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De'VIA: Investigating deaf visual art

Patricia Durr

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PATTI DURR

Patti Durr is an Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, NY.

DEAF STUDIES COURSES AND PROGRAMS OFTEN PUT A HEAVY EMPHasis on five main characteristics of Deaf culture: language, behavior/norms, values/beliefs, tradition/heritage and possessions. Within the last category, possessions, the focus is usually on material culture since Deaf culture does not have specific food, clothing, or music associated with its people. Hence things like TTYs, flashing lights, close captions, and interpreters are studied—most of these are access related. Unfortunately a critical component of Deaf cultural possessions—*art*—is often overlooked or uninvestigated.

Betty G. Miller, the first known Deaf American to exhibit art about the Deaf experience, stated, "some Deaf artists feel that visual art can be a "way of life" among Deaf people and a part of Deaf culture in the same manner that music is a way of life among the hearing society. Visual art can enlighten Deaf and hearing observers by presenting experiences reflective of a Deaf person's world view. This, in turn, can strengthen a Deaf observer's sense of identity within the Deaf culture (Miller, 1989:770).

DISENFRANCHISED ART

It is important to note that hearing disenfranchised groups often produce art that is unique to their own experiences. African American artists like Jacob Lawrence and Betty Saar have produced a large body of work that visually records the experiences of African Americans within the United States. Frida Kahlo's work examined Mexican/US relations, body identity and politics. In addition, Jewish artists have long preserved and shared their history, strug-

gles, victories, religion, customs, and spirituality through art. The experiences of living amongst the "other" have been the themes of artworks created by Chicano, gay/lesbian, women, Native Americans, and differently-abled artists. Disenfranchised groups create such pieces to:

- record their history and preserve their culture
- communicate ideas
- share and represent their collective experiences
- create things that are aesthetically pleasing and/or of cultural value
- make a socio-political statement and bring about social change

Examples of disenfranchised artists' works can be viewed by going to http://www.rit.edu/deafartists and clicking on "expressions of culture." Within disenfranchised art we see two dominant types of representation emerge. Expressions, in the form of celebration and validation of their culture, are known as affirmation art. Issues of oppression, identify formation and political struggles are also examined and represented by creating resistance art. Several works will combine both resistance and affirmation messages within one piece, thus showing evolution in the liberation process.

DEAF VIEW / IMAGE ART (DE'VIA)

Just as other disenfranchised groups choose to communicate and share their experiences via visual art, so too have Deaf people. In 1989 the term Deaf View / Image Art (De'VIA) was coined after nine Deaf artists met for four days prior to Deaf Way I to discuss the distinction between art by a Deaf person and art about the Deaf experience. (For more in-depth descriptions of art gatherings, exhibitions, and dialogues prior to the "birth" of De'VIA see the writings of Sonnenstrahl, Miller, Baird, Durr and www.rit.edu/deafartists for a "slide show" on the history of De'VIA.)

The nine Deaf Artists not only engaged in the important act of naming the art form, they also generated the name based on ASL and created an acronym to give the feeling of a foreign language. According to art historian Deborah Sonnenstrahl, "the signs are as follow in sequence: DEAF-BLOW UP (visual image) ART. Alternatively, it has been signed DEAF-VIEW (sign DEAF then 'SEE from eyes to handshape of image') ART. The handshape that represents the painting is the 'image'" (Sonnenstrahl, 1996:132). Betty G. Miller, often referred to as the mother of De'VIA, signs Deaf View / Image Art following the latter description and rather than the former. However, most generally refer to it simply by fingerspelling De'VIA:

> The abbreviation itself is an act of resistance by trying to create a totally new term that would reflect the meaning in the spirit of ASL rather than in

> English, the language of the dominant culture. This sets the tone for what De'VIA is about—bringing the hearing paradigm of deafness under the Deaf artist's gaze. Hence, this tiny, unique term was created to shatter the political cultural construct of deafness by the "other" and signified a shift in artistic consciousness from object to subject (Durr, 1999:51).

In addition to naming the genre, the group also wrote the Deaf View / Image Art manifesto, which states:

> De'VIA represents Deaf artists and perceptions based on their Deaf experiences. It uses formal art elements with the intention of expressing innate cultural or physical Deaf experience. These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and everyday life (Miller, 1989:772).

The manifesto went on to discuss formal elements, imagery, symbolism, and media De'VIA artists might use. It states that a De'VIA artist may be Deaf or hearing and may utilize representational or abstract work as long as the artist approaches the work with an intentionality to represent the Deaf experience. Some Deaf artists may choose not to self-identify as a De'VIA artist. However, if their being Deaf has played a role in shaping and informing their work, they may in fact be one.

The signatories of the manifesto are Dr. Betty G. Miller, painter; Dr. Paul Johnston, sculptor; Dr. Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl, art historian; Chuck Baird, painter; Guy Wonder, sculptor; Alex Wilhite, painter; Sandi Inches Vasnick, fiber artist; Nancy Creighton, fiber artist; and Lai-Yok Ho, video artist. To see the full De'VIA manifesto go to the above www.rit.edu/deafartists and click "Expressions of Culture."

A preliminary thematic analysis of De'VIA within Affirmation and Resistance Art incorporates the following themes:

Resistance De'VIA	**Affirmation De'VIA**
Audism	Empowerment
Oralism	ASL
Mainstreaming	Affiliation
Cochlear Implants	Acculturation
Identity Confusion	Acceptance
Eugenics	Deafhood

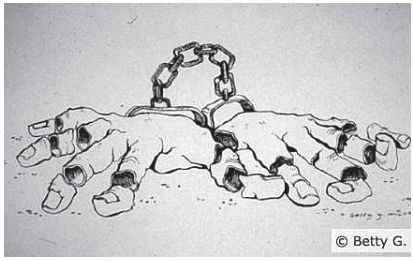


Figure 1: "Ameslan Prohibited" (Betty G. Miller)

Figure 2: "Best Friend" (Chuck Baird)

RESISTANCE DE'VIA

A sampling of important resistance De'VIA works that deal with the themes listed above include the famous illustration, "Ameslan Prohibited," by Betty G. Miller (Figure 1). The artwork challenges the old argument that allowing Deaf people to sign would make them dependent and they would use ASL as a crutch. Instead Miller graphically communicates that it is the lack of signing that is cruel, enslaving and ultimately leaves the Deaf person broken and disabled.

The untitled multimedia piece by Miller (Figure 3) also exemplifies the impact of audism and oralism on the Deaf individual. The metal gird in front of the static eyes indicates that access to visual information is screened and filtered—not freely or easily received. The metal rod through the jawbone appears to function as a vise for the puppet-like mouth and chin to open and close from. The mask-like face is set inside a mechanical device almost as if it were locked in. The Deaf portrait is trapped and framed with Miller's textual refrain of "MAMA. PAPA. GOD MADE ME DEAF. YOU SEND ME

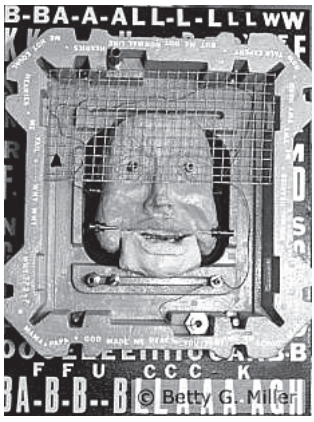


Figure 3: "Untitled" (Betty G. Miller)

Figure 4: "Family Dog" (Susan Dupor)

TO SCHOOL TO LEARN TALK TALK LIKE NORMAL HEARIES. ME TWY TWY HARD. NOW TALK EXPERT. BUT ME NOT NORMAL LIKE HEARIES. ME NOT EQUAL HEARIES. ME FAIL....WHY WHY WHY??????" The outer border of the piece also features text representing the over enunciation forced upon Deaf people during speech class where isolated speech sounds or monosyllabic words are practiced again and again. As another act of resistance, a curse word is sandwiched between the speech rehearsed words—clearly visible for all to see. Ironically, despite years of speech therapy where no profanity was practiced, Deaf people can often say such words the clearest. Whereas, the rehearsed words like "ball" were often elusive.

Another well-known De'VIA resistance work is exemplified by Susan Dupor's "Family Dog" (Figure 4). Deaf and hearing individuals respond strongly to this piece regardless of their family of origin. Anyone viewing this painting readily sees the depiction of a young girl treated as if she is the family's pet dog. Sadly, due to a lack of a shared language amongst the majority of Deaf children from hearing families, this metaphor is all too familiar. The adults in the background are clearly hearing given their blurred mouths and crossed arms with hidden hands. The relatives' static faces are covered in a bluish snow much like the visual noise one encountered when a TV station used to go off the air late at night. The lack of hands and frozen arms indicate that when gathered together they talk verbally, freely and openly without any signing or gestures despite the presence of the young Deaf girl clearly eager to please and be noticed.

Guy Wonder's "Forbidden Fingerspelling" (Figure 5) is a multimedia piece featuring wires shaped into handshapes with a print illustration. The fingerspelling paper is torn and floats amongst the wired handshapes. The work is an intentional or unintentional homage to Miller's work above. Here again is a visual testimony of the oppressive nature of oralism with its strong and relentless exclusionary methodology. The open handshapes stretching up to the top of the canvas indicates that despite the ban on fingerspelling, as George Veditz said in 1913, "as long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs."

While known to many for his strong representational work of sign language and animals, Chuck Baird does generate resistance work and works in a variety of mediums. "Mechanical Ear" (Figure 6), has a bit of a prophetic feel to it in light of the fact that it pre-dates the spread of the cochlear implant device. In ASL, a signer will often sign a box around the ear and around the mouth. This is a relatively new sign to represent the attempted hearingization of Deaf people by audists (people who believe in hearing people's superiority). Baird's work boxes in the ear to visualize and record the impact of this over-emphasis on what Deaf people can not do and the cost at which the

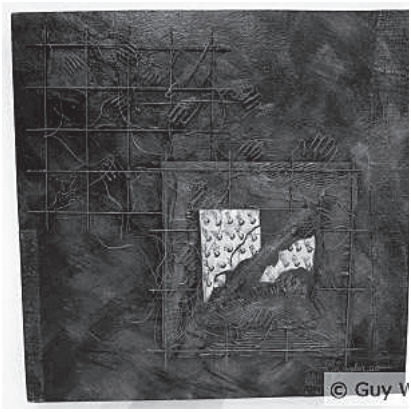


Figure 5: "Forbidden Fingerspelling" (Guy Wonder)

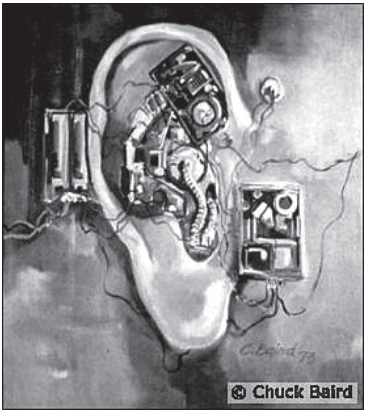


Figure 6: "Mechanical Ear" (Chuck Baird)

audists' quest to remediate, repair, and "redeem" a Deaf person comes.

Thad Martin's series of large ceramic busts entitled "Articulatus" (Figure 7) with their elongated, contorted necks, muted eyes, and distorted mouths, gives a chilling reminder of long and fruitless speech therapy sessions. A few of the busts feature a smaller human emerging out of the top of the skull as if to represent an "emerging consciousness."

Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* stated "because representation structures reality, the cultural figures that haunt us often must...be wrestled to the floor before even modest self-determination, let alone political action, can occur" (Thomson 1997:28–29). Resistance De'VIA makes visible and tangible the community's emerging consciousness and as bell hooks notes in Kill-

Figure 7: "Articulatus" (Thad Martin)

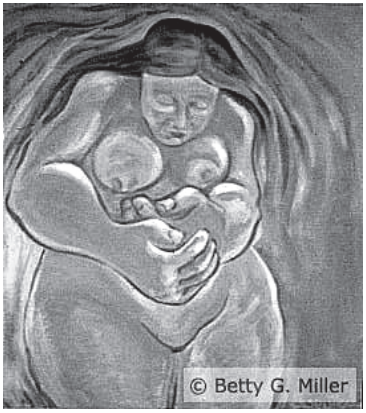


Figure 8: "Birth of a Deaf Woman" (Betty G. Miller)

ing Rage, "it is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery." (hooks 1995:47).

AFFIRMATION DE'VIA

While many people have expressed discomfort with resistance art because of its political nature—some going as far as to call it "angry art"—ying yang philosophy teaches us that we need both darkness and light in our lives for balance and honesty. De'VIA artists participating in resistance art also create affirmation art as well. Miller's "Birth of a Deaf Woman" (Figure 8) is created with warm and serene colors, yet a dynamic background. It shows a nude woman signing BIRTH. As many of us discover our Deafhood late in life, the acculturation process is almost like a re-birthing of ourselves.

Another piece by Miller (Figure 9) is more playful in nature. It features a C3PO bust with neon glass surrounding it, a TTY, and a golden hand. Miller has been quoted as having said she thought her resistance art was funny and didn't anticipate people being so offended by it or that it would create such a stir. Her affirmation pieces are clearly where her fun-seeking nature can be expressed and readily identified. This piece, "TTY Call," features artifacts of Deaf people's material culture: TTYs, an interpreter, and flashing lights.

Figure X: "TTY Call" (Betty G. Miller)

Figure 9: "TTY Call" (Betty G. Miller)

Figure 10: "Crocodile Dundee"

Figure 11: "Whale" (Chuck Baird)

Chuck Baird has numerous works of affirmation De'VIA, and probably the most well recognized and appreciated are those that represent and visually record the iconicity of ASL. "Crocodile Dundee" (Figure 10) and "Whale" (Figure 11) are just two examples in this spirit of his works. In the same vein of utilizing a sign to communicate an object or emotion, Charles Wildbank's two works below, "Love" and "Knowledge" utilize his gift for photorealism while capitalizing on the added dimension ASL gives to the pieces.

Figures 12 and 13: "Love" and "Knowledge" (Charles Wildbank)

Dupor has a growing number of De'VIA affirmation pieces focusing on empowerment, affiliation, acceptance, nature, womanhood, fertility, and gestation/reproduction. Her works "Sleep" (Figure 14) and "Stream of Consciousness" (Figure 15) both employ vibrant colors that create a focus on the female form. Both figures are in dream-like states. One seems to glide down a narrow stream without her feet and multiple hands disturbing the water at all. In the other, a woman is caressed and worshipped physically and sensually by a multitude of hands. Disabled people are often perceived by the majority as being disfigured or deformed.

Traditionally, Deaf people have not had to grapple with this issue as much as other more noticeable disabled groups. Yet, they have had to deal with the stigma of being viewed and treated as freaks when using their voice or signing. Deaf women in particular have had to combat the image of being a victim and being objectified as helpless and childlike. Dupor's images transform these notions of social isolation and vulnerability into erotic and affirming testimonies.

Like resistance De'VIA, affirmation art plays a vital role in our self-determination. Recognition of the value and naturalness of ASL, recording the acculturation process, celebrating a sense of affiliation and acceptance,

and giving visual form to Deafhood are all part of affirmation art providing an holistic gaze of Deaf people.

COMMON DE'VIA MOTIFS

In surveying De'VIA, it is fascinating to see not only similar themes and subject matters manifest themselves, but also to see common symbols and motifs. In our larger society, Jung theorized about collective consciousness and its symbolic representation. In Campbell's examination of mythology he saw many common themes, morals, and symbols used despite being cloaked in different cultural garments across continents and time periods. By examining De'VIA motifs, we may be witnessing an emerging Deaf visual mythology of our collective consciousness.

As the De'VIA manifesto states, De'VIA works will have a "centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands." Hands and eyes have long been symbols used by many cultures around the world throughout time. Given the fact that Deaf people receive and express information via the eyes and hands, it is no surprise these motifs are abound in De'VIA. The absence of hands and eyes represent a lack of signing, visual receptiveness and/or stimulation, whereas mouths and ears often appear in De'VIA to expose the pathological view of Deaf people and deafphobia. Conversely, the absence of mouths and ears are used

Figures 14 and 15: "Sleep" and "Stream of Consciousness" (Susan Dupor)

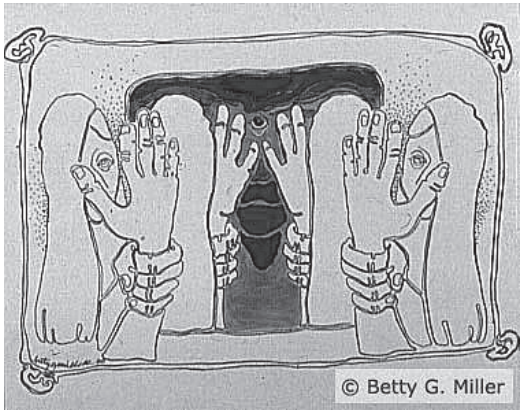


Figure 16: "Suppression" (Betty G. Miller)

to indicate that the subject is Deaf and/or "mute" due to linguistic oppression (denial of sign language).

In Miller's "Suppression" (Figure 16) we see the utilization of all four major De'VIA motifs. Ears appear in each corner to illustrate how the dominant culture "frames" Deaf people by what they can not do—hear. The interior of the illustration indicates how Deaf people often come to view themselves based on how the hearing world has defined and contextualized them via the looking glass self. Hence, a young woman is shown in mirrored and reflected images—her oversized hand covering one of her eyes and her mouth completely. Her arm is gripped, restricting her from freely signing and seeing her own reflection fully as she signs "mirror." The central image features the back of her head with her hands in stereo image so that she looks inward. The center of the artwork shows her gaze at the purple and pink inner image shaped much like a womb and featuring a third / inner eye and face. This work shows the evolution from resistance to affirmation and the potential for liberation.

Many other De'VIA pieces utilize these common body motifs such as Allen Ford's "'S KIN/left," Uzi Buzgalo's "On Going Conversation," Pam Witcher's De'VIA pieces, and Thad Martin "Articulatus" ceramic series.

Children are often employed in De'VIA works to emphasize the primal attachment Deaf people automatically feel toward Deaf children who represent our lineage and posterity. Miller's "Bell School, 1944" (Figure 17) and Dupor's "I Interesting the Hamster" (Figure 18) are fascinating in that they have so many similarities; yet, Miller created her work decades before Dupor made hers. Both works were created independent of each other yet the pieces call on similar composition, theme, and motifs. These commonalities persist despite one addresses the educational experience of oralism and the

other mainstreaming.

Other symbols that may be tapping into the collective consciousness of Deaf people via De'VIA are street signs (i.e. Dupor's "Regionalization" and several of pop artist Ann Silver's work). Chuck Baird's piece "Detour" (Figure

Figures 17 and 18: "Bell School, 1994" (Betty G. Miller) and "I Interesting the Hamster" (Susan Dupor)

19) is a powerful resistance piece using a commonly seen and recognized street sign as a visual metaphor for how convoluted, bureaucratic, and unnecessarily complex the Deaf education process can be. The painting features a detour sign mounted as if on a "slippery when wet" signage stand pointing between the grandiose towering columns of some state building. The space between the columns would never allow for the passage of an automobile signifying that parents and Deaf children who follow this detour sign can expect to get lost, get the run-around, and find some spaces very difficult to navigate—and some, sadly, will fall through the cracks. It is a visual testimony and commentary of the state of Deaf education in the United States.

Many well-known non-deaf artists utilize doors to represent portals to other experiences, places and times. Within De'VIA doors seem to be employed for the same purpose. Betty G. Miller's "Stairway to Deaf Club" has three staircases and one door, indicative of the many Deaf clubs that were located on the second floors in cities all over the country, as rent was cheaper for second floor store fronts. The piece also features a tribute to the deceased De'VIA artist, Harry Williams, by having his fingerspelled shaped people in the lower corner. Interestingly, several of Williams' pieces feature doors (one even immortalizes Gallaudet University's "Coffin Door" merging Deaf heritage with a homage to surrealist Dali's work).

Williams' work also featured violins and Chuck Baird shared at this Deaf Studies *Today!* conference why Harry Williams was so attracted to the

Figure 19: "Detour" (Chuck Baird)

Figure 20: "I'll Fly Away" (Randy Garber)

shape of the violin. The lines in the shape of the wood and the ends of the strings feature many detailed and elaborate curves in the vein of the baroque style. He found the highly elaborate use of curves and shapes very visually stimulating. In Williams' art that feature the violin, the strings are absent signifying that the instrument is to be "played" visually by its shape and design not for sound per se. The choice of musical instruments (real or imagined i.e. Johnston) and notes may seem like curious objects within De'VIA; yet, it seems Deaf artists are drawn to them for the visual metaphors they offer.

Hard-of-hearing artist, Randy Garber, has several De'VIA pieces examining sound and lack of sound. One piece, "I'll Fly Away" (Figure 20), features British fingerspelling, a violin and that double female image (front/back) reminiscent of the duality reflected in Miller's "Suppression" and very fitting for Garber, as a hard of hearing artist.

Throughout time artists have been attracted to flowers as a subject matter—O'Keefe's and Mapplethorpe's work probably being the most recognized and celebrated. Within De'VIA, we see the use of flowers also. Often, they are used as a symbol of hope and rebirth. In Rita Straubhaar's photograph of a bearded iris, "The Cave," we see the unique situation of a visual artist being inspired by the work of an ASL poet. Straubhaar's tribute to C. Valli's poem of the same title is done by capturing the natural mystery of a flower. (See www.rit.edu/deafartists and "NTID video interviews" to see Straubhaar explaining this piece and her other works).

Chuck Baird also was smitten by the power of flowers and made a series of several paintings of different flowers with parallel handshapes. Straubhaar, Morris Broderson, Harry Williams, and Chuck Baird all have works featuring Calla Lilies. In fact, in Baird's large "Left and Right" painting (Figure 21),

he pays homage to Williams' love for Calla Lilies and their strong baroque-like lines by placing two long stem Calla Lilies in a vase on a chair in front of an image of a human brain. The stems crossing over subtly reminds us how the different sides of our brain (left and right) cross-over to control the opposite sides of our bodies.

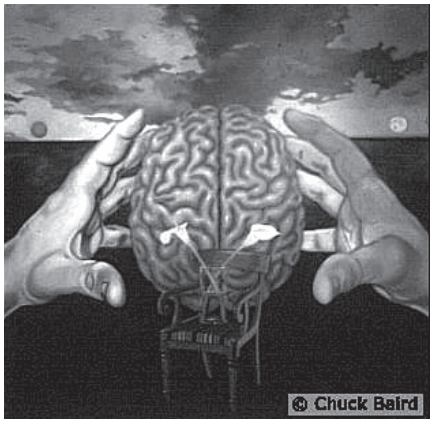


Figure 21: "Left and Right" (Chuck Baird)

Figure 22: "RELATIVITY/draining" (Allen Ford)

The chair in the "Left and Right" piece illustrates another motif used by some De'VIA artists. Baird explained at the Deaf Studies Conference that the chair in this piece serves as a visual pun as in court you are called up to the witness "stand" but you really "sit down on a chair." The term "stand" seems erroneous. The chairs in this work, Miller's "Three White Chairs," and Ford's "RELATIVITY/draining" (Figure 22) seem to tie into our collective consciousness of how we all differ in degrees of hearing loss, families of origin, language acquisition onset, and educational backgrounds, but often have a common denominator—some essential and undeniable common bond borne out of being Deaf in a hearing dominated world and represent how we all must bear witness.

Ropes are another symbol utilized by De'VIA artists. Baird's "Deadlock," Joan Popovich-Kutscher's "Anti-prisoner" and other works feature ropes. Popovich-Kutscher was misdiagnosised as developmentally disabled and wrongfully institutionalized. After the critical years of her early development, it was discovered that she was simply deaf. She was removed from the institutional facility and placed in California School for the Deaf. Having been denied access to language input and stimulation at a pivotal period of development, art became a formative form of communication. Several of Popovich-Kutshcer's works, featuring rope and broken zipper motifs, are

autobiographical in nature and give testimony to her personal history, which speaks for other Deaf victims.

Animals are often featured in De'VIA—usually because they can not speak yet are natural, creative, and vibrant entities. Dupor has used Dalmatians to examine eugenic practices as the parallel to Deaf cultural genocide. Several artists have created works in which fish are displayed.

Figure 23: "On an Evening Sabbath" (Uzi Buzgalo)

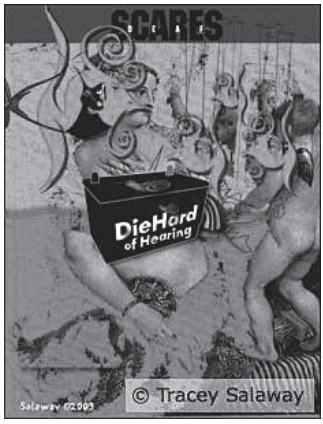


Figure 24: "Die Hard of Hearing" (Tracy Salaway)

Buzgalo's "On an Evening Sabbath" (Figure 23), Witcher's "To Be is To Be," Dupor's "Twenty Handshapes Beneath," Martianov's "Reflects," and Salaway's "Die Hard of Hearing" (Figure 24) all display fish. While Buzgalo's work is focusing on his Jewish identity and the traditional Sabbath meal, the floating spirit above the table seems to have hand-like fins symbolizing Jewish tradition and Deaf values.

Salaway's piece examines the role and presence of hard of hearing people within the Deaf community and that tenuous line of being a big fish in a small pond. In general, the Deaf artists may be drawn to fish as a visual metaphor for the Deaf experience because they have no ears and live in a silent world.

Birds also appear in several De'VIA pieces such as Buzgalo and Martianov to represent freedom and independence. Dupor uses the juxtaposition of a human child in a piece entitled "Passenger Pigeon" to forewarn us of the possible impending extinction of Deaf people. Several of Dupor's recent pieces incorporate black birds as well. McGregor's "ASL Eagle" incorporates ASL handshapes to personify an eagle in flight. Our hands as wings are a common metaphor in ASL poetry and visual art. It is interesting to note that ears are not a conspicuous feature of birds.

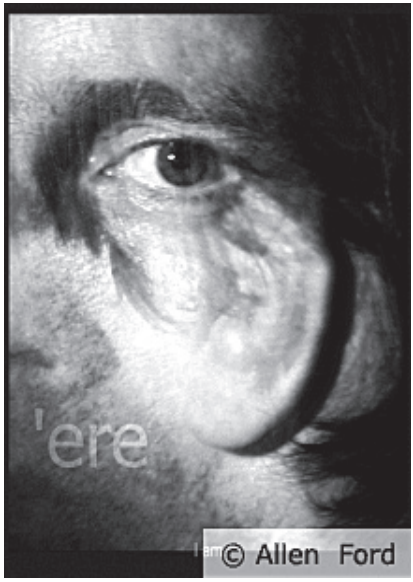
These shared motifs of hands, eyes, ears, mouths, children, street signage,

doors, violins, flowers, chairs, rope, fish, and birds help expand De'VIA from the obvious to the subtle. Further analysis and examination of De'VIA themes and motifs are needed to assist in revealing our collective consciousness and universal symbols as an understand of the Deaf lens emerges.

de'via self-portraits

Examining self-portraits is a rich exercise in exploring themes and symbols within De'VIA. Many De'VIA artists choose to represent themselves in a three-quarter poise so we will see both their eyes and one or none of their ears. Ford's "'Ere I am" (Figure 25) is a startlingly self-portrait. It is the only color photomontage image in a series of black and white works that examine his transformation from a hearing person to a deaf one due to a sudden and ongoing illness. In this piece, he superimposes his ear beneath his eye to signify the shift from being an auditory being to one who has joined the ranks of "the people of the eye."

Through Dupor's use of perspectives in "Deaf American," the artist portrays the impact of the dominant culture on Deaf individuals—leaving us to feel as if we are foreigners in our own country. An American flag hangs in the background as Dupor holds two hearing aids in the palm of one hand while her other clutches her stomach. A look of disgust on her face conveys the question, "Ain't I an American," (Figure 26) as much as Sojourner Truth's



Figures 25 and 26: "'Ere I Am" (Allen Ford) and "Ain't I an American?" (Susan Dupor)

"Ain't I a Woman" famous speech does. One of the first known Deaf artists to incorporate fingerspelling into non-deaf related art. Broderson's "Homage to Vincent" obviously is a dedication to Vincent Van Gogh with the presence of the sunflower, artist easel and hidden ear. It also illustrates how Broderson identifies with the tormented and brilliant painter.

Figure 27: "Struggle Within" (Trevor Sherman)

Figure 28: "Snapshot Silent" (Camela Lentini)

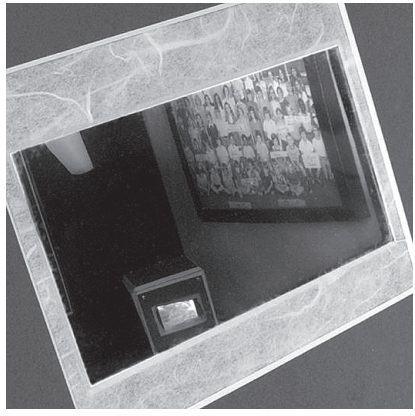
De'VIA is a new concept for many young Deaf people. By assigning them a project to create a De'VIA self-portrait they can explore this new genre within a framework of something very familiar and close to home—themselves. In the Deaf Art/Deaf Artists course taught at NTID, students are required to create self-portraits, which must reflect their understanding of themselves as a Deaf person. They can choose any medium or media they wish. Their self-portraits do not have to be literal pictures of themselves or feature their face. Because of the development period most college students are in at this time of their lives, many of their works deal with their family of origin and issues of acceptance, access and acculturation. Several explore issues of duality; their ability to hear some things at times pushes them out of the strong "big D/Deaf" world paradigm. However, their inability to understand spoken words easily and accurately put them on the outside of the hearing world also. Many of the student self-portraits have resistance and affirmation themes and employ many of the motifs described above.

Trevor Sherman's "Struggle Within" (Figure 27) depicts this struggle for identity integration. Using violent images of stakes and hooks, Sherman shows how he feels pulled by the Deaf world and stabbed by the hearing. A radio in his mouth represents his tendency to constantly talk and a rose in the lower right corner illustrate how everything beautiful also has its thorns. Next to his head appears the edge of a cliff but if you turn the artwork upside

down, it becomes a pit into which he is about to fall.

"Snapshot Silent" (Figure 28) is a painting by Camela Lentini, who comes from a Deaf family. Learning of how De'VIA's name originated from ASL and studying Popovich-Kutscher's work that has titles untroubled by English grammatical rules, Lentini consciously chose to have her title follow subject then adjective as we would sign it. She also composed the painting on poster board leaving a large blank white space at the bottom to give the impression of a poloraid snapshot. The image itself shows Camela as the focal point while the hands at the round table with her are those of her Deaf family members. In the background, other people gather in the restaurant. We know they are hearing because many of them are gawking at Lentini and her family as people will often do. Lentini also attempts to represent how noisy the hearing side of the image is by attaching letters to various actions / sounds—the clink of a glass, the shattering of a plate, etc.

Nicki Karayiannidis's "See Red" (Figure 29) is a multimedia piece using photography and clay to create a 3-D representation. Karayiannidis comes from a Greek family with a strong identity and affiliation with their nationality. She attended Greek schools on the weekend with her older Deaf sister. They were both raised to identify themselves as hearing impaired and did not sign at all. When her sister came home from high school excited to teach Nicki ASL, Nicki rebelled and did not want to be exposed to that "primitive form of communication." When she attended NTID and saw that signing is beneficial and natural, she began to use ASL and see herself as a Deaf person. Her artwork records and communicates how she felt once she entered Deafhood. In terms of the ear being placed over her mouth, Karayiannidis states, "I have made it that way so it can look like I am screaming my ear out and say that 'I am deaf and proud of it'."



Figures 29 and 30: "See Red" (Nicki Karayiannidis) and "Silent Deep Purple Box" (Margaret Steele)

"Silent Deep Purple Box" (Figure 30) by Tina-Margaret Steele, an interior designer pursuing a masters in Deaf education, is a very intriguing piece. It consists of a very small cube with one large rectangular viewing window and two small windows in the back to allow in light to illuminate the interior of the piece. The viewer actively has to put her/his eye up to the window to see inside. In doing so they are greeted by a miniature replica of the cubed artwork which has a rectangular mirror instead of a window. Thus, the viewer sees their own eye reflected back at them. Mirrors are symbols of how we see ourselves and how others see us. For some Deaf individuals, mirrors also represent those old days of speech therapy drills and practices. On the walls of the cube are pictures of Steele as a child and as she is now. The childhood pictures are in black and white—a Deaf school class picture and an individual school photo where she is looking very sad. In contrast, Steele includes a black and white photo of the her hearing daughter signing I LOVE YOU to show the irony of how a Deaf child is not allowed to sign yet a hearing child can and the happiness it brings. The ceiling is layered with other symbols relevant to the artist—one of which is a dolphin.

Another graduate student, Jena-Marie Daviton-Sciandra, chose to create her work "A Self-Portrait of My Ears" (Figure 31) as an abstract piece using

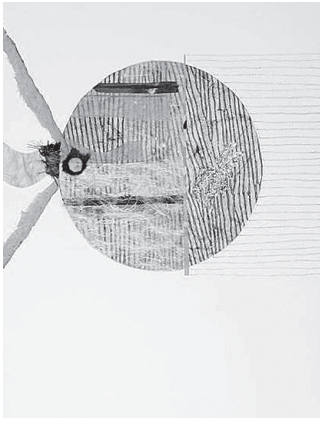


Figure 31: "A Self-Portrait of My Ears" (Jena-Marie Daviton-Sciandra)

Figure 32: "Grandpa, Mom and I All Touch the Sky" (Jessi Zeidner)

handmade paper. Born with an incomplete developed inner and outer ear, Daviton-Sciandra explores her existing sense of hearing from her "normal" ear and her lack of hearing in her other ear using colors, textures, shapes and composition. Similar to post-minimalist abstract De'VIA artist, Alex Wilhite, Daviton-Sciandra attempts to give visual representation to an auditory form. To see the artist explain her work in ASL or written self-portrait

reports by other students, go to www.rit.edu/deafartists and click "student self-portraits."

Several students utilize sophisticated collage works to create their self-portraits, which will not reproduce well in this document but can be viewed online. Most of the students taking this course are non-art majors and only take it because they need to satisfy their Deaf Studies / ASL course requirement and this particular course fits their schedule. Thus, their artistic talent is not on par with some of the students who are studying graphic design, painting, ceramics or other areas of art. Nonetheless, their introspection into their own identity and transference of it into art is remarkable. Given that they are prone to comparing their works with their more experienced and skilled peers, most of the non-art majors will not permit their works to be shared publicly. However, their work should be valued all the same if not more, for their courage in daring to create a visual representation of themselves when they feel so inexperienced and unsure.

de'via: it's never too late and it's never too early

During the presentation of this paper at the 2006 Deaf Studies *Today!* conference, we were honored by not just one emerging De'VIA artist sharing their work but by two. These artists covered a wide age spectrum, with one being categorized as senior citizen and one as pre-adolescent. After the screening of the documentary "Paint It Loud" by Emily Steinberg about the artwork of Betty G. Miller and Susan Dupor, George Wilding shared his deepest regrets that his mother had dismissed and shunned his interest in creating miniature outhouses. He lamented that it was too late for him to take up his artist yearnings. In order to prove it's never too late and to foster new De'VIA work, he was requested to generate some form of De'VIA to bring and share at the conclusion of this presentation the next day. It is a very formidable task to create art in a genre you have just recently been exposed to in only a few hours time and then to have it be publicly shared! Thankfully, George rose to the challenge and showed us his sketch of an outhouse complete with a cut out crescent moon but with a clever twist. The abode was donned with ears on both sides and wearing an old fashioned body aid. The work is reminiscent of Beverly Buchanan, African-American folk artist, architectural pieces about the South (paintings, pastels and wood sculptures) and has great potential. George's piece is begging to be made into wood and added to the NTID/RIT Deaf artists' website alongside the others in this paper.

In addition to George's great display of courage and vitality, Jessi Zeidner came forward to share her work at the gentle prodding of her mom. Jessi had three pieces of artwork to share with us, two of which were landscapes

and one which won an honorable mention in the Sorenson Art Contest last year. The piece entitled, "Grandpa, Mom and I All Touch the Sky" (Figure 32), incorporates the readily recognized I-L-Y handshape into three elements of nature—a body of water, a rainbow and the sun. Jessi explained to us that she made the artwork in memory of her grandfather. She stated that she knows he is looking down on them and continues to share his love just as they still look up to him with their love. Yes, there were many tears in the audience. It was a powerful moment, not just because it displays how healing artistic expression can be, but also because it illustrated perfectly how it is never too late to create De'VIA and how infinitely important it is to foster, explore, and advance this often overlooked part of Deaf studies.

We all have a personal obligation to familiarize ourselves with De'VIA, to introduce others to it and encourage them to create De'VIA, and also to *buy* De'VIA. Another highlight of the presentation was to have the owner of the original painting of "Family Dog" in the audience. Cynthia Plue owns this work, which many Deaf people respond to, remark on, and cherish, but few were brave enough to purchase and hang in their home. We are often worried about offending others but this politeness should not come at the expense of honesty and integrity. Furthermore, many people will spend big money on cars, technology, and material things but when seeing the price of an original piece of art, they will shake their heads and walk away. Given the great talent and soul invested by many of the artists committed to De'VIA, we owe it to them to buy their works. In addition to being a personal investment, it is an investment in the artist, the genre, and more broadly in the livelihood of Deaf culture. I can't wait to buy a George and Jessi piece.

POSTSCRIPT

Today as I was doing my final proof read of this paper to send off to the Deaf Studies *Today!* editors, I received a surprise in the mail—a package with a simple note on the back "I hope you like it." After I ripped it open before even checking the return address to see who it was from, my eyes filled with tears. I reached in to all the stuffing to pull out a six-and-one-half-inch wooden sculpture in the form of an outhouse—with a crescent moon burned into it and a hearing aid hanging from a wire suspended in front of the immobile door—the hearing aid's shape mirroring that of the moon's. Wow, I got me a Wilding original—perhaps the very first one. Better line up folks. (George, how much do I owe you? It's marvelous and I will treasure it forever! Viva De'VIA!)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patti Durr is an associate professor in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at the NTID at RIT. She teaches a course about Deaf art and artists and was artistic director for the Deaf Rochester Film Festival 2005. Durr has written and directed several educational films as well as the short narrative film "Don't Mind?," which was filmed and edited by RIT student Elizabeth Sorkin.