

De'VIA: A Cry for Social Change

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Abstract

Deaf art and Deaf artists have existed since the beginning of time, but they were not recognized until a group of empowered individuals formed an art colony that would birth the movement of Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) in 1989. Riding on the many waves of the Civil Rights Movement, these artists created pieces that empowered this disenfranchised group and called out the atrocities of the society they lived in. This paper will investigate both the social and art history influences of the artists that started this movement, specifically Chuck Baird and Betty G. Miller, as well as Nancy Rourke who is a part of the second wave of this movement. By analyzing the context and subject matter of their works, it can be concluded that this art movement has been a result of and continues to bring social change to the Deaf community.

Attitudes of Postmodernism

De'VIA was born under the umbrella of Postmodernism which came about in the 1970s as a response to the movement of Modernism. Like all art movements, these are conversations and responses across time among groups that change based on the ever-changing events and values of the world. Modernism came about in the early 1900s as a means of celebrating industrialization and modernity. Those who created art within this movement praised the simplicity and cleanliness of factory production and valued efficiency and functionality over form. This was considered to be the essence of beauty within this movement. After the events of World War II, artists and the world as a whole were able to see the capabilities of human beings. As a response to this, many artists broke away from the clean-lined boxes of Modernism and sought after a movement that rejected these very values.

Most art movements preceding Postmodernism stayed relatively within the realms of what would be considered “high” and “low art.” “High art” was for the aristocracy and could be enjoyed by those with a lot of money and refined tastes. “Low art” was considered for the common people. In the beginnings of Modernism, there was a rejection of this separation, and artists sought out ways in which they could level the playing field between these two categories. More artists were created out of intuition and broke away from the traditions that come from formal art training. Although this was quite revolutionary at the time, Postmodernism came about through the rise in social justice movements that recognized the habitual disenfranchisement of certain groups within American society. Modernism broke away from

many artistic traditions, but it was still heavily dominated by White men. Postmodernism came as a means to allow the voices of minorities to be heard.

There are three key principles of Postmodernism. The first is that there needs to be an immediate meaning to it, which means the piece has cultural relevance. Instead of pieces focusing on stories in the Christian bible or iconic rulers throughout history, artists under this movement stick to what is prevalent within their culture and society at that present moment. The second principle is that art can be made from anything. In the past, art that was considered high-end would be made from expensive materials such as canvas and oil pigments. Under the Postmodernist movement, artists have the freedom to use anything they can get their hands on and define it as art. This goal was to democratize art, as the expectation to make art out of specific materials pigeonholed many artists that couldn't afford such materials. The final principle is that the concept behind the piece is more important than the piece itself. There is a strong belief that the deeper meaning behind the work is what brings value to the piece and not the finished product itself (Artincontext, 2022). All of these principles were set as a means to make art more accessible to make and observe by the common person. This lined up well with the Civil Rights Movement because many disenfranchised groups did not have the ability either socially, financially, or both to obtain formal training in this industry.

Under this social context, many artists who resided within certain marginalized groups rose and formed their movements under the umbrella of Postmodernism. An example of this would be Feminist Art which discussed issues pertaining to issues women specifically face such as domestic violence, sexism, and employment issues. Although there is no clear evidence, one could assume that those who curated the De'VIA art movement followed this same wave of resistance in an attempt to express their specific social issues. A connection between this

movement and Postmodernism is with the Disabilities Movement and the creation of Disability Art.

Disability Rights and Art Movements

Before World War I, there was little support and acceptance of people with disabilities within America. These people were considered unfit to contribute to society so everything was done to make them invisible, from institutionalization to sterilization. Purification and segregation were considered to be acts of mercy (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). It wasn't until veterans returned from the war with lifelong injuries that would impair their ability to function within American society that this was considered to be a problem. Although this was recognized as an issue following the first world war, it was not considered to be a serious problem until more injured vets returned after the second.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed which prohibited the discrimination of anyone based on race, religion, sex, color, or national origin, but it did not cover the discrimination on the basis of physical or mental health. Although this Act gave many more freedoms to those within disenfranchised groups, those who had any mental or physical disability would and could be discriminated against. As a means to get equal protection for all, the Rehabilitation Act was instated in 1973. Under this Act, an equal opportunity would be provided for all regardless of their capabilities to obtain employment and have access to federally funded programs. This opened up many freedoms for those with disabilities, however, they would not receive the same protections as the Civil Rights Movement until the enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Regardless, this social change during the 1960s and '70s was the exact wave that pushed artists within this group to speak up and create as a means of social commentary and change.

Disability Art is defined as a rejection of the negative assumptions associated with the lives of those who reside within this group. It also defines their own identities, expresses a common pride within the community, and works together to reflect both the individual and collective experience of the group (TheArtStory). The core value within this movement is that it is really the society around a person that makes them disabled, not themselves. This means that their minds and bodies aren't the problems, society is really the problem that should adjust to them instead of expecting those with disabilities to adjust to the standard. Within this movement, one can understand the experience of the disenfranchised and how they view the world around them. Much like De'VIA, this movement praises the unique abilities of different people and comments on the damaging effects of societal standards.

Spectrum: The Beginnings of De'VIA

In the early 1970s, a Deaf artist by the name of Betty G. Miller started making art specifically through the lens of the Deaf experience. Although many deaf artists were making art prior to this time including herself, during this wave of major social change she started to make the earliest pieces of art which would be considered to be under the De'VIA movement. She and a group of other Deaf artists such as Chuck Baird had the collective desire to create an art colony that began in Austin, Texas where the Austin Zoo is currently located. Most of those who joined this colony were Deaf, but a few hearing individuals were a part of it who were interpreters in the community. Most of those who joined were from out of the state of Texas and all art styles were welcome including theater, dance, poetry, and drawing.

In an interview on the colony, Betty G. Miller mentioned that "looking back, there hasn't been any organization like that" which goes to show how unique and monumental this movement

was (YouTube, 2014). She also mentioned that she could not recall any deaf dancers before the start of this colony. This would make a lot of sense because traditional training for dancing would not have been accessible to deaf individuals. Under this colony, artists of all different backgrounds, styles, and preferences came together in a place where they could all be free to be themselves and express their ideas. Those that taught themselves certain techniques could pass the same knowledge on to someone else and they could all bond under the shared experience of their Deafhood. This colony was groundbreaking because, for the first time, deaf artists could communicate in the exact style that they wanted to, whether that be with their body movements or marks on a sheet of paper; anything that wasn't a verbal language. This was a complete rejection of societal expectations and a pure acceptance of who they were.

Nancy Rourke who is responsible for the second wave of De'VIA signed a poem made by Dorothy Miles about Spectrum. In this poem, she describes how each color of the rainbow comes together and creates the community that is Spectrum. There are repeated motifs about the colors blending together and becoming free which is indicative of how those within this colony saw themselves and the colony itself (Rourke, 2016b). There is a strong sense of community that comes with this unity of color and each color can be representative of a different person with a different background. Regardless of their differences, they all came together to create vibrant works within the colony. Although this colony did not last very long, it had a lasting impact on those within the colony and those who felt the ripples of it. This lasting impact would be the De'VIA art movement.

De'VIA

Before the conclusion of Spectrum, nine artists who lead this colony collectively created and signed a manifesto for the movement of De'VIA. This movement would stand for Deaf View/Image Art and the term was first coined in 1989. This term was created as a means to separate the Deaf experience from the English that is expected of them when living in American society. This would be a “totally new term that would reflect the meaning in the spirit of ASL rather than in English, the language of the dominant culture”(Durr, 2006, p. 169). Foreign in the eyes of the dominant Hearing culture, this was considered to be a comfort in the eyes of the Deaf.

Much like the collective ideology of Spectrum, this movement would be a means for Deaf artists to express the specifics of their Deaf experience. Although on the surface this would appear to be a movement specifically for the Deaf community and those who identify as Deaf, the manifesto includes anyone who is making art with the intention of focusing on the Deaf experience, so hearing people could be included. In addition to this, not all Deaf art would fit under the movement of De'VIA. Those under this movement also utilize bold and contrasting colors and textures. An emphasis would be on the body such as the hands, eyes, mouth, and ears due to the focus of these things within the Deaf experience. All of these things are a means to comment on how society handles their community as well as how they view themselves. This manifesto also covered this definition under all different practices of art because De'VIA isn't limited to fine arts; something Postmodernism had already rejected (Durr, 2006). Chuck Baird and Betty G. Miller were two of the nine that signed this manifesto and went on their own paths of De'VIA.

There are three categories under De'VIA: resistance, affirmation, and liberation art. Resistance art is made to comment on issues of oppression and political struggles in the Deaf community. Examples of this would be subject matters of oralism or audism, both rejections of Deafhood as a means of mainstreaming into the Hearing, English-speaking world. Affirmation art is made as a celebration and validation of the Deaf experience. Examples of this would be subject matters where the central figure is free to sign and be in touch with their native language and community. Liberation art is made in combination with resistance and affirmation (Durr, 2006). When an artist both criticizes society and embraces the positive experiences of the Deaf community, this shows the process of liberation because it shows both the negative and positive experiences that present the transcendence of reality. Under the first wave of De'VIA, Betty G. Miller was known for creating mostly resistance art.

First Wave of De'VIA: Betty G. Miller

Betty G. Miller is considered to be the mother of De'VIA and is often described as being ahead of her time when it comes to this movement. It would make sense that she was so ahead of her time when it came to the world of resistance art because she grew up in a strong Deaf home with an artist for a father (Deaf Art, 2020). Unfortunately, she was mainstreamed in school and taught the oral method so although she had strong ties within her community, there was also an incredible rift that she would have felt in her school experience because she was not allowed to use her native language (Betty G. Miller, 2010). One of Miller's best-known works of resistance art is her piece entitled *Ameslan Prohibited* was done before the creation of De'VIA in 1972 which is a simple, yet graphic, black pen drawing of two hands bound in handcuffs with the fingers cut off at the ends of the fingers in multiple sections (Miller, 1972). The decapitated

fingers represent the experience Deaf students would have in classrooms where ASL was prohibited. Teachers would strike their fingers with rulers as a means to discourage signing and encourage verbal speaking. Much like many pieces that express the hardships of a collective group, this shows both the cruelty of those who had power as well as the deep-rooted trauma of those who had to experience this.

The insides of the fingers are visible which are hollow much like those of a doll. There are many repetitive motifs within De'VIA and one of them is the image of a deaf person as a doll. This can be explained by how Hearing culture would view Deaf people as “dummies” or dolls who were unable to speak. This stigma about their inability to assimilate to Hearing culture not only emphasized this label of a doll, but also the inevitable emptiness that a Deaf person would experience as a result of unrealistic expectations. They were (and still are) expected to assimilate and blend into the Hearing culture by accepting English and rejecting American Sign Language. The term “Ameslan” is an old term used to describe ASL. “Ame” is “American”, “s” is for “sign” and “lan” is for “language”. Much like anyone who is forced into a world they cannot fit into, those who are forced to reject their Deafhood feel enslaved, mutilated, and hallowed out which is exactly what is shown in this piece and why it is so monumental fifty years later. Chuck Baird was the one who readily mentioned Miller being ahead of her time in a journal entry he wrote in Volume 1 of *Deaf Studies Today!* and in it, he goes on to describe how her style didn't reflect his own feelings that he conveyed in his art, but he was able to realize a style that did connect with which was affirmation art.

First Wave of De'VIA: Chuck Baird

Chuck Baird was one of the prominent artists to create and follow the movement of De'VIA but didn't have a close connection with resistance art the way Miller did which could be a result of his own upbringing. He too was raised in a Deaf home, but attended Deaf schools growing up so he was able to stay connected with his community both in and outside of his home. When he attended the Kansas School for the Deaf, he had the privilege of having Grace Bilger as an art teacher who specialized in watercolor painting under the Regionalist style. Both the influence of Grace Bilger and his positive experience within the Deaf community can be seen within his own works of affirmation art.

A drastic contrast from Miller's work which typically included harsh lines and few colors, many of Baird's work revealed clean brushstrokes and vibrant colors. He primarily utilized oil paint on canvas for his pieces because oil paint allows the user to layer and create depth that isn't typically capable with acrylic (Seremeth, 2014). One of his most well-known works is *Left and Right*, which has a central figure of a brain held by two hands with a strong depth of field and juxtaposing scale of figures reminiscent of Surrealism. Beneath the brain is a chair that resembles a witness chair that holds two calla lilies crossing each other's paths. The left hand is a hue of blue while the right hand is dipped in all the colors of the rainbow (Baird, 2018).

This piece is a perfect representation of affirmation art because it shows the beauty and power behind ASL and the Deaf community. The different colored hands represent the different sides of the brain: logic and creativity. The crossed calla lilies represent the overlapping connections between the two hemispheres of the brain (Baird, 2018). The chair can be seen as a representation of how artistic expression is the equivalent of being on the witness stand in court

and speaking one's truth. Although typically not done this way, the hands also represent the sign for "brain" which is done with one hand. All of these positive connections reinforce that this piece is a celebration of the Deaf experience and a creator. Unlike the hollow and mutilated fingers of Miller's *Ameslan Prohibited*, this work shows the vibrancy that comes from being connected and proud of oneself and their culture.

The De'VIA art movement didn't die when Baird and Miller died. Like many art movements, there are waves of De'VIA and this was only the first. The person noted as being responsible for this second wave is Nancy Rourke.

Second Wave of De'VIA: Nancy Rourke

Much like the first wave of De'VIA, the second wave came as a result of additional social change and shifts. This second wave began around 2009, which would seem to be an odd time for the wave to begin again, with the lack of political shifts to support the Deaf community. However, it makes sense when looking at the trend of Deaf recognition within America at that time. Unlike any point before the 2000s, Deaf people were being recognized for their work on TV such as Marlee Matlin's appearance on "Dancing with the Stars" or the TV show *Switched at Birth* which had a Deaf main character played by a Deaf actress (Deaf Culture Timeline, 2013). Prior to this time, Deaf people were largely invisible to the collective American consciousness. Once they were recognized both for their Deafness and capabilities, even if they were not accepted by Hearing people, they were being seen.

Like Baird and Miller, Nancy Rourke was born deaf but her parents were unaware of this until she was six years old. She went to an oral school so she had similar experiences as Miller with being disconnected from her language and culture. As a means to communicate with her

parents at an early age, Rourke began to draw (Rourke, 2022). She has many influences which can be connected back to the origins of De'VIA, but out of any of the artists described here, she had the most explicit influence from outside movements and artists.

In an interview with Rourke, she describes her influences to be from Fauvism such as Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian from De Stijl, and Jon Michel Basquiat from Neo-Expressionism. Matisse in Fauvism looked to separate the color from the subject by utilizing bright, contrasting colors. Within this movement, there is a play with color that brings a new sense of balance instead of bringing reality back onto the canvas. These colors represent feelings over their real hues within nature (YouTube, 2020). Mondrian too focused his work on the choice of color but limited his palette to blues, reds, and yellows primarily (Piet Mondrian, n.d.). Basquiat was widely known for his artistic improvisations that made harsh comments on how Black people were treated in America. He was known for writing down words and crossing them out within his work as well as the chalk-like and visible strokes he made within his pieces (Moore, 2019).

Much like any artist, Rourke's pieces are an amalgamation of her experiences and influences and it shows within her art. Due to her nuanced experience within the Deaf and Hearing communities, many of her works articulate liberation which is a combination of resistance and affirmation art. A really great example of this would be her piece titled *ASL Thrives* which is done in oil on canvas and has a combination of text and image, like Basquiat. There is mainly yellow, blue, and red utilized in this work. Rourke is known for using these specific colors which she describes as being representative of different themes. Yellow is the symbol for hope and light because light is needed for Deaf people to communicate. Red is the symbol for empowerment and blue is the symbol for Audism and oppression (Rourke, 2011a).

She also utilizes strong brush strokes that indicate the mark of the artist much like many within the Neo-Expressionism and Fauvism movements.

In *ASL Thrives* there is a central text that reads, “With ASL, a Deaf mind THRIVES” which is only half of the words. The rest are crossed out with blue “x”s and without them, the text reads “With no ASL, a Deaf mind is a terrible thing to waste.” This double meaning allows the reader to see both sides of the ASL experience for a Deaf person. In the far right corner, there is a feminine figure that is pointing to her head which is the sign for MIND. In the far left corner, there are hands that fingerspell out “ASL.” Both of these bottom figures are surrounded by the colors red, yellow, and black which indicate the symbol of hope and empowerment. Separating these two figures is a blue void in the shape of a square (Rourke, 2011b). This separation would imply that there is something (the Hearing community) that will try to prevent this connection between a Deaf person’s native language and their minds. This shows how although there is incredible oppression that is experienced by many within this community including Rourke herself, there is so much empowerment and beauty that comes from the connection and acceptance of the culture and their means of communication. Through these works, one can truly gain an understanding of the Deaf experience and all of the positive and negative aspects that are expressed are catalysts for social change.

Conclusion

Much like every art movement throughout history, De'VIA came about as a result of social issues and cultural shifts. This all began as a result of the bigger movements for Civil Rights and ripples are continued to be felt in the present day. Chuck Baird and Betty G. Miller were revolutionary artists of their time and their art continues to impact people in and outside of

the Deaf community. Nancy Rourke picked up that torch and continues to be a strong advocate for social justice through the context of creation and expression. De'VIA is something that anyone can feel for, and if they understand and connect with the community they can also feel with those who are disenfranchised. These are the things that can create positive social change within the American community at large.

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