

# New Ground in Examining Deaf Art

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*Coffee Shop Notes*

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Questions about the nature of deaf experience can be very perplexing, especially when trying to assess art by the deaf. We have identified DeVIA as a socio-cultural force addressing the issues of the culturally Deaf, and we are able to, through biographical information, identify mainstream artists who happen to be deaf. But what of the artists who do not identify themselves as culturally deaf, and yet create art from what is clearly deaf experience?

An alumna of Gallaudet University, having majored in art history, Louise Stern is currently in London, studying Contemporary Art for her Master's at Sotheby's Institute of Art. In her dissertation proposal, she raises the above questions through examining the work of deaf artists Joseph Grigely and Aaron Williamson.

Grigely and Williamson both do not consider themselves Deaf like MJ Bienvenu would. Yet their art is distinctly informed by their deafness. Grigely juxtaposes conversational notes written with hearing people in intellectually and/or aesthetically intriguing combinations, and Williamson is a performance artist who explores sound as he experiences it.

Stern's research will endeavor to place the issues of art and deafness in a position not widely used in academia—that of the norm, instead of "the other," the oddity, the deviant. That is, Louise Stern intends to demonstrate how the art of Grigely and Williamson are not just reactions to mainstream values (or oppression) nor is it advancement of a particular cultural concept, like DeVIA tends to be. Rather, their artwork happens to depict deaf aspects of the human condition. To quote Stern, "Deafness as an experience is not formed in opposition to the experience of hearing any more than the experience of being African American is formed in opposition to the experience of being Caucasian."

Basically, Stern wants to get away from the "clichÉ of silence," stating that "deafness isn't about not being able to hear." Not being able to hear MAY be an important factor in the two artists' creative expression, but it is not necessarily the answer to why their work carries the impact it does, nor does it wholly validate whichever idea is at stake.

This is a monumental leap in the study of art by the deaf. We have only up to now found deaf art to be in terms of either the advancement of our cultural experiences or in terms of blending into the mainstream while remaining silent about our deafness, e.g. doing commercial art for others. Louise Stern has got something new at her fingertips.

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