

Laga exhibit debuts

Malibleu Gallery, located on the site of Cosentino’s flower shop at the corner of Las Flores Canyon Road and Pacific Coast Highway, had an opening reception for artist William A. Laga on Saturday. Laga is an incredibly gifted artist who is also homeless, schizophrenic and has lived on the streets of Westwood for decades. In 2013, Laga was the subject of a documentary called “Mondays with William,” by director Steve Beebe, chronicling his life and artistic process. Malibleu Gallery’s director Robby Dillon said Laga’s work is “imagination on fire.” Laga’s work has been featured both in California and internationally in cities such as Paris. All of the gallery proceeds will benefit Imagine LA, an organization that helps homeless people of Los Angeles as well as the artist. The exhibition runs through Sat., March 22.

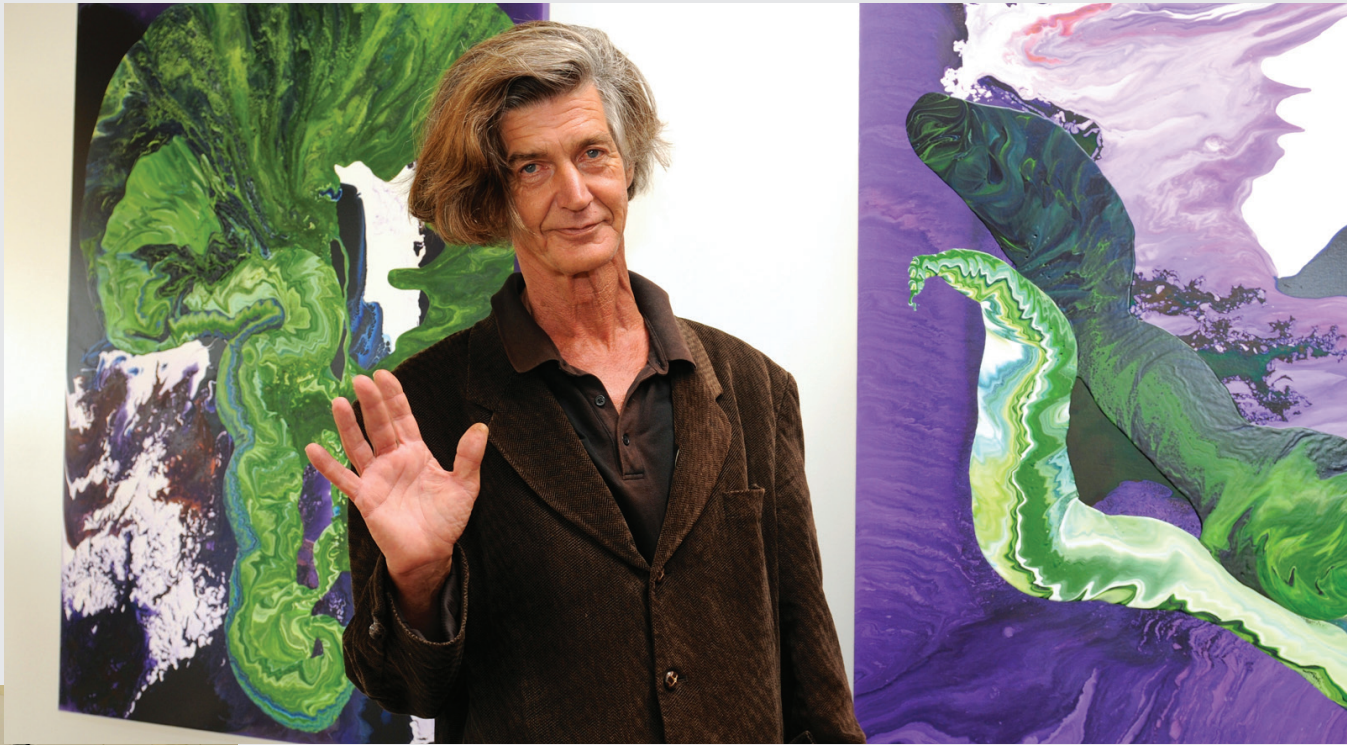


Photo by Julie Ellerton / TMT

Top: Artist William A. Laga at the opening of his show at the Malibleu Gallery.

Left and top right: The work of artist William A. Laga is on display at Malibleu Gallery.

Right: Malibleu Gallery’s director Robby Dillon and curator Nina Herzog prepare for Saturday’s artist reception.



Kristina Ellrod climbs aboard chase wearing her peace helmet.



Sammy Leffe rides during his time at the ELSA ranch in Monte Nido.

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stances came together in search of a solution in 2012 when they created the Aurelia Foundation, a nonprofit with the goal of creating a day center that offers continued education to mentally disabled adults. A little over a year later, in September 2013, Creative Steps was created. The Santa Monica-based program offers life skills, recreational activities, vocational training and job support to adults with disabilities. “We were very concerned that there weren’t any optimal programs for our young adults after they completed school,” Kym Karath, chair of the Aurelia Foundation, said. “We wanted to provide an opportunity for them to continue growing and developing.” Karath has a son, Eric, with special needs who is a “very happy member” of the Creative Steps program. He has benefited in many ways from the program, including growing independence, verbal and communication skills, and continuing to strive, Karath said. “The program offers excellent one-on-one [interaction] for our children,” Karath added. “A huge disservice was done to these young adults for many, many years and it’s really very tragic.” Lisa Szilagyi, who Karath refers to as the “heart and soul of the program,” is the founder and program director of Creative Steps. She has taught special education at Malibu High School for more than 12 years. The inspiration behind Creative Steps was her 24-year-old daughter with a genetic disorder.



Photo by Julie Ellerton / TMT
Kristina Cox grooms Chase as part of Creative Steps’ partnership with ELSA, a ranch skills program in Monte Nido.

“There weren’t many good adult programs out there for her once she graduated,” Szilagyi said. “She would be home with a caregiver all day and was very isolated. The statistics are horrifying; the majority end up isolated and alone. And I knew that we had to create a society for these adults so they can have fulfilled lives.” Szilagyi partnered with Shelly Cox, founder of Step by Step, in Santa Monica. Step by Step provides early childhood programs for children with disabilities, but it didn’t have an adult program. In September 2013, Szilagyi and Cox created Creative Steps for adults ages 18 and above. “We currently have 18 clients,” Szilagyi said. “Our youngest is 18

years old and our oldest is 46 years old. There is a tremendous need for these types of programs.” The Creative Steps program caters to adults with moderate to severe disabilities and provides a safe, caring, enriching environment that helps individuals achieve their full potential as contributing, valued members of their community. The program emphasizes job skills, self-advocacy, recreational activities, vocational activities, daily living/self-help skills and social connections. “They have the potential to learn all their lives,” Szilagyi said. “We want them to have a full, healthy and active life.” The program offers a wide range of basic life skills, including

how to buy and prepare food and how to do laundry. The program also helps clients get jobs and get paid for their work so they feel productive. Recreational activities are also important and clients are taught how to lead a healthy lifestyle by doing different exercises and yoga. Clients are funded through many different regional centers. The Aurelia Foundation funds equipment and is hoping to raise the funds to acquire vans for client transportation. “One of the regional center workers visited our Santa Monica location and had tears in her eyes to see how happy the clients are,” Szilagyi said. “She said she’s waited a long time for a program like mine to come to the Westside.” With both having children with disabilities, Szilagyi and Cox understand and work closely with clients’ parents. Many parents have expressed how well their children are doing in the program and the behavioral changes they’ve seen, Szilagyi said. Creative Steps is expanding to Thousand Oaks and Szilagyi hopes to raise the funds to open a Malibu location soon. “I feel like the Malibu community has so many wonderful things to offer,” Szilagyi said. “We really hope to get a place in Malibu. It will be such a great opportunity for clients.” “We would absolutely benefit from a Malibu location,” Karath said. “We live in Malibu West and it would be much better to have Eric in his community in Malibu, which he loves.”



Ellen Kabukuru lends a helping hand to Emily Szilagyi as she gently touches the horse.



Dawn Davis assists as Leslie Dorfman spends a little time getting to know Chase the horse.