

HUMANS BEING

Disability in Contemporary **Art**

April 1, 2006 – June 4, 2006



BONES FOR A BLUEPRINT:

RIVA LEHRER

There are at least 50 trillion cells in the human body.

There are 6,508,920,042 humans on the planet, as of today, April 10, 2006.

If you multiply those two numbers, you get an idea of all the ways that the body can produce disability. Disability constructs its secret plans inside the private carapace of our bodies. It exists on our outside, when injury or nature makes itself visible to the passing eye. Disability can reside only on the inside, real as rock but invisible as wind. It can live in the gaps between what your senses can take in, and what the world will let you know. Disability is made of blood, of bone, of thoughts, of catcalls, of mirrors, of laws, and of every concrete step leading to where you cannot go.



This exhibit, *Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* contains 40 works of art, by 32 artists. Obviously, it is hard for a single exhibit to reflect more than a fraction of the meanings of disability.

Humans Being includes a range of disabilities, though we would need a museum the size of the Smithsonian to explore them all. These include, but are not limited to, orthopedic conditions, cancer, deafness, brain injury, blindness, neurological conditions, limb loss, battle injuries, and developmental disability.

Our approach for this exhibit led us to construct some very clear parameters. We wanted to make an exhibit that first and foremost, looks at the depth and richness of disability as a topic for art-making. For this reason, all artwork had to address disability directly. While we focused on artists with disabilities, we included a number of artists who do not identify

as disabled, but who have explored the topic consistently in their work.

Some of these artists consider themselves as participants in the formation of Disability Culture throughout their careers. I would hazard a guess that most people, including many of the disabled themselves, do not know there is such a thing. This culture has been largely absent from other discussions in the art world; in contrast to art derived, for instance, from examinations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. One reason for this absence has been an unfortunate rhetoric describing the relationship between disability and art. This rhetoric sees art as a form of pathology, when it reflects the experiences of illness or impairment.

This view is partly a result of the long usage of art in therapeutic or rehabilitative contexts. While art is a deeply valuable way of filtering one's experience, disability art is rendered culturally irrelevant if one assumes that the artist is making work primarily for his or her private benefit, and not as a means of communication. Art historians who have traced the early influence of an illness or disability on an artist have often seen it as reducing the complexity or value of the work, as if art in response to intense experience is a kind of thoughtless bodily product – like pus after a wound.

Gender, class, ethnicity, and race have all gone through the process of becoming understood as important elements of cultural and political formation. But disability has been excluded until now, partly due to this medical metaphor. If disability is seen mostly as a medical condition, then it has no meaning for anyone else. A medical experience (unless it is a communicable disease – an interesting expression) is simply contained within the disabled body and cannot be conveyed outside itself.

Another element of invisibility is the absence of formal education of disabled artists. Potential artists have not had access to art schools until very recently. Art schools are quite physical places and must do a fair amount of accommodation for a disabled student. Even now, many are not equipped to help the impaired student learn a material practice.

In addition, many students are discouraged from incorporating disability into their explorations, for the reasons of prejudice stated above.

The professional art world also has its barriers. Here in Chicago, most galleries are in inaccessible buildings. An artist with impairments who wants to see or present work to gallerists is often out of luck. Museums may be ADA compliant, but art is often hung too high to be viewed by people in wheelchairs. Text that can be read by the blind and tours for the deaf are in short supply. Add to that the absence of images of our experience, and one can grasp the negative pressure on disabled artists.



What if you've managed to negotiate all of the obstacles to getting an education and you're making work about disability? The next thing you are likely to hear is: Aren't you afraid of being ghettoized as JUST a disabled artist?

But there are a few odd things about the disability ghetto. One is the extent to which it is a fractured location. Because of internalized oppression, and our isolation in institutions, homes, special classes, and special schools, many of us never know how much resonance there is between our life histories. Disabled people have not seen themselves as connected until recently. The act of constructing a communal narrative is very new.

When we begin to expose our ideas it can be a tremendously exciting time. Like discovering a secret world. Finding other people in the arts (this includes theater, dance, writing, all the Big A's) can be incredibly freeing for artists who have produced in isolation. So a certain amount of intense cultural construction in the Crip Ghetto may not be a bad thing. But nothing can thrive in a sealed room. This is the time that we open the gates.



Disability can be seen as a kind of billboard, one that enlarges, for easier viewing, things that happen to most humans. The brazenness of disability lets us see complex human experiences with more clarity. The artists in *Humans Being* explore elements of experience that will most likely ring true and familiar for many viewers, whatever the state of their able-bodiedness.

Certainly it's well-known that mainstream society has strong notions of beauty and health. Anyone who veers noticeably from the standards will hear about it from a thousand sources, spoken and unspoken. The way we look dictates to an uncomfortable degree the way we are treated in the world.

A large percentage of the works in *Humans Being* are figurative, and of those, many are self-portraits. Figurative work, especially portraiture, is deeply concerned with the relationship between outer appearance and inner perceptions. Two of the major aspects of disability are the effects of impairment on the function and goals of a person's life, and the effect of society's attitudes towards the person's disability.

For people with visible disabilities, their sense of self may be significantly formed by these attitudes. People who are visibly "other" often have to

navigate a maze of questions, prejudices, ignorance, and assumptions from the first moment of any encounter.

Self-portraiture takes a variety of forms in the exhibit. Jon Wos, Sunaura Taylor, John Dugdale, Mat Fraser, Sandie Yi, Al Davison, Susan Dupor, Laura Ferguson, and myself all employ fairly identifiable images of our own bodies. Many of them reflect a sense of seeing themselves from the outside. In Wos' tussling selves, Yi's use of her body as template and model for the objects of her adornment, Davison's nude fighter, and Sunaura Taylor's child-self, there is an awareness of the history of being stared at. Fraser and Davison confront the viewer; Dugdale, Dupor, Ferguson, and myself all remain in our private spaces, yet give the viewer a lush and alluring view.

Along with the experience of being scrutinized, the disabled person can feel fragmented into "normal" and "abnormal" pieces. Fragmentation – zooming in on the "disabled" part of the body as iconic self - shows up in work by Leonard Lehrer, Yi, Davison, Dupor, and Ferguson. A very changeable sense of self is expressed by Wos and Madison Clell.

Other artists chose a metaphoric or more interior set of images. Richard Yohnka and Katie Dallam depict ferocious avatars of pain. Katherine Sherwood and Terry Karpowicz use abstraction to lead the viewer into the interior of the body. Neil Marcus and Hollis Sigler render joyous, playful, transcendent visions of disability. William Newman melds his body into the forms of animals and calls the very boundaries of his "self" into question.

A number of pieces represent people with hidden disabilities. If you appear one way on the outside, but the interior differs quite a bit from what is

visible (just the covert nature of pain can produce this rift), then you may experience a sort of constant schism. Questions arise of exposure, of hiding, of choosing between explanation and silence. Often the inner persona is expressed in dramatic form, as a result of bridging the span. Madison Clell, Katie Dallam, Katherine Sherwood, and Richard Yohnka all explore this tension. David B. doubles the experience in depicting his inner life in response to his brother's epilepsy.

A disability is something that affects far more than just a single body. Seven artists - Karen Jayne (daughter), Leonard Lehrer (daughter), Beverly McIver (sister), Elizabeth Ernst (brother), David B. (brother), Tim Lowly (daughter), and Vincent Desiderio (son) all have family members with disabilities. In many of their statements, you will see them describe their art as part of the process of caretaking. The disabled family members are not depicted as vulnerable victims; rather, as complicated, struggling, and fully human.

Some artists look for ways to bring the viewer into a direct experience of disability. Karen Jayne, Stephen Laphisophon, and Harriet Sanderson manipulate the paraphernalia of disability. Jennifer Justice creates a sensory approximation of impairment. Madison Clell states that her work was done through a sequence of identity changes, which is reflected in her visual language. Ju Gosling gives a funny, wry synopsis of disability politics —how we are seen by "The Powers That Be." And Tabata Hideomi had himself documented in his daily rituals of self-care in order to demystify his everyday life, and to therefore render its poetry.

Nina Berman and Frances Turner explored communities of people with disabilities, in potent and startling portraits. Berman's *Purple Hearts* project

could not be more timely or important in wartime America. Turner used her prodigious ability to astonish us with paintings of friends of hers – with “other,” and fearless, bodies.

So, are you afraid of being ghettoized? The price of that fear is staying silent on all that you know to be true. We hope that this exhibit will be the bones of a blueprint for a new, open city.

NINA BERMAN

Through this work I have tried to show the human cost of war as personified in a wounded soldier. I use disability to make the soldier into a more human, vulnerable figure.

The disability is evident in the photograph, but it is not the dominant element. Rather, the disability is used as a metaphor into the soldier's psychological condition.

The soldiers are photographed alone to emphasize feelings of alienation and isolation. They are shown in their homes as opposed to hospitals, to imply the permanence of their conditions. As many of these soldiers joined the military to escape economic and social hardship, seeing them back in a domestic setting reinforces the notion that their dreams of escape through military service were painfully naïve.

The experience of photographing so many severely wounded and disabled young men and women was profoundly disturbing to me. I felt responsible for their injuries because they had fought in my name. And I felt a power and privilege because I did not have to make a similar sacrifice. I recall photographing one soldier who was completely blind. This soldier, an elite Army Ranger, flinched in fear at the sound of my camera.

Many civilians are shocked by my images, which surprises me as there are now tens of thousands of wounded soldiers from this war alone. I suspect they are surprised by the way I chose to photograph them, somewhat detached, as though the subject is present but unreachable, all alone, with no network of support.

Combat veterans, on the other hand, feel very familiar, almost personally acquainted, with my subjects. Sometimes this familiarity is overwhelming. I witnessed one Vietnam vet who attended an opening of my exhibition and after looking at three images, started panting. He struggled to catch his breath and cried, "I can't look at this." He ran out the door. *



Pfc. Alan Jermaine Lewis from the "Purple Hearts" series, 2003. Pigment prints. 28"h x 28"w. Courtesy of the artist.

MADISON CLELL

A dozen years ago I sat watching a VCR tape of three women; 2 integrated and 1 in-progress multiple speaking to the residents of a dissociative disorders psych unit. I was newly diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder (now Dissociative Identity Disorder). Their baggy eyes, world-weary faces, and wise words bored ominously into me. The voyage to mental health would prove a crooked, brutal path, and, while I accepted this truth, I also dreaded it. I wanted to reach out and touch, see, and hear those three women who had walked the path before me. I did not know any other dissociators. Seeing that other multiples had survived and even thrived became my lodestone. I would fall into many deep dark spaces, and often reorient myself by the memory of the flickering video light of three women Like Me Who Had Made It. I swore to survive and become like them – an accessible, recovered multiple.

CUCKOO is a graphic novel series that depicts my experience with Dissociative Identity Disorder. By becoming a brazen public symbol for healthy multiplicity, I actually manipulated myself into healing. Soapboxing about successful trauma recovery but then dying from fear and sorrow would have been too much disgrace. Thanks to many invaluable people, my work, and those three women, I am integrated. With *CUCKOO* I hope to evoke the experience of multiplicity. All alter personality changes in the comic series actually happened while I was drawing. The emotive linework and confusing narrative are as close to the inner goulash as I can convey. Since I am not representing any other dissociators – only myself – I guarantee the authenticity of the feelings and situations.

I don't actually consider Dissociative Identity Disorder to be a disability. Without an ability to subconsciously shunt mental and physical pain onto

those "other people" as a youth, I would be irrevocably screwed up. But D.I.D. "acts," like a mental disability when the trauma that necessitates the dissociative response is over. Memory gaps, alternate states of consciousness, and traumatic flashbacks wreak havoc in daily life. Particularly if one has no idea of what is going on.

Multiples/Dissociators hide like you wouldn't believe. The repercussions of being "out" can mean losing friends and jobs. So sometimes we hide because it's tiring to keep explaining that multiples aren't serial killers. Or when we're accused of making it all up in order to feel special. Ridiculous. There are so many more efficient ways of gaining attention; lighting oneself on fire, for example. Instead of years of therapy, some gas and matches can instantly create all the public notoriety they could desire, and for a fraction of the cost.

We also hide from ourselves. Seems a diagnostic criteria for a multiple is total denial that they are one. The genesis of D.I.D. is in horrific trauma, starting in earliest childhood. Working through it is a nightmare of flashbacks, lost time, and feeling completely insane. Recovery means recovering from the original mess. The idea of False Memories is mighty appealing. If your history was invented, then you could shut off those awful screaming images in your head, reconcile with your family, and for once get a ***ing good night's sleep. You wouldn't have to worry about switching in front of other people. Or have a pink elephant stomping the stuffing out of your current relationship. Take the money you saved by quitting therapy and go on that vacation to Aruba ... Multiples can run, but in the end they can't hide from themselves. And yes, sometimes we hide simply because it's nobody's business. *



Indifference from Betrayal, Summer 2000 from *Cuckoo* #11 and *Cuckoo* tpb. Ink and pencil on Bristol board. 17"h x 14"w. Courtesy of the artist.