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ALTERNATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY: DYSLEXIA

by

Clayton Colgin

Painting

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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and, especially, to my beautiful wife. None of this would have been possible without her. I also dedicate this to dyslexics everywhere who struggle to express themselves in a world ruled by the written word. Never give up.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would have been impossible just two decades ago before voice recognition and text-to-speech software was available. While still requiring considerable proofreading effort, these programs have made it possible for an illiterate like me to write a dissertation. I can only dream of what the future holds when all the bugs are worked out. What new opportunities will technology provide? I was never able to become a psychologist or a lawyer or a police officer, not any of my childhood dreams. Perhaps someday, a severe dyslexic like me will be able to choose any career path.

I also acknowledge the assistance of my wife, Lorel, whose voice is better than the synthesized tones of the text-to-speech program. She read books aloud to me that I know she had no desire to ever read. As a scientist forced to enunciate the arcane language of the artist, she was angelically patient. Thank you, Lorel, for all the countless little things you have done to help me along the way.

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created stunning and emotionally effective works to express those opinions better than words ever could. I look forward to seeing what you create in the future. Last but not least, thank you David Borrington. Unfortunately, I was required to cut my 25,000 word first draft down to 15,000 words; thus, I couldn't include the section I wrote about you. You'll have to take my word for it that I wrote wonderful and gushing things about your art. Good luck to all of you; your help was greatly appreciated.

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SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION OF STUDIO WORK

A selection of studio works developed over the course of my MVA will be exhibited in the 2008 Post-graduate Degree Show at the Sydney College of Arts in December. Eight paintings, acrylic on canvas, were chosen for this exhibit. The images explore personal memories and dyslexic thought: figures and objects are distorted and symbolism is employed to convey holistic conceptualisation. The style is influenced by pictographic primitive art. Distortion and patterning conveys a sense of motion. The themes and repetition of figures in 'Beginning' and 'New Beginning' are meant to convey the passing of time.

ABSTRACT

My MVA work, *Alternative Perceptions of Reality: Dyslexia*, revolves around dyslexia and ways in which dyslexic artists, like myself, represent reality in their art. I focus on how dyslexics perceive space and time, how this is represented in their work and how it manifests in my own work. The introduction describes why dyslexia is relevant to art, provides more detail on dyslexia itself and ways dyslexia can affect perception. Surrealism and Symbolism are discussed in order to draw parallels with dyslexic perception. Chapter 1 describes the influences on my own work, including dyslexia, primitive art and symbolism. The second chapter profiles two well known artists with dyslexia: Robert Rauschenberg and Pablo Picasso. I examine ways in which they represent space or reality and how dyslexic perception is apparent in their works. Similarly, in Chapter 3, I discuss the works of the contemporary dyslexic artists Terry A. Orchard and Katharine Dowson, including the results of interviews and surveys I conducted. Throughout this dissertation, I also discuss my own experience of dyslexia and how it is expressed through my paintings. In the conclusion, I discuss what I have learned about the work of myself and other dyslexic artists: How our paintings are a glimpse of alternative inner realities.

INTRODUCTION

Art and Dyslexia

My art is concerned with the inner world of thought and emotion. I am fascinated by the amazing worlds within our minds and how those inner realities are shown through art. I am dyslexic, and dyslexia has shaped my entire life and my inner reality, which is reflected in my painting. I am keenly interested in how dyslexia may have influenced the works of other artists as well.

Dyslexia is rampant in the art world. Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Chuck Close and Andy Warhol are just a few of the prominent artists known to have dyslexia.¹ Dyslexics are often proficient at visual tasks, either as a direct consequence of their brain development or because they have no other choice. Chuck Close stated that he had to put everything into his art because there was nothing else that he could do.² However, as I will describe later, it is well documented that dyslexics have highly developed visual-spatial thinking, and visual thought should, logically, be important to the visual arts. Therefore, it is surprising that the works of these artists is never discussed in relation to their dyslexia. The art historian, Robert Mattison, is one of the very few, apparently radical, people who have considered the influence of dyslexia on art. Mattison was interested in how

¹ TG West, 1997, *In the Mind's Eye*, Prometheus Books, New York, NY, p. 101-149.

² Charlie Rose, 1998, *An Interview with Chuck Close*. Program recorded February 27.

dyslexia may have affected the visual approach and artistic processes of Robert Rauschenberg.³

Dyslexics think visually, their artworks are visual extensions of their thoughts, thus an examination of the works of dyslexic artists can help us to understand a dyslexic perception of reality. Because I am interested in inner realities, and because I am dyslexic, I would like to understand how other dyslexic artists have revealed their inner worlds through art.

Dyslexia

In order to understand how inextricably dyslexia is entwined with my inner reality, you first need to understand something about it.

Dyslexia is a blanket description for anyone who has an unexpected difficulty with learning to read. 'Unexpected' means that they have normal vision and at least normal intelligence. There are many different tests designed to detect discrepancies between intelligence and reading ability, but one core difficulty that has come to be identified in dyslexics is a problem with phonological decoding.⁴ What this means is that dyslexics have problems associating symbols with their meaning. By symbols, I refer to alphabetical letters which stand for, or symbolize, a sound. A dyslexic might know the alphabetical symbol for 'S' and that it sounds like the 'sss' of a snake, but when it comes to stringing together long stretches of letters to make words

³ RS Mattison, 2003, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 34-40.

⁴ WH Raskind, Igo RP, Chapman NH, Berninger VW, Thomson JB, Matsushita M, Brkanac Z, Holzman T, Brown M, Wijsman EM, 2005, *A genome scan in multigenerational families with dyslexia: identification of a novel locus on chromosome 2q that contributes to phonological decoding efficiency*, *Mol Psychiatry*, 10(7):699-711.

and sentences it gets increasingly difficult. In fact, every time a dyslexic looks at a word it is like he sees it for the first time and must slowly attempt to decode it each and every time.⁵

Dyslexia is considered a disability because it hampers reading, writing and, as a consequence, learning to one degree or another. Dyslexic sufferers can have the mildest symptoms of letter reversal and slow reading, and these people may never know they are dyslexic. These mild cases may make up the bulk of the 10% of all people who are estimated to have dyslexia.⁶ Dyslexia can be more severe, however, resulting in extreme visual distortion when reading: letters seem to blur, move around, bleed and drip into the line below, sometimes with the white spaces within and between letters more prevalent than the letters themselves.

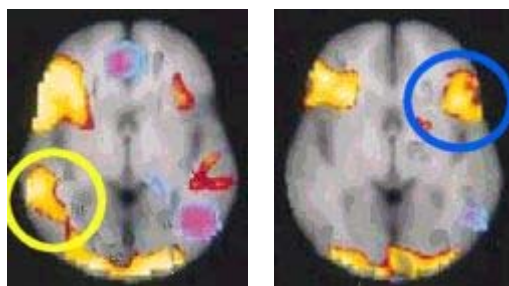
Dyslexia is thought to be a disorder of brain development, although I like to think of it as only a variation of how the mind can develop, similar to how blue eyes are rarer than brown eyes yet both are 'normal'. Dyslexia is not a new disability, but a different way of thinking that has probably been around since humans evolved. It persists at the rate of 10% in the population, which is much higher than even blue eyes, if you consider the world in general. It may have been advantageous to have at least a few dyslexic individuals in the communities of early man, because, as I will describe shortly, dyslexics have a very different mode of perception, one that includes highly developed three-dimensional visualisation and heightened awareness. This could have been useful for trackers, who must spot broken twigs and other signs left by game

⁵ C Gorman, 2003, *The New Science of Dyslexia*, Time Magazine 162(4), viewed online 2 June 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1005284,00.html>.


⁶ *ibid*

animals, or for early builders who did not have access to precise instruments for mathematical calculations of architectural designs, because they are able to see the completed structure in their own minds.

Very little is understood about dyslexia, even though it has been studied for fifty years. Researchers have found that, unlike most people, dyslexics rely heavily on the visual processing regions of the brain and use them even for reading. Magnetic Resonance Image (MRI) scans conducted on the brains of dyslexics and non-dyslexics showed that the right, visual-spatial regions, of the brain are used by dyslexics, rather than the left hemisphere's symbolic processing regions (**Figure 1**).⁷



Non-dyslexic brain Dyslexic brain

Figure 1. MRI of dyslexic reader. *Even when a dyslexic individual learns to read, visual-spatial regions of the right hemisphere are employed rather than symbolic, linear-processing regions of the left hemisphere.* (Increasing brain activity: )

The dyslexic's need to rely on the visual-spatial processing region of the brain only poses a problem in Western cultures that developed the linear

⁷ A. Marshall, 2003, *Brain Scans Show Dyslexics Read Better with Alternative Strategies*, Davis Dyslexia Association Inc., viewed online 5 June 2005, http://www.dyslexia.com/science/different_pathways.htm.

thinking needed for the alphabet writing system (English, German, French, etc). Dyslexia poses little or no problem in the cultures that rely on visual thinking and use ideographic writing systems more closely resembling the hieroglyphic systems developed by early man (China, Korea, Japan, etc)⁸. Because I have no intention of learning Mandarin and migrating to China, however, I must live with this disability, and it can be a terrible disability.

I am severely dyslexic and basically unable to read more than a few words. This means I need help planning the trains and buses to take travelling to work or university. Although I love books, just about every book I have 'read' has been an audio book or has been read aloud to me. I need scribes or voice recognition software to write anything more than the hieroglyphic notes I draw for myself. This makes filling in a medical history form at the emergency room an impossible task. Even ordering food at a restaurant limits me to the menu words I can easily recognise.

The only positive attributes associated with dyslexia are perhaps improved visual-spatial reasoning and holistic perception. What this means is that dyslexics deal well with visual information, especially the three-dimensional world. In fact, there are a higher proportion of dyslexics among art students, artists and architects than in the general population, so perhaps it can be advantageous in these professions, or at least not a hindrance as it would be for someone studying law, for example.⁹

⁸ RN St. Clair and Y. Jia, 2005, *Visual Metaphors, Visual Communication and the Organization of Cognitive Space*, Paper Presented at the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, Taipei, Taiwan.

⁹ U Wolff and Lundberg I, 2002, *The Prevalence of Dyslexia among art Students*, *Dyslexia*, 8 (1): 34-42.

Dyslexics can also perceive the world around them globally or 'holistically'. With global or holistic perception, "things are first perceived in their entirety, as a combination of details and qualities which are not divided or abstracted."¹⁰ Dyslexics were much faster than non-dyslexics at accurately determining that a figure was 'impossible' (**Figure 2**), indicating that they can more quickly process global visual information.¹¹

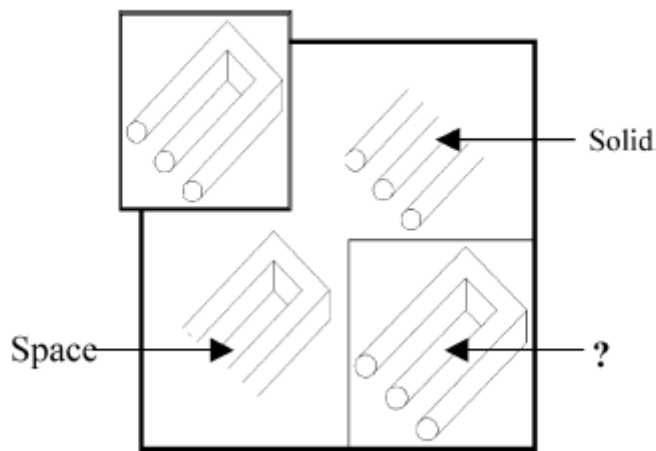


Figure 2. Impossible Figures. *If parts are viewed separately, they make sense and it is only when they are seen as a whole that the observer realizes it is impossible.*¹²

With holistic perception, "whole events can be perceived on the basis of a simple visual image. Entire circumstances can be perceived on the basis of particular sounds. Complete forms can be recognized on the basis of simple touch."¹³ For me, a room is not made up of a desk in one corner with a chair in front of it... oh, and over there is a window letting in light. A dyslexic like me

¹⁰ Holistic Educator, *Holism*, viewed online 12 Jan 2008, <http://www.holisticeducator.com/holisticperception.htm>.

¹¹ C von Karolyi, Winner E, Gray W, Sherman GF, 2003, *Dyslexia linked to talent: global visual-spatial ability*, *Brain Lang*, 85(3):427-31.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Holistic Educator, *Holism*, viewed online 12 Jan 2008, <http://www.holisticeducator.com/holisticperception.htm>.

sees the whole room all at once without seeing its component pieces, and it is stored like a hologram in memory. This is why I can immediately close my eyes after walking into a room and mentally count the number of books on the shelf that was behind that desk without opening my eyes to look at them. Unfortunately, this still doesn't help me find out what bus to take to Rozelle from outside Town Hall station.

Dyslexia and Perception

I have already mentioned several ways in which dyslexia can affect perception: Dyslexics experience visual distortion of writing; they tend to see the world around them holistically rather than as component pieces, and they have good visual-spatial skills.

Visual-spatial thinking is also prevalent among non-dyslexic artists and scientists.¹⁴ Severe dyslexics, however, rely almost entirely on non-linear, visual-spatial thought. Because of their poor capacity for verbal-sequential learning, the dyslexic brain adapts and has no choice but to develop its capacity for visual thought instead. Visual-spatial thinking translates all words and concepts into visual imagery, and all new thoughts are first formulated as visual images before being translated into words.

Visual-spatial thought has its own grammar, and this grammar has always been understood by artists, even if they choose to deliberately

¹⁴ LK Silverman, 2002, *The Visual-Spatial Learner: an Introduction*, viewed online 19 September 2007, http://www.gagtc.org.au/Conf2005/QAGTC_upside-down.pdf, originally published in *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*, DeLeon Publishing, Denver, CO.

contradict that grammar for discordant or dramatic purposes. The Golden Mean is an example of visual grammar, where the proportion used in the composition of paintings follows the same mathematical proportion employed by the spacing of petals on a flower.¹⁵ This sense of proportion is not calculated, however, but comes naturally to image-based thinkers, like dyslexics. The principles of visual syntax have been elucidated through Gestalt psychology, which has attempted to understand how the mind orders visual space. These principles of visual grammar that have been identified are: unity, harmony, variety, balance, emphasis, rhythm, movement, pattern, graduation and proportion.¹⁶ Images make sense and appeal to us when they obey visual grammar, but the reason for the existence of this grammar or how it evolved in the human mind is unclear. Dondis, a pioneering psychologist in this field, said, “Visual expression is the product of highly complex intelligence, of which we have pitifully little understanding. What you see is a major part of what you know, and visual literacy can help us to see what we see and to know what we know.”¹⁷

Non-linear thinking is another natural component of visual thought: images can be recombined in infinite ways and still carry meaning.¹⁸ Alphabetical characters, in contrast, can only be combined in so many ways and still form recognizable words. Words also need to be linked together

¹⁵ S Obara, 2000, *The Golden Ratio in Art and Architecture*, University of Georgia, Department of Mathematics Education, viewed online 24 May 2008, <http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/EMT668/EMAT6680.2000/Obara/Emat6690/Golden%20Ratio/golden.html>.

¹⁶ RN St. Clair and Y. Jia, 2005, *Visual Metaphors, Visual Communication and the Organization of Cognitive Space*, Paper Presented at the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, Taipei, Taiwan.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

linearly to complete a comprehensible thought: 'See Spot run' does not mean the same thing as 'Spot run see'.

When thinking with images, however, linearity of order is not necessary. With images of trees and elephants, as a random example, it doesn't matter if you first think elephant then tree or the other way around; they are actually both thought simultaneously and often combined into a single image. This combined image might mean 'elephants are voracious eaters of trees and contribute to ecological problems even though they are usually only seen as the victims of man's mutilation of the environment' or it may mean 'both the rainforests of South America and elephants are endangered species': all that from two images is pretty efficient. The old saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is particularly true of visual thought. Dense with images, visual thinking can be incredibly fast, carrying many layers of meaning, but it is more difficult to translate into words, and it may carry more than one interpretation.

Dyslexic thought—as a combination of visual-spatial thought, holistic perception and whatever else is going on in my brain—does interesting things with an object like a tree. My mind tends to observe a tree in infinite detail. Usually someone will see it, categorize it as a tree, lose interest and move on. Because of dyslexia, it is as though I see a tree for the first time, and I notice every leaf, every shape of bark and fleck of light through the canopy. I take it in as a whole, but I can simultaneously see all of its exquisitely detailed parts. In addition, without conscious intention, my imagination automatically determines what the tree must look like on every side, even the roots that are normally never visible. I also automatically imagine it through time, seeing it in

winter or when it was a sapling. This processing occurs quite rapidly, but does often consume a lot of my attention, so I may not notice people talking or other things going on around me until I switch my attention to them. There may be some overlap between dyslexia and autism, as autistic individuals are often overwhelmed with sensory details, but the situation is far more extreme with autism.¹⁹

While dyslexic thought patterns work well with imagery, this kind of thinking goes horribly wrong with linear symbols, such as alphabetical characters. Writing uses two-dimensional symbols that I'm told are supposed to mean something, so my brain tries extra hard to make sense of them. Unfortunately, when a letter or word is subjected to the same treatment by my mind as a tree, the word becomes warped and unrecognizable. A tree is always a tree, whether you are imagining it from below or above, but a letter 'S' can become many different things when twisted and turned by the imagination, becoming like a worm crawling across the page. In my mind, there is space, depth, substance and movement to letters and words. Letters even take on colours, as if this will help my mind to make sense of them. They are, after all, processed by the same part of the brain in dyslexics that deals with real world three-dimensional objects, like trees, so it is no wonder that my mind tries to transform letters into real objects.

Although it has not been studied, I think dyslexia also alters the perception of time. Many of the dyslexic artists I have interviewed mention

¹⁹ O Bogdashina, 2008, *Different Sensory Experiences—Different Sensory Worlds*, Autism Today, viewed online 24 May 2008, http://www.autismtoday.com/articles/Different_Sensory_Experiences.htm.

their visual thoughts having a sense of motion or time. And I have mentioned that my own mind automatically imagines objects through time, like a tree through seasons. The aging process and the ticking of a clock are other examples of the manifestation of time, and these examples often appear in my work. In addition, I've said that letters are not static on the page, they have motion, blurring and moving over time. Motion, which can result in blurring or distortion of images, is also dependent upon time. Motion is by definition an object existing in different positions in space at different times. Einstein and Picasso, both dyslexics, are both known to have had an interest in time, which is visible in Einstein's theory of relativity and Picasso's Cubism.²⁰

I quote Einstein often throughout this dissertation. While he did not paint, he did create something that moves us to this day—his ideas help us to understand our world in another way, and by what other measure can we define an artist? Einstein was the first person to show that space and time are interconnected and inseparable. As will be apparent in the discussion of my works, I have an innate need to include either the concept of time or at least a sense of motion in my works, even if painting on two-dimensional canvases, because I also see time and space as an indivisible whole.

In summary, there are several ways that dyslexia can alter perception: it causes distortion of written letters; it allows a holistic absorption of visual imagery; it necessitates reliance on visual-spatial thought, which allows instant alteration, warping and non-linear melding of imagery; and both space and time (three-dimensional images and movement or change) are

²⁰ Al Miller, 2001, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time and the Beauty that Causes Havoc*, Basic Books, New York, NY, p.320-21.

intertwined. I think all these natural tendencies of dyslexic thought lend themselves well to Symbolist and Surrealist art.

Surrealism, Symbolism and Dyslexia

Symbolism, in opposition to naturalism and realism, believed that art should be about the inner world of emotion and not about the outer world of appearances.²¹ The Symbolist manifesto, published by Jean Moréas in 1886, called for the use of indirect methods to capture absolute truths.²² This ideal led to the use of metaphor, where imagery or objects always meant something besides their literal interpretations. Symbolism began as a poetical movement but influenced other art forms, including painting. Symbolist paintings often employed iconic or mythical imagery to express the ideal, or essence, of a concept. Visual thinking, like that used by dyslexics, while often using the literal meanings of imagery, also makes use of the subtler, symbolic meanings of objects as well.

Surrealism arose almost 40 years later and was influenced by Symbolism, visionary art, primitive art and psycho-pathological art.²³ While visionary art sometimes strived to show objects not as they were but as they were seen in the mind, its more fantastical elements were mainly derived from mythology. Surrealism wished to explore even more fantastical lands than visionary art, drawing upon the imagination and the subconscious. Not surprisingly, the art of mediums, supposedly accessing imagery from other

²¹ A Dempsey, 2002, *Styles, Schools and Movements*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p.41.

²² M Gibson, 2006, *Symbolism*, TASCHEN, Köln, p.31.

²³ S Alexandrian, 1985, *Surrealist Art*, World of Art, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY, p.10.

worlds, and the art of psychotics and schizophrenics, who had given reign to the unconscious mind, was important to the Surrealists.²⁴ Early Surrealists were also enamoured of primitive art from Oceania and North America because this art was not concerned with realism but with the subconscious or metaphysical 'meanings beneath the objects of the world'.²⁵ The animals depicted in primitive art, for example, do not just represent real animals in the world but also gods or spirits and the forces of nature itself. A realist painting of the Earth might show a blue planet from space, but in many Native American tribes the Earth was represented as a twig or a seed carried in the beak of a bird.

The Surrealist Manifesto, written by André Breton in 1924, defined Surrealism as 'thought expressed in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all moral and aesthetic considerations'.²⁶ While some Surrealist art, such as automatic drawing, was unstructured, coming almost directly from the subconscious, other works relied on dream-like imagery to reveal that there are 'treasures hidden in the human mind' (as S. Alexandrian describes the basic belief of Surrealism).²⁷ The works of Surrealist painters, such as Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, contained recognizable images that conveyed thought in a strangely warped or hazy, dream-like manner. Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, for example, turns pocket watches into dripping forms that hang from trees or appear to crawl across the ground like worms (Figure 3). The detail of these works shows they were clearly not produced

²⁴ S. Alexandrian, 1985, *Surrealist Art*, World of Art, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY, p. 22-26.

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ A. Dempsey, 2002, *Styles, Schools and Movements*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p. 151.

²⁷ S. Alexandrian, 1985, *Surrealist Art*, World of Art, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY, p. 22-26.

automatically, and their generation obviously required some aesthetic censorship. In fact, Breton adapted his manifesto in 1928 to help define Surrealist painting, taking into consideration the difficulties in producing artworks automatically.



Figure 3. *An example of Surrealist painting. Perhaps the most famous Surrealist work, The Persistence of Memory (1931) by Salvador Dalí (oil on canvas, 24.1x33 cm, Museum of Modern Art New York) was included in a show of Surrealist work in New York in 1932.²⁸*

²⁸ P Moorhouse, 1990, Dalí, PRC Publishing Ltd, London, p. 49.

Like Symbolism, the paintings of many Surrealists also used metaphor to convey meaning, whether this was intentional or not. Even the seemingly bizarre world of dreams is not random, and is in fact layered with symbolism and meaning. Both the psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, and his student, Carl Jung, devoted significant amounts of their careers to the interpretation of dreams and dream symbols as a way of accessing the subconscious troubles of their patients and of understanding the human psyche.²⁹ The work of Freud is known to have directly influenced the Surrealists.³⁰

Because dyslexic thought is prone to turning and warping objects and blending imagery in the imagination as new ideas are generated, a 'snapshot' of some of this imagery offers a direct look at thought in its unfinished form, in keeping with Surrealist ideals. This is the basis for my 'Thought Paintings', where I wish to show a glimpse of my thoughts, as they occur to a dyslexic. I, also, cannot avoid an aesthetic approach, especially as these thoughts are conscious rather than subconscious dreams, thus they have visual grammar.³¹ My paintings may be more coherent than dreams, but they can often be very ambiguous or fantastical, because they are not concerned with outward reality, only how that reality is reflected and played with in my mind, and they offer a look at waking visual thought.

Interestingly, Dali's paintings with their dripping watches or Chagall's blurred forms all show a sense of movement or time. Earlier, I mentioned my suspicion that the relationship between time and space is integral to dyslexic

²⁹ CG Jung, 1964, *Man and His Symbols*, Dell Publishing, New York, NY.

³⁰ A Dempsey, 2002, *Styles, Schools and Movements*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p. 151.

³¹ RN St. Clair and Y. Jia, 2005, *Visual Metaphors, Visual Communication and the Organization of Cognitive Space*, Paper Presented at the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, Taipei, Taiwan.

thought. While it is undocumented as to whether Dali or Chagall were dyslexic, many Surrealist images tend to include time or representations of movement. Perhaps motion is necessary to show the sometimes random, non-static nature of dreams. Dyslexics may intuitively add a sense of time or motion to their works because they rely on visual thought, which, like dreams, is always in motion or changing. Ways in which dyslexic artists deal with time and space in their art will be discussed in more detail later.

I think that art dealing with dyslexic perception—which relies heavily on visual thought, tends to distort and blend imagery, and which carries rich layers of meaning through holistic perception—will inevitably find many overlaps with Symbolism and Surrealism. Thus, to fully benefit from an examination of ‘dyslexic’ art, I must not only consider how the artists convey the sensory experience of dyslexia, such as the perception of space and time, which is clearly integral to understanding the experience of dyslexia, but I must also reflect on the emotional experience of dyslexia, as well as the symbolic meanings expressed in dyslexic works. The symbolism in dyslexic art is the language of visual thought, and reading this language will aid in understanding the alternative perception of reality that is dyslexia.

CHAPTER 1

I have experimented with many different ways of showing dyslexic perception through my art. I have attempted to show what the world looks like through the eyes of a dyslexic, and I have dealt with the emotional repercussions of this disability. What I find most important to my work, however, is the link between thought and dyslexic perception expressed in the 'thought paintings' for my MVA project.

Dyslexia allows me to see my thoughts as images, and these mental images are the subject of my work. The thought-images are influenced by many factors: my personal history, including an early exposure to primitive Native American art; the language of symbolism that my mind uses to convey meaning; and an interest in the subconscious itself. This chapter will explore these influences, including theories of Jungian symbolism which are prevalent in my work.

Personal influences.

Few are those who can see with their own eyes and hear with their own hearts. [Albert Einstein]

Personal experience is the inescapable foundation upon which all my thoughts and thus my paintings rest. Dyslexia is probably the most powerfully influential force in my personal experience and thus on my art. I believe that dyslexia has always had an influence on my art and been visible in it, but my first deliberate experimentation with the topic of dyslexia began during my

time at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney. For most of my life I had avoided facing the emotional fallout of being dyslexic, and I had tried always to hide my condition as much as possible. However, an instructor of mine, Peter Sharp, encouraged me to delve deep into myself, to find what was most essential to me and paint about it. What I found waiting down in the dark basement of my psyche was dyslexia. I'd like to say that the process of exploring dyslexia through my art has been entirely cathartic, but most of the time it has been painful and embarrassing. As I have described throughout this dissertation, dyslexia influences how one physically perceives the world; it also makes one an outsider, excluded from literate society; and it necessitates reliance on visual imagery for communication.

From my earliest childhood, art was a way to both communicate and to escape into a better world where my inability to read didn't matter. I would draw pictures of toys and decorate donation jars, hoping my parents would put a few coins in so I could buy what I wanted. I drew fantastical worlds on napkins and school notepads, because I was never able to read or write words as well as my classmates. I wrote, and still do write, mainly through pictures.

My elementary school years (1976-1982) were spent at an American Indian school, because we lived near the reservation, and pictographic writing was not an alien concept to my classmates. Although they learned to read and write far quicker than I, I was not initially singled out by the other children as different. Most of their grandparents were illiterate, and knowledge was still passed down by traditional storytelling from the tribe elders. This is likely where my love of primitive art began.

Petroglyphs could be found on local rock formations, and touching these simple lines, feeling the depressions in the rock with my own hands, gave me a connection to those who had carved it. I could make out deer and birds, just like those that I hunted with the Indian boys, and those pictures seemed immediate rather than ancient, because they spoke of the nature that was all around me, impervious to the fluctuations of human history.

Most other forms of Native American art I encountered were bright coloured and used simple patterns or pictographic representations of people, animals and objects. Traditionally, images were outlined in black charcoal when drawn on cured animal hides and filled in with blocks of colour derived from clay ochres, berries and plants mixed with animal fat. While the modern Indians I grew up with no longer entirely relied on such primitive materials, they would use poster or oil paints to paint on paper or animal hides. The images would still be outlined and filled in with blocks of bright colour, perhaps even brighter colours than traditionally used because of the properties of modern paints. I adopted this pictographic style at an early age, and this influence was deliberately carried into my current works, my 'thought paintings' which are heavily influenced by these early childhood memories.

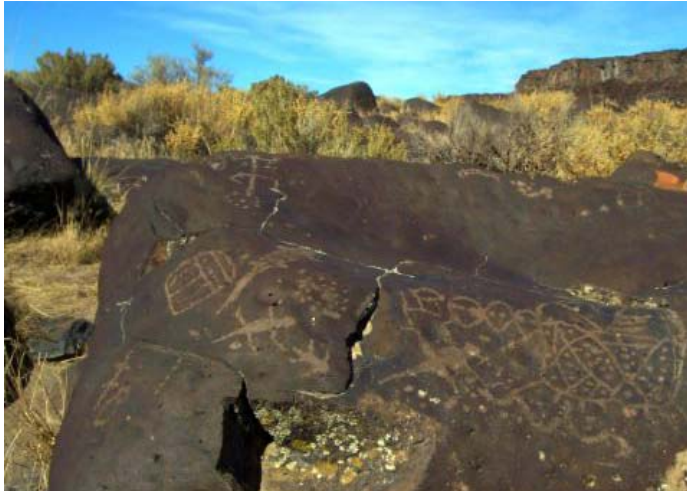


Figure 4. *Native American Indian petroglyphs. Petroglyphs carved into a couch-sized boulder in Celebration Park, Idaho (photo by D.R. Michhimer and L. Johnston, 2005).*



Figure 5. *Native American beadwork. On the left are male Blackfoot moccasins made from buffalo hide in 1890; on the right, a Nez Pierce ration card bag from the late 19th century (digital photos by River Trading Post, 2007)*



Figure 6. *Coyote, the trickster. Zuni Indian pictograph on a boulder north of Capitan, New Mexico, USA (digital photo by J. McCulloch, 2007).*



Figure 7. *Traditional Native American Indian garb (photographer unknown).*



Figure 8. *Example of an Indian Day festival. Note adoption of modern materials and pigments (photographer unknown).*

My inclination towards creative pursuits was encouraged by one of my teachers, Mrs. Eagle, who taught me to do beadwork on traditional garb that she sewed for the Indian Day festival where all the tribes on the reservation showed off their history and customs. Reservations are not composed of one tribe but could have Crow, Shoshone, Comanche, Cherokee and Blackfoot all crammed together. Each tribe had its own language, its own history and had often been moved from their lush native lands to a desert, dominated by the Blackfoot tribe for instance, where they had to learn to survive. Some tribes had traditionally been enemies, had kept one another as slaves, but after nearly a century of being forced together they had created shared holidays and rituals. We worked with leather, with bright coloured beads sewn in simple patterns that could say so much about the person and their place in society, and while we worked we listened to stories of the history of the tribes and the spirits of nature.

Stories were told every day among the Indians, sometimes with seriousness, sometimes with mocking disbelief, sometimes with both at once. I remember being taught the secrets of stalking silently through the woods, the lesson begun very seriously but culminating in “You see that twig? Don’t step on it!” and we all laughed at the simplicity behind supposed ‘mysteries’. However, when I was initiated into the tribe as a blood brother by my best friend, without permission, the elders did not laugh and gave us both a stern lecture on how such things were not to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, they accepted me, even if we had been young and foolish, because a blood oath was still a blood oath.

My very favourite stories were the oldest, those that spoke of the creation of the Earth, of how The People (as the Native American Indians call themselves no matter what language is used) came to be, and of the spirits of nature. I loved tales of Crow (also commonly called Raven in stories) who carried the world into existence as a seed in his beak, but Coyote was particularly special to me, because of how I came to hear his story.

I always had attention problems, fidgeting in my seat, my blood brother and I always causing trouble, and me always asking questions, stubbornly refusing to accept anything told to me unless I believed it using my own logic. The teachers and tribe elders used to shake their heads over me. I distinctly remember being presented to the oldest person on the reservation in her tepee during a storytelling session. She must have been nearly a hundred years old and had lived a remarkable life: captured and enslaved by an enemy tribe when she was young, she never saw her family again and raised a new family among her traditional enemies; she saw the coming of the white man

and accepted the conquering of her people and the move to the reservation, just as she might have accepted the seasons and all other things that she could not change; and she had become the tribe elder, passing on her histories to the reservation children and to me. A literate society cannot comprehend the awe of hearing a story that would never be written down, hearing it from the mouth of one who had experienced it, lived it. The old woman's words live only as pictures in my mind and in the minds of the other listeners, each with their own mental pictures and interpretations. An oral history provides a feeling of connection, of continuity, of knowledge that belongs to you and is not borrowed from a book.

The old woman had been told about me, and the teachers must have hoped that she would give me a lesson that would teach me to behave. Instead, the elder told me of Coyote, how he was just like me, always questioning, always unsettled, always disobedient and causing trouble. The other gods, like Crow, were always frustrated by him. They were always trying to make things orderly, but Coyote was a force of chaos and made everything unpredictable. However, Coyote was just as necessary as Crow. Life needed chaos, it needed change or else everything would stagnate, so I should just go on being Coyote and damn whatever anyone else thought!

Stories are very important to me, and every story I hear or event I personally experience becomes a series of images in my mind. Images dominate my memory, and for me to retell a story or event I must read the images in my mind. My paintings are sometimes the images from these stories or sometimes new images that arise from my thoughts. *Orca*, for example, is a 'thought painting' based on a memory from my salmon-fishing

days on the coast of Oregon in the United States. I stared over the side of our fishing boat, watching all the hooks and lines trawled out behind, when I saw a darkness beneath the water. It was a giant shadow that manoeuvred its way past dangerous hooks and neared the surface of the water right beside me. I wasn't sure exactly what it was until a giant eye opened and looked at me. It actually looked at me for a moment, and it was more than a dumb animal. It had braved the danger of hooks and fishing lines, which could easily have entangled it, just because it was curious. It travelled alongside the boat with us for some time until it turned and went its own way.



Orca, Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas

Figure 9. *Orca (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist). Orca is from a memory of meeting a killer whale that swam beneath my fishing boat*

No matter their source, the images in my paintings carry meaning without words. In order to translate these images into words, an understanding of the language of images is needed, and that language is symbolism. Psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud and his pupil, Carl Jung,

have tried to understand symbolism in order to understand the unconscious mind, and thus the basis of all human thought and behaviour.

Jung, symbolism and the language of thought

“The unconscious is pure nature, and, like nature, pours out its gifts in profusion. But left to itself and without...consciousness, it can, again like nature, destroy its own gifts and sooner or later sweep them into annihilation.”
[Aniela Jaffé³²]

My interest in symbolism and the language of thought cannot be traced to any particular episode, but I am sure that having dyslexia was a key factor. As a dyslexic I think in images, and there were always images in paintings and other art which fascinated me, saying so much without words. I see stories in imagery, and if there is no story in a piece of art I am personally not interested in it. Symbolist and Surrealist art is full of stories, which is why I am drawn to it. It is also because of dyslexia that I learned about psychology and the study of symbolism.

I became a psychologists' favourite subject during high school, when I lived in Fernley Nevada in 1984. I was a first string football player, but the school was a good one and not willing to ignore my poor grades without understanding why I couldn't read. It was there I was finally diagnosed with dyslexia. I was subjected to endless interviews, psychological testing, IQ tests, spatial reasoning tests etc., and I know I must be 'Subject A' in some research paper published out there. The research never helped me, except that it made me realise that what skills I lacked with written language I made up for in visual-spatial thought. The experience also made me ask why I was

³² Biographer of Carl Jung, who contributed the section “Symbolism in the Visual Arts”, pages 255-322 of *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, C.G. Jung, Dell Publishing, New York, NY.

different from everyone around me. I wanted to understand what being dyslexic meant, so psychology became a hobby for me.

Carl Jung's work on archetypes of the subconscious is particularly important for my own work.³³ According to Jung, our psyches are a balance of primordial aspects or archetypal figures, such as the Anima, the Animus and the Shadow. The male aspect, the Animus, is usually associated with reason as well as ambition, while the female aspect, the Anima, represents intuition and feeling. In addition, if you are a woman the male archetype takes on additional meanings, as the female archetype does for men. For men, the Anima can be a kind mother figure, but it can also be a seducer, like the lamia, mermaids and sirens of legend luring men into the unknown, often to their deaths. For men, the female Anima is also a powerful representation of our own subconscious minds: the mysterious, unknowable, alluring yet frightening depths of our selves.³⁴ Female figures are prevalent in many of my works, and they sometimes represent particular people I know or Mother Earth, but often they are the Anima. In essence, the women in my paintings may sometimes represent me, or the feeling and intuitive part of me that is looking out on the world and expressing itself through my art.

The subconscious is another universe, an inner landscape that is no less real just because it is invisible to our conscious minds. I think this is why Surrealism holds appeal for me: it tries to show the inner landscape of the subconscious, a world usually only glimpsed in dreams. The dyslexic artist, Terry Orchard (discussed in Chapter 3), mentioned that his love of Surrealism comes from the similarities with dyslexic thought. That shifting inner world of

³³ C.G. Jung, 1964, *Man and His Symbols*, Dell Publishing, New York, NY, p.186.

³⁴ *ibid*

dreams resembles the conscious, image-based thought of dyslexics; thus Surrealism is very familiar and comforting to us.

In addition to the archetypal figures described by Jung, dreams and image-based thinking uses many other symbolic elements. These symbolic images can be very personal, such as an umbrella at the beach reminds me not of sunny Australian beaches but of the rainy coastline of Oregon where I spent my teenage years. Other symbols are particular to certain cultures or religions, like how the cross symbolizes the sacrifice of Jesus in Christian mythology, yet symbolised the four directions—north, south, east and west—in Celtic culture.³⁵ And many symbols are almost universal, their meanings established in ancient preliterate times and carried down to the modern era, such as how the colour blue represents the sky, or black represents the night and the Tree of Life is central to many Middle Eastern and European creation mythologies.³⁶

³⁵ R Shepherd and R Shepherd, 2002, *1000 Symbols: What Shapes Mean in Art and Myth*, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY.

³⁶ D Fontana, 1993, *The Language of Symbols*, Duncan Baird Publishers, London.



Umbrella, Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas

Figure 10. *Umbrella* (2008), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist). Personal symbolism of an umbrella is mixed with the general symbolism of the sun, representing awakening consciousness.

The sun and moon are frequent symbols in my paintings, whose meanings are fairly universal, with the sun often representing the masculine light of conscious thought and the moon representing the feminine subconscious and intuition. The tree is also another potent symbol for me. It is sometimes the Tree of Life, which symbolises all of life and what we know of as reality. Or, it is sometimes the Tree of Knowledge, from the Garden of

Eden, which represents learned knowledge, like writing, or knowledge of good and evil and the loss of innocence.³⁷

Animals in my paintings may represent actual animals, such as pets from childhood, but often represent the gods and spirits of the natural world that I heard stories about at the reservation school. The Crow, for example, will thus have a different meaning for me, as a god of creation, than it would for someone familiar with Edgar Allan Poe and the European conception of crows as carrion birds and harbingers of death. I am aware of both interpretations of Crow, and such duality of meaning is even more satisfying to me, because as a symbol of life, Crow cannot exist without its opposite, which is death.



Clayton Colgin, Crow, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas

Figure 11. Crow (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist). Crow is a current 'thought painting' influenced by stories from childhood.

³⁷ R Shepherd and R Shepherd, 2002, *1000 Symbols: What Shapes Mean in Art and Myth*, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY.

Such many layered meanings are what make symbolist imagery so good at representing dyslexic thought. The holistic perception employed by dyslexics is not limited to just seeing multiple angles at once but is also capable of seeing multiple emotional or conceptual meanings at once.³⁸ Holism is the antithesis of duality, which divides: with dualism, good is separate from bad; life is separate from death. With holism, however, good/bad or life/death are seen as part of a whole and inseparable from one another. Symbolism, Surrealism and Jungian archetypes thus allow me to express a holistic union of concepts in addition to the holistic perception of visual space experienced by a dyslexic.

³⁸ Holistic Educator, *Holism defined*, viewed online 12 Jan 2008, <http://www.holisticeducator.com/holisticperception.htm>.

CHAPTER 2

In order to discuss more about my own reality and dyslexia, I wish to investigate those dyslexic artists whose work has particular resonance in relation to my own.

In this chapter, I will examine the works of two well known dyslexic artists: Pablo Picasso and Robert Rauschenberg. I want to illustrate how dyslexic perception is apparent in their work, in particular how I believe they may have made use of holistic thinking, visual-spatial thought and time or motion. Parallels with some of my own paintings will also be discussed.

Pablo Picasso

“A painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions.” [Pablo Picasso]³⁹

“True art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist.” [Albert Einstein]

I was uneducated in the history of art for most of my adult life, but when I stepped into a gallery for the first time, I was drawn to a set of sketches. I instantly understood and felt them, and it was not until someone read to me the name printed below one that I knew they were by Picasso. I had never seen his work before, not even in books. I only remember adults in the country towns where I grew up speaking of Picasso’s work as an example of strange and incomprehensible art: “He put guitars in people’s faces”, people would say. Now, whenever I visit a new gallery, I may admire this or that painting,

³⁹ D Ashton ed., 1972, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, Da Capo Press, USA, p. 43.

but then something stands out from all the rest, like love at first sight across a crowded room, and my feet glide me towards that one small painting on the wall. It has 'something' that seems to speak directly to me. Then I see the signature, and no surprise it is a Picasso, of course! I clearly remember experiencing this with Picasso's *Crying Woman* in Melbourne and *Girl Before A Mirror* in New York.



Figure 12. *Girl Before A Mirror* (1932), Pablo Picasso, 162 x 130 cm, oil on canvas (photo by Museum of Modern Art, New York).

Why is it that a Picasso speaks so strongly to me? Picasso's earlier works, his blue period for example, do not have the same effect. It must be Cubism and primitivism, Picasso style. Perhaps it is the distortion of space, the sense of motion and time, the ambiguity of emotion and meaning? It is likely all these things combined, which seem to capture my own thoughts and feelings on the canvas and make his paintings feel like a thought from my own mind made manifest with accomplished ease.

It is the display of holistic perception in Picasso's work that most strongly resonates with me. Holistic thinking involves seeing something all at once. This aspect of holism, also called global perception, means that a dyslexic sees all angles of an object at once—front, back, sides, even the inside—even if a touch of imagination is required to 'see' the parts that are not normally visible.

Nowhere is holistic perception better expressed in painting than in Cubism. *Girl Before A Mirror* (1932) is an ideal example. In it we see both the side and front view of the woman's face: the side view is sad and moon-like, while the full face is lightened with yellow and is smiling like the sun. The reflection in the mirror reveals yet other sides to the face and the woman's figure, with opposing colours that alter the feel of the reflected image, reversing shadow and light from the main figure so that we see everything, even what would normally be hidden. With Cubism, multiple angles are shown, allowing this technique to capture all sides of an object at once, effectively pressing a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional canvas. Picasso claimed that this was the very purpose of Cubism: "All of this

is my struggle to break with the two-dimensional aspect”⁴⁰, and, speaking of a strange sketch on paper, he said “It’s a chair, and you see, that is an explanation of cubism! Imagine a chair passed under the rollers of a compressor—it would turn out just about like that.”⁴¹ Thus, Cubism grants a two-dimensional painting an ability not even matched by sculpture, the ability to show an object holistically.

Two of my own works—*Sun Mirror* and *Moon Mirror*—draw upon the compositional device used by Picasso in *Girl Before A Mirror*: images reflected in mirrors help to convey holism, also reversing shadow and light, as they are meant to show what is normally hidden. Holistic perception is not limited to just seeing multiple angles at once but is also capable of seeing multiple emotional or conceptual meanings at once, like seeing night and day, sadness and joy, all at once.

⁴⁰ D Ashton ed., 1972, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, Da Capo Press, USA, p. 61.

⁴¹ D Ashton ed., 1972, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, Da Capo Press, USA, p. 63.



Figure 13. *Sun Mirror* (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist).

Sun Mirror was inspired by observations of how people can seem one way from the outside but be experiencing something totally different on the inside, and this affects their perception of themselves and the world. I may seem confident and outgoing to others, but on the inside, because of my dyslexia for one thing, I feel frightened and sad at times. An image came to mind of a bright sunny world, but the reflection in the mirror was the opposite, night, and it was the only thing the person within the painting saw, as the mirror could not show her face as the rest of the world saw it. It was a reflection that was in some ways false, because it did not accurately reflect the world around her, but it was also truer, in that it was a look into her inner world, a true reflection of her feelings.



Figure 14. *Moon Mirror* (2007), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist).

Moon Mirror is the opposite perspective of *Sun Mirror*. This is the other side of the looking glass, an alternate universe on the other side of the mirror where a woman shrouded in darkness looks and sees the light within her. I felt this paired painting was necessary in order to capture the holistic nature of dyslexic perception. When I saw *Sun Mirror* in my mind, *Moon Mirror* was there simultaneously. The other side of the mirror, the other universe, was an intrinsic part of the thought. You can say that both paintings, both thoughts, sprang into existence simultaneously, and one was the shadow of the other. The Shadow, according to Jung, is the hidden parts of our subconscious,

sometimes our animal nature, and often a part that we are ashamed of.⁴²

Despite the fact that the Shadow is hidden away, it is still very powerful and affects all of our existence. Similarly, the shadow world on the other side of the mirror, the world of night, represents the Shadow of the subconscious in my painting. The symbolism of *Moon Mirror* deliberately reflected its shadow existence, and even colours and forms were the opposite of *Sun Mirror*.

In addition to showing holistic perception, including multiple angles at once, Picasso's Cubism can also show time and motion. Time and motion are inextricable. Motion cannot exist without time. We can watch a person or object moving, see it shifting position from one second to the next, or we can turn away from a scene and then look back a few seconds or hours later and see that it has changed, see that tree branches have moved in a breeze or day has turned into night. If two snapshots separated by moments are blended together the image appears blurred, like when slow film is used to photograph a runner; effectively, the image of the runner in different spots over time is blended together. Thus, we can watch motion continuously, like watching a movie, or we can be aware of motion in snapshots, and both are valid representations of time passing. The motion in Picasso's works is more similar to the latter—snapshots of time, yet they are blended together in one painting without blurring rather than divided into separate still images.

Returning to the example of *Girl Before A Mirror*, we can see both the side and front views of the woman's face simultaneously, like the face has been rolled out flat. However, we can think of the face in another way, in terms of motion or time. The side view of the face is not terribly distorted if

⁴² CG Jung, 1964, *Man and His Symbols*, Dell Publishing, New York, NY, p. 171.

looked at in isolation; similarly, the full rounded front view isn't entirely squashed flat and would look more normal in isolation. Thus, we could be seeing two snapshots of time fused together: a side view at one time and a full face view at another time. The sense of images in time is reinforced by the two perspectives, side and front view, mirrored by two different colour schemes, like moonlight and sunlight, two entirely different times of day or different stages of life.



Figure 15. *Dying Bull* (1934) Pablo Picasso, 33.3 cm x 55.2 cm, oil on canvas, Mexico City, Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection (photo from Archive Andre Held).

Another example of how Picasso captured time and motion using blended stills is *Dying Bull*. While somewhat distorted, much of the bull in this painting is well proportioned and not “flattened”. The entire right half pretty much conforms to conventional perspective, but the left third is discordant. Both sides of the bull’s face are visible, and where the right front leg should be there is another large, muscular hind leg facing the wrong direction. This

discordance disappears if we imagine motion: the bull thrashing about in pain might twist its head from side to side, so that two stills of this blended together would allow us to see both eyes at once; if the bull had been facing to the right then its right hind leg would be in the position shown, so all we must imagine is that it turned itself around, but Picasso left the first snapshot of the leg in its original spot. Thus, *Dying Bull* makes perfect visual sense if we imagine seeing two or three snapshots of time blended together. Picasso's Cubism thus has the ability to show not only three-dimensional objects holistically but to capture motion or time without blurring.



Figure 16. *Beginning* (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist).

For my own work, one way in which I capture a sense of time and the motion of my thoughts is to use two paintings that have a shared element, which is unchanged or changed subtly, while other aspects of the painting

show dramatic changes with the passage of time. This is apparent in *Beginning* and *A New Beginning*. In these paintings a dark-haired 'mother earth' brings change to her people, depicted as less distinct shadowy forms. The mother is basically unchanged in the two images, but the world has altered dramatically with the passage of time: from primordial prehistoric life, with a world empty except for the tree of life, to a modern era of tall buildings and human advancement, where the people are forced from their teepees into a new future.



Figure 17. *A New Beginning* (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by the artist).

Like *Dying Bull*, some of Picasso's paintings seem like two frames combined to capture motion. I did not want to blend my snapshots as he did, but, instead, to give them separate spaces on which to exist, give them each

their own canvas. Thus, to experience the time and motion of the images, a viewer needs to physically stand in the room with the paintings near each other or on opposite walls from each other. The viewer then has to physically turn their head or move in space about the room, holding the images in memory. The similarity between one image and the next then makes them wonder what was different, so they look back and forth between the images. Thus, the viewer generates the motion, physically and mentally engaging with the memory, as if they are within it. There is an interaction between the image and the viewer, between the thought and the mind's eye of the dyslexic, which I wanted to capture with my works.



Figure 18. *Guernica* (1937), *Pablo Picasso*, 349 x 776 cm, oil on canvas (photo from Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid).

In addition to the holistic way of seeing space and time achieved by Picasso's work, he also made use of symbolism to convey greater, holistic concepts without words. *Guernica*, for example, is famed for its layers of symbolic meaning about war. It has been described as Surrealistic, as a

recording of the subconscious, employing the ‘expressive power of children’s art’.⁴³ Within I see many powerful symbols of light and darkness, life and death, the ancient and the modern. A broken sword next to a flower on the ground is a powerful contrast, containing dichotomies typical of holistic thought. A modern electric light shaped like an eye watching everything in detachment, while next to it a more ancient lamp of flame and passion is carried in the arm of someone fleeing the dark in horror, speaks of emotion versus intellect. It is a powerful work with many more layers of symbolism as well as multiple perspectives of space and time.

In conclusion, Picasso’s art provides us with many examples of how dyslexic perception can be expressed through art: multiple spatial perspectives, time, motion and holistic meaning through symbols. With Cubism we see the clearest view of this and of Picasso’s thought. He has said that the goal behind it was simply to paint:

... And to paint seeking a new expression divested of useless realism, with a method *linked only to my thought*—without enslaving myself or associating myself with objective reality. Neither the good or the true; neither the useful or the useless. It is my will that takes form outside all extrinsic schemes...⁴⁴

With Cubism, Picasso freed himself to show the world through his own perception, what I see as a dyslexic perception of reality.

Robert Rauschenberg

“Curiosity is probably the most important energy that any creative person can have.” [Robert Rauschenberg]

⁴³ IF Walther Ed, 2006, *Picasso*, Taschen, Köln, p. 400-401.

⁴⁴ D Ashton ed., 1972, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, Da Capo Press, USA, p. 63.

“Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality... Never lose a holy curiosity.” [Albert Einstein]

Rauschenberg’s art spans painting, performance, photography, sculpture and epitomizes mixed media. He is known for his lateral thinking, for rearranging, juxtaposing and engaging in intuitive, non-sequential, leaps of creativity. Rauschenberg himself has admitted to using many “tricks”, which were intended to bring himself to a state where creativity flows, namely relying on the novelty of his materials, or on Jack Daniels and fatigue.⁴⁵ For example, Rauschenberg said, “...Another good trick is fatigue... It is then that I find myself in another state, quite outside myself, and when that happens there’s so much joy! It’s an incredible high and things just start flowing and you have no idea of the source.”⁴⁶ This process is reminiscent of Native American vision quests, like those I learned of as a child, where the seekers, sometimes boys wanting to become men or experienced medicine men, wander into the unknown and inspiring wilderness. They subject themselves to physical exhaustion or drugs to bring about a hallucinatory state where they can speak with their totems, or spirit guides, and see to the heart of themselves.⁴⁷

The biographer and art historian, Robert Mattison, has suggested, that in addition to the deliberate cultivation of creative thinking, Rauschenberg may also be influenced by an innate characteristic—dyslexia—which Mattison

⁴⁵ RS Mattison, 2003, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 33.

⁴⁶ R Rauschenberg, 1977, “Robert Rauschenberg: An Audience of One,” interview with John Gruen, *Art News* 76, no.2, p. 48.

⁴⁷ Also briefly described in: L Irwin Ed., 2000, *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader, Voice, Representation and Dialogue: The Poetics of Native American Spiritual Tradition* by Robin Ridington, University of Nebraska Press, USA, p. 101-103.

points out should not be thought of so much as a disability but as an alternate mode of perception.⁴⁸

Rauschenberg said, “Probably the only reason I’m a painter is because I couldn’t read.”⁴⁹ This is a statement I entirely sympathize with. We may desire to put a positive spin on it, but dyslexia is a disability; it limits what we can do and limits our choices in life. Yet, it is also an alternate mode of perception, one that can actually be advantageous to a painter.

Rauschenberg may have become a painter rather than a writer because of dyslexia, but if the lack of reading ability was his only determinant, he could just have easily become a welder or carpenter. I believe that along with the curses of dyslexia also comes an inclination towards creativity, non-linear and image-based thinking, all of which make art a more natural choice for dyslexics than other alternatives. Rauschenberg also said, “[as] a dyslexic, I already see things backwards! You see in printmaking everything comes out backwards, so printing is an absolute natural for me”.

Many of Rauschenberg’s works, like *Retroactive I*, where images within a collage are multiplied, rotated or inverted, show evidence of the visual-spatial thought employed by dyslexics. In dyslexia or visual modes of thought, an image can be rotated in any way and still be understood in terms of its inherent meanings. The dyslexic is compelled to twist and distort things, unable to keep them static, in an effort to ‘see’ them more clearly or to understand them in a new way. In Rauschenberg’s words, “[images] keep on

⁴⁸ RS Mattison, 2003, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 34.

⁴⁹ *ibid*

suggesting things when they are juxtaposed with other images on the canvas, so there's... possibilities of collaboration and discovery".⁵⁰



Figure 19. *Retroactive I* (1964), Robert Rauschenberg, 213 x 152 cm, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas (photo by the artist).

Another tendency of dyslexics is to see alphabetical letters as images, rather than abstract symbols for sounds. Rauschenberg, when confessing his reading problems, said “every few minutes my mind would shift and I would

⁵⁰ RS Mattison, 2003, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 38.

pick out all the O's then all the letter A's on the page". This is a symptom of dyslexia that I experience myself. A single letter, such as A, will seem to float above the page, all of the A's on that page will be floating above the paper, separate and isolated from the words they are supposed to belong to.

Rauschenberg's *Summer Rental series*, for example, all treat letters as pieces of imagery without confining them within words or sentences. The letters are also sometimes rotated, reversed or distorted just as any image is treated by visual-spatial thought.



Figure 20. *Summer Rental +3 (1960), Robert Rauschenberg, 70 x 54 in, oil and printed paper on canvas (photo by the artist).*

Dyslexia was my first attempt at showing a dyslexic perception of writing. My aim was to show just how distorted words and letters become in my mind's eye, and thus why it is so difficult to read. Because of letters being

treated as object-images by my mode of visual-spatial thought, words not only blur for me, but move around, float over the page on another visual plane, distort and even take on colours.



Figure 21. *Dyslexia* (2003), Clayton Colgin, 56 x 71 cm, printed paper and ink on canvas (photo by the artist).

Dyslexics have an affinity for three-dimensional imagery, which is why they are often sculptors, like Rodin, another known dyslexic artist.⁵¹ In lieu of sculpture, collage adds a deeper dimensional life to paintings, another spatial plane to which multiple viewpoints can be added. *Dyslexia*, for example, has

⁵¹ Encyclopedia of Psychology, *Dyslexia*, 20010406 FindArticles.com, viewed online 26 May 2008, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0004/ai_2699000449.

layers of paper included, which are printed with quotes of wisdom that are uninterpretable, but which are nevertheless there. These layers of paper also produce thin shadows in certain lighting, which holistic perception allows me to immediately notice, and I also imagine the dark undersides of those papers while viewing the visible surface of the piece.



Figure 22. *Untitled (1954), Robert Rauschenberg, 86x37x26 in, mixed media (photo by Brian Forrest).*

There are an infinite number of collages among Rauschenberg's work, not to mention his involvement in dance and performance, all examples of his

need to express three dimensional thought and motion. One piece that Rauschenberg spoke of in particular during an interview held at the Guggenheim museum in 1998, was *Untitled c. 1954*. He spoke of his love of the piece because it was the first to 'move away from the wall', which clearly shows his deep-rooted need to have three-dimensionality in his creations.⁵²



Figure 23. *Reservoir (1961), Robert Rauschenberg, 85x62x14 in, mixed media (photo by the artist).*

⁵² Charlie Rose, 1998, *An interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, Program recorded February 27.

Because of my own fascination with time and motion, I was immediately struck by Rauschenberg's *Reservoir*. This *combine* (as Rauschenberg's mixed media works are called) is made of wood, metal, fabric, paint and other materials in a three dimensional feast of imagery. More importantly, it is also alive with time and motion. Motion is conveyed by a real wheel suspended in the middle of the painting plus a dark wheel painted prominently in the 'sky'. This sky wheel has spokes and is powerfully reminiscent to me of the Wheel of Life, an ancient reference to the turn of the seasons through winter, spring, summer and back again, which also refers to the life of a person from childhood to maturity and death followed by rebirth (or reincarnation). Two clocks are also embedded in the work (their settings separated by the time between start and finish of the painting), which tick away time continually.

The plethora of clocks, wheels, athletes, dancers and other symbols of movement in Rauschenberg's paintings have been remarked upon, previously, by Branden Joseph, who wrote that "[his] works... seem to lament their own lack of mobility."⁵³ John Cage observed, "[Rauschenberg] regrets we do not see the paint while it's dripping."⁵⁴

Similarly my collage, *Woman in Time*, used a dizzying array of images to represent time and motion: the papers pasted across the surface were crowded with printed images of clocks, cogs, gears and wheels. Furthermore, I drew a woman warped and unstuck in time: young, old, pregnant or stooped with age, all was meant to be unclear, to be simultaneous, in keeping with

⁵³ P Schimmel Ed., 2005, B.W .Joseph, *Rauschenberg's Refusal* essay in *Combines*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, p. 260.

⁵⁴ J Cage, 1961, *On Robert Rauschenberg, Art and His Work*, in *Silence*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown CT, p. 100.

holistic thought. I showed her from slightly different angles and at different sizes, as though she were moving farther away. I even incorporated a few mathematical formulas about time, but warped them, as both numbers and letters are affected by my perception. This collage was thus an orgy of time and motion, and my fascination with the subject was barely satisfied.



Figure 24. *Woman In Time (2005), Clayton Colgin, 76 x 121 cm, paper and ink on canvas (photo by the artist). This collage addressed my interest in time, being rich in symbols of time, change and motion.*

Rauschenberg has produced a bewildering mass of works over his lifetime, and it would be foolish to claim all, or any, of it was specifically about his dyslexia. He dealt with whatever subjects concerned him at the time: animals from childhood memories; his own confusion as a Southern boy thrust into the fast-paced life of urban New York City; an enthusiasm for flight and space travel at the dawn of the Space Age. There were endless ideas and subjects for his works. Rauschenberg said that “[art] has you, but it isn’t you”.⁵⁵ Dyslexia, despite having a profound impact on Rauschenberg’s everyday life, may not have been the subject of his work, but it certainly was a factor in his mode of thought and the generation of *all* his works. As Mattison points out, Rauschenberg has used the disorientation that results from dyslexia to express the disorientation most people experience in the confusion of contemporary life.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Charlie Rose, 1998, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, Program recorded February 27.

⁵⁶ RS Mattison, 2003, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 39.

CHAPTER 3

In this section I will discuss the works of two contemporary dyslexic artists, Terry A. Orchard and Katharine Dowson, commenting on how they show dyslexic perception through their art. I obtained ethics approval from the University of Sydney to conduct a survey and interview dyslexic artists about their disability and how they believe dyslexia has influenced their art. A copy of the ethics approval and the survey questions are included in the Appendix. Information gained from this survey and from email interviews was used to write this chapter.

Terry A. Orchard

Terry A. Orchard is also referred to by his artist's name, TAO. He is heavily involved with the British Dyslexia Association and is an Artist in Residence at a special needs school in Essex County England. He is a tremendously giving person who has devoted his life to teaching dyslexic and disabled children the beauty of art and revealing to them their own capacity to create something wonderful. He tries to spread awareness about dyslexia and also help dyslexic children to see their own self worth, despite their difficulties with school. He says, "If there was a cure I wouldn't want it. Going through school was extremely difficult, but now I am a practicing artist my weakness has become my strength. I now consider dyslexia as a gift."

TAO, like me, is severely dyslexic with poor reading ability and memory problems. Yet, in compensation, he has a highly developed capacity for three

dimensional and holistic thought. He says, “I think in three dimensions—I see everything from all angles and even on the inside.” He will turn images around in his mind, warping them into new things. TAO believes that dyslexia has not only affected him emotionally, but has made him see the world differently from non-dyslexics. He is drawn to Surrealism because “the dream world appeals to my dyslexic thinking”. TAO also believes dyslexia is integral to his artistic ability. He has no difficulty coming up with images to paint, because images make up every aspect of his thought.

The topic of TAO’s art is dyslexic perception, about seeing into his inner worlds of thought and emotion. His artist’s statement says:

As long as I can remember I have felt the need to paint and draw. Being extremely dyslexic and having lived in my visual world for 47 years, I began to realise that although we as humans need and desire the same things, we think and react as unique individuals. The way we process our thoughts when we hear the spoken word, or how we view our surroundings, is unique to you and me. Dyslexic people process thought in a very different way. We think in a purely visual way, conversations and stories are short mental films. There is no smell or touch to thought but we see it or hear it. I believe through dyslexia I have the ability to see thought and can share this gift with others, by exposing my mind in the form of images, stills of thought, a snap shot from a long film. Welcome to my mind.

Because TAO’s perspective and goals match my own, he is an invaluable resource as I explore ways in which dyslexic perception can be expressed through art. Appropriately, the first painting by TAO I ever saw was *Images of Thought*, which is his attempt to show dyslexia through painting.



Figure 25. Images of Thought, *unknown year*, TAO, 4 ft 6 in x 2 ft 6 in, oil on canvas (photo by artist).

When I see *Images of Thought*, I see a world contained in one painting, an infinite collection of meaning. The horizon stretches on forever, blending into seascapes and landscapes like patches of dream. The world is composed of a shifting tapestry of threads and blocks, like strands of DNA joining people to the earth. A feminine figure is prominent, relaxed, drawing her finger through paint or the blood of life. She is like the artists' muse, like Mother Earth herself, or the Jungian archetype that represents the creative subconscious of the artist, powerful and unafraid. One ginger-haired man in the foreground has his head enclosed in a globe, like another world of thought within the world shown within the painting, worlds within worlds stretching forever.

The clearest meaning this painting holds for me, however, is the sense of being an outsider, of being different, and the whole world knowing that you

are. The central figure is shy, huddled, with his back to the viewer, standing on a feather of thought, the only thing supporting him on the shifting blocks of this world's reality. He is surrounded by an audience of differing people. Many are looking away, consumed in their own torments or thoughts, but most are looking directly at him, watching curiously, or angrily, or coldly, whispering among themselves, heads hung in disappointment or even pointing. Although the pointing figure can be interpreted more optimistically: it could be beckoning the lone outsider to come closer, to join the community at the edges of his inner world.



Figure 26. *Hollow* (2007), Clayton Colgin, 75 x 119 cm, acrylic on canvas (photo by artist).

My painting, *Hollow*, is reminiscent of TAO's works, in that we both convey the fluidity of visual-spatial thought by warping and distorting the figures within the image. *Hollow* is about loss, my wife's miscarriage, and vanished possibilities. The woman in *Hollow* is warped and fluid, bent like the trees around her. This fluidity extended to the shadows in her dress, which flow into spirits and ghosts, representing possibilities of children who would now never exist. The swirling clouds, hair and twisted trees, like those blown in a wind, gave a sense of motion, similar to TAO's twisting blue cords that vanish into the distance in *Images of Thought*.

The distorted figures and symbolic imagery employed by both TAO and myself are the result of visual-spatial thought without words. This plasticity of the imagery, representing living, changing thoughts themselves, is Surrealistic. TAO and I have the shared goal of showing dyslexic visual thought through painting, and both of us have been drawn to Symbolism and Surrealism.

Katharine Dowson

While TAO's work and my own current works are concerned with showing dyslexic thought, the emotional experience of being dyslexic is also a powerful influence on us as artists. Katharine Dowson is a dyslexic artist working in London. Her art is mainly about her dyslexia, particularly about the frustration and emotional turmoil caused by growing up in a society that values the written word above spatial reasoning and other forms of intelligence. Spatial reasoning is the ability to deal with real world three dimensional problems, such as constructing buildings or machines. For

example, spatial reasoning is required to figure out how to get a sandstone block weighing 2 tonnes from a quarry and on top of a pyramid being built 5 kilometres away. This form of intelligence is undervalued in modern society, where everything is judged by how well you write an essay on the topic rather than on how well you understand the topic itself.

Katharine Dowson has spoken about the difficulties faced by dyslexic students, saying, “Intelligent children at five years of age can see that they are unable to read while their contemporaries can, and they are quick to find fault with themselves. It is often the early loss of confidence in their own abilities which causes problems later. As a dyslexic I have been through many IQ tests that seem to base intelligence on your language and numeracy skills. Fewer questions are devoted to spatial awareness and creativity—all associated with the right side of the brain and with dyslexia. Therefore your weaknesses are exposed while your strengths are not fully analysed.”⁵⁷

This exposure of our weaknesses while ignoring our strengths is what makes school, testing, university and academic life in general a hell for dyslexics. We live in terror of being asked to fill in a form or read a bus schedule; think of the sheer panic that strikes us when we are presented with a pop quiz or, worst of all, a written IQ test. An IQ test is supposed to measure our intelligence, not on our terms but on the terms of the examiner and on the basis of language skills, and of course we fall short when the test is so skewed. It is exactly like asking a blind person to take a written test that is not provided in Braille and when they fail, as they inevitably will, calling them

⁵⁷ Catalogue introduction provided by artist

stupid when there was never any possibility of truly seeing what they could do with such a measurement of intelligence.

As a dyslexic, you are a curiosity in the zoo of the psychologists, and they love to give you IQ tests. Like me, Dowson had the experience of being a trained monkey: "...Dyslexia was only recognized as a condition by a very few educationalists. Most children were labelled slow and never given the chance to overcome their difficulties. I was lucky enough to be one of the few who was identified as being 'orally deaf and visually blind', and consequently spent the rest of my schooling being IQ tested to prove to the exam authorities that I was dyslexic." The frustration associated with this testing, with the lack of understanding, inspired several of her works.

With *Word Play*, Dowson very subtly captures the frustration of being a dyslexic in grammar school. There is no more innocent scene than a small school desk with a colourful child's word puzzle in progress. This scene is deceiving, however, because to a dyslexic it is not innocent but a shameful and terrible memory of school days gone by. If you look closer at the word puzzle, it spells out descriptions like 'dense', 'illiterate', 'slow', 'stupid', some of the many words we have heard spoken about us by teachers and classmates, words sometimes whispered behind our backs but more commonly spoken directly to our faces, as though we were too 'stupid' to understand. This image reminds me of my own anger and frustration from those days, and I know exactly how Katharine Dowson feels when she recalls her own past, "Scrabble, Boggle, Hang Man, word searches and crossword puzzles all instil

a sense of frustration and fury at one's own inadequacies. Many encouraging remarks such as 'This shouldn't be difficult' can be so humiliating!"⁵⁸



Figure 27. *Word Play (2001), Katharine Dowson, Junior scrabble and modern school desk (photo by Lucio Sansone).*



Figure 28. *Word Play (2001), detail, Katharine Dowson, Junior Scrabble board (photo by the artist).*

Similar to Dowson, I have tried to express my frustration with the education system I endured growing up. School children in the United States are often taught a sing-song phrase, "ABC as easy as one, two, three..." which has always haunted me, and I did two works based on it. One was a

⁵⁸. M Simpson, 1998, K Dowson catalogue for *Myriad*, The Whitworth Gallery, University of Manchester.

digitally warped and blurred version of the words printed on canvas, the other a similarly altered painting of the words on glass, which allowed the words to be further confused as it dangled from the ceiling, twisting the letters around in three dimensions.

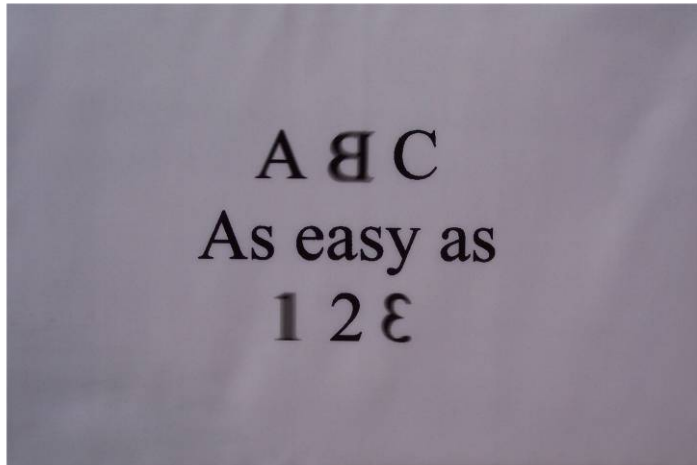


Figure 29. *ABC (2004), Clayton Colgin, 47 x 70 cm, digital print on silk stretched on canvas (photo by the artist). The ridicule experienced in grammar school is captured by the phrase, 'ABC easy as 123'. With the letters blurred and reversed even these supposedly simple things are difficult for a dyslexic.*

In addition to a deliberate discussion of the emotional and physical aspects of being dyslexic, the experience of dyslexia, or dyslexic perception itself, comes through in Dowson's other works, such as *Myriad*. In a description of Katherine's exhibition for *Myriad*, which consists of a 7 meter long curtain of 4000 lenses with varying focal lengths, Michael Simpson, curator of the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester at that time, wrote: "Figures and objects seen through it become dislocated and fragmented. Two people standing side by side looking at the same object would have two completely

different visions.”⁵⁹ I have heard no better description of dyslexia itself. A dyslexic and a non-dyslexic looking at the same object, whether it is a tree or the written word, will see two completely different things.

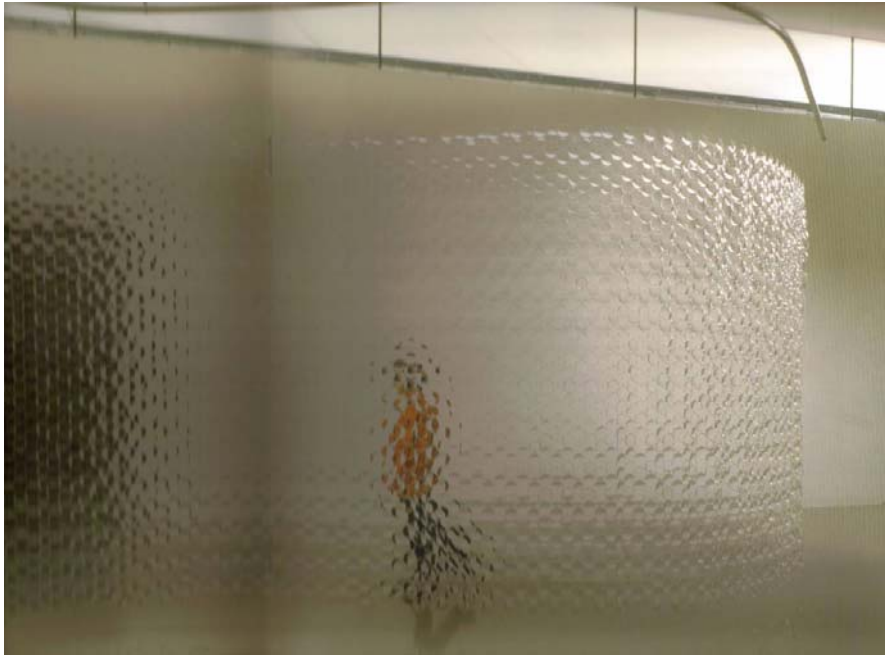


Figure 30. *Myriad* (1998), Katharine Dowson, 730 cm length, acrylic optical lenses and stainless steel (photo by Fine Art Photographic)

⁵⁹ M Simpson, 1998, K Dowson catalogue for *Myriad*, The Whitworth Gallery, University of Manchester.



Figure 31. *Myriad* detail (1998), Katharine Dowson, 730 cm length, acrylic optical lenses and stainless steel (photo by Fine Art Photographic).

The broken images produced by *Myriad* are distorted, yet they still form a recognizable whole. Looking closely through this glass curtain at a building produces a view of bricks and windows from multiple angles and perspectives. This is reminiscent of the holistic, three-dimensional thought of dyslexics, where images can be mentally rotated and examined from multiple angles at once. Dowson describes words as appearing to ‘shimmer’ in her mind’s eye, and words displayed through *Myriad*’s curtain would look similarly blurred. Thus, *Myriad* is in a sense like looking through her mind’s eye at the world.

CONCLUSION

Expression of Dyslexic Perception

“All knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it”—Einstein.

I am interested in the inner realities of ‘the dyslexic’. In addition to my own experience and expression of dyslexia, I have tried to understand how other dyslexic artists have revealed their inner worlds through art. The elements of dyslexic perception I have looked at are: holistic thinking, visual-spatial thought, time and motion.

I learned that not all dyslexic artists show all these elements of dyslexic perception in their art, or not all in the same artwork. Many dyslexic artists do not concern themselves with time at all, like Katharine Dowson, while Rauschenberg makes it the focus of many of his works. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, I was not able to include all of the dyslexic artists that I surveyed in this dissertation. Nevertheless, all the dyslexic artists I have studied exhibit an awareness of motion and a tendency toward visual-spatial thought, like Picasso’s Cubism or TAO’s warped figures. Most also show a tendency to think holistically, either by showing multiple angles at once or in the symbolic content of the final works. Therefore, I believe there is clearly an underlying perception of reality shared by these artists.

Visual thought is core to dyslexic thinking. When I learned of TAO’s way of perceiving the world, I was overcome with the similarities between us—our way of thought. Because we think wholly visually, there are no words or

internal monologue in our heads. Art is thus the natural choice for expressing ourselves in the world. This also became clear to me when I studied Rauschenberg's work. When he says that being dyslexic made him an artist, I believe he means that visual art was the only way to show the rest of the world his thoughts.

In addition to a shared perception, I found a shared emotional trauma, at least among the dyslexics I interviewed. Dyslexia—in particular the lack of performance in traditional academic environments and the stigma attached to being 'stupid'—has impacted our self esteem. It seems that art is also a natural choice for dyslexics because it serves as an outlet for the anger and frustration that builds from being a sufferer of this disability.

Despite a shared visual perception and emotional experience among dyslexics, there is considerable variability in the expression of that shared reality. The styles, themes and approaches used in 'dyslexic' art can vary widely. Sculpture, painting, collage, installation, all were effective at showing dyslexic perception. In some cases this perception was subtly suggested in distorted figures, or holistic (in terms of space or meaning) compositions. In other cases, the aim was to directly show dyslexic thought or convey the emotional fallout of growing up with this disability. Thus, I learned that there are many ways in which a dyslexic perception of reality can be shown through art. I came into this project thinking there would be a few obvious indicators of dyslexic art, but there are as many ways of showing dyslexic perception as there are art forms.

My Work: Thought Paintings

I have used my 'Thought Paintings' to express my own dyslexic perception of reality. They are both a symbolic and literal look at the dream like nature of my thoughts. It was only upon reflection that I realized the primitive style I chose to employ for these works is heavily influenced by my personal experience of Native American art while growing up on the reservation. This style uses bright colours, simple lines and distorted figures. It is the style of my childhood, and thus it carries the power and vividness of those childhood experiences and emotions. Recalling some of those memories during the writing of this dissertation was the catalyst for my final exhibition works, *Beginning* and *A New Beginning*. I took this newfound subconscious influence and chose to bring it into consciousness, into light.

The imagery for all my works is heavily laden with personal and archetypal symbolism. The symbolism can deal with the emotional experience of dyslexia, with memories or with thoughts. What was important to me was that the images carry meaning, just as the visual imagery of all dyslexic thought carries meaning. While, initially, I thought it important to include universal symbols, such as the sun or moon in my works, I eventually realized that personal symbols were equally effective. People I know see *Orca* and they ask me about the story behind it. They feel that there is a story there, even if the exact meaning is unclear to them. Achieving that sense of story was my goal.

Another goal I had was to show the breadth of dyslexic perception. The rich symbolism I used was one way to demonstrate a holistic visualization of

the subject matter. I also tried to keep a connection between paintings using a similar sky, sun or figure. In some cases, I showed the same scene on separate canvases with subtle or even drastic differences between the compositions.

All my MVA paintings developed as the result of my search to convey motion, time and, more importantly, a holistic way of seeing, of connecting my thoughts and stories together in a tapestry of paintings that reflects the interconnected tapestry of images in my own mind. I have spent years, prior to and during my MVA research, trying various ways to express my dyslexic perception of reality. Studying other dyslexic artists for this dissertation has shown me infinitely more possibilities for expressing that perception. Thus, I think there is almost no end to these explorations.

Links Between Dyslexia, Surrealism and Symbolism

At least two artists described in this dissertation specifically mention an interest in Surrealism, TAO and myself. I found that even Picasso's cubist works have many symbolic and surrealist elements, like *Girl Before A Mirror* and *Guernica*. As discussed in the introduction, I think that the paintings of dyslexics will often share elements with Symbolist or Surrealist art because of the nature of dyslexic thought.

Both TAO and I have tried to express our internal worlds of thought through art. That internal world, full of images, is fluid and shifting, like thought itself, which is why it resembles Surrealism. However, our thought images are structured of their own accord. The images in my mind are not random dream images but are strung together to carry meaning and express complex

thoughts and feelings like others might use words. Thus, the end product is more developed and appears more meaningful, which is where comparisons to Symbolism arise. Symbolism also grants a holistic way of comprehending a subject, and dyslexic thought is very holistic.

The Symbolism in dyslexic paintings is not contrived but spontaneously arising from the mind, as a product of image based thinking. Thus, the meanings of those symbols can be universal, arising as archetypes of the collective subconscious, or they can be quite personal and incoherent, and so our paintings also look very at home in the camp of the Surrealists.

The surrealism in my own work was spontaneous rather than deliberate. However, while researching the introduction to this dissertation, I developed an appreciation for the Surrealists' ideals, their search for a deeper meaning that cannot be expressed through words. The art historian, S. Alexandrian, has stated that the Surrealists searched for the "meanings beneath the world".⁶⁰ This meaning can be conveyed through the disturbing, contradictory and dream-like images used by Dali and other Surrealists, through the primitive truthfulness of Native American and other primitive art, or, I believe, by looking at the waking visual thought of dyslexics.

I think that all humans can think in images, that the primitive mind, which existed before language evolved and which still exists in the core of all our minds, thinks with images, and this is apparent in our dreams. However, for some unknown reason, many dyslexics think in images consciously as well as subconsciously in dreams. Because dyslexic thought is prone to turning and warping objects, to blending imagery in the imagination as new ideas are

⁶⁰ S. Alexandrian, 1985, *Surrealist Art*, World of Art, Thames and Hudson, New York, NY, p. 22-26.

generated, a 'snapshot' of some of this imagery offers a direct look at thought in its unfinished form. Being able to see thought in its pure form, to find the truth that underlies conscious reality, is the goal of the Surrealists and of my own work as well.

Alternative Perception and Art

In this dissertation, I have only brushed the surface of dyslexia and the expression of alternative perceptions of reality through art. My main goal was to begin discussions on this topic, to explore my own thoughts on the subject and, through my interviews with contemporary dyslexics, to make connections with other dyslexic artists, to discover if we really do share a similar experience of reality. I was gratified to learn that we do and that there are other dyslexics out there who are focusing their artistic inquiries on dyslexia and on raising public consciousness. I hope in the end we can build a better understanding of dyslexia among artists and the wider community. Understanding leads to greater acceptance. It would be better if fewer dyslexics had to endure the stigma and emotional trauma experienced by myself and others.

Despite a focus on dyslexia, this dissertation is meant to evoke thought in others about their own uniqueness. Doesn't everyone experience the world just a little bit differently? How do biological differences—like colour blindness, gender, dyslexia etc.—affect our perception and thus our own personal realities? I hope this work will encourage people to ask questions about the perception of reality they take for granted every day and to open their minds to

other ways of seeing the world. In the end, I believe that is what art is all about.

By pointing out the elements of dyslexic visual thought in my work and the work of other dyslexic artists discussed here, I hope it makes it possible for dyslexics to be more self aware and for non-dyslexics to see what it is that we see. Most importantly, I hope everyone is enriched by experiencing this alternative perception of reality for themselves.

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APPENDIX

- Ethics approval
- Participant Information Statement
- Interview Questions
- Survey Questions



The University of Sydney

NSW 2006 Australia

Human Research Ethics Committee

www.usyd.edu.au/ethics/human

Senior Ethics Officer:

Gail Briody

Telephone: (02) 9351 4811

Facsimile: (02) 9351 6706

Email: gbriody@usyd.edu.au

Rooms L4.14 & L6.04 Main Quadrangle A14

Human Secretariat

Telephone: (02) 9036 9309

(02) 9036 9308

Facsimile: (02) 9036 9310

25 October 2007

Dr D Dawes
Sydney College of the Arts
Rozelle Campus – N01
The University of Sydney

Dear Dr Dawes

Thank you for your correspondence dated 8 October 2007 addressing comments made to you by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). After considering the additional information, the Executive Committee at its meeting on **24 October 2007** approved your protocol entitled ***Alternative Perceptions of Reality: Dyslexia***.

Details of the approval are as follows:

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Ref No.: | 10-2007/10394 |
| Approval Period: | October 2007 to October 2008 |
| Authorised Personnel: | Dr D Dawes Mr C Colgin |

The HREC is a fully constituted Ethics Committee in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans-March 2007* under Section 5.1.29

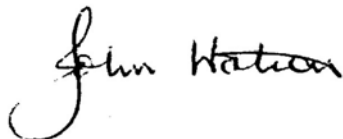
The approval of this project is **conditional** upon your continuing compliance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. We draw to your attention the requirement that a report on this research must be submitted every 12 months from the date of the approval or on completion of the project, whichever occurs first. Failure to submit reports will result in withdrawal of consent for the project to proceed.

Chief Investigator / Supervisor's responsibilities to ensure that:

- (1) All serious and unexpected adverse events should be reported to the HREC as soon as possible.
- (2) All unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should be reported to the HREC as soon as possible.

- (3) The HREC must be notified as soon as possible of any changes to the protocol. All changes must be approved by the HREC before continuation of the research project. These include:-
 - If any of the investigators change or leave the University.
 - Any changes to the Participant Information Statement and/or Consent Form.
- (4) All research participants are to be provided with a Participant Information Statement and Consent Form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee. The Participant Information Statement and Consent Form are to be on University of Sydney letterhead and include the full title of the research project and telephone contacts for the researchers, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee and the following statement must appear on the bottom of the Participant Information Statement. *Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811 (Telephone); (02) 9351 6706 (Facsimile) or qbriody@usyd.edu.au (Email).*
- (5) Copies of all signed Consent Forms must be retained and made available to the HREC on request.
- (6) It is your responsibility to provide a copy of this letter to any internal/external granting agencies if requested.
- (7) The HREC approval is valid for four (4) years from the Approval Period stated in this letter. Investigators are requested to submit a progress report annually.
- (8) A report and a copy of any published material should be provided at the completion of the Project.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor J D Watson
Chairman
Human Research Ethics Committee

cc Mr Clayton Colgin, Unit 3/1 Jessie Street, Westmead NSW 2145

Encl.
Participant Information Statement
Interview Questions



Dr Debra Dawes
Senior Lecturer
Sydney College of the
Arts
Locked Bag 15, Rozelle
NSW 2039
NO1 Rozelle Campus
Balmain Road Rozelle
AUSTRALIA
Telephone: +61 2 9351 1058
Facsimile: +61 2 9351 1144
Email: d.dawes@sca.usyd.edu.au
Website: www.usyd.edu.au/sca

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT
Research Project

Title: Alternative Perceptions of Reality and Art: Dyslexia

(1) What is the study about?

The study will compare and contrast the artists who have mentioned they have dyslexia. The study is designed to assess whether the participants have dyslexia, what their experience of dyslexia entails and how they believe dyslexia affects their artworks and their artistic practice, if at all.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Mr. Clayton Colgin, a student, and will form the basis for the degree of Master of Visual Art at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr. Debra Dawes, Senior Lecturer.

(3) What does the study involve?

Artists considered to be dyslexic will be contacted and asked to complete a short survey about their dyslexia and their artistic practice. In addition, they may be contacted for a phone or email interview, whichever is more convenient for the participant. As participants in this study have a learning disability, we suggest that they have a friend or relative read this participant information sheet to them along with the permission form and survey questions to avoid any misunderstandings and to aid completion of the survey.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you are contacted for a phone or email interview, this should take an additional 20 minutes.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and - if you do participate - you can withdraw at any time without prejudice or penalty.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

Alternative Perceptions of Reality and Art: Dyslexia

(7) Will the study benefit me?

This study will look for similarities between dyslexic artists, and this may be of interest to your own artistic practice. For this reason, you will be provided with a digital copy of the completed MVA dissertation of Mr. Clayton Colgin, in which the results of this study will be included.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes.

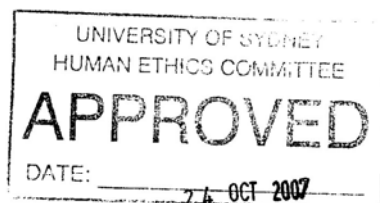
(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information, Mr. Clayton Colgin will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Mr. Clayton Colgin by email at ccol2523@usyd.edu.au or by phone at +61 0430375824. Alternatively, you may contact Dr. Debra Dawes by email at d.dawes@sca.usyd.edu.au or by phone at +61 2 9351 1058.

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns? ,

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811 (Telephone); (02) 9351 6706 (Facsimile) or gabriody@usyd.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep

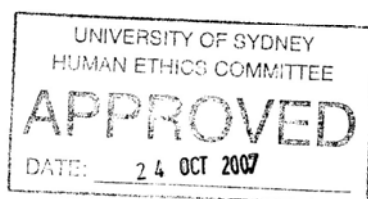


Debra Dawes and Clayton Colgin

Title: Alternative Perceptions of Reality: Dyslexia (Ref. No. 10394)

Interview Questions:

1. Do you believe that your dyslexia affects your perception of the world? If so, in what ways?
2. Does dyslexia affect your artistic style or methods? If so, provide details.
3. Have you deliberately tried to convey a dyslexic perception of the world in your art? If so, how have you done this?
4. Please describe any other effects you think dyslexia has had on your artistic practice.





Survey Questions:

With regards to your dyslexia:

1. Do you consider yourself to have dyslexia? Yes No
2. Have you been tested and diagnosed for dyslexia by educators or psychologists? Yes No
3. What are the major symptoms of your dyslexia? (Tick all that apply)

Reduced or absent reading ability?

Distortion, movement, bleeding of words when you attempt to read them?

Memory problems, such as the inability to remember spellings or the correct orientation of letters?

General memory problems not related to reading?

Do you consider yourself extremely observant?

Do you get headaches, eyestrain or experience visual distortion when transitioning between reading and looking at photos or real world objects?

Other? Please provide some detail:

With regards to holistic thinking:

1. Do you generally have inspiration come to you all at once, such as an instant vision of the artwork you wish to create?

Yes No

2. What percentage of your creative process involves generating an idea and how much is simply refining an idea that came to you whole and complete?

_____ % generating idea _____ % refining idea

3. Any thing else you'd like to add?

With regards to image based thinking:

1. Do you daydream or tend to think everyday thoughts in terms of images or stories in your mind?

Yes No

2. Do all of the images, shapes and/ or colours used in your artworks carry meaning for you?

Yes No

3. Are the meanings of your artworks

Specific Vague Concepts or Both?

4. Do you choose colours, shapes and textures because they

(Tick all that apply)

carry meaning

'feel' right

look 'pretty'

conform to some artistic method or theory you have learned

5. Do you find it easy to come up with images or ideas to paint?

Yes No

6. Any thing else you'd like to add?

With regards to visual distortion:

1. Do you tend to use your imagination to 'play' with images and objects around you?

Yes No

2. Do you turn objects or images around in your mind, warp them into new things?

Yes No

3. Do you often imagine what an object looks like on the sides you can't see?

Yes No

4. Do you often imagine objects, people or places in time? Ie. What they looked like in the past and how they will look in the future?
Yes No

5. Anything else you would like to add?

With regards to artistic practice:

1. Do you practice a wide range of artistic styles?
Yes No
2. Do you jump around between projects?
Yes No
3. Are you able to maintain intense focus on one project for long periods of time?
Yes No

With regards to dyslexia and art in general:

1. Do you believe dyslexia has influenced your art?
Yes No
2. Do you believe you see the world differently from non-dyslexics?
Yes No
3. Has dyslexia affected you emotionally?
Yes No
4. Do you think your dyslexia is important for your artistic ability?
Yes No
5. Anything else you would like to add? -

LIST OF IMAGES

A New Beginning (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Beginning (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Broken House (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Coyote Desert (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Coyote Moon (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Crow (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Crow Lightbringer (2007), Clayton Colgin, 28 x 36 cm, acrylic on canvas
Crow the Creator (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Hollow (2007), Clayton Colgin, 75 x 119 cm, acrylic on canvas
Kokopelli (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Labyrinth (2008), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Lighthouse (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Moon Mirror (2007), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Mother (2008), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Night and Day (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
One Day (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Orca (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Shadow (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Story of Crow (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Sun Mirror (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Sun Woman (2008), Clayton Colgin, 91 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Sun Woman II (2008), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
The Trickster (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas
Tree Shadow (2008), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas
Umbrella (2007), Clayton Colgin, 51 x 76 cm, acrylic on canvas

CATALOGUE OF WORK PRESENTED FOR EXAMINATION

A New Beginning (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

Beginning (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

Crow the Creator (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

Kokopelli (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

Night and Day (2008), Clayton Colgin, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

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