

## ***De'VIA: The Manifesto Comes of Age***

### **The De'VIA Manifesto (Deaf View/Image Art)**

De'VIA represents Deaf artists and perceptions based on their Deaf experiences. It uses formal art elements with the intention of expressing innate cultural or physical Deaf experience. These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and everyday life.

De'VIA can be identified by formal elements such as Deaf artists' possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands. Currently, Deaf artists tend to work in human scale with these exaggerations, and not exaggerate the space around these elements.

There is a difference between Deaf artists and De'VIA. Deaf artists are those who use art in any form, media, or subject matter, and who are held to the same artistic standards as other artists. De'VIA is created when the artist intends to express their Deaf experience through visual art. De'VIA may also be created by deafened or hearing artists, if the intention is to create work that is born of their Deaf experience (a possible example would be a hearing child of Deaf parents). It is clearly possible for Deaf artists not to work in the area of De'VIA.

While applied and decorative arts may also use the qualities of De'VIA (high contrast, centralized focus, exaggeration of specific features), this manifesto is specifically written to cover the traditional fields of visual fine arts (painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, printmaking) as well as alternative media when used as fine arts such as fiber arts, ceramics, neon, and collage.

Created in May, 1989, at The Deaf Way.

The signatories were: Dr. Betty G. Miller, painter; Dr. Paul Johnston, sculptor; Dr. Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl, art historian; Chuck Baird, painter; Guy Wonder, sculptor; Alex Wilhite, painter; Sandi Inches Vasnick, fiber artist; Nancy Creighton, fiber artist; and Lai-Yok Ho, video artist.

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### **Text Panels and Object Labels**

#### **Introduction**

In May 1989, a group of nine Deaf individuals—eight artists and an art historian—gathered with a mission: to draft a manifesto that proclaimed the existence of an art genre that intentionally represented Deaf culture and experiences. The group called this genre *De'VIA*, a name they invented from American Sign Language (ASL) meaning: Deaf View/Image Art.

De'VIA began in order to give this genre of art a name. Over the years, however, the name and the genre have become synonymous. *De'VIA: The Manifesto Comes of Age* honors the movement's 30th anniversary in an exhibition that features work by several of its precursors and founders, as well as by contemporary artists who continue to explore the relevance of De'VIA's original objectives.

Tabitha Jacques, director of the Dyer Arts Center's at Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT) National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), and her staff have generously supported this exhibition from its inception by loaning work from the Dyer Arts Center's permanent collection and coordinating loans from artists and private collectors. Patricia Durr, artist and NTID faculty member, has provided invaluable advice on the history of the De'VIA movement and its evolving influence.

**Nancy Rourke**

*Second Wave of Milan*, 2015 [MUSEAI app video #10]

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Referenced in the title is the Second International Conference on Education of the Deaf, which was held in Milan, Italy in 1880. The conclusion reached by this international gathering of educators was an agreement that oral education was to be the universally preferred mode of education for Deaf students. To express the devastating effect this decision had on Deaf culture, the artist patterned her work after Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, drawing on both the visual structure of Picasso's painting and its iconic, historical significance.

### Setting the Scene

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.

**Chuck Baird (Charles Crawford Baird)**, American (1947–2012)

*Untitled*, n.d.

Acrylic on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**David Bloch**, American, born Germany (1910–2002)

*Crying Hands*, ca. 1975

Woodcut

David Bloch, who was Deaf and Jewish, was briefly interned at Dachau Concentration camp in 1938 following Kristallnacht. Memories of this experience found expression in his work decades later in the 1970s and 1980s when he created a series of paintings and woodcuts, including *Crying Hands*.

**Morris Gaylord Broderson**, American (1928–2011)

*Sound of Flowers*, ca. 1958

Mixed media

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

Morris Broderson returned repeatedly to the image of a single figure tilting its head and lowering its ear toward an upturned flower. This series, *Sound of Flowers*, explores the curiosity of Deaf children wondering—"Do flowers make sounds?"

**James Canning**, American (b. 1942)  
*Cantata*, 1985–1986  
Oil on canvas  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Mary Rappazzo**, American (b. 1962)  
*A Party of One*, 2012–2013 [MUSEAI app video #9]  
Acrylic on canvas  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Marjorie Stout**, American (b. 1959)  
*Culture Shock*, 1990  
Acrylic and photograph on canvas  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

For the Dyer Arts Center’s files, Marjorie Stout explained, “Growing up, I was raised by a hearing mother and deaf father. Yet, we did not really know other Deaf or have influences that affected me. In college, however, I met other Deaf and started watching TV for the first time in many years (because of closed captioning). I was completely overwhelmed in the discovery of not only Hearing culture that I had missed for years, but Deaf culture, too. This reflects in the painting *Culture Shock*. I was touched by the extreme differences of both cultures.”

To suggest the magnitude of this revelation, the artist placed a small photograph of a young girl between the two large abstract expanses of color.

### **DeVIA: The Manifesto**

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.

**Chuck Baird (Charles Crawford Baird)**, American (1947–2012)  
*Whales*, 2001  
Mixed media  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Paul Johnston**, American (b. 1952)  
*Deaf Education Pinball*, 2008 [MUSEAI app video #6]  
Print  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

The challenges Deaf children encounter in the educational system are a recurring theme in De'VIA. Drawing both on individual memories as well as referencing historical events, the artists represent the struggles experienced between such conflicting traditions as oralism—mandating oral communication skills—and learning to communicate manually with fingerspelling or in American Sign Language.

The idea for *Deaf Education Pinball* first occurred to Johnston when he imagined a Deaf child as a pinball ricocheting off the confusing options the educational system posed for Deaf children. The artist captures the essence of the experience in this imaginary pinball game that labels the complexities faced by Deaf children and their parents. The largest is English, flanked by VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) and SSI (Supplemental Security Income) which channel children down a cochlea-shaped spiral that removes them from the game. Only if Deaf children successfully navigate to the bottom are they offered services promised by the ADA—the Americans with Disabilities Act—the legislation that ensures accommodations commensurate with a child's educational needs, such as an education in ASL, positioned at the very bottom right of the game.

**Betty G. Miller**, American (1934–2012)  
*Say the Word*, 1988  
Mixed media  
Private collection

“*Say the Word*,” references the familiar experience for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in an audiology lab where they are asked to repeat a series of two-syllable words: airplane, popcorn, baseball, hotdog, etc. Although regularly submitting to this testing at first may suggest the subject's vulnerability, there is nothing submissive about the woman's posture. And if the viewer misses her commanding presence, Miller adds a telling detail—the figure signs “bullshit” with the hand that rests on her bent right knee.

**Guy Wonder**, American (b. 1946)  
*Forbidden Sign Language Alphabet*, 2009 [MUSEAI app video #12]  
Mixed media  
Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

### **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.

Following Durr's definitions, the pieces representing Resistance De'VIA would include Betty G. Miller, *Say the Word*, Paul Johnston, *Deaf Education Pinball*, Guy Wonder, *Forbidden Sign Language Alphabet*, Susan Dupor, *Pussy*, and Randy Garber, *Silence Takes its Measure*. Affirmation De'VIA would include Chuck Baird, *Whales*, Betty G. Miller, *Birth of a Deaf Woman*, Ann Silver, *Tattooed Lady*, and Susan Dupor, *Courtship*.

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.

**Susan Dupor**, American (b. 1969)

*Courtship*, 2003

Oil on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Susan Dupor**, American (b. 1969)

*Pussy*, 1994 [MUSEAI app video #4]

Oil on Masonite

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

*Pussy* began as an experiment: how could a two-dimensional work of art suggest motion? To suggest both the silhouette of a woman in motion and movement as an essential characteristic of sign language, the artist chose a sinuously shaped Masonite board. On this “shapely” surface, she painted multiple images of a man leering and signing— among the words signed is the title, “Pussy.” Dupor's intention in creating this piece was to elicit our discomfort and implicate us as voyeurs to such reprehensible behavior.

**Randy Garber**, American (b. 1952)

*Silence Takes Its Measure*, 2001–2002

Intaglio print

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Betty G. Miller**, American (1934–2012)

*Birth of a Deaf Woman*, 1989

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection

**Nancy Rourke**, American (b. 1957)

*Sterilization Without Consent*, 2018

Oil on canvas

Private collection

The history of the Eugenics movement in the United States includes the forced sterilization of individuals who were deaf. In the early 20th century, Deaf women who were among those deemed “unfit” by the government were sterilized without their knowledge. Often told they were having an appendectomy, they were subjected instead to a salpingectomy, a surgical procedure that removes the fallopian tubes. At the bedside of a woman who has just given birth, a nurse is represented as if in mid-procedure severing a fallopian tube with her left hand, while holding a tray with the previously removed fallopian tube with her right.

**Ann Silver**, American (b. 1949)

*The Tattooed Lady*, 2012

Digital print on paper from 1987 original

Private collection

## 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*.

**Arnaud Balard**, French (b. 1971)

*L'Abbé de L'Epée*, 2013 [MUSEAI app video #1]

Lightbox

RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archives

L'Abée de l'Epée (1712–1789) was an 18th-century Parisian clergyman who defied the commonly held belief that because deaf individuals could not hear or speak that they were cognitively challenged. Far from being intellectually impaired, he discovered that the Deaf community was extremely sophisticated and had developed a parallel culture with its own with a complex manual language. L'Abée de L'Epée dedicated his life to challenging society's misunderstanding about the Deaf community and supporting the education of Deaf children in their own native manual language.

**David Call**, American (b. 1962)

*Star Maker*, 2011

Linocut

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**David Call**, American (b. 1962)

*Your Joy, My Pain*, 2013 [MUSEAI app video #3]

Linocut

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Ellen Mansfield**, American (b. 1960)

*I Will Never Forget*, 2013 [MUSEAI app video #7]

Oil on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Nancy Rourke**, American (b. 1957)

*Stand for Justice*, 2011

Oil on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

## 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.

**Hilary Allumaga**, Nigerian (b. 1963)

*Deaf Perception*, 2016

Acrylic on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Iris Nelia Arnada**, born Panama (b. 1967)

*Untitled*, 2016

Watercolor and ink on paper

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Uzi Buzgalo**, born Israel (b. 1956)

*Beauty of Diversity*, 2009–2010 [MUSEAI app video #2]

Mixed media

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Ashley Hannan**, American (b. 1984)

*You See Me*, 2018

Acrylic on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Takiyah Harris**, American (b. 1975)

*Diverse Deaf People Were Starving to Eat AGB Fish*, 2015 [MUSEAI app video #5]

Mixed media

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

Takiyah Harris's *Diverse Deaf People Were Starving to Eat AGB Fish* fits securely within Resistance De'VIA. In her collage Harris draws on multiple art historical as well as Deaf cultural references. The central image of a boat crowded with dark-skinned figures suggests Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*, a parody of Emanuel Leutze's iconic *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. In Colescott's painting, all the figures are rendered as caricatures of African Americans, including one in the bow of the boat landing a fish.

In her title, *Diverse Deaf People Were Starving to Eat AGB Fish*, Harris also alludes to another iconic painting, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, an early

19th-century French painting recalling a tragic shipwreck whose survivors engaged in cannibalism. The "AGB" in her title refers to Alexander Graham Bell, whose face appears on the head of the fish below the boat. Harris seems to suggest that Bell's insistence on oral education and communication for Deaf people was not only oppressive but tantamount to starving them. The "cannibalism" alluded to in the title symbolically suggests Deaf people turning the tables on history and nourishing themselves.

**Theresa Matteson**, American (b. 1964)

*Love Comes in Diversity*, 2009 [MUSEAI app video #8]

Quilt

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

**Pamela Witcher**, Canadian (b. 1975)

*My Heart is a Village*, 2004–2011 [MUSEAI app video #11]

Acrylic on canvas

Dyer Arts Center Collection, NTID

## De'VIA: A Glossary of Terms

### **American Sign Language (ASL)**

American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language. With signing, the brain processes linguistic information through the eyes. The shape, placement, and movement of the hands, as well as facial expressions and body movements, all play important parts in conveying information.

### **Audiology, audiologist**

A branch of science dealing with hearing.

Audiologists are the primary health-care professionals who evaluate, diagnose, treat, and manage hearing loss and balance disorders in adults and children.

### **Audism**

Discrimination or prejudice against individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

### **Cochlear implant**

A Cochlear Implant is a device that can be surgically implanted into a person's cochlea to stimulate it to cause hearing. It consists of a tiny receiver which is placed under the skin in the bony part behind the ear.

### **Deaf, deaf**

"We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and a culture." Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (1988).

### **Fingerspelling**

Fingerspelling is the process of spelling out words by using hand shapes that correspond to the letters of the word.

### **Deaf Gain**

"In the early 2000s, Deaf scholars proposed the concept of Deaf Gain and with it a challenge to assumptions about what is normal . . . By framing deafness in terms of its intellectual, creative, and cultural benefits, *Deaf Gain* recognizes physical and cognitive difference as a vital aspect of human diversity."

H-Dirksen L. Bauman, *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*. University of Minnesota Press. 2014.

### **Hard of Hearing**

Hard-of-hearing can denote a person with a mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

### **Hearing impaired**

This term is no longer accepted by most in the community because the term is focuses on what an individual cannot do . . . It establishes the standard as "hearing" and anything different as "impaired," or substandard, hindered, or damaged. It implies that something is not as it should be and ought to be fixed if possible.

**Eugenics**

The practice or advocacy of controlled selective breeding of human populations (as by sterilization) to improve the population's genetic composition.

**Manualism**

A method of teaching or communication with or between deaf people by means of sign language.

**Mainstreaming**

The integration of children with special educational problems, as a physical handicap, into conventional classes and school activities.

**Oralism**

The system of teaching Deaf people to communicate by the use of speech and lip-reading rather than sign language.