

Expression in Print

by Joan Popovitch-Kutscher

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Deaf Artist in Residence at Taft Hearing Impaired Elementary in Santa Ana

Joan Popovich-Kutscher the Deaf Artist in Residence: at Taft Hearing Impaired Elementary in Santa Ana. She is jointly supported by the California Arts Council and the Santa Ana Unified School District for the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years. All of the children at Taft have art with Joan once a week.

Both the process and results of my printmaking are symbolic and hold great significance for me. I was born deaf in 1951, in Pasadena, California. At the age of three my parents placed me in a care home and then in a state hospital. Everyone assumed that I was mentally retarded. It was discovered years later that I was deaf, not retarded, and I transferred to the Riverside School for the Deaf. I was isolated by my inability to interact with children who were hearing impaired. Having adapted successfully to my previous environment, I had to learn that what was appropriate behavior at Pacific State Hospital was not appropriate behavior at Riverside. My childhood was full of pain and confusion. Gradually I began to trust and respond positively to my new environment. I first started to draw and use scissors when I was four years old.



Joan Popovich-Kutscher the "Deaf Artist in Residence" at Taft Hearing Impaired Elementary in Santa Ana. She is jointly supported by the California Arts Council and the Santa Ana Unified School District for the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years. All of the children at Taft have art with Joan once a week. Photo by Sylvia Edwards.

In the fall of 1958, when I was seven years old, I formed my first clay object. One morning before breakfast I woke up, walked to the living room and crawled under a table. I sat on the floor all hunched over. No one could see me. I saw small pieces of clay on the floor and picked some up. I was there for some time, sitting under the table with my back to everyone working very intently. I formed a dog from the clay with my own hands. The Psych. Tech. nurse was Mrs. Lux Armstrong. She crawled on her hands and knees to see what I was doing. She sneaked up behind me, looked over my shoulder and was very surprised. The tiny piece of clay that I had scraped off the floor had been made into a very tiny perfect dog. It had pointed ears, a nose, four legs with feet and a tail that curled over its back. I was pulling my hair out of my neck trying to stick it into the clay dog, Mrs. Armstrong was so afraid that I would crumble it up when I saw her. After much coaxing I finally gave it to her, Although I had never seen a dog I imagined one in my mind.

I entered the Riverside School for the Deaf in the fall of 1959 when I was eight and a half years old. I was



'Red Mark Passed'

distortions, gestured wildly, hollered and displayed a grotesque posture. Mrs. Fauth chose to draw a picture of my unsmiling face with my hair a mess. This showed me how terrible I looked and she took me to a mirror where I couldn't accept my appearance. When I was in a good mood she showed me that I looked neat. In contrast she would draw a pleasant face on the paper, and show me how I would look if I smiled. After taking a good look at myself, I would put my hands all over my face. This incident fostered my interest in art.

surprised at the difference in behavior between the deaf and mentally retarded children. This environment was new to me. The deaf children never communicated with me because they disliked my odd actions. I was often frustrated and angry and would go to my room drawing my feeling with symbols. This occurred frequently. I felt chained and closed in. It was the invention of my manual skill, ingenuity and originality that aided me in creating. The end result on paper could express my moods. My eyes seemed glazed, my expression foolish and vapid. Most counselors and teachers couldn't handle me because of my strong emotions. I had no encouragement or love. Finally my teacher, Mrs. Bette Fauth, devised a good plan. When I was in a bad mood, I expressed unusual facial

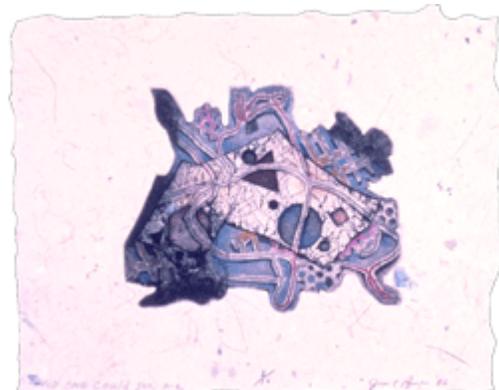


'Confusion of Silence'

degrees of sharpness, communicates the sharp pains in my life. The fear and darkness in this early period of my life is represented by dark values and tones.

The imagery in my art is based upon my personal history and I have found etching on zinc plates the best way to express my self. The first record of an etched print was in 1513, the year Urs Graf produced his etched prints. By 1515 etching had become a major art form. I am still studying the etching process. By experimenting I can create very important visual effect. The subject of my work focuses on the period of my life when I lived in a State Hospital. I discovered some symbols that I saw in an Alpha Beta Market. The small promotional game card formed the appropriate sharp line imagery when the numbers were removed, which represents the destruction and frustration in my life. In the game card, the lines represent meanness and roughness. The sharp lined image of rope pulling the graphic symbols, bearing different

I etch impressions which vibrate the negative and positive sharpness, looking at each image carefully, and selecting woven fabrics which suggest personal meanings. I feel I need to get control of the lines on the cloth to express emotion. My pictures are often free flowing as exemplified by the different images of cloth on the etching plate and represent my feeling as a released prisoner. My concentrated effort into this style of imagery refers to the suffering of being jailed which I have felt. Technically I love working on clear contact paper, cutting the holes out with the small x-acto knife. I go beyond the material and onto the background which has been treated at some length to signify its



'No One Could See Me'

importance, my personal sensibility, and the tension of working on the etching plate. The fear of dark, the dots and building shadows in different areas are carefully controlled to express my meaning. Building up various material, using printing techniques, and color selection help me express my mood and my experiences. Careful control of color combination is an effective means to express the emotional quality. I love the feeling of rolling the ink roller in my hands. I clean the etching plate with Q-tips to express the bright line of the Alpha Beta game card image and the active flowing rope. The inked plate is printed on hand made paper. I cannot wait to see the final print. I am excited by creating the print. Although printmaking is my media, sometimes I did not accept the etching plate but by working more I learned to express my feelings through colors combined with black lines.



'No Notice or News'

My imagery on handmade paper looked messy, resembling the old building at the State Hospital which was very dirty, cold and unsanitary. Consequently I often became ill and feverish. I tried to print the etching plate on the hand made paper because the personal experience matched the emotion of being entrapped in the mental hospital, an old dirty building. In spite of these negative surroundings, my attitude was positive. Both my life and my art took a different approach than that of those around me. I attempt to express that change by making the work more personal with deeper psychological impact, and feel

that the handmade paper can be a narrative device in which the psychological issue is dealt with much better. This made the "heavier" theme more integrated, and could be read a little more intimately.

I studied art under Felix Kowalewski, my deaf teacher, from 1959 until 1970 when I graduated from high school. Although I had been drawing and painting for many years, printmaking was not available to me. I did know that I wanted a career as an artist. So after two years at Riverside City College, I transferred to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia for the next three years. There I studied painting and then Eric Marsh introduced me to printmaking and the subsequent exploration of new materials in 1973. I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from California Arts in 1975. Four years of full-time parenthood followed. Despite a disappointing year spent at California State University, Pomona, I wanted to continue my art education, emphasizing the symbolic through the technical. Travel and study have enlarged my awareness of ancient belief systems and related imagery. My dream is to learn more about both the artistic and technical aspects of printmaking in Paris; additionally, I would benefit from exposure to the innumerable old master prints there.



'Myself'

Through working as a symbolist, I feel that I can communicate expression and ideas. Like earlier symbolists whose visual imagery was powerful, I represent a contemporary symbolic artist who hopes to influence others to become better artists. After the natural barriers to learning have been broken down, I believe and trust that I will continue to grow and do this work.
