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Through a different lens: celebrating artists with disabilities

By Sara Arenson on October 19, 2013

Posted in Arts & Entertainment, Downtown, Reviews

Many famous artists – Goya, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Monet, Manet, and Frida Kahlo to name a few – have had some form of disability. Yet their disabilities are largely forgotten in the art world, as if drawing attention to them would diminish the artist's accomplishments.

But what if instead of seeing disability as pathetic or tragic, we admired the creativity and persistence of these artists? What if disability was seen as a source of truthfulness and deep life experience? And what if the art of disability, in representing a fullness and diversity not seen elsewhere, is actually more valuable than other art?

These are the questions that **ART + BODY: See Me Hear** challenged its audience to answer. The festival, held on the evening of October 10 and afternoon of October 11, brought together fourteen artists with disabilities to showcase and celebrate their talent. Through performances, artist talks, a keynote lecture and an art show, ART + BODY crossed a wide range of disciplines.

"We're trying to get the word out that artists with disabilities are talented and are able to work just as well as able-bodied people," said Susan Lamberd, Chair of the Arts & Disability Network Manitoba (ADNM), the non-profit group presenting the event. "And their work is just as good, if not better, because of the bigger message that they're trying to tell. They have lived through more, and they have more to say, and say it through a unique perspective."

This was the second ART + BODY festival held by ADNM, and the theme this year was "See Me Hear". Sound artist Christine Sun Kim, deaf since birth, came from New York to kick off the festival Thursday night. Her unique sound art, in which transducers (speaker parts) taped to piano wires give audiences a sense of the vibrational quality of sound, offered a new perspective on a sense often taken for granted.

"Sound," she said in an artist talk the next day, "is like a ghost to me." She cannot hear it directly, but she feels the vibrations and see the visual effects – e.g. a pen tracing a pattern on paper, blue marks that appear when paint-dipped nails clatter about on a moving surface, vibrations from speakers.

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PHOTO OF THE DAY



On the bandwagon: a sign of the times at a local donut shop. No word yet on official bagels or perogies. PHOTO by Greg Petzold

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RIVER CITY 360



Artist Christine Sun Kim with her sound equipment. Photo by Marie LeBlanc.

For much of her life, Kim felt that sound “belonged” to others. For many years she was a painter. Then she fell in love with sound – “I love its fluidity. It gives me a much bigger platform than painting does.”

As the hundred plus audience circulated in a room at [Plug In ICA](#), touching wires and smiling at the different sensations, Elaine Newhook took delight in the experience. “I think it’s amazing,” she said through an American Sign Language interpreter named Scott. “Using piano wires, it’s a different feeling, and to be able to go around, touch all these wires and feel the different vibrations, it’s definitely a good feeling, a good experience.”

“You could probably give yourself a back massage by lying on one of the wires,” quipped [Alice Crawford](#), one of the fellow artists showcased in ART + BODY.

Afterwards, Christine Valk said, “The sounds that were coming out of the wires at first sounded very disjointed or like an alarm almost, but over time it seemed like the sounds came together, and it almost sounded like an orchestra.”



Susan Lamberd, Chair of Arts & Disability Network Manitoba, listens to transducer as audience member feels the vibration in the piano wire. Photo by Marie LeBlanc.

Valk and her friend Corinne, an art teacher, noticed Kim checking the vibrations in the wires and wondered: “What was she experiencing versus what our experience was?”

In an artist talk of her own, [Alice Crawford](#) gave the audience a critical insight: in the deaf community,



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LOCAL HEROES



Little girl’s dreams carried out through Memorial Fund

By Kerry Ryan on January 28, 2015

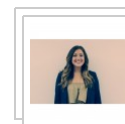
Gracie Heritier passed away tragically at age 7, but the Fund in her name fosters creativity by supporting artistic endeavours for young people.

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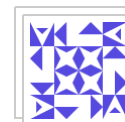
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deafness is understood as a human difference, not a condition to be fixed. However, deaf artists in Winnipeg have had trouble finding opportunities for training and performance, so new initiatives have been started in the past few years with the help of the Manitoba Cultural Society of the Deaf and Arts and Culture Industries. Winnipeg now has a deaf mime troupe, ASL storytellers, actors, photographers, a mural artist, and Crawford herself, who works in typography, graphic design and collage illustrating.

[Burton Bird](#) from Saskatchewan, Canada's first deaf hoop dancer, showed the beauty that comes from full training opportunities. When he started dancing in 1989, at an Aboriginal school, his teacher would take on anyone who enjoyed dancing and was willing to learn. At ART + BODY, he performed a lively dance where he used 21 hoops to portray all kinds of images – from a bird to riding a horse, even a snake and a turtle with a shell around it. "It's a spiritual way to express myself, through dance," he said. He has had a very positive experience traveling and sharing his dance with audiences. The audience at the [Winnipeg Art Gallery](#) showed their pleasure with enthusiastic applause.



Burton Bird performs a hoop dance.

[Jeremy Rusu](#), blind since birth, did not see a direct connection between his disability and his art – "I've always been blind, so I've never really thought of doing things any other way." He wondered whether his perfect pitch had anything to do with being blind, but had no way of knowing. Regardless, Rusu's jazz piano playing was delightful and polished, his fingers powerful and nimble over the keyboard. Normally a "band guy" who sometimes plays three or four instruments on a gig, Rusu started with the piano at age five, when his mother noticed his musical talent. He plays all types of music with numerous bands, and enjoys arranging parts.

[Nigel Bart](#), a visual and video artist who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19, spoke about how he incorporates his unique perceptions into his art. "I use my hallucinations, whether they're auditory or visual. I use them in my art. And often we don't talk about that side of someone's perception. Just like if you're deaf or if you're blind, and how you perceive the world around you."

[Debbie Patterson](#) was already working as an actor and playwright when she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. As the MS progressed, affecting her ability to physically perform, she started focusing on writing and directing. Her play *Sargent & Victor & Me*, which will be presented by [Theatre Projects Manitoba](#) at the Canwest Centre for Performing Arts (University of Winnipeg) in February and March 2014, was originally entitled *Sargent & Victor*, until Patterson's MS made her rethink the project.

"I started performing it, but at the same time that I was working on this show, MS was affecting my legs more and more, and affecting my body, so I couldn't hide the fact that my body was telling a story of its own – when I was trying to perform this piece that was not at all about myself."

Patterson decided to change the script to incorporate her own experience. Originally the piece was about the Sargent and Victor area and how the neighborhood went from being a great place to raise kids, a strong and safe community, to a dangerous place afflicted by violence, prostitution and crack houses. Patterson added herself and her struggles with MS into the script, creating a metaphor for the neighborhood. "So now the play is about how we live within unstoppable processes of destruction."

With voice and gestures laden with emotion, Patterson read aloud from *Sargent & Victor & Me*. Some of the most poignant monologues, in her own voice, evoked the fear, helplessness and losses that come from no longer being able to control parts of one's body or keep balance. Other monologues, the voices of Sargent and Victor area residents, were taken word for word from interviews that she conducted in the neighborhood.



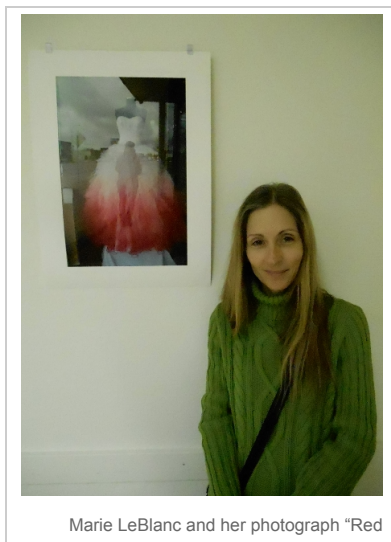
Dr. Nancy Hansen delivers keynote lecture. Beautified crutches such as these "have become points of disability culture and pride."

Dr. Nancy Hansen, in her keynote speech *The Normality of Doing Things Differently: Reclaiming Art Through a Disability Lens*, explained how depictions of disability in Western art have often been seen as ugly, upsetting the accepted view of what is "natural". There were even "ugly laws" in the late 19th and early 20th century to keep the "unsightly" out of public spaces.

"At present," said Dr. Hansen, "few if any galleries or museums show experience of disabled people. There is a high level of uneasiness associated with impairment, and curators may believe that they may be in a difficult position, caught between fear of insult and treating disability as an object." But by excluding such depictions, the art world reinforces the sense of disability as unsightly and unworthy of public viewing. Hansen shared her own joy at seeing "my peeps" in a gallery, when she came across L. S. Lowry's painting *The Cripples*.

She also described a hopeful new trend. "People with disabilities are engaged in a cultural reclamation project. No longer content to be absent citizens on the cultural landscape, disabled people throughout the world are laying claim to cultural spaces on their own terms." She showed pictures of beautified crutches and wheelchairs, including crutches she herself uses, explaining that "they have become points of disability culture and pride", "instruments of self-expression and social change".

Marie LeBlanc, whose photo *Red Dress* was in the exhibit, faces barriers because her disabilities are invisible – environmental illness, fibromyalgia, interstitial cystitis, emotional trauma, depression, and the legacy of twenty-four surgeries to treat conditions such as endometriosis and a thyroid tumour. She is in constant physical pain, and her eyesight and memory are getting weaker. Yet she finds the world incredibly beautiful – drawn especially to shadows and reflections – and takes her camera with her everywhere, calling it her "memory bank". In *Red Dress*, she is completely encased in the reflection of a beautiful red and white dress in a shop window. "In that piece, it's almost like I'm trapped. Nobody can see me. Yet, at the same time, they see the inner beauty in a world that often seems chaotic and confusing."



Marie LeBlanc and her photograph "Red"

Master of Ceremonies Ryan Ash leavened the afternoon program with some stand-up comedy where he talked about his own ADHD and adjusting to living in Winnipeg.

Dress", in the ART + BODY juried art exhibit.

ART + BODY: See Me Hear also offered a juried visual art exhibit, featuring the work of [Alice Crawford](#), [Cara Mason](#), David Kehrer, [Diane Driedger](#), [Marie LeBlanc](#), [Ron Dini](#), Shonnah Reid, [Susan Aydan Abbott](#), and [Yvette Cenerini](#).

A stimulating and exciting two-day odyssey, ART + BODY: See Me Hear had something for everyone. And what's more, it reminded us that impairments or challenges can be powerful drivers of artistic excellence – and that a close-minded society, a society of exclusion, is what really disables people. **Upcoming Events:**

Sargent & Victor & Me

Written and Performed by Debbie Patterson

Directed by Arne MacPherson

February 27th – March 9th 2014 at the Asper Centre for Theatre and Film – 400 Colony Street (University of Winnipeg Campus)

For more information, please see: <http://www.theatreprojectsmanitoba.ca/wp/sargent-and-victor/>

Chrysalis 2013 Manitoba Deaf Juried Art Show

Featuring Vanecia Austria, Campion Bourque, Alice Crawford, Jocelynn Johnson, Brenda Roznowski, Jo-Ann Schroeder, Jessica Szacilowski, Judyta Szacilowski, Coleen Turner, Denise Watson-Jarigen, and Dana Zimmer. And California Guest Deaf Artist, Joshua Lacosse.

Oct 25 – Nov 8, 2013 at Gallery Lacosse, 169 Lilac Street

Opening Night Friday, October 25, 2013 from 7:30 – 9:30 pm

Live performance by ASL Storyteller Christine Mitchell and video ASL storytelling by Joanna Hawkins.

ASL Interpreters will be on site to bridge communications.

For more information about the work of the **Arts & Disability Network Manitoba (ADNM)**, and local resources for artists with disabilities, please see: <http://www.adnm.ca/>

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About Sara Arenson

Multimedia Journalist specializing in hard news and commentary from Canada and around the world. Also an Indy television producer, screenwriter, playwright, and actress. Just get me to a karaoke. I'll take care of the rest.

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