The Image of Disability: Can Art Be A Catalyst For Change?

Introduction

Disabled bodies have long been portrayed in art. Yet, the complex nature of these portrayals raises questions about whether art merely reinforces popular stereotypes surrounding disability or whether it is capable of redefining society’s understanding and perception of people with disabilities. Scholars such as Roxanne Mykitiuk, Amy Chaplick, and Carla Rice have observed that “art-based mediums have the potential to affect positive change and alter prevailing perceptions of embodiment.”1 In other words, art has the potential to color, if not alter, society’s perception of various people or bodies. But, the question remains: can art accomplish a similar change in perception with a subject such as physical disability? In this paper I seek to answer the following questions: In light of the bioethical complexities surrounding the artistic portrayals of disability, can art be used as a tool to redefine society’s understanding and perception of people with disabilities? In addition to analyzing the history of the intersection of art and disability, I will seek to answer these questions through dialogue with Robert Cushmac, a quadriplegic who offers a unique insight on this subject.

History of Art and Disability

Assuming there is a general societal pressure to attain “normalcy,” which is often translated as attaining the ideal body, physical disability can be very difficult, if not disturbing, to encounter.2 It defies the normative aesthetic definition of the human body and has been shrouded and sequestered in political correctness, possibly causing the general public to “tip toe around

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2 Robert Cushmac, in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
it.” According to Mykitiuk et al., even the word “disability” is “unavoidably negative: structurally it signifies a loss or a lack, a state that exists only because it falls short of something better.” Whether it is spoken of or remains silent in the light of political correctness, disability still carries cultural connotations of a “natural state of inferiority,” “stroke of misfortune,” “unlivable lives,” or “personal tragedy.” At this intersection between art history and disability studies, the social constructions around the physically disabled body have the potential to change.

**History of Art and Disability: The Medical Model**

Disability is often understood using two different models: the medical model and the social model. In the medical model, disability is perceived “as a problem in need of a solution: an unwanted condition that demands a cure.” By definition, medicine seeks to restore the physical condition back to “normal.” Therefore, anything that deviates from “normalcy” becomes “abnormal.” According to this line of thinking, people with disabilities are labeled “abnormal” as a result of their different physiologies. Even though medicine may have the noble intentions to help people with disabilities or discover a cure, as Tobin Siebers, a pioneer in the interdisciplinary field of disability art history and author of *Disability Aesthetics* argues, the scientific nature of the medical field tends to inventory people with disabilities as “medical specimens.”

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3 Robert Cushmac, in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
5 Ibid., 373-375.
6 Ibid., 373.
7 Ibid., 375.
8 Ibid.
Historically, the medical model has dominated artistic portrayals of people with disabilities, both in the fields of medical illustration and fine art. In the field of medicine, many images of people with disabilities were produced for the purpose of recording the body “before” and “after” surgery, or in attempts to categorize, identify, or catalogue various conditions, with the professed aim of furthering medical knowledge. As Siebers observes, “No person in a medical photograph is a picture of health.” Rather, these images “represent medical subjects: the sick, the disabled, the injured, the deformed” who are “in need of a cure.” One such artistic example is offered by Henry Tonks’ pastel drawings, Portrait of a Wounded Soldier Before Treatment [Deeks] (1916-1917; fig.1) and Portrait of a Wounded Soldier After Treatment [Deeks] (1916-1917; fig.2). The purpose of these “before-and-after” images was to document the effectiveness of reconstructive facial surgery, a novel surgical procedure in World War I. However, the artistic elements add additional connotations beyond what is medically necessary. In fig.1, Tonks draws the soldier in brown tones, highlighting in red the facial distortion, and making the figure look distressed and disheveled with uncombed hair and the absence of clothes around the neck. In fig.2, the “after” image, the same patient is portrayed as a respectable man with neatly brushed hair, wearing a suit and tie, and drawn using a brighter color palette. The “after” image shows the man after he has been “fixed”—he has returned to the state of normalcy. In response to medical image’s portrayal of disability, Siebers argues that a danger of intersecting medicine and art is that medicine’s mentality is finding a solution for a problem and, as such, “medical [images]
may enfreak any deviation from the baseline.”

The portrayal of disabled bodies becomes increasingly complex when these medical images are removed from the medical sphere and circulated publicly. For example, the Mütter Museum of Philadelphia exhibits “medical specimens, artifacts and photographs to 80,000 people annually,” with exhibition titles such as, *Medical Photographs: The Art of Making Strange.* Even as of 2017, the title on their Trip Advisor website is “Love weird stuff? Go here,” implying that human bodily abnormalities are a source of entertainment for the general public and can be classified as “stuff.” As recently as 2008, *Newsweek* published an essay, “A Century of Medical Oddities,” in which ten sample images from the museum’s catalogue, *Mütter Museum: Historical Medical Photographs,* were published “for the distinct purpose of presenting disabled people as objects of visual pleasure.” Readers commented that the essay appeared to “deliberately…mine the shock value of the medical photographs.” For example, one image, “Ectopagus” (1891; Figure 3), shows dicephalus dibrachius tripus twins (laterally joined), which originally appeared in a medical textbook of congenital abnormalities from 1891-1893, hence serving a scientific purpose. However, in *Newsweek’s* essay, the image was taken out of context, lacking a medical explanation for the condition, reducing the disabled twins to a form of entertainment. As Siebers states, *Newsweek’s* essay was merely “a continuation of the freak-show tradition,” reaping “fun and profit [from] people deemed inferior.”

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15 Ibid., 44.
17 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics,* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 44.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 47.
20 Ibid., 46.
Similarly, many portrayals of disability in the domain of “high art” also adhere to the medical paradigm of disability. Unlike the medical images discussed above, works such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Beggars* (1568) (fig. 10), the Master of Alkmaar’s *The Seven Works of Mercy* (1504; fig. 4), Dürer Albrecht’s engraving of *Petrus und Johannes heilen den Lahment* (date unknown; fig. 5), and Nicolas Poussin’s *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man* (1655; fig. 6), were not created to serve a medical purpose, but rather were a product of the artist’s individual perspective. Rather than emphasizing the scientific process, as in medical images, these high art depictions draw on the latter concepts of enfreakment and inferiority, seeming to denigrate the disabled. In doing so, they invoke the medical model, applying it to social understandings of the interactions between the disabled and able-bodied. They express the idea that the disabled should be healed, helped, or pitied, creating a social barrier between the “normal” and “abnormal,” and seeming to objectify the disabled as “the cripple,” “the lame,” or “the beggar,” rather than depicting them as humans with dignity.\(^{21}\) Works like these appear to exploit the disabled for their symbolic function to illustrate a societal moral like charity, pity, or Christian ethics.\(^{22}\) Consequently, the medical model is not only creating a social barrier between the “normal” and “abnormal,” but it is also subordinating the disabled to the able-bodied by placing them in juxtaposition to each other in the painting. This usage implies that the disabled need healing, hand-outs, and assistance, as they are a deviation from “normal.”\(^{23}\)

Images such as Vladimir Sinyavsky’s painting, *The Homecoming* (1913; fig. 11), also follow the medical model, but seem to emphasize a medical perception of disability as an unwanted condition. In *The Homecoming*, the child remains seated in the presence of the older

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
man, starring at him as if he is a spectacle, invoking the idea that without his leg, the older man has lost his societal respect. As art historians Giorgio Bordin and Laura Polo D’Ambrosio suggest, there appears to be a “tension,” discomfit, or divide between the man and the boy. By placing the soldier’s absent leg both in the center of the boy and observer’s view, the observer gets the sense that the soldier’s disability is the center of this discomfort and conflict. The tension is further enunciated by the tilt of the boy’s head in tandem with his hand on the ground, which creates an unsettled position, suggesting that at any moment the boy might jump up and flee.

**History of Art and Disability: The Social Model**

The second paradigm of disability is the social model, which suggests that the concept of “disability” is “a social construct that marginalizes people with impairments.” As the newer paradigm, the social model was created in rebuttal to the medical model and is “asserted” by disability studies. It originated in the 1980’s with the birth of disability studies as an “academic field and political movement,” and took root with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. In contrast to the medical model, the social model suggests that disability is a construct of intangible societal and cultural interactions, reinforced by images, such as the ones previously cited, which follow the medical model. Consequently, the social model focuses on “changing cultural structures that oppress disabled people.” Although this model identifies the person with a disability and the chasm that exists between them and society, some scholars

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26 Ibid., 1.
27 Ibid.
argue that this ideology sets up a “false dichotomy” by ignoring the actual physical limitations with which people with disabilities struggle. Thus, the social model “dismiss[es]” the physical reality of “the impaired body,” and by doing so, allows disability to be defined entirely by the alienating biomedical realm.

The “social” model of disability also manifests itself in art, particularly modern art. Contemporary artists like Marc Quinn strive to create artworks that break those barriers and display disability in a way that boldly challenges social norms and expectations. For example, Quinn’s sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005; fig. 7), is an 11.5 ft, 13 ton sculpture of a pregnant woman with congenital deformities, which was unveiled on the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square in 2006, where it remained for 18 months. With this piece of art, Quinn brings disability to the general public, making it a centrally visible figure. By portraying a pregnant, disabled woman, Quinn challenges cultural stigmas around disability, aesthetics, normality, sexuality, reproduction, and mothering. It also forces reevaluation of the definition of beauty. When questioned about the statue, Alison Lapper, an artist herself, questioned, “Why shouldn’t my body be considered art?” Siebers argues that once Alison Lappers’ disabled body was artistically represented, it had a “better chance of being accepted as art than a nondisabled body, despite the fact that disabled bodies, outside the aesthetic context, are still dismissed as repulsive and ugly.” He goes on to argue that when disability is portrayed in art, it becomes “a mode of appearance that grows increasingly identifiable over time as the aesthetic itself.” By sculpting

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31 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
her out of pure white marble and literally raising her to the heights of the war-heroes depicted in Trafalgar Square, Quinn seems to elevate the disabled from a societal taboo to an awe-inspiring figure.

However, visual art that follows the social model of portraying physical disability illuminates another facet in the complexity surrounding art’s depiction of people with disabilities: the subjectivity of their portrayal. In another one of Quinn’s works, The Complete Marbles, (1999-2000; fig. 8), he created a series of marble sculptures that were modeled after numerous people who were disabled due to an accident or congenital abnormality.36 Partially inspired by fragmented or damaged classical sculptures such as the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum and Venus de Milo at the Louvre, the works seek to meld the ideas of the idealized classical body with the “incomplete” human body.37 Although the intention behind the works may have been to combat stereotypes surrounding people missing limbs, Quinn created figures that were physically normalized to socially and aesthetically ideal standards. A “realistic” disabled physique is absent in Quinn’s sculptures. For people missing limbs, other muscles are made to compensate and carry the strain, which shapes musculature differently than in the non-disabled body. Much of Quinn’s artwork appears as if a normal body were created and then, after the fact, an arm or leg was removed, creating an unrealistic, but “normalized” version of the disabled body.

By creating sculptures of people with disabilities in a way that makes disability more palatable to the audience, one must question if stereotypes are really being broken, or if art is merely conforming to and reaffirming the “aesthetically normal.” It raises the question of

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37 Ibid.
whether disability should be normalized to be made acceptable to society, or if society should be acclimated to images of disability? Art historian Ann Millett-Gallant, who was born with a “congenital amputation” and various “deformities,” says that culture heroizes individuals who “overcome” their disability to conform to accepted definitions of “success” in mainstream culture. She says, “our success is intrinsically tied to the denial of our disabilities and our bodies” with the goal of becoming “as normal as possible.” As artistic portrayals of disability such as Quinn’s move further from reality, the chasm between the non-disabled and disabled seems to widen, elevating a new “idealized disabled body” that is physically impossible to obtain.

Art that falls under the social model also raises ethical questions of whether disability is being used for its “shock factor” and its capacity to provoke. For example, scholars Siebers and Mykitiuk point out that distorted faces and bodies depicted in modern art closely resemble people with physical disabilities. Although these images may aide in exposing more people to physical deformities, these images tend to be caricatured and are derogatory, which inevitably shape the tone of the painting and thus the portrayal of physical differences. Siebers suggests that “Picasso’s cubist faces present superb example[s]” (fig. 9) of the fact that, in art, the depiction of “strange and disability are not so easily distinguishable, especially because modern art relies with increasing frequency in its history on the semblance of disability to produce aesthetic effects.”

This is a crucial distinction because “as long as it remains unacknowledged, disability can be

39 Ibid., 9.
42 Ibid., 46.
used to disqualify and oppress human beings.”

A Conversation with Robert Cushmac

If art does depict disability, can it do so in a way that doesn’t falsely “normalize” the disabled body? Or shock audiences because of the disabled body’s difference? Or imply that the disabled bodies must be “fixed” to be of full value? Or manipulate them to draw attention?

A vital aspect of understanding the complexities of how art can be used as a tool to affect public perceptions of disabled bodies is to be garnered through engagement with the disability community itself, whose unique perspective and experiences are something that a person without a disability can never fully appreciate. Ironically, in the recent publication of Disability and Art History, which is the very “first volume to feature interdisciplinary art history and disability studies” (published in 2017), the authors claim that the study of the representation of disability in art will “allow its members to identify and define themselves, rather than be defined by others.” Yet, it appears that the majority of the contributors to this book are not disabled, with the exception of Ann Millett-Gallant, Shayda Kafai, and Amanda Cachia. If the voice of the disabled is so crucial to the field of disability art history, why are their perspectives not being heard?

In 2017, I conducted a series of first-hand interviews with Robert Cushmac, a Georgetown University graduate and attorney, who at age 10 was in a car accident that left him quadriplegic. When faced with the images above (fig. 7, 10-11, and 16), he stated that disability is

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44 Tobin Siebers, Disability Aesthetics, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 44.
46 Ibid., 2.
47 Ibid., xv-xvii.
“disruptive,” not only visually to the onlooker, but also to the disabled.⁴⁸ “No person,” he said, “wants to look at an image of a disabled body and be told that is who you will become,” as physically there is nothing aesthetic or anything to idealize about it.⁴⁹

Cushmac concluded from many of the images that, historically, art has in many ways widened the chasm between the disabled and non-disabled, as it has tended to depict people with a disability one dimensionally—stopping at their external physical disability. For example, rather than emphasizing their shared humanity, images like Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s The Beggars (1568) portray the disabled in such a caricatured way that they are barely “recognizable as people.”⁵⁰ The figures’ disabilities appear to be a “freak-show,”⁵¹ conveying a message that “equates being ‘handicapped’ to a life of begging and poverty”⁵² and separation from the rest of society.

Cushmac had a similar reaction even to disabled artists’ self-portraits, such as those done by Frida Kahlo. In Cushmac’s opinion, in Kahlo’s Self Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill, (1933; fig. 12), the concept of “disability” overpowers the humanness of Kahlo.⁵³ He argued that this only serves to further alienate the disabled from the public, as there is nothing with which the non-disabled can relate or sympathize.⁵⁴

Even works, such as Lotería-Tabla Llena (1972) by Carmen Lomas Garza, which attempt to reach past external appearances, still conform to the painful stereotypes that “associate older

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⁴⁸ Robert Cushmac, in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵² Robert Cushmac, in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
⁵³ Ibid.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
people with wheel chairs.” Although, Garza tries to portray the man in the wheelchair in a joyous light, Cushmac points out that the artist’s choice of associating wheelchairs with the elderly undermines the reality that people of all ages have disabilities—the wheelchair is not isolated to the elderly after they have had an opportunity to live a “normal” life. These images seemed to fall short, in Cushmac’s opinion, of the desire of people with disabilities, which is to be accepted as whole, dynamic and productive human beings, not merely as disfigured bodies.

Adding to the complexity of the artistic depiction of disability is the bioethical concern of “staring” at a deformed body. Ann Millet-Gallant argues that the stare “confront[s] the spectator and effectively ‘talks back’, and that the very interaction of staring at art—the “mutual and altering exchange between the viewer, the image producer, and the body on display”—provides the “potential for progressive social change.” Although Cushmac agrees with Millett-Gillant, he strongly cautions against works that elevate people with disabilities to the status of “disabled hero” as, in his opinion, was done in works such as Quinn’s Allison Lapper Pregnant. He expressed anger and frustration with people with disabilities who allow themselves to be treated “like a mascot” and “held up as a badge of honor.” Whether it is in contemporary art like Allison Lapper Pregnant (Fig. 7 and 14) or in photographs for charities like Smile Train (Fig. 15) that “equate disability to a loss of life,” Cushmac believes that people’s worth should not be reduced to their physical impairments. In his words, let “people be seen for who they are and what they do,” rather than uplifted or “hero-ized” for being disabled or overcoming their

55 Robert Cushmac in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
56 Ibid.
disability to be “normal.” Art like this, he said, only “create[s] another obstacle,” preventing people with disabilities from “becoming mainstream.”

Cushmac explained that being disabled can be very isolating because most people don’t know how to relate or respond to the physical differences, causing people with disabilities to become “untouchable.” Their portrayal in art has seemed to further that alienation, as the observer struggles with how to respond to the deformed physical images that are depicted. Since art tends to be static, it is difficult to go beyond the visual image of a disabled body; only a “dynamic relationship between the non-disabled and disabled,” he believes, can fully solve this. “Art requires time and effort to marinate in [one’s] brain,” and seeing one picture is not likely to revolutionize one’s ingrained thought processes.

Yet, amidst this web of complexity, there is art that does, in Cushman’s opinion, move closer to bridging the chasm between the disabled community and mainstream society. Vladimir Sinyavsky’s painting, *The Homecoming* (1913) in fig. 11, portrays an amputee with a degree of emotion that emphasizes his humanity. Thus, he becomes someone with whom the observer can identify, despite his disfigurement. The soldier’s expression and posture emphasize a weariness with life and cause the observer to stop and ponder what he must be feeling, thinking, and experiencing, creating a human bond and “normali[zing]” his humanity, not his physical condition. A similar reaction was elucidated by Rick Guidotti’s photograph (fig. 16), where

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60 Robert Cushmac in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
the “first thing” the viewer notices is the little girl’s smile.\textsuperscript{68} Rather than being struck with the child’s deformity, the viewer experiences a “welcoming” and is embraced by the little girl, as in Cushmac’s words, “we all want to be a part of joy.”\textsuperscript{69} Only after being enwrapped in the girl’s mesmerizing joy does one begin to notice her disability—the humanity surpasses disability. As Cushmac said, “the little girl is relatable” as she exposes her human soul to reach out and touch the viewer, breaking through the web of complexities and stereotypes—just one human touching another.\textsuperscript{70}

**Conclusion**

If visual depictions of disabled bodies are innately uncomfortable to view and cause viewers to recoil, is it even possible for art to portray a person with a disability in a way that can change that reaction? Can art truly be a tool to change society’s perception of disabled bodies and make them less ‘untouchable?’ Cushmac insightfully stated that “everyone can relate to emotion,” and he believes that it is through the emotional connection between humans that a bridge can be built between the disabled and non-disabled.\textsuperscript{71} Although Cushmac is only one of millions of disabled people around the world, he expressed his desire to see people with disabilities portrayed in art in a way that helps them “become mainstream”—in a light that allows people to “meet on an emotional level” and “engage on a human level” so that they are seen as people rather than as a face of “disability.”\textsuperscript{72} Hence, art could potentially destigmatize disability by providing the framework to help desensitize the shock of deformity, while allowing

\textsuperscript{68}Robert Cushmac in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
\textsuperscript{69}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72}Ibid.
viewers to see and connect on a deeper emotional dimension with another’s humanity. Amidst its complexities and subjectivities, art has the potential to share the universal language of human emotions and feelings between the subject and observer. So maybe, just maybe, art could be, in Cushmac’s words, “the prologue to a bigger conversation.”  

73 Robert Cushmac in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.
Figure 1: Henry Tonks, *Portrait of a Wounded Soldier Before Treatment* [Deeks], 1916-1917, pastel. The Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Figure 2: Henry Tonks, *Portrait of a Wounded Soldier After Treatment* [Deeks], 1916-1917, pastel. The Royal College of Surgeons of England.
**Figure 3:** Barton Cooke Hirst and George Arthur Piersol, “Ectopagus,” *Human Monstrosities*, 1891-1893, photograph. Reproduced in “A Century of Medical Oddities,” *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

**Figure 4:** The Master of Alkmaar, *Works of Mercy*, 1504, St. Lawrence Church in Alkmaar.
Figure 5: Albrecht Dürer, *Petrus und Johannes heilen den Lahment*, 1513, engraving.

Figure 6: Nicolas Poussin, *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*, 1655, The Metropolitan Museum, New York.
Figure 7: Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005-7, Fourth Plinth Project.

Figure 8: Marc Quinn, *The Complete Marbles*, 1999-2000 (Jamie Gillespie, Stuart Penn; Catherine Long, Selma Mustajbasic)
Figure 9: Pablo Picasso, *Maya with a Doll*, 1938, Paris, Picasso Museum.

Figure 10: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Beggars*, 1568, Paris, Musée du Louvre.
Figure 11: Vladimir Sinyavsky, *The Homecoming*, 1913, Bordighera (Imperia), private collection.

Figure 12: Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill*, 1933.
**Figure 13:** Carmen Lomas Garza, *Lotería-Tabla Llena*, 1972, hand-colored etching and aquatint, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

**Figure 14:** Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005, 11.5 ft, 13 ton, Trafalgar Square.
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Figure 15: Smile Train website, 2008.

Figure 16: Rick Guiodotti, Skeletal Displaysia: (lpaonline.org): Image 37 of 38—Positive Exposure, photograph, UNESCO, Paris, France 2016.
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Cushmac, Robert, in discussion with the author, May 2, 2017.


