

Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists

National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art

This first touring exhibit features works by Deaf artists focusing on the Deaf experience. Deaf people make up a separate, distinct and proud culture. Deaf artists identify themselves not as persons with a disability – “little ‘d’ deaf” – but as members of a linguistic minority – “capital ‘D’ Deaf” – hence not something to be “fixed” but people to be celebrated. Deaf Art is like other genres of minority art in communicating universals of minority oppression and bonding.

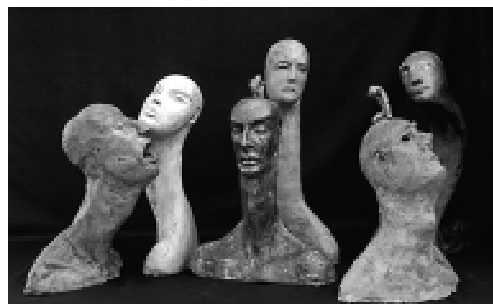
Deaf Art expresses the values of Deaf Culture: the beauty of sign language and its painful oppression, the joys of Deaf bonding, communication breakdowns between signers and non-signers, the discovery of language and community, and the history of Deaf people. Deaf Art or, more precisely, DeafView/Image Art, is a genre that uses formal art elements to express the “innate cultural or physical deaf experience.” Deaf Art is created when the artist intends to express their Deaf experience through visual art.

History

The concept of Deaf Art crystallized in the early seventies but probably existed before that time. The environment of political activity surrounding the civil rights movement in the late sixties is likely to have influenced the Deaf Art Movement of the early seventies in that it began the process through which Deaf people became self-aware. Works of literature and art addressing issues of Deaf culture and language bloomed.

The history of oppression of sign language has been a long one. One of the milestones in that history was the resolution passed at the International Conference on Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy in 1880 that effectively banned sign language as a method of instruction in schools for the deaf. From the founding of the very first American school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817 to late in the nineteenth century, schools for the deaf in the United States with few exceptions used sign language as the method of instruction. Starting in the 1860s and accelerating after the Milan conference, Deaf teachers and administrators were dismissed and teachers emphasizing speech as the only method of communication took their place. Sign language was held in scorn; it was not perceived as being a language but only a gestural system.

Only in the 1960s did progress towards the elimination of negative connotations of sign language begin. This was chiefly due to Dr. William Stokoe, Jr., chair of the English department at what was then Gallaudet College, whose research into the linguistics of American Sign Language established it as a distinct language in and of itself. The newfound validation of ASL profoundly affected Deaf people's concept of their own language.



Thad C. Martin
Articulatus (Read My Lips),
1994, ceramic,
34 x 78 x 48 (all 6 heads)



Paul Johnston
Poetic Hand I, 1998,
watercolor, 22 x 29
(courtesy of Clayton Valli)

The early 1970s saw a renaissance in the arts related to Deaf culture, history and language. In February 1972, Betty G. Miller had her one-woman faculty show *Silent World* at the Washburn Arts building at Gallaudet, the world's only liberal arts college for Deaf students. During the same weekend the exhibit opened, the National Theatre of the Deaf's (NTD) production of *My Third Eye*, performed at Gallaudet. For the first time in NTD's young history this play was about Deaf culture and sign language from the perspective of Deaf people themselves. *Ameslan Prohibited*, a work in the current touring exhibit was shown at *Silent World*. (Ameslan is an obsolete shortening of American Sign Language.)

Spectrum—Focus on Deaf Artists was established in 1975 by a group of hearing artists in Texas with financial assistance from the National



Ann Silver
Deaf Identity Crayons: Then and Now, 1999, mixed media, 20 x 16

Endowment for the Arts. Betty G. Miller joined them and *Spectrum* was officially launched in 1977 with 22 performing and visual artists. First based at a ten acre ranch, it later moved to a renovated warehouse in downtown Austin. *Spectrum* was a Deaf arts colony consisting of Deaf visual and performing artists working with a few hearing members. Plays were created by Deaf playwrights, and *Spectrum's* first theater production was *A Play of Our Own*, by Dorothy Miles, a comedy about a young Deaf woman who brings a hearing boyfriend home to meet her family. Dances choreographed for Deaf dancers were performed independently of music. Betty G. Miller and Chuck Baird started an archive of slides containing works by Deaf artists in the U.S., and under Miller's direction the *Spectrum* Visual Arts Institute published a newsletter and hosted summer conferences on Deaf arts.

Deaf Artists of America was established in 1985 as a professional organization intended to provide a clearinghouse for Deaf artists. DAA published an artists' directory and a newsletter as well as sponsoring conferences. The 1980s also saw a profusion of books about Deaf culture and Deaf people, promoting even greater awareness about Deaf people. The *Deaf President Now* protest at Gallaudet University in March 1988, now known as the Gallaudet Revolution, brought Deaf issues to the nation's televised evening news. Since then, Deaf people have had greater political and career expectations.

One year after the *Deaf President Now* movement, *Deaf Way*, an arts festival and conference celebrating Deaf culture, literature and art, took place at Gallaudet University in May 1989. Immediately preceding *Deaf Way*, a four day workshop co-facilitated by Betty G. Miller and Paul Johnston and involving seven other Deaf artists defined and developed the concept, the name and a written manifesto of DeafView/



Susan Dupor
Delavan, Wisconsin, 1891, 1999, oil on masonite, 13 x 9.25 diptych (courtesy of Dennis and Dorene Tully)

Image Art, also known by its abbreviation De'VIA. The De'VIA Manifesto 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. De'VIA can be identified by formal elements such as Deaf artists' possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands. Currently, Deaf artists tend to work in human scale with these exaggerations, and not exaggerate the space around these elements." There is some indication that the work done at the De'VIA workshop may soon be further developed.

Deaf Art exhibits, while not originally designed into Deaf Studies conferences, became an integral part of these conferences beginning in Chicago in 1993. That exhibit, like others before it, has not yet been documented as conforming to the criteria of DeafView/Image Art. The first group exhibition that is known to be exclusively DeafView/Image Art was *Perspec-*



Orkid Sassouni,
Being Deaf and Free-Spirits, 1998-99, book of photographs, 3.5x4.5 photos

tives of Deaf Culture Through Art, which consisted of 32 artworks by 8 Deaf artists and was mounted in September 1993 at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Deaf Artists' Exhibits have accompanied the Deaf Studies Conferences in 1995, 1997 and most recently in at the Pro Arts Gallery in Oakland, California in April 1999.

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The exhibit covers a variety of subjects related to the Deaf experience. Sign language and the means whereby it is used are one popular theme. Sign language is not just a means of communication for Deaf people but a cherished art form in its own right and a source of pride. Paul Johnston, Chuck Baird and Orkid Sassouni use images of the hand as important elements in their work. Paul Johnston has a Ph.D. in Art Education and Philosophy from Penn State University, and studied furniture design, woodworking, and sculpture as an undergraduate at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He states "In creating my *Handscapes*, I use my insight into imagination, interpretation, perception, perspective and appreciation in an experiment with content and form to construct three-dimensional poems. I am infatuated with the shape and gestures of the hand. The perception of the 'hand instrument' and the 'mask-of-hands' relates the poetic beauty of hands using either sign language or gesture to the expression of mood and emotion on the face or through the voice." Johnston combines musical instruments and hands artfully his watercolors, *Poetic Hand I* and *Poetic Hand II* to demonstrate the visual lyricism of sign language.

Chuck Baird's *Art No. 2* depicts both the tools of the

artist's trade and the sign for "art." This is the second in Baird's *Art* series, the first of which is on the cover of his book *Chuck Baird, 35 Plates*. These are crisp illustrations, seemingly drawn in mid-air, of the sign for "artist," a concept that is essential to Chuck. "Art is my whole life. The radiance behind the sign 'art' represents the radiance of Hope. The flying objects represent the various mediums in which I work." In the first painting, the sign is seen from the viewpoint of the signer/artist, but in the present work, it is seen from the viewpoint of the receptor/viewer. Baird received his BFA in Painting from the Rochester Institute of Technology. He was the Visual Arts Coordinator at *Spectrum-Focus on Deaf Artists* and is well known for his ten years as an actor, set designer and painter with the National Theatre of the Deaf.



Chuck Baird

Art. No. 2,
1994,
acrylic,
24 x 30
(courtesy of
Jaime Harter)

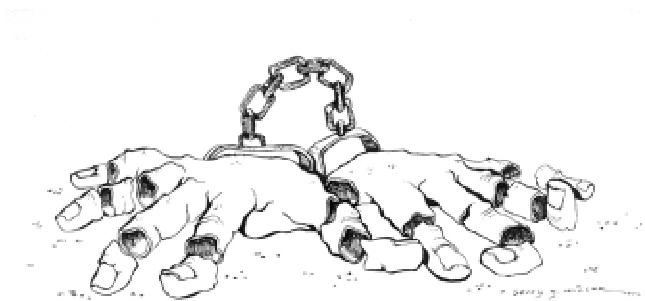
visual art. I present both the suppression, and the beauty of Deaf Culture and American Sign Language as I see it; in the past, and in the present. Oppression of Deaf people by hearing is actually cultural, educational, and political. I hope this work, and the understanding that may arise from this visual expression, will help bridge the gap between the Deaf world,

and the hearing world," Betty wrote in her artist's statement. Miller graduated from Gallaudet University and received her doctorate in Art Education from Penn State. She was one of the founding members of *Spectrum-Focus on Deaf Artists*.

Ann Silver likens the medical and pathological views of Deaf people to

The stark simplicity of Orkid Sassouni's black and white photographs highlights the unrestrained expressiveness of her Deaf subjects in her *Being Deaf and Free Spirit*. Orkid was born in Tehran, Iran and immigrated to the United States in 1971. She graduated from Gallaudet University in 1995 with a degree in Art History and Museum Studies and took advanced photography courses at the Parsons School of Design. She is currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Arts at San Francisco State University. Of her subjects, Sassouni says, "I became fascinated with their pride, their energy, their most important tools in communication, their thoughts, and their self-conscious of the world outside."

Both Betty G. Miller and Ann Silver give political expression to the history of Deaf people. Oppression of sign language is Betty G. Miller's theme in *Ameslan Prohibited*. This pen and ink drawing, done in 1972, shows manacled hands with dismembered fingers and is representative of the style of Miller's early period. It was included in her historic 1972 solo exhibit about the Deaf experience, which provoked strong reactions from both Deaf and hearing people. Betty is a pioneer in expressing the Deaf experience through art, which to her credit has now become widely accepted as an art genre. "Much of my work depicts the Deaf experience expressed in the most appropriate form of communication:



Betty G. Miller

Ameslan Prohibited, 1972,
ink on paper, 23 x 15
(courtesy of Sandi Inches Vasnick)

the uniformity of boxed and labeled crayons in *Deaf Identity Crayons: Then and Now*. Silver holds a Bachelor's degree in Commercial Art from Gallaudet University and a Master's degree in Deafness Rehabilitation from New York University in 1977. She writes, "No matter how you look at it — protest art, political satire, victim art or graphic wit, I do not shy away from ethical questions or controversy. Having fused scholarship, creativity and sociopolitical philosophy, I truly believe that my being Deaf-with-a-capital-D gives me a greater visual acuity, which in turns affects my work, artistic and otherwise. Deaf Art is my soul, my heart, my conscience." Describing this work, Silver said "Centuries ago Deaf people were a box of crayons, not human beings. Through the 20th century has witnessed shifts in terminology, the painstaking removal of poisonous power from archaic descriptors accorded our unwitting community is far from finished. As such, we must not allow others to define who we are, how we should be identified, or what is semantically apropos for us."

Communication barriers are another linking theme in the exhibit. Susan Dupor portrays feelings typical to isolated Deaf children living in non-signing hearing families in *Family Dog*. The faces of other family members are blurred, likening lipreading to viewing a TV program disrupted by static. Dupor attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned her Bachelors in Fine Arts and then received a Masters in Science in Deaf Education and Art Education from the University of Rochester and National Technical Institute for the Deaf. She writes, "A lot of energy, inspiration and passion occur during the art making process when I create art related to the D/deaf experience because it is highly relevant and spiritual to me."



Susan Dupor

Family Dog, 1991,
acrylic on canvas,
56 x 57

Articulatus is Thad Martin's composition of heads depicting a story of the deaf experience: from an awakening to one's

sense of self, through a struggle for footing in the hearing world, to an affirmation one's wholeness and acceptance of the journey to come. The six ceramic heads vary in height from 36 to 28 inches, and visually represent struggles with communication, with the mouth shaped in different ways in efforts to articulate. Thad wrote, "Being Deaf, and understanding how the loss of one sense affects the sum of the whole, has had a profound effect on my visions. I live in a silent world, one in which visual imagery becomes paramount. There are things which we experience without the intervention of words or even of thought. The silent knowledge has no linear breakdown; therefore, it does not lend itself to verbal articulation. I turn, then, to visual images to express myself." Thad graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with BA degrees in Art and English in 1989, and obtained his MFA degree from the same university in 1992.

Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists, the First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, is a juried collection of works by 16 American Deaf artists in a variety of styles and media, created between 1972 and 1999. The exhibit was made possible through the financial support of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, with additional financial support from Northeastern University Trustees Chet Krentzman and Stanley Young. It premiered at the Bank of America Gallery in Seattle, WA in October of 1999 and in February 2000 appeared at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, NY. The exhibit opened in Boston, MA in April 2000, and was at the World Peace Bell Exhibit Center in Newport, KY from May 22-June 22 and at Gallery Art in Aventura, FL from September 7-28, 2000. It is now showing at the Lakewood Cultural Center in Lakewood, CO from January 10-February 16, 2001.

Brenda Schertz
Bibliography available upon request.
www.DeafArt.org

Checklist Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists

Chuck Baird, b. 1947

Art No. 2, 1994, acrylic, 24 x 30 (courtesy of Jaime Harter)
Crocodile Dundee, 1992, acrylic, 24 x 30 (courtesy of DawnSignPress)
Heart, 1999, mixed media, 14 x 17 (courtesy of Elizabeth Weyerhaeuser)
Please But, 1999, wood, 11 x 36 x 24 (courtesy of Susan Rutherford)

Irene Bartok, b. 1965

Divine Power, 1996, photograph, 18 x 20

Uzi Buzgalo, b. 1956

Color in Wind, 1997, acrylic on paper, 30 x 35
Hard Move, 1999, acrylic on paper, 32 x 39
I Want to Ride, 1997, acrylic on paper, 33 x 38 (courtesy of Steven and Nancy Bock and family)
In the Light, 1997, acrylic on paper, 30 x 40
Long Night, 1977, acrylic on paper, 29 x 36

Susan Dupor, b. 1969

Delavan, Wisconsin, 1891, 1999, oil on masonite, 13 x 9.25 diptych (courtesy of Dennis and Dorene Tully)
Family Dog, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 57
I interesting hamster, 1993, oil on masonite, 49 x 49.5
Narcissus, 1999, oil on masonite, 27 x 19
Narcissus and Swallows, 1999, oil on masonite, 32 x 21
Pussy, 1994, oil on masonite, 30 x 13 (courtesy of j. david mccluskey)

Paul Johnston, b. 1952

Energy of Language, 1998, watercolor, 26 x 34 (courtesy of Northeastern Univ.)
Poetic Hand I, 1998, watercolor, 22 x 29 (courtesy of Clayton Valli)
Poetic Hand II, 1998, watercolor, 22 x 29 (courtesy of Betty G. Miller)
Theory of Language, 1998, watercolor, 26 x 34 (courtesy of Northeastern Univ.)
Unity of Communication, 1998, watercolor, 34 x 26 (courtesy of Northeastern Univ.)

Thad C. Martin, b. 1967

Articulatus (Read My Lips), 1994, ceramic, 34 x 78 x 48 (all 6 heads)
Articulatus, detail, "ooo," 1994, ceramic, 30 x 22 x 8
Articulatus, detail, "ahh," 1994, ceramic, 36 x 20 x 20
Articulatus, detail, "err," 1994, ceramic, 28 x 22 x 11
Articulatus, detail, "ege," 1994, ceramic, 34 x 23 x 8
Articulatus, detail, "mmm," 1994, ceramic, 32 x 27 x 10
Articulatus, detail, "uhhh," 1994, ceramic, 27 x 18 x 13

Tony Landon McGregor, b. 1958

Southwestern Fishes, 1999, wood-burned gourd, 9 x 12.5 (courtesy of Steven and Nancy Bock and family)
Three Southwestern Signs, 1999, wood-burned gourd, 18 x 12.5 (courtesy of Steven and Nancy Bock and family)

Betty G. Miller, b. 1934

Bell School, 1944, 1972, oil/mixed media, 36 x 36 (courtesy of Tom Humphries and Carol Padden)
Ameslan Prohibited, 1972, ink on paper, 23 x 15 (courtesy of Sandi Inches Vasnick)

Joan Popovich-Kutscher, b. 1951

Confusion of Mood, 1999, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 10 x 10
Effect Point, 1993, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 7 x 7
Final Out only Deaf, 1989, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 15 x 17
Point on Art, 1999, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 10 x 10
Point Lose Class, 1994, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 7 x 7
Symbols in Art, 1999, etching/aquarelle on handmade paper, 13 x 13

Orkid Sassouni, b. 1971

Being Deaf and Free-Spirits, 1998-99, 3.5 x 4.5 photos in 14.5 x 8 book

Ann Silver, b. 1949

Deaf Identity Crayons: Then and Now, 1999, mixed media, 20 x 16
Kellogg's Deaf Studies, Not Pathology, 1996, mixed media, 16 x 20
Will The Real Goya Please Stand Up?, 1996, mixed media, 20 x 16
Hearing-Impaired: Wrong Way, Deaf: Right Way, 1992, mixed media, 20 x 16
Deaf & Dumb 1903, Deaf, 1993, 1993, mixed media, 16 x 20

Marjorie Stout, b. 1959

Black and White: Deafness With Noise, 1990, acrylic, 36 x 48
Sound, 1990, acrylic, 36 x 48

Robin Taylor, b. 1952

Avenue of Loss, 1998
Bronze, Stainless Steel, Copper on Marble base, 15 x 12 x 8 (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Bruce)

Sandi Inches Vasnick, b. 1951

Silence, 1989, batik, 21 x 16

Alex Wilhite, b. 1960

Camera, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24
Kiln, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24
Red Sea, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24
Spaced of Wings, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 18
Waterstream II, 1997 acrylic on canvas, 18 x 80

Harry R. Williams, 1948-1991

A Violin Becomes an Artist, 1983, oil on wood, 18 x 40 x 1 (courtesy of Betty G. Miller)

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Exhibition dates: January 10-February 16, 2001
Gallery hours: Monday-Friday 8 am-5 pm
Saturday 10 am-5 pm
Sunday 12-4 pm