

Master Printmaker

by Terri Manning

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Nothing has ever come easy for Joan Popovich-Kutscher. Misdiagnosed as mentally retarded, she was confined to a state hospital for many years. Now she is making up for lost time.

Joan E. Popovich-Kutscher—39, living in Pomona, California with her husband and 12-year-old son — prints intricate visual images on handmade paper that express powerful and deep emotion. "My childhood was full of pain and confusion," she recalls. Gravely misunderstood at three-and-a-half **years old** by her parents and misdiagnosed as moderately retarded, she was placed in a state hospital for the developmentally disabled. Out of contact with deaf children like herself and without a kindred soul around, Popovich-Kutscher's first language was art.



The den in Popovich-Kutscher's home, which doubles as her studio, is full of her artwork: paintings, drawings, prints, beautifully decorated boxes and handmade bound books. Stacks of her prints, on richly soft, handmade paper, line the room in their finely crafted oak frames, waiting for prospective exhibition opportunities. She is well-trained in various media but prefers printmaking, etchings on zinc plates, as the best way to express herself.

Her prints come in varying sizes and generally have a semi-square, semi-amorphous image concentrated in the center of the handmade paper. Within the printed space, Popovich-Kutscher condenses a complex mosaic of abstract details, both organic and sharp, to reveal an interior, psychological vision. Her paper is soft, thick, fibrous and speckled, beautifully accentuating the weight of the printed images. "All of my artwork," she says, "is drawn from feelings of frustration in my childhood.



"My mother wished I hadn't been born and thought I wasn't intended to survive because I was different," Popovich-Kutscher explains. When she was an infant, her parents took her to the John Tracy Clinic for consultation. Dissatisfied with the diagnosis that their fourth child was deaf and "seeking institutional commitment," they sought other opinions. At three-and-a-half, their daughter tested low on a verbal I.Q. test, one not typically administered to deaf children. Convinced by the test and willing to "accept placement in any facility," her parents arranged for her to be admitted to Pacific State Hospital, now Lanterman Developmental Center in Pomona, California.

'Self Portrait'

Popovich-Kutscher vividly remembers the dirty walls, the smells, and the cold, prison-like atmosphere of the state hospital, her home until she was almost nine. There she was medicated and denied access to education and communication. "Everyone assumed that I was mentally retarded," says Popovich-Kutscher, who has since completed two master's degrees, M.A. and M.F.A., and has received 29 awards for her artwork.

During her stay at Pacific State Hospital and throughout her childhood, Popovich-Kutscher excelled in arts and crafts. At an early age she learned to vent her feelings of frustration and entrapment in the things that she made. "I first started to draw and use scissors when I was four years old," she wrote in her master's thesis a few years ago. It is not too surprising that her talent in art is what eventually led one state hospital nurse to suspect that she had been wrongly placed.

One morning when Popovich-Kutscher was seven, she hid under a table and made her first clay object. The nurse, Lux Armstrong, who found her that morning, was very impressed with what the little girl had created. "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."

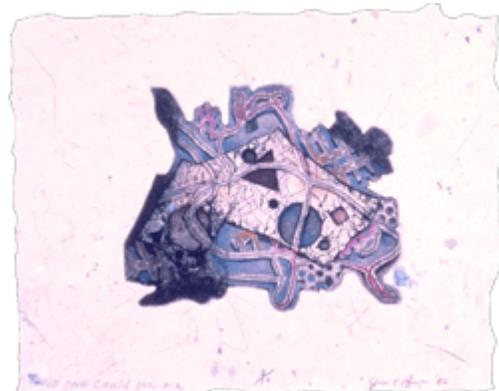
This crucial incident resulted in a long process, at the insistence of Armstrong, involving consultation after consultation which would eventually rule out retardation and confirm her deafness. The clay dog story, a turning point in Popovich-Kutscher's life, is the subject of a beautifully bound book titled *The Art Imagery of Dog Clay*. Popovich-Kutscher crafted the book in 1987, complete with text and a series of prints richly symbolizing the emotions she felt, finally released from the shackles of misdiagnosis.

Her I.Q. was retested at seven-and-a-half years old and proved to be above average - a gifted child. One doctor reported, "The change in the functional I.Q. during the period of treatment at Pacific State Hospital was in many ways phenomenal. Such changes occur rarely in children so hospitalized. It would appear that she no longer belongs in a hospital for the mentally retarded but should be treated primarily as a deaf child."

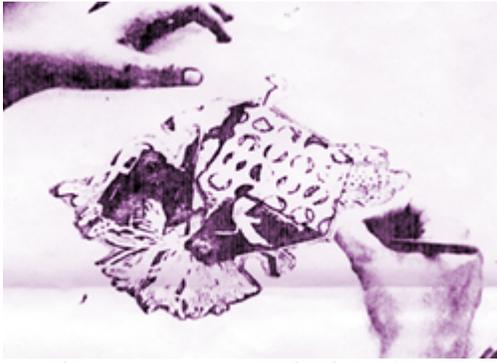
In reality, she never belonged there, but it took another year to completely convince her parents and hospital authorities of their mistake. The consulting doctor added in his report, "Because of the parents' concern about the diagnosis it was suggested that this matter be brought up over a period of time in order that they could readjust to the changing concept of the diagnosis." Finally, she was transferred to the California School for the Deaf in Riverside.

Once in school among other deaf children her own age, her troubles were far from over. A painful adjustment period ensued. "I didn't know the difference between being deaf and mentally retarded. Everyone was using sign language, which I didn't understand," she recalled. Her behavior was strange and unpredictable. She was often in trouble and was not well-liked by her peers. The stigma of mental retardation stuck even as she made progress academically to catch up with her age group.

Her social skills lagged behind. "When I was in a bad mood, I expressed unusual facial distortions, gestured wildly, hollered and displayed a grotesque posture." One teacher, Bette Fauth, communicated to her how



'No One Could See Me'



Hand painting on an etched print.

this behavior seemed to others by drawing. "She 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." One of her prints, *I Couldn't Accept My Appearance*, symbolically addresses her experience with the burden of youthful insecurities.

Her first report card at the school for the deaf noted her gift for art activities and creative ideas. Art, Popovich-Kutscher explains, "became my means of communication," before she learned American Sign Language. "I was often frustrated and angry and would go to my room drawing my feelings with symbols," she wrote in her thesis.

Although she practiced art from a young age, her formal training began at the school for the deaf, where a deaf art instructor encouraged her to study painting and drawing. After graduation, she continued studying art for two years at Riverside City College before transferring to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. While earning her B.F.A., she was introduced to printmaking. She was impressed with how prints could create a different kind of three-dimensional space, a suitable medium for the psychological content of her work. She then enrolled in graduate school at California State University at Fullerton, where she earned both her M.A. and M.F.A. in printmaking in 1987. As part of her 126-page master's thesis, Popovich-Kutscher discusses the troubled life of Vincent Van Gogh, whose art, like her own, expresses desperate and deep emotions.

To this day, her style centers around personal symbols. All of her prints have a powerful depth that extends beyond the two-dimensional surface, echoing the complicated, multi-faceted depth of her personality. One shape, a rectangle with two square holes, was inspired by a supermarket game card. She used it in a series of prints to represent herself, focusing on the period of her life when she lived in the state hospital. "The small promotional game card formed the appropriate sharp-line imagery when the numbers were removed, which represents the destruction and frustration of my life," she explains. "The lines represent meanness and roughness. The sharp-lined image of rope pulling the graphic symbols, bearing different degrees of sharpness, communicates the sharp pains in my life. The fear and darkness ... is represented by dark values and tones."



At work outside her home in California.

Popovich-Kutscher is well-versed in the formalities and footwork required of artists struggling for recognition. She has an extensive exhibition history and has delivered lectures in American Sign Language to hearing-impaired artists about printmaking and how to get artwork shown. Several individuals and organizations in her community have added Popovich-Kutscher's prints to their collections.

Currently Popovich-Kutscher teaches printmaking, papermaking and bookbinding to hearing-impaired youngsters in schools of Orange County, California. She received a one-year grant to cover her salary and materials, and is the only deaf visual artist teaching in the county.



Popovich-Kutscher leading a workshop at DAA's 1987 conference.

Her grant was not renewed for next year, and she did not get other fellowships. Being deaf, she says, makes it especially hard to find sponsors in the art community. Ideally, she wants to teach and inspire children to express themselves and communicate through art, but the California Basic Educational Skills Test required for all California teachers-which discourages many deaf Californians from completing their credentials-stands in her way. Once again, Popovich-Kutscher has come across another test which determines her future opportunities.
