De’VIA: THE MOVEMENT MATURES

De’VIA has proved its enduring relevance as it has adapted its focus and imagery to reflect changes within society at large and within Deaf culture. While personal and cultural identity continue to be important in De’VIA, many contemporary artists do not see themselves as only Deaf, but visually reference multiple aspects of their identity, including how they identify sexually, culturally, and racially. One of the shaping forces on De’VIA since its forming is the influence of international artists and students who traveled to America to teach and study at NTID in Rochester or Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. A heightened awareness of international and racial diversity within Deaf culture is celebrated here in both Uzi Buzgalo and Theresa Matteson’s work.

Where De’VIA’s founders addressed external challenges to Deaf people, many younger Deaf artists are wrestling with both externally imposed concerns as well as issues about Deaf identity arising within the community itself. Underpinning these internal discussions is the either-or question: Are individuals who are Deaf members of a linguistic and cultural minority or are they disabled? Cochlear implants are referenced in several works to symbolically challenge this binary understanding. Hilary Allumaga’s *Deaf Perception* represents his struggles as a Nigerian student at Gallaudet University when he discovers resistance among his classmates to cochlear implants. Combined in his painting are dark colors to represent his conflict and starbursts of color to express his hope the future will bring more acceptance among Deaf people about their individual choices. Two individuals tenderly touch foreheads in Ashley Hannan’s *You See Me*. One has a cochlear implant, one does not. Beneath their heads, with a hand from each person, together the sign “same” in ASL.

The energy that propelled De’VIA into existence has now been channeled by over a generation of artists. Not all artists who explore Deaf experiences and Deaf identity today identify as De’VIA, but the abiding influence of the Manifesto and the movement have indelibly shaped Deaf art and in turn, Deaf culture.
In the late 1960s and 1970s—in response to the growing recognition of Deaf identity and culture—a movement began to coalesce among Deaf artists exploring imagery that explicitly focused on Deaf experiences. Among the early images to emerge was Betty G. Miller’s 1972 *Ameslan Prohibited*, a soon-to-become iconic image of two handcuffed hands with broken fingertips. Ameslan refers to an abbreviation of American Sign Language and the image to the common practice of punishing Deaf children for signing in school.

Interest among Deaf artists to create work about their experiences grew and in 1989 a group of eight Deaf artists and a Deaf art historian proclaimed the emergence of a new genre of art for which they issued a manifesto and invented a name, De’VIA—Deaf Image/View Art. Communicating Deaf experiences and culture provided the content for this movement, while using contrasting colors and focusing particularly on hands and eyes defined it visually. Four of the original eight De’VIA artists are represented in this exhibition: Chuck Baird, Paul Johnston, Betty G. Miller and Guy Wonder. Miller, Johnston and Wonder are represented by work that explores familiar experiences to many Deaf people: a visit to the audiologist, the complexities and convolutions of the educational system, and the forbidden use of sign language. Chuck Baird’s image of breaching whales is a playful reference to an ASL handshape classifier, which is a technique used in ASL storytelling to signify motion and the location of an object.
SECOND WAVE OF DE’VIA

De’VIA’s maturing as an art movement parallels the social empowerment that Deaf individuals claimed as members of a distinctive cultural and linguistic community. By the early 2000s, a new group of Deaf artists joined with the founders and early adopters of the movement to continue the conversation. Expressions of the challenges continue. Ellen Mansfield recalls disturbing memories of enforced oralism in her childhood classroom in *I Will Never Forget*. David Call’s *Your Joy, My Pain* is a visual pun that plays with the image of a bell identified with the initials AGB, as it brings joy to a hearing individual and pain to a Deaf child. The image of a bell refers to Alexander Graham Bell’s (AGB) insistence on oral education for deaf children. As expressions of oppression and resistance continue, so do affirmative expressions: David Call’s joyful *Star Maker* and Nancy Rourke’s declaration of Deaf rights, *Stand for Justice*.

Surdism:

In 2009, without prior knowledge of De’VIA, Arnaud Balard, a French artist who is DeafBlind, issued a manifesto of his own. Balard protested the international oppression of Deaf people and rallied for the emancipation of Deaf artists in all media—literature, film, theater, the visual arts—to celebrate Deaf culture, Deaf language, and Deaf identity. Balard named his manifesto *Surdism*, a word he invented based on the French word for deaf: *sourde*. 
RESISTANCE DE’VIA AND AFFIRMATION DE’VIA

The De’VIA movement empowered Deaf artists to expose commonly shared experiences of injustice and oppression as well as to celebrate the emergence of a positive sense of Deaf identity and a strong and diverse Deaf culture. Writing about De’VIA in 1999, artist and activist Patricia Durr proposed that there were two primary De’VIA strands: Resistance De’VIA and Affirmation De’VIA. Occasionally, Durr later suggests, that a third strand emerges: Liberation De’VIA, that includes elements of both Resistance and Affirmation De’VIA.

Resistance De’VIA showcases themes of audism, oralism, mainstreaming, cochlear implants, identity confusion, and eugenics. All of these themes, typically negative in the eyes of the artist, are brought forward as a form of protest, as Resistance De’VIA conveys how Deaf people have been oppressed and marginalized.

Affirmation De’VIA demonstrates themes of empowerment, ASL affiliation, acculturation, acceptance, and Deafhood. Affirmation De’VIA highlights the positives by expressing the joy and empowerment within Deaf culture and the attributes of Deaf Gain that Deaf people share.


With these definitions in mind, explore the show on your own and determine whether you would label individual pieces as Resistance, Affirmation, or Liberation De’VIA.
The art historical canon includes the work of many artists who are deaf. Represented in MAG’s collection, for example, is the work of Francisco Goya, George Catlin, Maurice Prendergast, and David Hockney. What distinguishes the artists in this exhibition is not just that they are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, but their explicit choice to represent Deaf experiences in their art. In the background of this work is a long and rarely acknowledged history of discrimination and injustice experienced by many Deaf people. It is not a coincidence that the emergence of Deaf experiences as an intentional subject for art coincides with many of the societal changes of the mid-to-late 20th century, including the Civil Rights movement, changes in public education that mandated inclusion of Deaf children into mainstream classrooms, and by the acknowledgement of Deaf people as members of a cultural and linguistic minority.

The De’VIA Manifesto of 1989 is the centerpiece of this exhibition with its recognition that Deaf identity and culture were recurring themes among Deaf artists. Spanning over 60 years, the exhibition includes artwork that originally inspired De’VIA and ends with contemporary work that engages with the same themes: isolation and oppression, resistance and affirmation, liberation and celebration. Selected to honor the movement’s 30th anniversary year, this work represents not only De’VIA’s enduring influence on Deaf art but its vital role in making Deaf experiences and Deaf culture visible for all.