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His Body Was Crushed in a Car Accident. His Artistry Brought Him Back.

Paul Madonna, known for his drawings of San Francisco landmarks, has recovered enough to have his own art exhibition four years after nearly dying in a head-on collision.

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By Heather Knight
Reporting from San Francisco

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It was a Sunday night, and Paul Madonna was driving home on a dark road through John McLaren Park in San Francisco. He crested a hill, and his whole life changed.

His last memories from Nov. 6, 2022, are of a pair of bright headlights zooming straight at him — in his lane. The sound of crunching metal. Then, blackness.

Mr. Madonna woke up four days later in a hospital bed. He looked down to see large staples holding together each side of a long incision stretching down his torso. He saw a web of tubes connected to his body and a machine helping him breathe.

“Something terrible has happened to me,” he thought.

Mr. Madonna was famous for his highly realistic, extremely detailed drawings of San Francisco. He had sketched the city's landmarks, including its Victorian homes, towers, parks and hillside staircases, for "All Over Coffee," his strip in the San Francisco Chronicle that ran for 12 years. He produced several popular books.

But the crash wrecked him. He suddenly had a brain injury, a torn carotid artery, a broken nose, nerve pain and a right foot that, as doctors described, was like "a bag of broken cornflakes," he said. The impact pushed his stomach into his diaphragm and other organs into his lungs.

Miraculously, one of the few body parts left unscathed was his right hand.

He was bedridden for the first six months after the crash, sleeping as many as 23 hours a day, and his hand-eye coordination was all out of whack. His first drawing after the crash, dated March 17, 2023, was a self-portrait. It looks almost child-like, a mix of squiggly lines that only somewhat resembles a face.



Mr. Madonna's first drawing after the crash was a self-portrait that he sketched on March 17, 2023. Paul Madonna



Mr. Madonna this year drew this San Francisco street scene, which is an example of the work for which he is most famous. Paul Madonna

“It’s hard when you know you’re better at something than you’re doing at the moment,” he said.

Over the past four years, Mr. Madonna, 54, found a touch of the divine in the kindness of strangers. They came in response to a plea that he posted on social media for someone, anyone, to come to his home to sit for a portrait.

The artist knew he needed to retrain himself, but he could not yet roam the city in search of his usual subject matter. He asked his visitors to sit for free, and he would draw their portraits. But the results, he warned, could be dreadful.

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More than 100 people, most of them strangers, signed up, and a new person arrived every few days.

The sessions were meant to give Mr. Madonna different subjects so that he could teach himself how to draw again. But they also became mini-support groups as the artist told the visitors about his crash, over and over again.

Now, he has recovered enough to have his first art show since the crash: “We Came Here to See,” at the Nelson Duni gallery in San Francisco through Dec. 3. And the portraits he drew during those visits comprise part of the exhibition.



A mix of work, including the portraits, are part of Mr. Madonna's art show, "We Came Here to See," at the Nelson Duni gallery. Austin Leong for The New York Times

"I used the creative process to literally bring myself back to life," he said in an interview.

Ken Newman, a songwriter and guitarist, was among those who signed up to be sketched by him.

"I didn't know the guy at all," Mr. Newman recalled. "I just knew him by reputation."

Mr. Newman said he had been feeling frustrated about hitting age 72, with his aches and pains and the realization that most of his life was behind him. But as he strummed his guitar and Mr. Madonna drew him, the men talked about the crash and life in general. They cried together. Mr. Newman said it helped him put his own aging in perspective.

“Most of my tears were empathetic, like I can’t imagine what that would have been like,” Mr. Newman said. “Paul was really opening up. I don’t remember the context, but I do remember how I felt. Like it was a gift we gave to each other.”

Another visitor was Joseph Amster, who leads walking tours in the city dressed as Emperor Norton, an eccentric San Franciscan who in 1859 had pronounced himself “Norton I, Emperor of the United States.”

For the sitting, Mr. Amster dressed in full regalia, with medallions hanging from his chest and red and purple feathers adorning his top hat.



In June 2023, Mr. Madonna sketched Joseph Amster, dressed as the eccentric 19th-century San Franciscan known as Emperor Norton. Paul Madonna

Back then, he said, Mr. Madonna was thin and haggard and got around the studio with the help of a knee scooter.

Mr. Amster's husband, Rick Shelton, also posed for a portrait. He recalled Mr. Madonna saying that if his artery had been nicked a tiny bit more — the width of a paper cut — he would have died.

"It's a reminder of how fragile we all are," Mr. Shelton said.

Slowly, Mr. Madonna's skills came back. His portraits grew more detailed and realistic, like his prior sketches of the city. After the current exhibition ends, he said, he will give those portraits to the people who sat for him as a thank you.

His art has progressed far faster than the case against the man who has been accused of hitting him. According to the San Francisco police officers who responded to the crash scene, the driver of a black Mercedes-Benz sedan had been speeding and crossed a double yellow line before plowing into Mr. Madonna's car. The Mercedes was unregistered and uninsured, the police said.



Mr. Madonna was bedridden for the first six months after the crash. Austin Leong for The New York Times

Witnesses said they saw the driver of the Mercedes flee the vehicle. The police found a package in the car addressed to Eduardo Sanchez Giron, 35, and went to the address listed on the mailing label. Mr. Giron's brother said that Mr. Giron had

told him he had been involved in a crash, the police said, and Mr. Giron was arrested and released on bail.

Brooke Jenkins, the San Francisco district attorney, has charged Mr. Giron with felony hit and run causing great bodily injury.

Mr. Madonna said that he has appeared in court 29 times since the crash, but no trial date has yet been set. Mr. Giron is due back in court on Friday.

The San Francisco Public Defender's office, which is representing Mr. Giron, declined to discuss him or the circumstances of the crash. Attempts to reach Mr. Giron were unsuccessful.

The San Francisco criminal justice system has always moved slowly, but the courts have faced additional backlogs in recent years because of shutdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic and more cases being filed by Ms. Jenkins than by her predecessor. Court staff went on strike briefly this year, saying they were overburdened.

Mr. Madonna said the past four years have been the most humbling ones of his life. He learned that the criminal justice system does not move like an episode of "Law and Order" and is filled with delays and aggravation.



Mr. Madonna went from being a 50-year-old at the top of his game, he said, to feeling like an old man, less fit, much grayer and walking with a cane. Austin Leong for The New York Times

Though he is angry about the case, he has learned to be gentle with himself. He went from being a 50-year-old at the top of his game, he said, to feeling like an old man, less fit, much grayer and walking with a cane. A young woman called him an elder the other day, and it stung a little.

Once a bike messenger who could whip through the city's chaotic streets, Mr. Madonna is now scared to cross the road, fearful that he may not make it before the light turns red.

He has constant pain in his right foot. He needs naps. He used to love having a busy schedule, but if he traipses around the city one day, he needs to rest the next.

Still, he is alive. He is making art again. Hundreds of people have come to his show, and some of his work has sold.

And that, for now, is enough.

Heather Knight is a reporter in San Francisco, leading The Times's coverage of the Bay Area and Northern California.