

Chicago!

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Coffee Shop Notes

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I love to travel and see new places, and I like it even better when I have a purpose for doing so, which brings focus to my trip. It was within this frame of mind that I flew to Chicago early Saturday morning, on May 23rd to attend the last full day of the Deaf Way Illinois conference. My attendance was largely solicited by renowned DeVIA artist Chuck Baird, who told me that the artists (those who were able to attend) would be having a roundtable discussion to address the wants and needs of the deaf art community. The roundtable was scheduled for 2 pm, and in the morning, I met the art gallery coordinator Jill Stark, an extremely skilled watercolorist and designer who works for Precious Moments, and her assistant Laura Kim (also an exhibiting artist) for a look around the art gallery.

The diversity of visual styles, from syntheses of early Modernism to Surrealism to pictorialism to abstraction, and the range of conceptual expression, much of which dealt with deafness as a subject, was striking. Dawn Barnett's sculpture of a pregnant woman, while being of a natural grey beige, echoed the long necks of her fantastically colorful paintings. To Barnett, the long neck represents the struggle of using our voices. Subtle for a Deaf motif. Nice.

Also noteworthy is the latest work of Chuck Baird and Susan Dupor, which demonstrated thematic evolution. Departing from his well-known large-canvas paintings of subjects and their representative signs or handshapes, Baird has created a series of scrapbook style portraits, culled from antique photographs, with handwritten commentary transforming those anonymous photos into scenes of deaf life from around the turn of the 20th century. Dupor seems to have moved beyond her reputation as an creator of audist DeVIA (that is, art that represents negative experiences of being deaf, i.e. FAMILY DOG), with her recent paintings which, while still surrealist in style, now incorporates humor. One diptych, in a rather Bairdesque approach, depicts a woman signing "ICE-FREEZE" and "SLIP-FALL" while slipping on the ice.

Later that morning, I attended a presentation by Deborah Meranski Sonnenstrahl (author of DEAF ARTISTS OF AMERICA, published by DawnSignPress) who shared with the audience anecdotes from her book and research experiences. I must say I was delighted, as was the audience, when Sonnenstrahl regaled us with tales of early American deaf artists and their places in our history. The first deaf artist of America, William Mercer, studied under one of the Peale brothers who later painted a portrait of Laurent Clerc! This reminded me of the connection which the deaf Civil War news correspondent and poet Laura Redden Searing had with both Abraham Lincoln (they were acquainted) and his assassin, John Wilkes Booth (Searing helped him pen a love poem).

After lunch, the two-hour long roundtable talk commenced, and while there was no explicit agenda, a lot of significant thoughts came out into the open. Among them were concerns about the low incidence of representation in major art galleries and museums—a lack of strong deaf arts journalism was identified as one significant factor; without publicity, artistic reputations are hard to build. Other issues also included protecting one's work through copyrighting, and utilizing the Internet as a source of networking.

Past histories of deaf arts endeavors such as Spectrum (during the 1970s) and Deaf Artists of America (late 1980s-early 1990s) were reviewed briefly and it is now hoped that in the near

future, we will be able to make better connections through the benefits of communication technology and network more around the country. The idea of a conference for deaf artists was also strongly appealing, but this has not been resolved yet, due to more immediate concerns of strengthening the deaf art community's network. I offered to use my new domain, <http://www.artdeaf.com> , as a starting point for the cyberspace version of the deaf art community, and hopefully, we will be able to get the site jumping soon with a dynamic collection of information and links. More on this to come in the near future!

I then spent the rest of the afternoon and evening meeting people and touring the exhibit booths (Chuck Baird and Iris Aranda had sales of their artwork there). The Holiday Inn O'Hare International had a nice variety of dining facilities, and I enjoyed the food. Then on Sunday morning, Laura Kim, who is a native of Chicago, gave me a tour of the uptown districts before I returned to DC that afternoon.

Somehow, the history books in high school and college missed out on the vibrant urbane creativity that permeates Chicago and I am very glad I had the chance to finally visit the city, however briefly! Mark my words, I will visit again.

It was an honor to meet and network with some of America's finest Deaf artists and allies. Brenda Schertz, for instance, is an amazing person, being energetic and focused, and her experiences in working with gallery exhibitions of deaf art (she coordinated the national tour of Deaf Art three years ago) will continue to be one of the many valuable resources of the deaf art community as we move further into the 21st century.

To see a picture from the roundtable discussion, please visit <http://www.artdeaf.com/CSN57.html>

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