lyme's disease wasn't really well-known down here. Like it was more up north. And then one of my neurologist happened to go to a convention up north somewhere and he heard about Lyme's disease. He said, "You know, that's pretty familiar."

And then he ran the tests for me down here and sure enough I had it. I had it and it caused a lot of nerve damage. And it was either...by that time, my seizures were really bad. I was going through status epilepticus. Most of the time, when you have a seizure, you come out of it. You're disoriented, you might forget things. But this sort of\_\_, you come out of it. With status epilepticus, the seizure keeps ramping up until your breathing stops, your heart stops, you start having these...and that's not good for you! [laughter] Apparently, you need that breathing and heart to go on. So that was causing some damage and they said it was like getting hit in the back over and over and over and over. And I would have these huge seizures twelve times a day. Not necessarily the one where my heart would stop or my breathing. I would have those maybe once a month or so once every six months. But it was a enough were it was causing damage to my occipital lobe, which is the part that does vision. At the time, I didn't know though. It was all after the fact. 'Cause once they discovered what was happening...they could go back and do scans. They could kind of see where the damage was. And then they when, "Ohh...my eyesight is 20/20.

But yeah. My eyesight went very slowly and had a series of really bad seizures and it just kind of made it go a lot quicker. Sorry for the long answer. [laughter]

**Gray**

No, no you're fine. So how much can you see currently?

**Bramblitt**

You know what? I have light perception. I have no vision left. And whenever I lost my eyesight, I didn't even know anything about blindness. I had 20/20 vision. I had this perfect vision, everything was going great, I never really thought about it when the seizures I started having started when I was eleven. It was causing some problems. But after the seizure, my vision was clearing up. And I wore glasses for a little while. But the um...my gosh. I'm sorry I went off on a tangent. What was the question? Sorry, I thought about thinking about when I was eleven and I completely forgot where I was supposed to be going.

**Gray**

Oh, you're fine. You don't have to apologize.

**Bramblitt**

[laughter]

**Gray**

But I was wondering. You said that you can see light...

**Bramblitt**

Oh, oh yes! About the vision. Thank you...My goodness. I swear...I have light perception. And before I lost my eyesight, I didn't know anything about vision loss. And I thought it was a black sort of world. For me, where the damage is in the back part of the occipital lobe, or where the optic nerve goes into the occipital lobe. So the optic nerve, my eyes are fine. And where the optic nerve goes back, it goes around most of the brain until it gets there. So my brain knows light out there. It just doesn't know what to do with it anymore. It's almost like a TV that works, but the cable's disconnected, so you don't get a picture anymore. So my brain knows there's light and it will tell my eyes. Especially in the beginning. It would tell my eyes to dilate, dilate, constrict. My eyes would just turn blood red because my brain was telling me to, "Work! Do something."

Now it's less...it doesn't do that so much anymore. But I used to get terrible headaches. I still get them, but I used to wear glasses. So I don't see anything. I don't have any color or shading, any shadow or something like that. But the light perception helps. And it helps you kind of stay oriented a little bit. But, 95% of people who lost their vision have some sort of light perception. Unless you lost the actual orb or the optic nerve's been severed. So with some people, it doesn't hurt their eyes. With some people, it does. Which is why you see some visually-impaired people wear sunglasses. Some that don't. Some incandescent light will cause terrible headaches. Others, it doesn't bother at all. But fluorescent lights are...it's one of the things about vision loss is that there are so many different ways to lose your vision. So many different types of vision loss. That is just...and I didn't know that. I never really thought about that everything I'd know at that point was I learned from TV and movies, which was not any place to get your info when it comes to vision loss. [laughter]. If you are blind, you don't walk around like Frankenstein. In a lot of times in a movie or TV show, a person loses their eyesight and suddenly seem like they lost all of their knowledge too. Like their mom would walk into the room, and they are like, "Who are you? Who are you?"

You're like, "Oh come on."

If you're a kid, you're in a dark room and your mom walks in, you would still know who she was. Just 'cause you couldn't see her. So anyway, sorry for the long answer.

**Gray**

You're fine.

**Bramblitt**

I'm gonna vent a little. [laughter]

**Gray**

So what did you major in at UNT?

**Bramblitt**

<topic>Adjusting to life with a disability during college</topic>

I lost my eyesight while I was in college. But I was really fortunate because I gave up on myself. I had no...I thought it was over. But the people there, I was already registered with the Office of Disability Accommodations because of the epilepsy. But I went to them and told them, "I can leave school because I am losing my eyesight. Obviously, that's not going to make things better."

And they were like, "John, don't be silly. You can do anything you want."

And I thought they were so nice to lie to me, try to make me feel better. But they weren't just being truthful. And I was an English major. And suddenly I couldn't read or write anymore. I kept going to classes and I was afraid that if I went to school, I would never go back. You always hear people leaving school for good reasons. And then suddenly, life intervenes and they don't go back. And I feel like I've lost so much. So I'd always go to class. I had a sighted guy take me and I would just sit there like a bump on a log. And then when we'd talk about books, I couldn't read. And papers I couldn't write. But I would get incompletes, which I made up later. But because of that, I had to relearn read and write in a different way. Using the computers that we have...gosh. Where is my brain this morning? Screen software and the screen reader. And Braille, I use a little of that for my paints. But only like 12% of blind people use Braille anymore. I use it for playing cards and paint. But because of all of that, I end up staying in school longer. So I ended up with a Lit Degree and a Creative Writing degree and a Disability Studies degree. 'Cause just sitting like a bump on a log, you have to keep enrolled so you can make up the classes. And I was just taking classes and I ended up with too many hours. Too many credit hours. But I'm a nerd, so it worked out for me.

**Gray**

So one thing I forgot to ask you earlier. Like, what exactly...I mean you can't really see on the recording obviously. But could you tell us more about your ethnic background?

**Bramblitt**

Oh my goodness, let me see. I am almost all Irish with a little Scots and a little Comanche. So, mostly Irish though which is weird because it was never planned to be that way. Things like, we accidentally marry other

people that were descendant from Ireland. [laughter] Like my wife...Honestly, when I was dating, it's not like something you'd ask. Like, "So what country are your...everybody from?"

But yeah, it worked out that way. I don't know. But yeah. That's pretty much it. And Comanche, which is unknown because back in the day, it wasn't cool to have a Native American. A lot of people try to hide it. So I'm either, oh gosh, an eighth or maybe twice that. So I'm not sure. It has a lot to do with fibbing. [laughter]

## **Gray**

So exactly...you said that you use Braille to paint your pictures. Can you tell us the process of your painting?

## **Bramblitt**

Yeah, yeah. And actually the Braille used for my paints...so that. Just like if you were a sighted person, you are going to look at a tube of paint and see what color it is...read the label. I just use the Braille to write on the paint. Like, "What color it is?"

I'm a lazy Brailier, so I just usually use a few colors...a few letters. So if it's purple, I might use "P" or "Pu" or cerulean blue like "CB" on it. When I draw though, I use orientation mobility techniques. To make sure the techniques. So if you are visually-impaired, how do you get around in the world? So if you're blind, you navigate the world through touch. You learn through the cane. There's techniques that will let you know where you are, to be able to orient yourself and to understand where everything else is in relation to you. And whenever I was in school, I started learning how to use a cane, which was crazy and scary and I end up being all banged up and bruised up. And broke my foot, got hit by a couple of cars, I got a scar on the back of my neck. I have no idea how I got there. It was just suddenly on my back. But then, that kind of spurs you on to learn a little bit more to get a little bit better at it. You get tired of walking into poles and trees and things. So you get better at it.

And after about a year, I was able to leave my apartment and find the campus on my own and find the right building and find the right classroom and finally find the right seat in the classroom without knocking over too many people or anything embarrassing. And whenever I got that point, I thought, "You know, if I can get across the city, surely I can get across a campus by using the same techniques."

So if you are walking down a street with a cane or with a guide dog like my guide dog, and you get a street corner, you know exactly where in the city you are. You know that's where those few streets cross. You can't be anywhere else. You have to be right there. So you are oriented to the entire city. But a painting, I started drawing with lines to touch and feel. So when I was sighted, I used pens, pencils, charcoal. Which are great, but you can't really feel them. So I started using paint and that's what eventually put me over into paint. You can actually touch it. So I would make one line and then I would make another line and then those lines crossed or touch each other. I would know exactly where the canvas light was. But it was very rudimentary. When I was sighted, I took every kind of art course you could. Like I could do drafting, I could do an exploded view of an engine, I could do the blue prints of a house, do portraits, do cartooning. I just...I was just crazy for art. Always have been. And never thought it would be a career. I just thought it was something really...I mean, having a career in the creative arts sounds kind of silly. Whose gonna pay you to paint? So I just did it because I loved it.

But when I first started re-learning how to draw, my brain still knew how to comprehend. The only thing that was lost was the connection in my hands. My brain knows exactly what my hand was doing. And so I had to build that up. So I was drawing like squares, trying to make a perfect square that I could touch and feel. Make

another square that would be half that size. And then I only worked with a few colors: black, white and red. And then I'd try to get the paint all in it. Completely boring. It just sounds like more, going back to it now, like, "Oh my goodness! How in the world?"

The time was just so hard. I would just break a sweat. I would paint 14 – 16 hours a day, every day. I would go to classes, I would hang out with friends a little bit. But I knew that things, like I said, you need to be around other people. Depression would kick in. Every day, I made a point, gotta see some friends and then I would go home. I didn't have any homework 'cause sometimes I still couldn't read or write well. So I would just paint. I would just paint and paint. See very little. The next day, repeat. Go back to school, find classes, see some friends and paint for 15 or 16 hours. And then doing that, I would add different things. I was gonna make the lines a little bit thinner, a little bit more complex, maybe a little less geometric. After every few months or so, three or four months, I'd add a new color. And it was like, "Uhhmm. Oh my gosh! I'm painting with four colors now."

It was just mind-boggling. I would tell color through texture. I would mix two mediums together to make the paint feel different. So the white actually feels different than the black. The white can be like toothpaste and the black, I can mix it so that it feels like oil. So on a palette, it was like extremely different. You're not gonna mix them up. But the great thing though is that I learn is when you mix them together, you can actually control the colors. If you want a grey halfway between black and white, you just mix for the texture that's halfway between. And that gives you a very precise way to controlling color. But at the time, I should say I never thought anyone would see a painting of mine, I thought I was crazy. I didn't even tell people I was painting. It was just...because I thought people would think I'm just crazy. 'Cause there wasn't any blind painters. I thought I was nuts. I thought, "Oh this is the final straw. They are going to come after you with a butterfly net."

[laughter] "Hey John, you're a nice guy, but we have to lock you up for a while. You're nuts."

But it got out 'cause I had a little, white dog and I didn't realize how paint stick on your hands. I would wash them. Then my little dog would come over and say, "Hey Anne!" And I would pet her. My friends would come over and say, "Why is Anne purple and green and blue?" [laughter] It was like, "Ah, she was like a crazy, little dog. She gets into things."

But it got out really quick. Even my first shows I did, I didn't tell people that I was blind. Would have a show opening and had shows that did well. But then it got out that I was visually-impaired and hear some stories that led me to working with charities and things. Sorry, I know I just ramble on.

**Gray**

No, no. You're perfectly fine.

**Bramblitt**

I love talking about art. I love talking about disability. And so it just...blah!

**Gray**

We have plenty of time. Let's see. So does disability influence your subject matter?

**Bramblitt**

<topic>Becoming a visual artist</topic>

You know...That's a really good question. It does, but I don't think about it. It usually just subconsciously it's there. There is a reason why I paint the way I do. So I guess that I would say yes, absolutely. Because before I lost my eyesight, I had epilepsy and artwork was my way of dealing with that. But I never showed everybody my stuff. They were mostly friends. They were into art and it was just, "Oh, what are you working on? What are you working on?"

And then that was it. I'd throw it away 'cause it didn't matter. But then whenever I lost my eyesight, it was my way of trying to reconnect with people. One thing about losing your eyesight is that, in lots of different disabilities too, but I think eyesight in particular. Where people don't know what you understand. Like a lot of times when somebody didn't have a disability and then they get one. And suddenly these people aren't sure how to relate to them a bit. But with vision though, so much of our words, even our language, "Oh I see what you mean."

Or, "I understand."

Or, "I'm blind to that."

Which means you don't understand. And so somebody's lying. But do they understand? So I wanted to show that I understand that there was still me in here. And I knew what the world was like, so the painting I worked on, instead of doing sculpture. You'd think, "Well you're blind. Why don't you use your sense of touch? 'Cause you're so into touch."

But if I happened to be good at sculpture, I didn't want people to be looking at it and say, "Of course he's good at that. He's blind. That's why he's good at that and not because he has something to say."

Where if it's a 2D image, which actually my paintings are minisculptures. They're very thin, but it's still a sculpture. You are piling on things that you can touch and feel, but it's more of a 2D image. So people would look at that and they're like, "He really does understand what that person looks like or he has feelings on this and is still John in there."

And that's what kind of started. Sorry, I know I'm off topic.

**Gray**

Oh, you're fine.

**Bramblitt**

Well, I'm this way all the time. I promise. And I'm scatterbrained. I usually...I get things done. Like Part A, Part Z, Part D...I'm sorry. [laughter]

**Gray**

Well speaking of subject matter, could you tell the readers or the audience that what kind of subjects do you paint?

### **Bramblitt**

I think...I paint a lot of people. And usually, the people that I paint are real people that I meet. Unless it was someone who passed away, which is a whole technique that I got into about six or seven years ago. I was working with The Metropolitan Museum and Dallas Museum of Art to bring art to more people. But most of the people in my paintings were just real people. They were friends of mine or people I had happened to meet and I'd feel their faces. And other things. Like I love dogs so I paint dogs. I love cats, but I'm allergic. Hay fever all the time. So I paint cats and nature. I love music. Whenever I hear music, I see color. And that's where my color comes from. And it always have. I always see color with music. We got speakers all over here and it can get pretty loud. It sounds like the painting and I want a lot of color in the painting. I take it from the music. So a lot of my paintings are music paintings, even if it's a person's face. It's music that's making the color. But a lot of people, I've been able to paint some famous people like Jeff Bridges, Lyle Lovett, Tony Hawk a bunch of different musicians because whenever people are looking at it, they'd go, "Oh I know what they look like."

If I paint like my friend, like Jason, nobody else would know what Jason looks like. So did I get them right or did I not? But if I paint like Jeff Bridges, then most people will know what he looks like. He looks a little better. I think he went to see a movie or something...Jason Lee, the chipmunk guy in the *Alvin and the Chipmunk* movie or the chipmunk movies. Although he has a beard and wears a funky hat, which is weird [laughter] drives a beat up truck. It be loaded.

[laughter] But whenever I paint people like that though, I learned it really helps with...I worked with a lot of charities and non-profits. I'll do events. And I work with children. The blind services in eight different states now. Where I'll go in. If I could show them a painting of someone they heard about...it seems like it kind of does awakening for them they can relate to. Or at least their parents. Like, "Oh yeah. Maybe my kid can learn to get around with a cane. Maybe that can lead to something. And maybe they can go to school."

I'm sorry. I totally got off on the tape. You know, I am just going to stop apologizing. You know me by know, so you know whatever you ask me, I'll end up somewhere else. I'm sorry.

### **Gray**

So you involved with like VSA or any other disability rights organization?

### **Bramblitt**

I am not officially...I don't think I'm officially with VSA. But they're awesome. I love them. I've done so many different events with them. And like they go in and they do. Gosh, I think for about five or six years, I was the Resident Artist of Texas. They would send me to disability conferences and I would go there. And VSA would be there and chat and hang out 'cause they are down there in Austin. They're just awesome at what they do. But I never really liked...I was never really a member I guess. I don't think, I might be. I don't know. I mean it sounds like something that I would do. But the type of shows and stuff that they were doing wasn't really something that wouldn't help with my career. So it was sort of like a thing like, "What can I do to help you guys? And I'll spread the word."

But groups like that are so important. I mean it's just...it's incredible...I work with children who are blind all over the country. And I Skype with people in the world and talk with schools. Because it's free to Skype. It doesn't cost anything, where as if you were going to fly in. That's expensive. But children, though, who start to paint with the techniques that I use because I used to O and M. Just orientation mobility. It's just game training. You just apply it to different painting techniques. And it's free to learn. I never charge for a workshop. It's completely free. And these kids that learn it though, in a couple of weeks they're ability to get around explodes. I'm a little jealous 'cause it took me years. And these kids like in a couple of weeks basically like learning...if you are feeling a painting, where one part is to another part. A lot of these kids had never had that. Walk into a mall and there's like a picture of the map of the mall, showing where every store is and you kind of orient yourself to that. They never had that. So you introduce that to them when their brains are just hungry for it. And they go like, "Oh I see what you are talking about. This is over there. I'm over here. And that makes sense."

And when they sit down to eat, it's easier for them to remember where their glass is, their plate is, where their friend is over there. And it's so funny because I don't know how many times I've gone to a classroom and the teacher will e-mail me or they will call me later...like a couple of weeks later. They usually said their visually impaired students...they take them into, sit them in a chair and that's where they are. They're not gonna move until somebody gets them. They are not going to need extra paper, they are not going to go talk to friends. They're, after doing art for a week or two, they are getting up. They are running all over the classroom. And the teacher's like, "It's great. But it's crazy because now the students won't stay still. [laughter] We don't know what to do."

But it's just art that went. And you know, that's just incredible. But it makes sense. It's just orienting yourself with things.

**Gray**

Right. [Turns to Sharron Gray] did you have any questions?

**Sharron Gray**

Oh no. Go ahead. I might have some on the end.

**Bramblitt**

Sorry for how warm it's getting in here. It's gonna be 106°F.

**Sharron Gray**

No, I'm really good.

**Gray**

<topic>Working with charities and other organizations</topic>

Let's see. Have you worked with any other organizations or companies for your works? 'Cause I know we talked with Randy Souders and he worked with Disney.

**Bramblitt**

Yeah, yeah I worked with lots. [laughter] I can't believe that I cannot think. I worked with...oh gosh. I don't know how many charities and non-profits. We're constantly working with them. I don't even know. I mean it's hundreds. It's just one of the things that I do, half of what I make, I try to donate or would try to raise money. And on average, in the average year, I usually fly two or three times a month. Most of it is to go to different organizations where will do fundraisers. We'll do all kinds of things. And it's a lot of fun. It helps with...one of the reasons is that the art I try to do is very positive. And if you are going to a group, or working with a group...the soldiers. Let's say they have PTSD or children with autism or adults with Alzheimer's or any kind of thing. A lot of times, when people think about disability, they like, "Aww, that's sad."

You get pity. You get depression. It's a negative sort of thing. So the events that I go to or do they are very positive. They're happy. And it's art and live paintings. There's music and all of this stuff going on and we raise money. And it's just...it's awesome. It's just brilliant. So we spend a lot of time doing that. But as I wait, I feel really fortunate. I've been doing this for a career since college. And which is boggling to me that I ever did. It just sort of wasn't really the plan, "Oh this is a lot of fun. Oh they're gonna pay me to do that? Wow! They are gonna take me over here and I actually get to do what I love and I get to work with these amazing people?"

And I thought, "Well, I'll go back. I'll start grad school next semester."

And then something else would pop up. And I'm like, "Alright, I'll just start next semester."

And it just keeps growing. And my wife's worked at UNT. She's a director in the Journalism Department for journalism. [laughter] Why did I say it so weird? The Journalism Department for seventeen years. And then finally, the arts I did grown so much that she left that and started taking over the art in the business. 'Cause I have no business in it. As you can image the way I jump around. And immediately, when she did that, the amount of charities that I could work with tripled. It was just so much wasted time and energy though. And then I get wind from I think like the highest auction we did for a painting with a charity was when I was controlling things. [laughter] Maybe like \$5,000. And then when she did it, it was like \$30,000.

**Sharron Gray**

Wow!

**Bramblitt**

And then working on one now. Oh I haven't started. I haven't started on that. [laughter] But there's a blank canvas over here which I haven't. Supposed to put paint on it. It's really \$22,000.

**Sharron Gray**

Wow!

### **Bramblitt**

It was just a blank canvas. And then just the idea of me doing a painting was auction at the charity, which I don't caveat. I don't sell my paintings that much. It's just for me. Every penny goes to the charity. And I sell painting. It's way less. [laughter] But it's not that people think my art isn't worth that much. It's just they think the charity's worth that much and the cause is.

So...but that's the brilliant thing though is that...I honestly, whenever I started painting, my prognosis wasn't good. I really wasn't supposed to be around longer. The doctor gave me like a year to live. Fortunately, things got better, which surprised everybody! But when I started painting and doing all of this, I was just doing it. Fortunately, things got better, which surprised everybody. But when I started painting and doing all of this, it was just because I wanted to do what I love. And now when I started working with these groups...I did...I felt good. I felt really good. And then...so I just kept doing it. And that's exactly kind of where I've been. And we've been working on ways to make it a little bit better. I like working with a lot of big name organizations, but also a lot of really small ones. Some they don't have the funding to get someone to come on in that knows how to throw a fundraiser. We've been through so many of them, it's easy to see for us to come in and say, "Well if you are going to do an art auction, what are you going to do? And you'll raise like ten times more..." So that's been kind of fun.

But I've worked with Boeing and Delta and worked with...gosh. I don't even know. The artwork has gone over 20 countries around the world. And we've worked on...gosh we've been on live TV in Holland, Japan...But we have news crew coming all of the time. Once or twice a month, we'll have news crew coming here from somewhere which boggles my mind. Just the internet, thank goodness for the internet. Because I mentioned before, I never charged anything for my workshop, unless we're raising money for a charity. And then like if I'm working with a museum, they'll pay you a stipend. They'll pay you to be there, they'll bring you out. So the museum is covering your cost for being there. And...but then the rule was that you can't charge anything for anybody. Any workshop. Anybody who wants to learn how to paint. If you have a disability, money is usually very tight. And going off and learning something, even if it's trying to help you and make you feel better, you don't have the money. If you can't afford your meds, you are not going to be able to afford the paint. So, good grief. So anyway, that's how that started. I'm sorry...I said I wouldn't apologize. Dang. But I've gone so much off the rails, it's ridiculous.

### **Sharron Gray**

No, I'm enjoying it.

### **Gray**

We have plenty of time.

### **Bramblitt**

Well, thank you. Gosh, I can't even imagine...if you have to edit this, bless your heart. I can't imagine you

trying to edit this whole...

**Sharron Gray**

[To Kayla Gray] Well tell him you're used to it.

**Gray**

It's part of my job. [laughter]

**Bramblitt**

Bless your heart. That's just, man.

**Gray**

So what years were you in college?

**Bramblitt**

Oh good Lord, I don't even know. [laughter] I just have to ask my wife. I'm horribly...one thing about the seizures too is that you lose a lot of the memories and so a lot of it is kind of fuzzy. And I was having a lot of it when I was first in college. So it's funny. A lot of my history, I wrote a book. Sometimes I have to re-read my book.

"When did I do that?"

Or somebody will tell me about something and I'll forget. I wrote it down. And I'll be like, "How did you know that?"

I don't know. I'll have to ask my wife. But I was in there. I was in college for about six years. Maybe seven. I don't even know. And one of the things too is when I got out, I was instantly going to go to grad school, so it didn't even really matter. I thought it was, "Ah, so this is the next thing."

And I was traveling a lot for the artwork, went over to a few different museums and things. I put it off and kept putting it off and...but it was in the 2000s...I mean, I lost my eyesight in 2001. So I was a student then...gosh, I guess until 2007, '08? Maybe '08? I know that kind of rings a bell. Oh no, no. My son was born in 2008. That's why that rings a bell. [laughter] Good Lord, I don't know. I'm sorry.

**Gray**

Oh, you're fine.

## Bramblitt

Maybe later.

## Gray

Sure, we can go back to that later. Let's see. Have you ever had any...have you ever faced discrimination because of your disability?

## Bramblitt

Yeah. It's funny about that because a lot of times, people don't even realize that they're doing that. And I'm fortunate because I have to deal with much less than a lot of people do because I'm self-employed. My boss is very understanding about the whole thing. About even with the epilepsies. Like, "Okay John. You are having a bad day."

Like I don't my pay whenever I do that, but I've talked to a lot of people who had that trouble. And I know. I travel with a guide dog and some industries refuse service because of that. Like there was an Uber about a month ago that wouldn't pick me up. I think Uber ended up letting that guy go. I was just letting them know so that they can educate that guy. But they fired him. And I thought, "Oh, gosh. Don't fire him. Let him know that it's the law. If you got a guide dog, you have to pick them up."

So I think they went a little too far. [laughter] But I mean, it's just going to make people not like people with disabilities more. But it's one of those things I think where a lot of times, people discriminate because ignorance. But isn't discrimination always ignorance? You know, really. Like if you have more knowledge, then you wouldn't be discriminating. You know about anything. It's just...but a lot of times, people think that you aren't capable of doing something like they don't know or they don't want to risk it. We're visually impaired people now. You know screen readers, there's a lot of things on a computer a blind person can do quicker than a sighted person because of the software that we use. It's quicker than a mouse. A lot of times, you get in there and vroom and zoom through. And the person with a mouse is still like, "Oh where do I click?"

And, which I think is awesome. And now, with like screen reader, I can read 350 to 400 words a minute and the average sighted person reads 250 words a minute. So I actually read faster now than what I used to because...Unless it's really dense. Like a really dense thing. Then I'll slow it way down. But like e-mails, I can zoom through that stuff really quick. But yeah, it's...I think it's something. You know what's interesting. I did a talk. The first time I gave a talk as at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, I went there and I was looking up just about disability. So I was doing research, and there was an article. And it was...they had a photo on it. And it was great! The photo that actually someone went in and wrote a description of what the photo was. But the article was a disabled man in New York. But so the photo of a disabled person was just a blind person. They had a cup and they were begging on the street corner. And so that was just the idea. If you wanted a photo, like, "What does a disabled person look like?"

That was the mindset.

"Oh it's a beggar on the side that's blind with a cup."

And then I was thinking about that and I was standing in the street corner in New York and I was about to cross over to the Met, which for an artist is like a cathedral. [angelic singing] Like it's just amazing. I was going there to talk about my artwork. And I was on that street corner and I was thinking, "How incredible things have changed. That...the viewpoint of people. Where it goes from a point where you have a disability, then obviously you are not able to provide, you're going to be a burden on everyone, you're not able to contribute to anything. Until the world we live in now, I used to have a lot of changes and a lot of things to make sure that for all types of people are based on what they can do. Not on any of these frivolous sort of ideas that you have about...sorry. I'm just...it makes me mad. [laughter] But I don't know...it's not that bad anymore really. I think it's getting better. Like the world that my son is growing up in is different world than what my parents grew up in. And they are really pro-disability in stuff. But I mean still...gosh it's just things are changing for everybody. I hope. Gosh, you read about things happening around the world, around our country. And you think, "What the heck?!"

About every...sorry. [laughter]

### **Gray**

So how does the public, I know we talked about how the public typically reacts to your works. But have you ever had any harsh criticisms about it?

### **Bramblitt**

[laughter] Oh yeah! They're awesome. I love it when people hate it or they love it. Actually, there was a guy from Japan who sent a death threat to me. He wanted to kill me.

### **Sharron Gray**

Oh my goodness!

### **Bramblitt**

He actually wanted to do some really terrible things before. [laughter] But I won't say it 'cause I don't want it on tape. But I thought, but as soon as I heard it, I think it's funny. I think my mom knew it was there and my wife were like, "No!"

And I was like, "What a complement!"

That guy feels so strongly. That's awesome. And then there's some people that are like...have different views of religion and they'll see that if a person who is disabled, some will see it as a curse God put on the person. Which I don't believe in. So every once in a while, you will get someone who has a different philosophy maybe [laughter]. Or different thinking and you get criticism like that. But honestly, I don't know. Like one of the things I learned in writing courses in the School for Creative Writing was that don't put your stuff out there unless you can take the criticism. And also if you could also take the praise. And the praise is just as worse 'cause if you are working on something and someone says, "Oh, I really like that!"

You may stop working on that because you think it's done or it's good when you can never push it further. And then when somebody hates it, they just don't get it. Or maybe they'll never get it. But that's okay too. So I started to work on my asset where I show something to someone, I want their input, but I always put it over here. I just put it to the side. And then I'll think about it and decide almost like I am the third person or something. I won't let it affect me too much. I try to take the good parts out of it. Sometimes people being angry about your artwork is a good thing. I had people cry in front of my paintings and then people want to kill me over my paintings. So we Run the Gauntlet. Hopefully more of the people who just kind of giggle or get a smile at me better.

## **Gray**

Okay, let's see...okay we have a few minutes left. And we asked you all of the major questions. [Turns to Sharron Gray] You didn't have any questions?

## **Sharron Gray**

I do. I have one. Are the paintings that are hanging now, are these like your early works? Like I see Einstein over here.

## **Bramblitt**

Oh Einstein. That's right. It's a poster. Actually, I don't know why I took them down. I have a couple of early works over on the side. I guess I should show you. It's a recording, so you won't be able to see it.

## **Sharron Gray**

That's okay. I was just curious myself.

## **Bramblitt**

[laughter] But I should say, the Einstein one is probably five years old. Four years old? Five, six? But it's a new technique though where that's one of the things I love to talk about. I love to teach is the technology that we have. So I have a 3D printer in the other room which is massive for printing. An entire head of a person. You can print out the Statue of Liberty, 'cause I remember seeing her, but I couldn't remember which way the flame go. And I knew she was kind of grim-looking, but gosh. She does not look happy at all. [laughter] She looks very stoic. And then, you see all of the little details. But also like with screen readers, computers...touch screen devices have apps on them. So it will take a photo and reduce it to lines. And those lines, it makes it like a tactile device where as you are running your fingers across the screen, it will vibrate as you are touching the thick lines. It will vibrate a lot. Thin lines, it will vibrate a little bit. And this technology. The type of technology we had for decades were the Brailers that would, they could also make raised-line pictures. But those were very, I don't know. A basic kind of very, picture. Almost like, my son would say like a Minecraft kind of picture. Very blocky, very basic. With the computers now, you can really zoom in, you can zoom out, you get a lot more detail. It's instant. So it's just right there. So in museums and things, you are using those a lot. My studio, I use those constantly. And there are other aspects that convert pixels to sound. You can hear how light or how dark

a pixel sound. Just all kinds of cool things. It's just getting better and better. And so I use kind of a cross between that. Like with the Einstein, I use a touch screen device mostly because I kind of remember what he looks like. So I was trying to start with people like Einstein or like Marilyn Monroe or Coltrane. And people that I've never seen when I was sighted. So when I was trying to understand the photos of them using these different devices, I would kind of have someone to grasp onto. So I know like with Einstein, the crazy hair! [laughter] And like alright...must be in the crazy hair part because this...

### **Sharron Gray**

That was also one of my questions. Were you drawing from memory?

### **Bramblitt**

Very little. I did at first more, but your sense of touch is so good at getting information that it's actually...I teach some workshops for professional artists and museums and where we would get professional, working artists come in and learn how to feel a person's face or object or whatever by using your sense of touch, being able to build a map 'cause it's so quick that your hands are really good at being able to tell turns and shapes in the difference of things. It's just wired for it in your brain. Where your eyes aren't good for that. So you'll see a sighted artist in a workshop. They maybe sketching a person for an hour, trying to get the ear right. Because the eyes are good for movement and getting a lot of detail very quick. But not really a concentrated area for that. So thinking about how that angle and another angle where with just a little bit of training, you can do it with your hands and feel it and instantly know and put it together. And if you're a sighted artist, they can do that. Then you have your eyes and your hands doing it. And you remember it. Like a painting I did of Tony Hawk, I did a sitting with him in like the summer. And then I didn't do that painting until winter. You're just, so much for your brain is wired for touch. That it's just so much more to remember. It just makes it easy.

### **Sharron Gray**

Wow! Technology is something.

### **Bramblitt**

Oh my goodness! Even like the dogs. Guide dogs are different now than they used to be. And it's weird to think of a dog as technology, but the training. Like my guide dog Eagle. Like I saying, I fly a lot. And 90% of the time, it's just me and my guide dog. And unless it is somewhere interesting, then my wife wants to come too. But usually though, it's somewhere out in the middle of nowhere. But it's usually me and the guide dog, but she knows where to find a men's bathroom and a ladies' bathroom. It's like a bomb-sniffing dog, but she'll find bathrooms instead of bombs. And which way she knows where is the urinal, toilet. She'll find the sink, she'll find the trash can, she'll remember what seat you were sitting in if you're in an airport. Even if it's gates away, she'll remember. She will take you right to that seat. She knows counters. She knows all these sorts of things. So when I travel, it's hard not to think about anything anymore. It's just incredible.

And so I just try to put it all on that. Like, "Oh actually I have a painting of my dog over there. Eagle, she's running on a beach."

This is a commission, but I threw my dog in there [laughter] because I could.

**Sharron Gray**

Awesome!

**Bramblitt**

Thank you. She's never run on a beach out there, but at the lake a little. She's too dainty.

**Gray**

Now with that painting, where is that located? Like Lewisville Lake or...?

**Bramblitt**

I actually...it's a made up. The people wanted a certain bay up north. But they described what they wanted, like a lighthouse and a big dock in all. I've never been to that actual bay, but I've been to some other bays that are kind of similar. That's actually a boardwalk that I walked on in Myrtle Beach. [laughter] So don't tell anybody. It doesn't matter. I take in what I know. And then it's a lighthouse that I like. I'm able to be around. And then that boardwalk. And so I put that in there and I put Eagle. I actually take somethings that I am actually able to feel or experience.

I did a TV show in Holland where I was able to be there for a little while. And I was able to feel all the old architecture. And the little town I was in was Ice and Amsterdam where you can feel the old, centuries old architecture in the streets. And New Orleans where you can walk in. Those streets have been around for so long like The French Quarter and music coming off of the stones. And I viewed so many paintings because where it might be sighted somewhere, it's really a street in New Orleans where I was. And it's like a little place in Holland where I was able to visit. And yeah it was just stuff like that. And I kind of grab stuff that I touch and feel.

And people too. All the people that aren't famous, which I don't have that many in here. Maybe there's a lady up there. A friend of my wife on her roller derby team. And gosh, I can't think of...and all dogs and cats are real dogs and cats that I know. They all have names. So I try to paint from reality.

**Sharron Gray**

Yeah, I'm looking at a Coca-Cola can. Is that what that is over there?

**Bramblitt**

Oh yeah! I was doing some stuff for Coke. And so, which I've put on the backburner a little bit. They just got a new, it's for Australia, and I was going to be the grand ambassador for them. But then they just got a new

director for the entire region. And like Coke Southeast Asia and all that...she's...Everything is on hold when she gets stuff in. And then maybe it will go through, maybe it won't. But yeah. I do a lot of Coke stuff just because before that.

It would be fun if I did. I've never been to Australia. I want to go to New Zealand and go kayaking. I heard that it was the most beautiful place to go kayaking. I know that seems like a waste because I wouldn't get to see the beauty, but I think I'll feel it. I went to the Grand Canyon and I loved it. Which was basically a hole you can't see anyway. If you go in there and not see anything.

**Sharron Gray**

Yeah, that's one way of looking at it.

**Bramblitt**

You can hear the wind down below and then the sounds. And even the people as you approached it, it was almost like you're walking in a church where everybody hushes down a little bit. So you can tell if it's like closer to the rim. Just little experiences like that. So I would like to go out there and just see what it's like.

**Sharron Gray**

I was looking at your signatures. It's kind of interesting with the two circles and the 'x'. How did that come about?

**Bramblitt**

I was really angry when I lost my eyesight, which I should have mentioned that. I should have mentioned I was really angry and extremely depressed. So angry that I didn't realize I was angry. 'Cause I was doing everything that they'd tell me to do. I was learning Braille, I was learning O&M, I was learning how to sew buttons without sticking yourself with needles too much, learning how to read and write. All this sort of stuff and more. There is just so much you have to learn.

And so, I was extremely angry when I'd lost my eyesight. So on all my drawings early on, I would do two eyes crossed out 'cause I was just an angry sort of thing. After painting for about eight months, it forces you to only think about the one brushstroke at a time. You don't think about the paint on the end of the brushstroke. Everything that you were worried about goes away. You are not thinking about the past, you're not concerned about the future, you aren't worried about a test coming up or a bill you got to pay or any of that. And I started to really calm down and living in the moment more. So that whenever I was hanging out with my parents. I would always have dinner once a week or friends I was in the moment with, instead of stressed out by all this other stuff. And it occurred to me that you really don't need eyesight to be able to appreciate art or even to create art. Art is such a human part of us. It's just a part of the expression. I kept signing it, but it became a very happy way to sign. Plus, signing your name all the time just sounds so boring. [laughter] I was a little like, "Oh my goodness!"

But I hate doing repetitive things. I should say though, whenever I was losing my eyesight, I thought I was

different than anybody else. I thought I was isolated and I just felt horrible. Even though I had so many loving people around...my family, they are brilliant. But it just feels like you are letting everybody down and your mourning this life you thought you were going to have. And it's almost like you've had a death in the family. Everybody is mourning then. And then I thought it made me different than anybody else. The more I had the opportunity to work with different non-profits and charities, I'll go in and I'll do workshops. We'll do talks and we'll hang out. People with PTSD or autism, Alzheimer's all these different things. I realize that everybody goes through something. And everybody goes through something they think is bigger than what you can handle. So instead of making me different from everybody, it just made me more like everybody. I don't know, once I realized that, I started feeling a lot better. Was a lot less hard on myself. 'Cause people are so...people are. In my experience, people are their own worst enemy. We are so mean to ourselves. We don't have to be. Everybody else should get down on...you should raise yourself up. You should at least be your own best friend.

**Sharron Gray**

That's awesome.

**Bramblitt**

Sorry for rambling guys. I know I said I wouldn't say 'sorry' anymore.

**Gray**

I'm having lots of fun. But before we wrap things up, is there any other artist you recommend for an interview?

**Bramblitt**

Oh my goodness! What type of artists are you guys looking for?

**Gray**

Well, any kind. I know I've talked with Janet Morrow, Stephen Lapthisophon...

**Bramblitt**

Oh yeah. Yeah that...he is nice! I did a talk with him once. The DMA (Dallas Museum of Art). He's cool. Gosh, I can't think of anyone off the top of my head. And it's just for Texas, right?

**Gray**

Well preferably Texas.

**Bramblitt**

Okay. Yeah that's...I've heard of a lot of disabled artists, or artists with disability around the country. Most of my work takes me elsewhere. Until recently, except for the Dallas Museum of Art and Meadow's Museum, I don't do much around here. It's usually other...isn't that weird? You know it's funny. If you travel somewhere, then you're special. You're like, "Oh this person traveled all the way from Texas."

And your like, "Whatever."

But if you're in Texas, then it's not as special. I used to live down the street. I know Mill Finefaux. She is a professional artist, but she's blind. She plays the guitar and she sings a lot. She's that not that famous, but she's really good. Gosh, I don't know. I can't think of anything else. As soon as you leave, I'll probably remember something.

**Gray**

It's alright. You can e-mail me or call me.

**Bramblitt**

Okay, cool. Thank you. You know, I'll have to check my e-mails. I e-mail constantly with people. But they are all over the place. I'm not even sure where half the people live. Sorry. [laughter] I know.

**Gray**

Well, this was awesome. Thank you so much John.

**Bramblitt**

Thank you so much for coming! Would you guys like some water or coffee or anything? I know it's hot back here.

**Sharron Gray**

No, no. It's not hot. It's fine. Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

**Bramblitt**

Well it was so sweet of you guys to come for this. Thank you for doing this.

**Gray**

No problem!

**Bramblitt**

I know for me, whenever I was going through all of that. I would read different people's stories. I would hear about stories and it's so uplifting. It just changes because you...you get into this side of myself. I didn't think anything would change. Then you hear about people who went through similar things.

**Sharron Gray**

They did it so you can do it too.

**Bramblitt**

Yeah, maybe my thinking wasn't completely right like that. Which for me, is unusual because I'm usually thinking that I'm right.

**Sharron Gray**

So it ended up being a blessing in disguise.

**Bramblitt**

Yeah, weirdly isn't it? Oh my goodness. But you know, you never know what's going to be a blessing. Sometimes you work so hard to get something and then you get it and say, "Aw. This wasn't what I wanted it to be like."

And then other times, you think it's going to be the worst thing ever. And then you turn around and say, "That's not what I thought it was going to be like either."

**Sharron Gray**

Awesome.

**Gray**

Well this is Kayla Gray interviewing John Bramblitt.

**Bramblitt**

I'm sorry. [laughter] I didn't know we were still recording.

**Gray**

It's alright. We usually record after anyway. Signing out.