

Spotlight On . . . Robert Wittig

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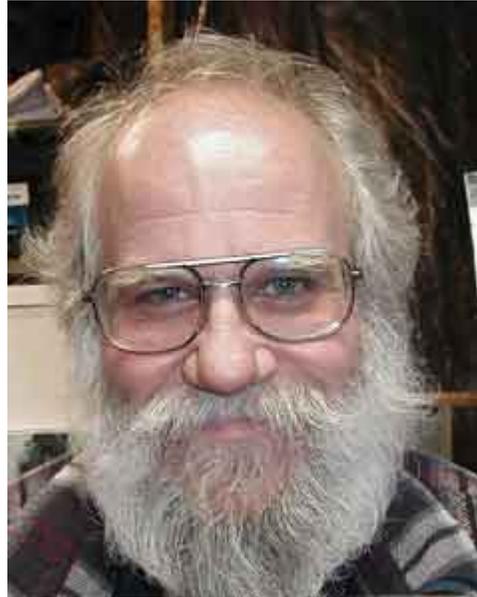
by Raymond Luczak

Staff Writer

Through an emailing list I was on, I first came across Robert Wittig's Web site and discovered that he was a ASL-using deaf artist living in Chicago. The quality of his artwork on his site intrigued me enough to ask him to do an email interview.

SIGNews: What led you to become an artist? What situation led you specifically down that path?

Wittig: Deafness and a stroke. Until June 1994, I was a hearing person, and had just about zero knowledge of either deafness or deaf culture. On Memorial Day weekend, 1994, I had a severe stroke that left me deaf, along with a lot of other physical, mental and emotional problems as well. I was almost unable to communicate because of aphasia (an impairment of the ability to use or comprehend words), and I was in a hospital for much of the following year. Eventually, the doctors decided that I was never going to improve any more, so they sent me home, and I went on SSDI as permanently disabled.



Prior to my stroke, I was a furniture finisher, and owned my own small business. The business had to be closed and the factory sold to pay bills and, in January 1996, I got tired of cleaning the house and watching TV I didn't understand, so I went down into the basement, and got out my old furniture painting tools, and began messing around on scraps of wood, and on the backs of canvases that people threw out in the alleys around my house, where my dog liked to walk me.

My left hand was weak, so I got some clay to mess with, figuring it would help my hand (eventually, I learned to use my right hand as my dominant hand), and my first real works were in terra cotta clay, but after I got my hands working a little better, I stopped with the clay and returned to painting. I have been painting and drawing ever since.

SIGNews: What kind of deafness do you have? And how did you learn ASL?

Wittig: My ears are okay, but the paths in my brain that transmit the signals for sound were destroyed by the stroke. Arthur Tomlinson, a Certified Deaf Interpreter who lives about a mile from my house, who, in addition to knowing several different sign languages, is skilled at communicating with "home signers" and deaf people who had never properly acquired language when they were children. Arthur found me one day and was the first person I was actually able to understand, in years. He was my first ASL teacher, and introduced me to the deaf community where I had many other teachers who were not professional teachers at all, but who took the time to help me out, one sign at a time, and still do.

I consider ASL my "first" language, because it was not until after I learned ASL well enough to communicate again, that I was able to put my mind to relearning English again, which was my birth language.

ASL and painting are so "everyday" to me that I don't really think about it. I don't think that ASL plays much of a part in painting, or vice versa; they are two totally different ways to communicate ASL being a reasoning language, and painting being a more emotional way of communicating, so that there is almost no overlap between the two, except when I get recruited to draw hand shapes for posters and flyers, for upcoming events.

SIGNews: What have you learned from using ASL?

Wittig: Before my stroke, I thought I understood human nature, but I did not. When I became deaf, friends whom I thought were for a lifetime, disappeared in a matter of weeks. At first, I was bitter and depressed, then I met up with some deaf people, made some new friends, figured out I could paint, learn, study and get my life back- not my "old life" but a totally new life- so I quit feeling sorry for myself, and got on with the business of living. I eventually got involved with the Anixter Center here in Chicago, teaching a class in basic computing skills for deaf adults, and working with ARD (Addiction Recovery for the Deaf).

So, what have I learned?

People are people- deaf or hearing. Time is the only really non-renewable resource that we have. You only get to use each minute once, and when they are all used up . . . poof, you're gone. Money is only worth what it is applied to; if you use it to destroy yourself, it is a liability, and even if used wisely, it can't purchase you any extra minutes, once your clock has run down.

I don't know whether my work will ever make much of a difference in the human condition. It is just another grain of sand or two on the beach. The best I can do is to make sure that the work is as honest as possible, and the best I can do. If I can make this so, then I have used my time to the best of my ability, and life cannot ask more than that of a person.

Somewhere over the last few years, I think I went from "deaf" to "Deaf." I stopped looking at deafness as a pathology and a deficit, and began to realize that it is just another way of experiencing existence, and that, like money, it can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the individual's attitude.