

Preternatural Powers

Stephen Wiltshire's incredible visual memory and drawings have enabled him to transcend autism and develop a thriving career.

All images © Stephen Wiltshire.



"New York Panorama," 2009.



Wiltshire drawing "New York Panorama."

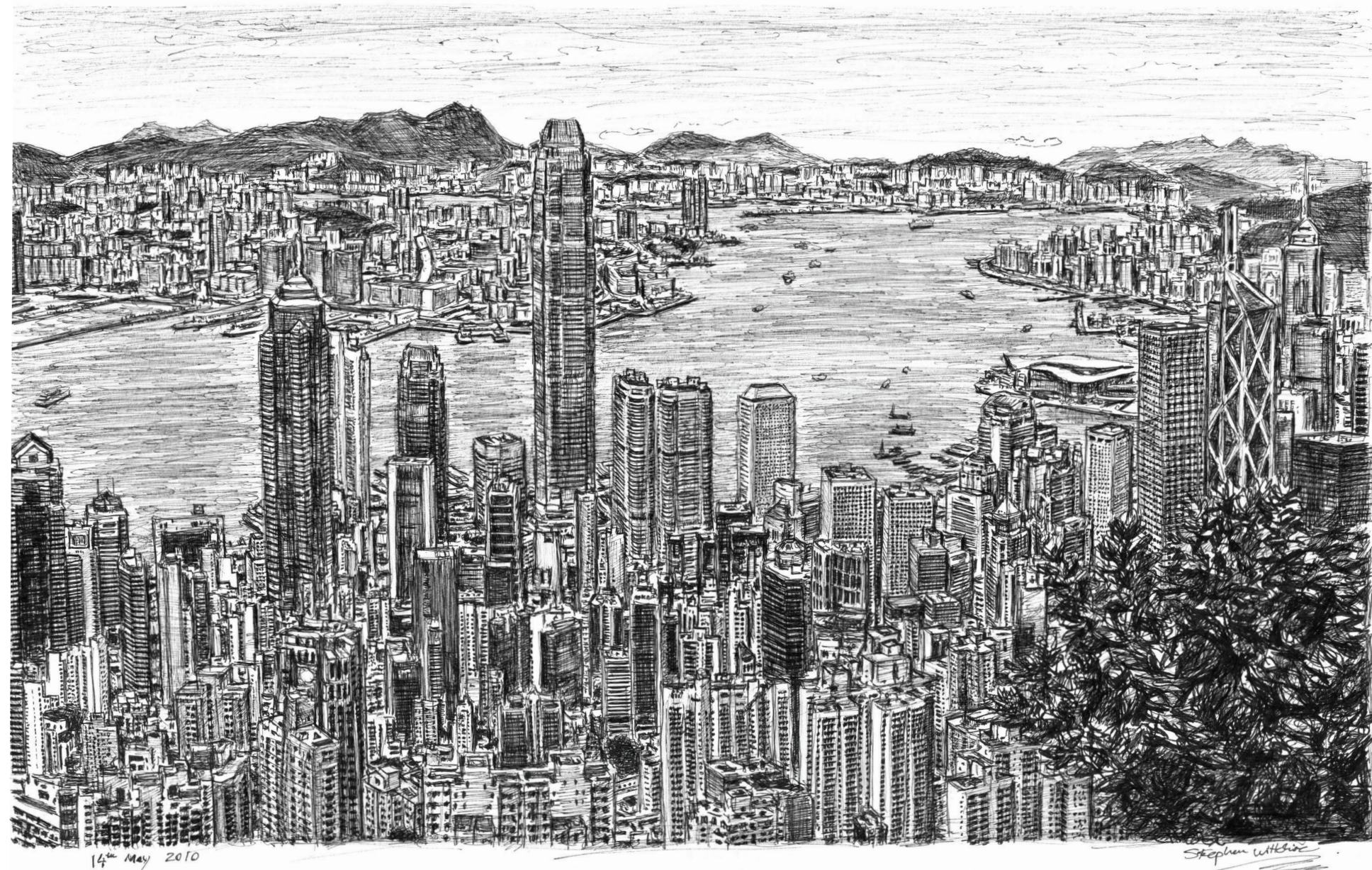
by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

A few years ago, CBS News documented an English artist making a 20-foot-long drawing of New York City. The young man took a 20-minute helicopter ride over the city, then spent five days methodically sketching thousands of buildings on a long band of white paper. When he was done, the densely built metropolis appeared in aerial perspective, with landmarks in proper relationship to one another and many individual structures replete with accurately rendered detail. Other artists might produce such a large-scale panorama based on photographs, but this one wound up on the morning news because Stephen Wiltshire had drawn the entire thing from memory.

In the past eight years, Wiltshire, 39, has performed mind-boggling feats of memory-drawing around the world, often sponsored by corporations and recorded by film crews and the media. He might take some photographs or make sketches going around town, but these studies are not at hand as he completes the drawing, and that's what makes his process so fascinating. One video, about the making of his 2005 panorama of Tokyo, has more than 1.1 million views on YouTube.

The globetrotting artist's sprawling panoramas—Rome, Hong Kong, Frankfurt, Madrid, Tokyo, Dubai, Jerusalem, Sydney, Brisbane, Shanghai, London and New York—are only the most prominent of his artworks. He also draws streetscapes, individual buildings, automobiles and sometimes people, often from memory after only briefly taking in a subject. His amazing talent has led to a flourishing career that would be remarkable for any artist, but Wiltshire's success is all the more extraordinary because he is autistic. ▶

"Hong Kong Skyline," 2010.





"Aerial View of Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey," 2008.

Autism and Art

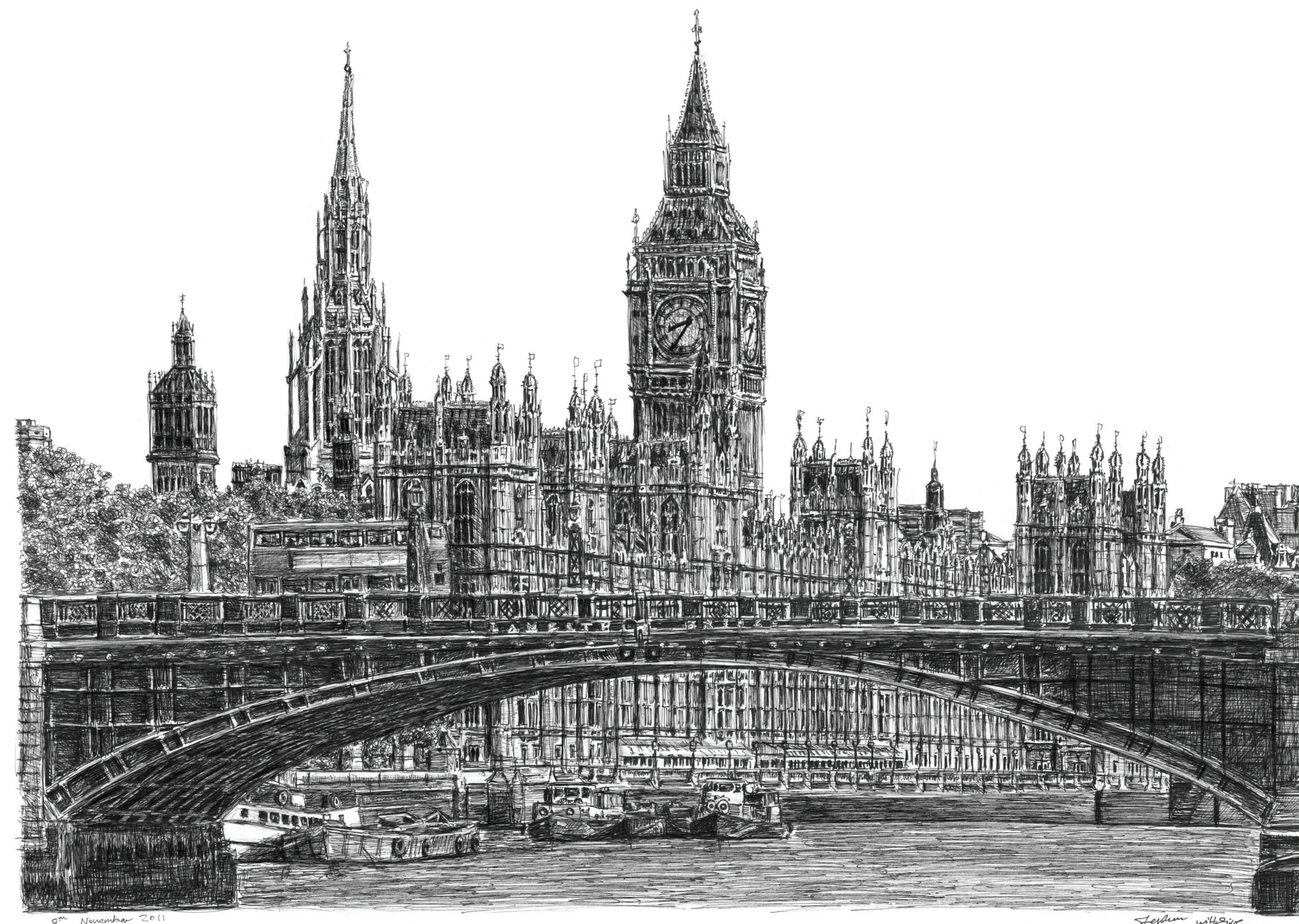
Autism is a neurological disorder that adversely affects social interaction, communication and standard measures of intelligence, but about 10 percent of autistic people have special abilities. Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who profiled Wiltshire in his 1995 bestseller *An Anthropologist on Mars*, cites subjects who complete immense mathematical calculations in their heads, name the weekday for any past or future date, memorize entire volumes word for word or acquire musical ability as toddlers without ever taking a lesson.

Before the condition was identified in the 1940s, gifted people with autism were known as "savants" or "idiot savants." Wiltshire is such a savant. His verbal communication, numeracy and abstract thinking are compromised, but his visual memory and drawing skills are bolstered far beyond ordinary.

The panoramas are a case in point. Using pencils and pens, he loosely outlines a section of the city, then adds major landmarks and secondary features, building up the texture of urban fabric. He proceeds

section by section without first laying out the entire composition, yet the final drawing ends up centrally positioned on the paper with the main elements in proportion and in correct relation to one another. It's as if he saw the picture in his head before he began and merely traced it in.

"I find drawing very exciting," he notes in an email interview through his manager. "I must get the details right, the shading and sometimes I also add color. I listen to my music on my iPhone and it helps me to focus on my work. I can remember any scene I like very well for long time." In fact, not all his works are strictly from memory. "I have a lot of books about cities and my laptop in my studio if I want to browse the Internet," he says. But his manager adds, "He can also memorize scenes and recreate them the same day, a week or years later." Asked if he ever corrects mistakes, Wiltshire replies, "I don't make mistakes anymore. I used to when I was younger." ▸



"Houses of Parliament," 2011.

Unique Skills

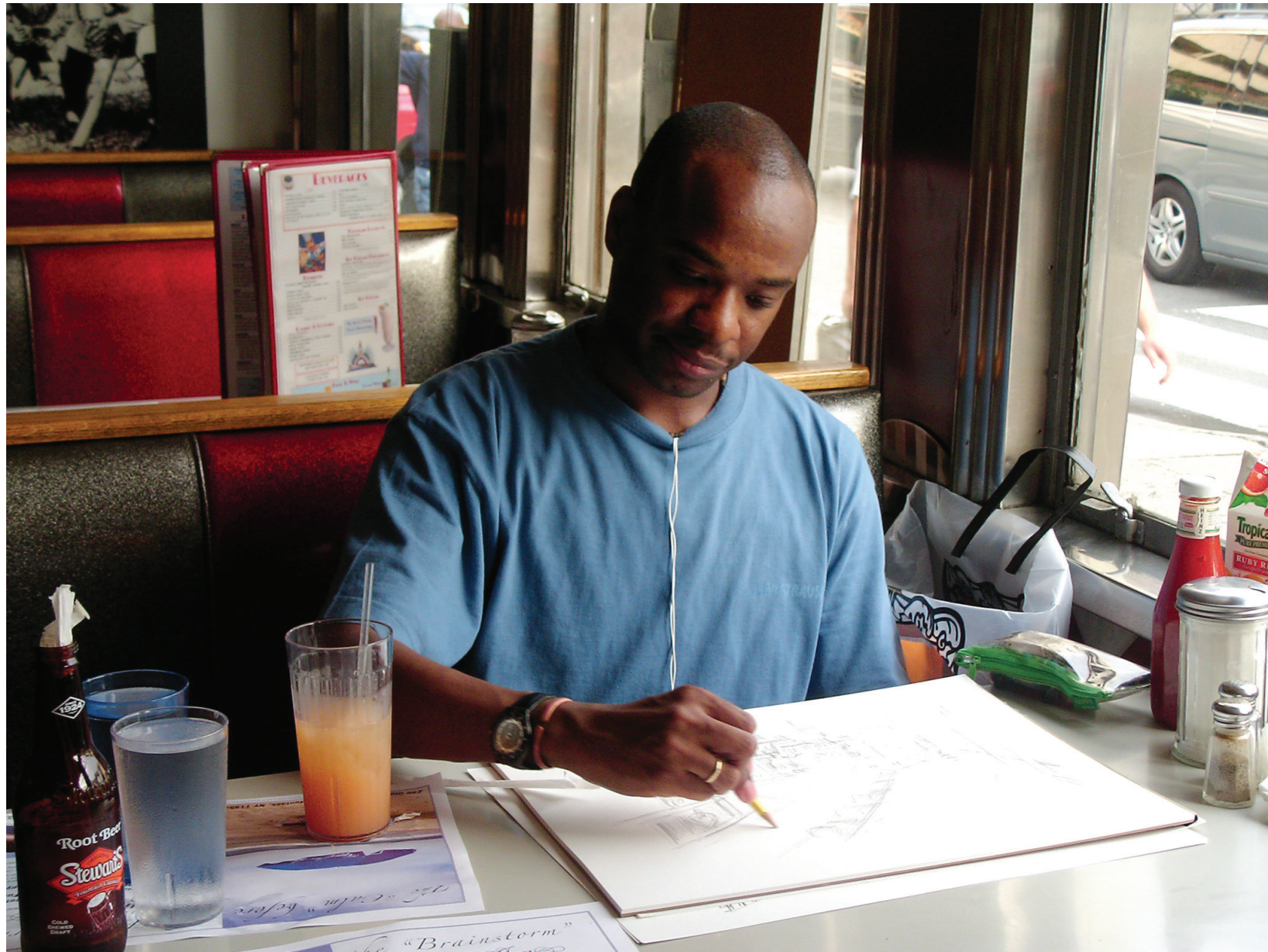
How many people can pick up a pen and draw an accurate representation of a person, object or landscape? Fewer than you might think. In an age when contemporary art tends to be abstract, conceptual, minimal, photo-based or digital, drawing is no longer a professional requirement. Cameras provide visual souvenirs in an instant, obviating the need to render by hand what the eye or mind sees. Yet drawing is still prized, perhaps even more so as it becomes increasingly rare, and Wiltshire's proficiency, as evidenced by his paranormal panoramas, is by all reckoning unique.

He has been called a "human camera," an epithet his family rejects as both dismissive of his creativity and insensitive to his self-perception as an artist. They maintain that his talent is not machine-like, lacking the invention and expression we associate with art. Yet, while Wiltshire has a distinctive graphic style and sometimes adds or removes components of a scene, it is not clear that these idiosyncrasies are deliberate efforts to express some personal vision or idea. His hand is confident and energetic, but the drawings feel like sketches based on photographs—the sort of thing one associates with advertising illustration. Were they not done from memory, Wiltshire's works would be far less interesting than they are.

But, as one clinical psychiatrist has observed, Wiltshire is "the Mount Everest of visual memory." His extraordinary talent has led to commissions from corporations, universities and the U.K. government; sales of thousands of drawings and prints; public exhibitions and extensive media coverage, including BBC and ABC documentaries; and awards, including the chivalric MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) conferred in 2006. The U.K.'s PowerList recently named him one of "Britain's Most Influential Black People." ▸

"Times Square Street Scene," 2012.





"London Taxi Cabs," 2011.

Troubled Prodigy

Videos posted online show a rather ordinary-looking man, about five-and-a-half feet tall, with a light-brown complexion, buzz-cut hair and a slight moustache. He seems to like casual attire, such as polo shirts, baseball caps and sneakers. He often smiles gently and responds to questions amiably but awkwardly, in a halting monotone that exudes none of the focused intensity one would expect from the maker of such amazing memory drawings.

Born to West Indian parents in London in 1974, as a child he was mute and unable to relate to others, often screaming and throwing tantrums. When he was three—the same year his father, a

transit worker, died in a motorcycle accident—Wiltshire was diagnosed as autistic. He was sent to a special-needs school, where instructors observed the troubled child's penchant for drawing. At first, he drew animals, buses and cars, but by 10 he had focused on architecture, drawing buildings from memory with detail and perspective that astonished his teachers. Specialists judged him a savant in terms of visual memory and drawing, though he remained innumerate and with a verbal IQ of 52.

Autistic savants often fixate on a subject, and Wiltshire's is cities. "I like modern cities, the traffic chaos, taxis, people and the rush hour. I also like

the square avenues, tall buildings and skyscrapers. I find it exciting," he says.

In 1987, Wiltshire was featured in "The Foolish Wise Ones," a BBC special on autistic savants that launched his career. Sir Hugh Casson, the former president of London's Royal Academy, deemed him "possibly the best child artist in Britain," and introduced him to Margaret Hewson, a literary agent who became Wiltshire's mentor. She published several books of his drawings, secured him commissions and arranged sponsored travel to Europe and America, with proceeds going into a trust for Wiltshire's benefit.

His 1991 book, *Floating Cities*, with drawings of Venice, Amsterdam, Moscow and Leningrad, topped the British nonfiction lists and spurred media attention and more commissions. Wiltshire studied drawing and painting in the City & Guilds of London Art School. Then in 2001, another BBC documentary showed him flying over London in a helicopter and subsequently completing one of his signature aerial illustrations from memory within three hours. Two years later, he had a retrospective in a gallery in suburban London. ▷



Personal Life

As Wiltshire's career advanced, so has his personal life. Supposedly, he first spoke at age 6 when he learned to ask for "paper" to draw, but he did not speak fully until he was 9, and even then he often echoed the words of his interlocutor. But he has since acquired life skills, learning how to navigate the city on his own and politely interacting with others. He still lives with his mother, Geneva, a native of St. Lucia in the Caribbean. He maintains routine—certain meals at specific times—and entertains particular passions.

First is his obsession with cities—his favorites are New York and London, especially the Canary Wharf development. But he also loves the look of American cars from the 1960s and 1970s, and has a model automobile collection in his room. A favorite haunt is Hamleys toy shop on Regent Street. He enjoys taking photographs and always carries his camera-equipped iPhone loaded with the classic rock, Motown, funk, soul and pop music that he enjoys. And he plays the piano quite well himself, though he says he no longer memorizes songs as he once did.

His favorite movies are "Saturday Night Fever" and "Rain Man," in which Dustin Hoffman plays an autistic savant. And his favorite artist—no surprise here—is Richard Estes, the American photorealist painter of cityscapes. In his late teens, Wiltshire started drawing girls and following the television series "Beverly Hills 90210," and reportedly fantasized about living with the characters in a Park Avenue penthouse. He continues to make private images of ladies, but his condition has prevented him from having a relationship. ▶

"Manhattan Skyline from the Top of Empire State Building," 2007.



Wiltshire drawing “Globe of New York,” 2011.

Commercial Success

Forbes magazine has portrayed Wiltshire as an entrepreneur, but he owes his success to mentors and family members who run the Stephen Wiltshire Gallery in London’s Pall Mall. Managed by his older sister, Annette, and her husband, Zoltan Szipola, the gallery is the exclusive outlet for his works, which can command thousands of pounds. A recent 23-by-31-inch drawing of a globe bristling with skyscrapers is available for \$28,122. Works rarely come up at auction; the top price is \$18,413 for a 48-by-26-inch oil “Times Square at Night,” realized at Christie’s London in 2010. According to his manager, the average wait for commissions is now four months. The gallery recently doubled in size and further expansion is planned. And the website (stephenwiltshire.co.uk) is a sophisticated marketing and sales machine, with biographical information, frequently asked questions, 10 pages of links to media coverage, scores of photographs and more than 50 videos of the artist at work. Images of

hundreds of artworks are accompanied by a sidebar with prices (convertible to various currencies) and options for mounting and framing, installment payments, shipping and insurance. Branded merchandise includes posters, books, calendars, dozens of key chains with framed original signed miniatures (around \$300)—even Stephen Wiltshire mugs decorated with a London bus or inscribed with his motto, “Do the best you can and never stop.” Wiltshire recently made a view of London from the 800-foot tower known as The Shard, sponsored by the company that built it. “I have just finished a view of Rome and St. Peter’s in pencil on paper. The one before was a night view of Monte Carlo in pen and ink and some color. I might go to Monaco, Bangkok and Singapore later, and they asked me to go to Abu Dhabi as well,” he says. Wiltshire’s website stipulates that sponsored travel must be business-class with five-star hotels, and “a nice view of the city from his room is always appreciated.” ♦

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