

**Essay title: *Disability art and Ableism.***

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## Introduction

To understand disability requires adaptation and thinking beyond what is normal. There are psychological barriers to disability that run deep into the fabric of society. These barriers are often silent and unspoken, those with disabilities experience feeling shunned from society. It is hard to understand unless you actually experience it yourself.

Disability studies are a relatively new field of study emerging in the 1980s; its main concerns are issues relating to those with disabilities. Disability studies has coined the term 'ableism', which is the discrimination against disabled people in society (Millet-Gallant and Howie 2). Ableism describes discrimination against disabled people in favour of able-bodied people, for example; In Felicity Reid's recent article in the North Shore Times; *Play date welcomes boy back*, she recounts a case of discrimination against six-year old Charlie McKendry who is wheel chair bound with cerebral palsy and his mum Kirsten. The pair were told to leave the Takapuna Beach playground in April 2017, because Charlie had experienced a seizure as they arrived at the park. Reid says, "Two other mothers told McKendry that Charlie, 6, should go away, because he was frightening their children"(1).

They did leave, however Kirsten recounted the discriminatory incident to the Hauraki Corner Residents Group Facebook page and received a lot support from the community about the situation (Reid 1). Most ableist attitudes are based on the intolerance of disability by the able-bodied society. Historically, the disabled are seen as a medical issue that has no place in society. This is the kind of attitude that disability studies aims to change.

Disability art, too, is a newly recognised field of practice linked to disability studies, as it shares the same concerns. Artists with a disability do not necessarily produce it; however, the role of disability art, it seems, is to be reflexive and challenging to our contemporary society in order to raise awareness of the discriminatory and social identity issues around disability. Disability art is not outsider art, although some outsider artists do fit into this genre. Outsider art recognises artists who are self-taught, often mentally disabled and eccentric or misfits who have no formal training.

I define my current field of research and artistic practise as Disability art. Disabled people are a marginalised part of society that need help to become more accepted and recognised as a social identity within society. Such art aims to change society's long-held misconceptions and discrimination against the disabled. I am inspired by the fact that artists have the avenue to seed social change. Art talks without words and the truth is there to see. I also believe the spirit of the artist resides more powerfully in disability art because it is unspeakable.

In this essay, I commence by briefly citing historical artists Pieter Bruegel, Diego Velazques, Antoine Trouvain, Paul Strand and author Jacque Derrida who all depict disability in their works.

Then I introduce a discussion outlined by authors; Anne Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie in *Disability and Art History* 2017 that suggests that art history as a field of study, has chosen to over-look the presence of disability in the analysis of art and the possible reason for this. Then I look at disability studies as it views disability in identity politics against a backdrop of ableism.

Next, I introduce the phenomenological idea that the spirit of the artist resides in their art. Then I discuss the physical, psychological and mental issues of four disabled artists; Agnes Martin, Frida Kahlo, Judith Scott and outsider artist Henry Darger and the presence of the disabled spirit in their art. Then I look at the collaborative work of non-disabled photographer Joel Peter Witkin and disabled writer Anne Millett-Gallant, whose work distorts and perverts the ideals of disability art as it is seen to exploit disability and death. I then discuss the collaboration between disabled artist Alison Lapper and non-disabled artist Marc Quinn that challenges society's ideas about disability and beauty by raising public debate.

After that, I introduce the non-disabled artist Kader Attier, whose art deals with those disfigured by war and social injustices of the past. Finally, I include my own analysis on disability art and ableism, concluding with a comparison of the positive and negative ways that disability art is constructing a new future for those living and dealing with disability.

## **Disability as portrayed in art.**

Many artists throughout history have depicted disability in their art. Listed below are examples of four artists and one writer whose work historically recognises the disabled both positively and negatively.

In Pieter Bruegel the elder's painting "The Beggars" he depicts a dubious view of five crippled beggars, each appearing to wear crude wooden prostheses and more interestingly they are adorned with fox-tails. Author Manfred Sellink says in *Bruegel in Detail*, that the fox symbolizes "lies, deceit and cunning" a reference from the tales of Reynard the Fox. The beggars in this painting are seen with "social satire, class prejudice and begging as organized fraud" (Sellink 84).

Diego Velazquez painting "The Family of Phillip IV (Las Meninas)" conversely, features a favourable inclusion of a young dwarf woman named Maribarbola. She wears a dress befitting the royal court and clearly holds a position of status as a royal attendant. The painting features the Infanta of Spain (Margarita), her ladies in waiting and in the left foreground he paints the figure of a young dwarf woman (Checa 199).

Antoine Trouvain's artwork "Christ's Healing of the Blind in Jericho" depicts a scene from Christianity that refers to the Bible scripture, where Jesus heals two blind men at the roadside, who call to him for mercy, through the crowd as he is leaving Jericho (*The New English Bible*, Matt. 20: 29-34).

A less historical example is photographer Paul Strand's "Blind Woman" depicting a blind beggar on the streets of New York. This image provokes society's attitude to the blind. Strand wanted to show the harsh reality of life (Tomkin 19). The woman wears a registration number at her throat and is blatantly labelled in large letters that say 'BLIND' on a small square placard that hangs by a cord around her neck. It serves to categorise her as legally eligible to beg on the street. This method of labelling and registering the disabled was seen as progressive at the time, as it legalised their right to beg (Chouard 27).

Author Jacque Derrida in his *Memoirs of the Blind, The self-portrait and other ruins*, identifies an elevated view of the blind, when he says; "the blind man can be a seer, and he sometimes has the vocation of a visionary" (Derrida 2).

Authors Millett-Gallant and Howie in *Disability Art and Art History* suggest that art historians have chosen largely to avoid recognizing disability in its interpretation of art. They theorise that the reason for this avoidance is that the study of art history originated in the early 19th century at a time when medical research dominated society's attitudes. At this time, disability was considered socially unacceptable and for the most part hidden from sight, so it seems that art historians of the time also chose to ignore it.

For example, Frida Kahlo's luscious, colourful, and sometimes heart-breaking paintings have been conventionally seen as self-indulgent and as compensating for her emotional and physical trauma, without consideration for Kahlo's powerful influence on art, society and politics; scholarship has also largely ignored Kahlo's subordinate status and lack of adaptive tools, state-of-the-art prosthetics, and mobility equipment, as a disabled woman in the early twentieth-century (Millett-Gallant and Howie 5).

*Disability Art and Art History* describes a new way of thinking about disability through art. Essentially the authors seek to redress this misgiving, by re-looking at art history through the lens of the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies (Millett-Gallant and Howie 2).

## **Disability studies against a backdrop of ableism.**

Disability studies became a stronger political movement in the 1980s. One of its aims was to re-orientate historical ideas of disability, which is often perceived as either a medical issue or socially as a metaphor of something corrosive and destructive (Millett-Gallant 1).

The term “ableism” has been coined through disability studies as a means for aligning the disabled in society with other recognised groups of marginalised or oppressed peoples. Millett-Gallant aligns it to racism, sexism, classism and homo-phobism (2). A movement against ableism aims to raise awareness of the ways in which the dominant culture marginalizes people who sit outside the norm. She suggests it is only since the 1990s that disability studies have been offered as a field of scholarship allied to the biological and social sciences in the study of disability (6). This highlights the reality that, until recent times, disability has been something that society has turned itself away from, deeming those who have a disability as not having a place in society.

This is where art can and always has established (argues Millett-Gallant and Howie) a means for disability to challenge cultural norms. These authors define the arts as a platform for identity politics that allows marginalized groups to identify and define the way they perceive themselves, rather than how society sees them. Millett-Gallant and Howie state that the role of disability studies is to challenge the medically modelled ideas historically based around disability, which identify disability as an illness or issue that has to be fixed, cured or at worst ignored. Disability studies views disability as a cultural construct that marginalizes people with disabilities. The disabled are also part of a larger group that includes those who may pass in and out of disability due to illness or accident, or who are permanently affected for life (Millett-Gallant and Howie 2).

Disability studies today view one of its roles as correcting art history’s avoidance of disability. Theorist Tobin Siebers suggests an ableist society can reflect itself through its perception of art and points to Hitler’s intolerance of Modern art as a marker of an ill-adjusted culture; because Nazi Germany based its ideals around perfection and tried to erase all perceived imperfections in life. This is an extreme example of an ableist society. Siebers also poses the question of whether artistic genius belongs only to the most intelligent people suggesting that artistic genius could be found in those with disabilities and cites Judith Scott, an artist with Down’s Syndrome. Scott could not hear, had no speech and no concept of what an artist was; yet she created magical woven and bound fibre sculptures that were aesthetically appealing works of art (70). I will discuss Scott’s life and art later in this essay.

## **Phenomenology: The spirit of the artist.**

The idea that an artist's spirit can reside within an artwork is an intangible and theoretical concept. Theorist David James compares and contrasts Georg Hegel with Immanuel Kant in his book *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics*. He outlines Hegel's idea that art is a product of the spirit and a form of truth, he defines the need for art as fundamental to human thought, claiming that through art we gain consciousness of ourselves, our spirit (James 3).

James also suggests Kant's theory of the mathematical sublime (the undetermined power) meets Hegel's theory of the 'symbolic form of art' in reference to God (the infinite being). James defines Kant's theory of the mathematical sublime as the feelings that are aroused in us when facing an object of an unfathomable nature or undetermined power, which goes beyond one's ability to express. James contrasts this with Hegel's ideas based around Christian spirituality, whilst Kant's spiritual interpretations have no religious bases. He suggests the connection is in the sense of unspeakable awe of a spiritual experience (James 4).

It is the unspeakable awe of a spiritual experience that is of particular interest to me, because I found a reflection of it in my own experience during the first few days after the birth of my daughter when her life hung in the balance. I remember an extended moment when I experienced a sensation of being immersed in an unspeakable white light that only I could see. Was it a spiritual experience or was it shock, or a chemical reaction affecting the vision my brain was seeing? This whiteness inverted the scene around me from darkness into dazzling light. I tend to think this experience was close to Hegel's notion of the spiritual, the sense of unspeakable awe, but I may never know for sure.

## **Artist: Agnes Martin**

Agnes Martin's art reveals the inner landscape of a mind in pursuit of 'perfection'. Her art practice developed around the spiritual and moral teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, using these disciplines as a way of growing one's awareness, or heightening one's perception. Art, for Martin, had a greater purpose; it was spiritual and ontological (Haskell 136).

In 1957, Martin joined the artistic community of Lower Manhattan known as "Artists of the Coenties Slip". This shift from Tao Mexico, to the Slip community in New York, shifted Martin's abstract painting style from biomorphic forms to more geometric considerations in search of the spiritual truth.

In her lecture held at the Elam Lecture Theatre, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2017, Dr Susan Hudson suggests, that Martin had a mental condition such as Schizophrenia or Bi Polar disorder and that records of her times spent in psychiatric hospital are sketchy. Martin was supported at these times of illness by her fellow artists, in particular Lenore Tawney who was much more to Martin; she was Martin's patron, collector and the one with whom she held confidence (Hudson 23). In Hudson's lecture she suggests that Martin and Tawney were also lesbian lovers.

Writer Timothy Rodgers *In pursuit of perfection, the art of Agnes Martin* reports that Martin strove to paint the perfect fleeting moments of joy and peace by capturing them on canvas or paper; and that she did this in order to hold back the negative emotions of life (20). Contrary to this thinking on Martin's art, Hudson in her latest essay, claims the artist only painted when she was well, saying: "She seems to be fine when she was working and to have stopped when work was not possible"(Hudson 23). According to Hudson, Martin gained great happiness from drawing the horizontal and vertical lines that made her grid paintings.

To me it would seem that Martin struggled with her mental illness between good times and bad. She had the strength of mind to hold her private life as secret as possible during the 1950s – 60s (at the height of her career), when in America the mentally ill and homosexuals were considered outcasts of society. Agnes Martin survived her troubled life by striving to paint perfection when she was well and was supported by her artistic friends when she was unwell.

### **Artist: Frida Kahlo.**

Frida Kahlo also battled with depression, but in her case, it was essentially as a result of a lifetime of physical pain. In 1925, at the age of 18, Kahlo was injured when the bus she was travelling in collided with a motorcar leaving her critically injured. Her injuries would plague her health and affect her mental well-being for the rest of her life. After her accident, her parents fitted a mirror above her bed and provided her with canvas and paint, so naturally, Kahlo's first paintings were self-portraits, a theme that continued throughout her life (Bauer 34). I doubt she would have survived her injuries without the love and support of her parents, who recognised her talent for painting and provided her with the tools to paint. Painting became Kahlo's way of dealing with the symptoms of her disability and the harsh realities of her life.

Kahlo's painting "The Broken Column" is a self-portrait that shows Kahlo naked from the hips upward, her body is torn in two vertically to show a broken roman column in place of her spine. An orthopaedic body support is strapped to her torso. She symbolises the pain she feels by the many nails that appear driven into her skin

all over her body and the tears that stream from her eyes. She appears against a backdrop of a ruptured landscape.

In 1929 Kahlo married Diego Rivera a famous mural artist of that time, but this was a relationship that endured the many adulterous affairs of Diego. She also suffered many miscarriages and was never able to have a child of her own as result of her on-going physical issues. Kahlo suffered deep depressions due to the stress of these times and her paintings reflect not only physical pain but also emotional distress (Bauer 51).

Kahlo is recognised by many as a pioneering woman artist, but just as significantly she is an early pioneer of disability art because she gives the viewer an insight into physical disability and psychological depression. Kahlo's disabled spirit lives on through her paintings, it links her directly to the new genre of disability art and the larger socio-political 'disability landscape'. The term "disability landscape" is my broader metaphor for the chaotic nature of a life lived (for me as a parent/caregiver of a disabled person) with a long-term disability. Let me explain: the terrain is never smooth as discrimination and physical barriers forever rupture it. I see this kind of ruptured landscape in the background of some of Kahlo's portraits of pain.

### **Artist: Judith Scott.**

Judith Scott was a pioneer disabled artist with Downs Syndrome who came to art late in life, at the age of 45. Prior to that she spent 38 years institutionalized and neglected. She did not speak because she was also deaf, yet with the right familial support around her she developed her own visual language as a sculptural/fibre artist. With her artistic genius she gained fame initially as an outsider artist, and then recognition as a contemporary artist in her own right.

In the 1940s, as James Trent, co-editor of the *Mental Retardation in America*, wrote, "To have a defective in the family was to be associated with vice, immorality, failure, bad blood and stupidity. To place that defective in a public facility was to be associated with the lower classes"(Wallace Scott 199).

Judith and her twin sister Joyce Wallace Scott, were born in 1943. When societal pressure deemed that the only choice that families were offered was to commit their disabled children to institutions. For many disabled children, this was done at birth, but Judith's parents tried hard for seven years of her life to keep her. However, one morning, when she was seven years old, Joyce discovered her sister gone from the bed they shared and the family were never the same again. Joyce tells the story of her life and the 38 awkward years and troubling times visiting Judith with her family. Judith was categorised as:

“Not appropriate for any educational programs.”

“Mongoloid idiot–Profoundly retarded–IQ 30” (Wallace Scott 99).

At home Judith's name was seldom mentioned, as society's way was not to talk of such things. Joyce never forgot her beloved sister and finally, in 1987, after gaining approval from the state to become Judith's guardian, the twins were reunited.

After 38 years of neglect and isolation her twin was determined that Judith's remaining years were to be as rich as possible and within a short time she enrolls Judith in the Creative Growth Art Centre in Oakland. It is here, that after two years of regular attendance, Judith's interest was finally sparked by a visit from fibre artist Sylvia Seventy. She began binding, weaving and wrapping objects, that had been discarded or found, into beautiful and complex fibre sculptures. Each sculpture conceals its inner object(s) from the viewer in order to create unique and unusual forms. Judith had found her voice, so to speak; her energy and devotion to each sculpture became boundless.

After twelve years of art making, Judith's sculptures were revealed to the art world. The Creative Growth Art Centre held an exhibition of her work and launched a book written by John Mac Gregor called *Metamorphosis: The Fibre Art of Judith Scott* (Wallace Scott 149). Judith's art was deemed pure creative genius and was initially categorised as “Outsider art”; she subsequently received art-world acclaim.

Joyce explains that Judith's art works seem to some viewers to be like artefacts from ancient Egypt, Native American spiritual figures, or tribal art from some faraway land (197):

There is ... something exquisitely magical about Judith Scott's pieces” wrote Hoffberger (director of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore).

“Much like the mojo bags and shamanic medicine sacks, whose secret contents are often wrapped in string and yarn to form bundles for broadcasting protection and healing energies, Scott's work contains the unseen and the barely seen, like a peek into an earthbound crow's nest feathered by shiny bits and colourful string collected from his travels (Wallace Scott 210).

Judith Scott is now recognised in the formal art world as a brilliant and original contemporary artist. If not for the unending love and belief of her twin sister Joyce, the art world would not have experienced the magical mystery of her sculptures. The lesson that we learn from this remarkable true story is that, just because someone sits outside the normal realm of expectation does not mean that they have nothing to give

to society. Without the love and the facility of the Creative Growth Centre in Ohio the world would not have known such a creative genius. To me, Judith's bound and woven sculptures, that entrap found and discarded objects, reflect the way she must have felt - wrapped under thirty-eight years of neglect, discarded or lost as an object (not a person) in the institutional system. Remarkably, her artistic spirit reveals itself through her work. Her artwork belongs to the genre of disability art because she was able to overcome the ableist societal barriers that had deemed her worthless.

### **Artist: Henry Darger.**

As for artist Henry Darger, he never had the support or love needed to overcome the neglect of the society he lived in. Darger was a tragic creative artist, whose secretive vestige of artistic endeavour was discovered by his landlord shortly before his death in 1973. His art revealed an imaginary inner world that consisted of writing and watercolour illustrations depicting child abuse, torture and murderous scenes. The victims he portrayed were young girls with penises, who were known by him as the Vivian Girls, and the evil adult abusers were the Glandelinians (Wojcik 63).

As an adult, Darger had led a mundane, reclusive life. However, it was believed that he had had an emotionally disturbing and abused childhood and that this may have contributed to the manifestations in his art. His mother had died giving birth to his baby sister, when he was only eight years old. His poor father, unable to manage, put the baby sister up for adoption and sent young Darger to a Catholic Orphanage. Darger's behaviour was reported as disturbed and self-harming, so he was then sent to an asylum for children, where he was said to have suffered harsh physical abuse. He escaped after five years to find his own way in life as a cleaner. He lived as a recluse, collecting items to hoard from the trash in his apartment, making his perverted tragic art and writing in his spare time. Since the discovery of Darger's art some writers have theorised that the Vivian Girls could have been linked to some gender issues that he may or may not have had (Wojcik 67).

Perhaps the truth behind his art will never be known, as the artist is dead. In comparison to Martin, Kahlo and Scott, Darger did not have the love and support of a family. He was cast out in the early 1900s into a society that was indifferent to the needs of an emotionally disturbed child. I think as Darger was psychologically and physically abused as a child, it is likely that this is the reason his artwork revealed a perverted fascination with gender and child abuse. Perhaps his art was therapy for him, his way of dealing with the horrors that plagued his thoughts. Whatever the case, I do not think he ever intended his art to be revealed to the world. I am guessing that his landlord did not gain Darger's permission to take this artwork. It would seem to me that his human rights were exploited during his life as too were his artworks after his death. I see this as one person's art therapy that has no business being exploited as

outsider art. It does not belong to the genre of disability art because there is no moral gain in exploitation of a disturbed individual's art.

Disability artists concern themselves with the issues of disability and aim to help those with disabilities, not exploit them. However, outsider artists sometimes are subject to exploitation from the art world.

### **Writer Anne Millett-Gallant and Photographer Joel Peter Witkin.**

Ann Millett-Gallant author of *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* who was born with missing and deformed limbs and mouth, collaborated with Joel Peter Witkin, photographer, who as a child, witnessed the disturbing scene of the severed head of a young girl rolling down the street in front of him after a car crash (Celant14). Witkin's unspeakable childhood experience has manifested into a macabre fascination with the dead and disabled. Millett-Gallant offered herself as a model for Witkin to create an image for her book titled "Retablo (New Mexico)" Together they claim to challenge ableist ideals of beauty.

In this photograph Millett-Gallant models naked, seated on a drape-covered stool, with her back to the viewer, her handless deformed arms reach outward as her head inclines slightly upward to her left. She looks toward a naked female model (half the model's right leg is amputated from the knee) the model stands one legged upon a draped stool, her body is stabbed in four places with what looks like small broken-off spearheads. This one-legged model clasps a sword in her right hand and with her left hand she looks set to place a garland on Millett-Gallant's head. The point of the sword acts to stab at the male genitals of the smaller naked female figure, who has four arrows stabbing into her body. To the bottom left, we see a human skeleton partially draped, posed leaning inward and at the lower right, a small table with a vase on it, angles awkwardly back into the tableau. Set against a steeply painted floor perspective, a painted medieval landscape reveals a demonic winged creature that appears disembowelled and also has an arrow speared into its left eye. The arrow has been cast by a robed arm of a figure whose identity is hidden outside the frame of the picture.

If Witkin and Millett-Gallant aim to challenge ableist ideas of beauty I think they have missed their mark. The deformed and maimed models seem to me to justify the mutilation of the deformed and the skeleton glorifies death. I find Witkin's art perverted and objectifying of his deformed, disabled and often dead subjects (cadavers). Retablo refers to Spanish catholic altarpieces that contain Christian iconology. However, in "Retablo (New Mexico)", the Christian iconology is distorted into something demented.

Witkin's work may seem provocative to some. However, I see it as exploitative and tasteless in its representation of the disabled body. Millett- Gallant defends Witkin's artwork from those who critique it as grotesque and offensive in its portrayal of the disabled body when she states: "Witkin poignantly pairs the conventions of medical imagery with the traditions and motifs of Classical art, which serve as a legacy in Western culture for ideal beauty in art and other media" (86). To me Witkin's art takes a grotesque leap from the early medical photographers, who were often doctors, who used photography as a means of documenting medical curiosities. One such collection of photographs is by Stanley B. Burns. By comparison to Burns' photographs, Witkin's images are hybrids that challenge our ideas of beauty, what's normal and abnormal (Millett-Gallant 87).

Millett-Gallant grew up in an able-bodied environment and found support from family and medical advances. She uses a prosthetic leg and crutches to walk. She always knew she was different but never talked or thought about it as part of her identity until she was studying art history at PhD level- even though it was the most obvious thing about her. She wrote the book as a form of self-exhibition (8).

In my opinion, Witkin and Millett-Gallant's artwork is a debauched and self-serving fascination with the macabre. I find it difficult to see how it uplifts disability or supports ableist issues, let alone challenge any worthwhile debate on the topic.

### **Artist: Alison Lapper and Sculptor Marc Quinn.**

Alison Lapper is an artist (with a deformed body) who collaborated with sculptor Mark Quinn (with no disability) to raise the profile of disability and give it a new social identity. Lapper rose to fame in 2005 when Quinn's "Alison Lapper Pregnant" was publicly unveiled on the fourth plinth at Trafalgar Square, London. Public reaction to this sculpture drew various responses, from accusations against Quinn for the artwork being a "tasteless political stunt" to positive statements about Lapper as being "brave and bold" and "pregnant and proud"(Millett-Gallant 51). She writes that Quinn and Lapper collaborated to make this public artwork as a political statement. "As a monumental body and public spectacle, it recycles and contemporizes the representation of disability as both heroic and freakish, visible and open for public debate"(53).

Millett-Gallant explains: the sculpture's unveiling threw a huge spotlight on Lapper's own artwork, and her life story became publicly known. Lapper was born in 1965 with no arms and foreshortened legs to a single working-class mother who chose not to raise her. She grew up instead in a British institution for children with disabilities. She always favoured art classes as she had undiagnosed dyslexia. Aged seventeen she went to Queen Elizabeth's Foundation for Disabled People at Banstead, Surrey to

learn independent living skills, then enrolled at the Sutton College of Learning for Adults to pursue an arts degree, graduating at 28. Lapper's artwork is self-exploratory, in the form of self-portrait photography, sculpture, painting and installation (76). Lapper says Quinn's sculpture "Alison Lapper Pregnant" did not make her feel exploited because she knew that he was interested in the difficulties of representing the disabled body publicly and wanted to challenge the stereotypes of disability and bring them into public debate (Millett-Gallant 70). Lapper puts her humanity on the line, her right to be seen as publicly acceptable as a mother and a sexual being. Lapper compares herself to a modern day "Venus de Milo"(76). Theorist Siebers suggests that we would not consider the "Venus de Milo" to be one of the best examples of both human and aesthetic beauty if she had not lost her arms (Siebers 65).

Initially "Alison Lapper Pregnant" was a life-sized sculpture that was part of Quinn's "The Complete Marbles" series that included sculptures of several other amputee models. Notably, the models themselves felt complete and perfect when they closed their eyes and imagined themselves from within. They felt inner wholeness even though they were physically less than perfect as a human subject. Despite this fact, they were perceived as not only physically disabled, but often as intellectually disabled as well. This is a common issue for many disabled people; it is the underlying ableist perception of mainstream society (Mengham 24).

What intrigued Quinn was that these subjects, when seen as sculptures, are socially acceptable in the form of marble sculptures amongst the antique fragmented sculptures in the British Museum where they are upheld equally as examples of aesthetic beauty. Ironically, what is acceptable as beautiful in art is unacceptable in real life (Mengham 24).

What this monument does is the reverse of traditional ideas behind public monuments. Traditional monuments usually reflect the dominant culture and reinforce ideas of war, power, colonialism and conversion. In reverse, the public art of contemporary culture demands minority groups have a public face to challenge inclusion, acceptance to redress years of marginalization (Millett-Gallant 54-55).

Quinn says this sculpture is seen as a heroic statement as the use of marble is associated with a material that honours heroes. 'Alison Lapper Pregnant' represents a new kind of hero, one who has conquered the challenges of her own inner world to become a productive artist and a pregnant mother to be (Mengham 32). As a public art-work it is successful because it highlights identity issues of the disabled body and raises public debate.

## **Artist: Kadia Attia.**

Kadia Attia is a French/Algerian installation artist, explains David Houston Jones in his *Journal of War and Cultural Studies* article (79). Jones discusses Attia's 2013 -14 exhibition "Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder" at the White Chapel Gallery. He suggests that Attia acts altruistically in an attempt to repair the past, when he commissions both African and Italian craftsmen. The African carvers are commissioned to reinterpret the *gueules cassees* (broken faces) a French term for the facially disfigured returned service men from WW1, from medical photographs (69). Conversely the Italian marble sculptors of Carrara are commissioned to reinterpret the African faces and bodies that have been the subject of scarification practises.

Attia attempts to offer reparation, to the disfigured faces of European war heroes, who received early maxillofacial surgery in attempts to repair them. He compares this to the African aesthetic practice of scarification, a kind of early surgical beauty treatment. Attia shows the contrast in social values relating to scarring. He commissions the crafts people from Africa and Italy to interpret each others values in an attempt to repair the socio-political injustices of the past European slave trade and current mining and wars in Africa and to recognise the broken faces of the *gueules cassees*.

The African craftsmen's interpretations of the *gueules cassees* were brutally cut, chiselled and carved wooden-heads. They represent a compelling evocation of the brutal human cost of war. Conversely, when seen along-side the Italian marble sculptures depicting scarification of African heads and bodies in a stylistic smooth sculptural white marble, the extreme contrast creates a cross-cultural rupture and an exchange of values. Jones suggests Attia's use of craft reminds him the work of Richard Sennett, who sees common participation of craft people as a way of regenerating social ideas. Sennett proposes; "we want the shared ability to work to teach us how to govern ourselves and to connect on common ground" (Jones 68). Jones refers to Attia as a reparation artist when he quotes Diawara in his article. He says "Attia makes us revisit, through his installations, Europe's debt to Africa for the slave trade, colonialism and the current mutilation of indigenous populations and their environment through mining and wars"(Jones 70). Attia's artworks and ethos give me hope for humanity and a better society.

Claire Penketh quotes Attia in her paper "Invention and Repair: disability and education after the UK Coalition Government, Disability & Society". Attia says "The biggest illusion of the human mind is probably the one which man has built himself: the idea that he invents something, when all he does is repair"(3). Penketh advocates for children with special needs to have the same rights to education as children without. She urges against the marginalization of disabled children. This is a subject that is close to my heart, as I continually have to advocate for my daughter's rights to

an education. I am inspired by Attia's artwork and its sensitivity to important political and social issues. His work overlaps into disability art, as it values and identifies disability as something we must address in order to repair society and go forward as a global community.

## Nicola Simpkin-Hill (Personal Context)

My personal interest in disability art is as the mother of a daughter with a moderate cerebral palsy condition. As an artist of this particular circumstance I am aware that disability is not something society has learned to deal with adequately from a social point of view. There is a kind of unconscious discrimination underpinned by ignorance and past denial of identity within society that makes the disabled members of the community marginalized.

I facilitated one of several community-lead workshops in 2016 to help gather ideas in planning new disability strategies in this country. It is being formulated in order to address the many issues of discrimination and injustice and inequality faced by the members of the disabled community and their families in this country. The draft strategy acknowledges that 1.1 million of the New Zealand population identify as having a disability of some kind (Ministry of Social Development 5). Since the 2001 Strategy many improvements have changed the lives of the disabled and their families but there is much more that needs to be done. "The persistent gap between disabled and non-disabled people also has a flow-on effect to our country as a whole; it impacts on families, friends and communities. When disabled people aren't able to participate, the entire country misses out"(Ministry of Social Development 3). As one of contemporary art's roles is to provide an avenue to help give meaning and understanding to the margins of society, I see my role as an artist is to activate the identity of disability. I tend to agree with art historian Esther Pasztor who says "art can do for disability what no other field of study can because art gives symbolic status to that which cannot be otherwise explained at a practical level"(Millett-Gallant and Howie 61).

I had hoped to collaborate with my disabled 17-year-old daughter for this Masters photographic project. However, the human ethics application (Human Ethics application 019566) process became over-complicated and ableist (in my opinion and in the opinion of our youth lawyer) when the committee asked for an assessment of my daughter's mental aptitude (to be obtained from her teacher) in order to assess her ability to give her own consent. I felt this was an unethical and discriminatory request, as did my daughter, therefore due to this and time constraints, I did not pursue with the application process. I felt this to be a similar discriminatory experience to the amputee models who collaborated with Quinn for "The Complete Marbles" who claimed that there was an immediate assumption by society, that because they had a

physical disability, therefore they must also be intellectually impaired. It does highlight again, the ableist mind-set which still pervades our society.

The images I present represent emotional states, spiritual expression and the metaphorical disability landscape associated with being the para-parent of someone affected by a life-long physical disability. The images are self-expression of the initial inner trauma, shock experienced post birth and the awkward on-going battle with societal barriers that manifests in such circumstances. Using a combination of stretch fabric over laid with an image projection, that results in images that conjure alienated beings and dark atmospheres; they talk to the otherworldliness and spiritual nature of life in the disability landscape.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I have briefly discussed historical artists Bruegel, Velazques, Strand, and Trouvain whose works have depicted disability throughout history and writer Derrida who writes of blindness as a visionary gift. I discussed a possible link to the avoidance of identifying disability in the study of art history, to the time of medical world dominance in the early 1900s. This medical modelling of society deemed those with a disability as outcasts. This lead me to discuss the rise of disability studies in the 1990s, which is the socio-political study of disability issues and 'ableism' that is the discrimination of the disabled. Disability art shares the same aims as disability studies. These aims are to raise the awareness and social identity of those with disabilities and promote change to the ableist ideas that discriminate against them.

I defined my current field of research and artistic practice as disability art. I feel a responsibility to up-hold the issues and identity of those with disabilities because they cannot always achieve it by themselves. They need the love, respect and understanding of not just their families but of the society they live in.

I outlined Hegel's idea that art is a product of the artistic spirit and that it is fundamental to our sense of identity and consciousness of being ourselves. Through James I compared Hegel's spiritual phenomenon of Christianity with Kant's ideas of the mathematical sublime as being the same, only Hegel's is religious and Kant's is not. I included this idea of phenomenology of artistic spirit and truth to investigate my own spiritual experiences around the time that my daughter's life was in a critical condition in hospital. I believe that as an artist I may be more intuitive and sensitive to spiritual experience.

Martin used her spiritual knowledge of Buddhism and Taoism in her relentless search for perfection and as a way of enjoying her mental state of wellbeing. I explained that she was supported by her friends of the Coenties Slip artistic community when she was mentally unwell.

Kahlo was so flamboyant as a woman artist in her time of the 1930 and 40s, that it may seem to some that she does not fit into the disability art genre because she was so well known already. However, I could not ignore her as a fervent early pioneer to the disability art genre; her art symbolised her pain and depression so well. Here too Kahlo's artistic talent was not without the support of her loving parents.

Scott's contribution to the genre of disability art is an amazing story of familial love and the discovery of a genius talent that would have gone undiscovered in the ableist society that discriminated against her, if it had not been for her spiritual bond with her twin sister, Joyce.

In comparison to Martin, Kahlo and Scott, the tragic outsider artist Darger enjoyed no love and support; his art and writing was that of a psychologically disturbed individual whose human rights and artwork were exploited by a society that was indifferent to disability in the early 1900s.

I discussed Millet-Gallant exposing her disability to the world, which I felt was exploitative of disability because she collaborated with the infamous Witkin whose art is shameless in its perversion of disability and death.

In contrast to this, the collaboration between Lapper and Quinn is empowering and uplifting to the issues of disability. It is a great public artwork that aims to change ableist ideas. I see 'Alison Lapper Pregnant' as a successful disability artwork. As too is Attia's reparation art that deals with the disfigurements of war and socio-political injustices to help repair the global community. His work is current and sensitive to the political ruptures of the past and present.

Lastly, I have summarised my attempted collaboration with my disabled daughter and the ableist constraints that have moulded my Masters project this year, which has led me to photographic self portraits and chaotic landscapes based around the psychological depression and spiritual experiences of a parent with a disabled child.

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Final visual submission.

**Project title: Para-Zeitgeist. No ordinary spirit of the time.**



Title: Otherworld figures. 2017 (Left)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 841 mm x 594 mm.

Title: Otherworld landscape. 2017 (Right)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Scream. 2017 (Left)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 420 mm x 594 mm.

Title: Scream landscape. 2017 (Right)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt)

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Alien figures. 2017 (Left)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 420 mm x 594 mm.

Title: Alien landscape. 2017 (Right)

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Disability landscape. 2017 (Right)  
Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).  
Size: 841 mm x 594 mm.

Title: Fetal. 2017 (Left)  
Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).  
Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Constraints. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 841 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Otherworld figures. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 841 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Otherworld landscape. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Scream. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 420 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Scream landscape. 2017  
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Title: Alien figures. 2017

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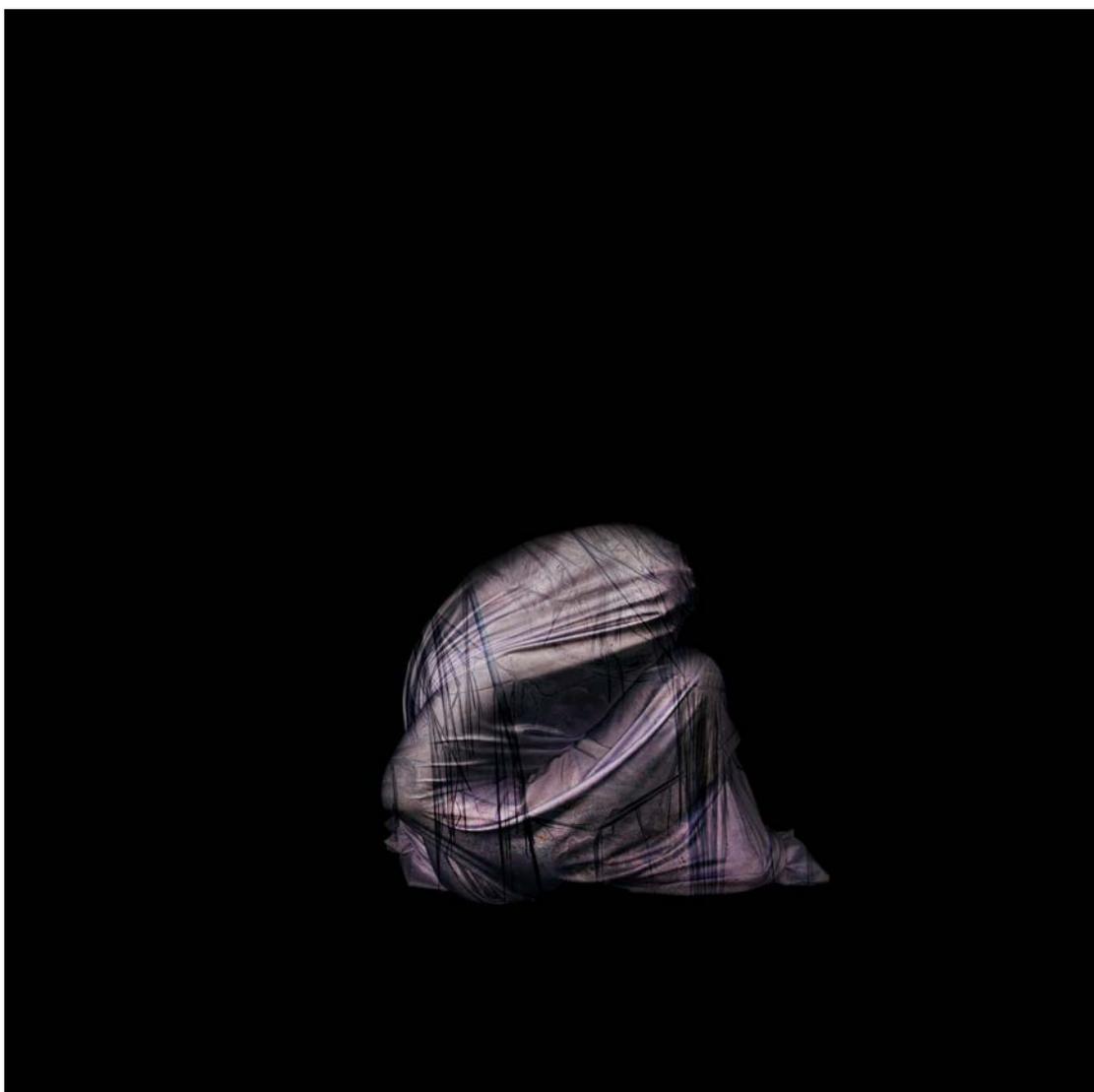
Size: 420 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Alien landscape. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Fetal. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 594 mm x 594 mm.



Title: Disability landscape. 2017

Medium: Photographic print on Fine Art Paper (Enhanced Matt).

Size: 841 mm x 594 mm.