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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

THE SILHOUETTES OF AUTISM

SUBMITTED TO

**PROFESSOR RANKAITIS
AND
PROFESSOR GONZALES-DAY**

BY

CHLOE DOBBERT

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

**FALL/2013
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I just wanted to say thank you very much to Professor Charlop at Claremont McKenna College's Autism Center for making this thesis possible. She helped me tremendously with the children at the school and also in my research. My photographs and artistic creations would not have been attainable without you. Thank you very much.

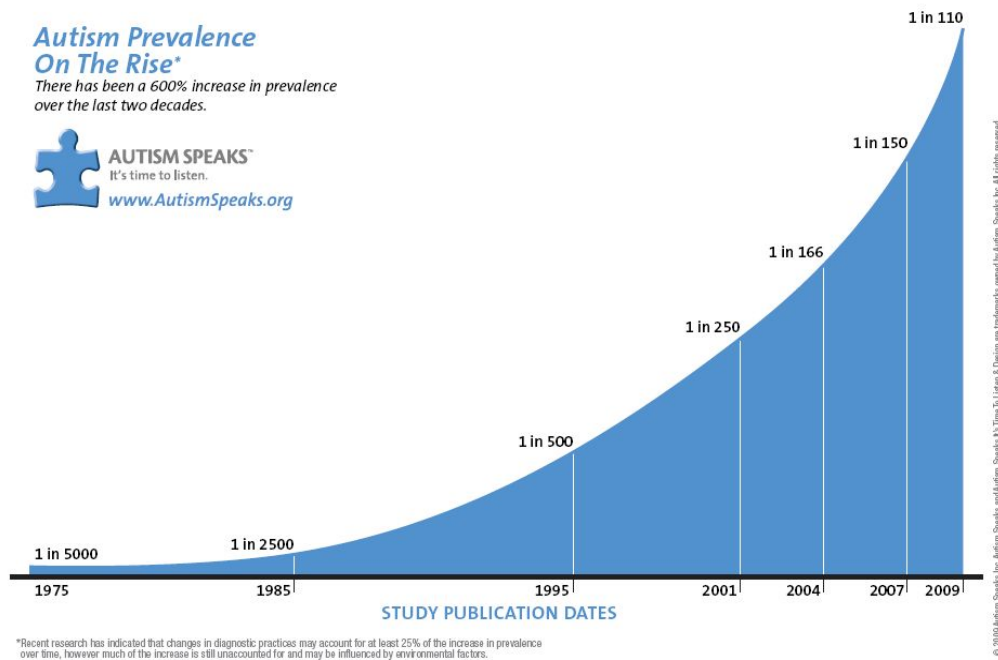
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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a general term for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. ASD can be associated with intellectual disability, difficulties in motor coordination, attention, and physical health issues such as sleep and gastrointestinal disturbances. Some persons with ASD excel in visual skills, music, math and art.

Unfortunately, there has been a steady increase in the number of children diagnosed and it appears that at least one in 600, and maybe as many as one in 160 children, display the disorder. As many as 90% of children with autism remain disabled into adulthood and are unable to lead independent lives.¹



¹ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eight ed., pp.544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

Although my artwork is not meant to showcase Autism and bring pity on those children and adolescents who have the disorder, I do hope to promote awareness that Autism is a disorder that can benefit from many therapies, including, but not limited to, art therapy.

My passion as a student at the Claremont Colleges is to help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder grow and learn as normal children and to help prepare them for life outside the Autism Center at Claremont McKenna College. In my thesis project, I am exploring the concept of silhouettes through photography and my perceptions of the stories told to me by the children I teach. Esthetically, I am inspired by Kara Walker's installation of large cutout silhouettes but I am using different mediums to accomplish my project: Artistically, I am inspired by the detailed descriptions of the obsessive stories and information provided to me by the children at the Autism Center. Primarily, I will be using photographs that I have taken of the children and creating silhouetted images of them through Photoshop. Afterwards, I will paint my perceptions of the detailed and creative descriptions of the different information relayed to me by each individual child. Secondary, there will be some life size black cutouts, on black paper, of different imagined scenarios with the children. In the spring, I see this as an installation with many separate pieces that contain different sizes, depth, and simplicity.

Chapter 1: Historical

Donald was not like other 5-year-old boys. Leo Kanner knew that the moment he read the 33-page letter from Donald's father that described the boy in obsessive detail as "happiest when he was alone... drawing into a shell and living within himself... oblivious to everything around him." Donald had a mania for spinning toys, liked to shake his head from side to side and spin himself around in circles. He had temper tantrums when his routine was disrupted. When Kanner met Donald, his suspicions were confirmed. In addition to the symptoms the letter described, Kanner noted Donald's explosive, seemingly irrelevant use of words. Donald referred to himself in the third person, repeated words and phrases spoken to him, and communicated his own desires by attributing them to others. Kanner described Donald and ten other children in a 1943 paper entitled, *Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*.² In this initial description of 'infantile autism', which went on to become a classic in the field of clinical psychiatry, Kanner described a distinct syndrome instead of the previous depictions of such children as feeble-minded, retarded, moronic, idiotic or schizoid. Since Kanner first coined the term autism in 1943, professionals have struggled to define the disability clearly and functionally.³

As late as the 1970s, autism was considered by some to be a psychotic disorder. Then in 1981, autism was officially recognized by DSM III, representing a major advance. In a major step forward, autism was included as a developmental disorder in the DSM-III, in the same category as learning disorders. Other disorders included in with autism under this new label were Childhood Onset Pervasive Development Disorder (COPDD), Pervasive Development Disorder Not

² Kanner L. Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child* 2, 217-250 (1943)

³ Kaplin, Peggy. (2007, July 5). SFARI. *Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative*. Retrieved September 26, 2013 from <https://sfari.org/resources/>.

Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), CDD, Asperger's Disorder, and Rett's Disorder.⁴ Although the PDD umbrella has continuously appeared in the APA diagnostic series since 1980, several researchers questioned its appropriateness. The term "pervasive" implies severity, which is the most variable aspect of autism.⁵ Over the past 15 years, the definition has been refined to acknowledge the lifelong nature of the disability, its subtleties, and its essential features, including early onset, social problems, communication difficulties, narrow interests, and resistance to change. As of May 2013, the DSM-V concluded that Pervasive Developmental Disorders (Autism, Asperger's, Rett's, Child Disintegrative Disorder) are now referred to under the umbrella term of Autism Spectrum Disorder.⁶

After almost two decades of research, the precise causes of autism remain unclear and to date, no biochemical marker for autism has been found. The research on biological causes of autism has been fraught with contradictory and disappointing results; findings rarely replicated and often do not add up to a coherent explanation. In earlier studies, the fact that autism could be genetically determined seemed very unlikely because parents did not have the disorder and it was uncommon for one family to have more than one child with autism. However, newer research makes it more apparent that autism sometimes did, and does in fact, affect families more than once. In a 1977 study, the purest method of exploring the possible genetic basis of autism was deployed: the twin study. Their finding that 4 of 11 monozygotic pairs, as opposed to 0 of 10 dizygotic pairs, were concordant for autism.⁷ This suggested that there was a genetic component, yet the location and direct cause was still unknown. What was theorized was that what was genetically inherited was not an autism "gene" per say, but rather some linguistic or cognitive impairment of which

⁴ Adams, A. W., Klinger, L. G., & Mesibov, G. B. (1997). *Autism Understanding the Disorder* (5). New York, NY: Plenum Press

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eight ed., pp.544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

⁷ Folstein, S., & Rutter, M (1977). Infantile autism: A genetic study of 21 twin pairs. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 18, 297-321.

autism is one manifestation⁸. In a more recent epidemiological study conducted in 1989, at UCLA and the University of Utah, it was reported that autism is 215 times more likely to occur in siblings of people with autism than that in the general population.⁹

Many researchers believe that autism may have not just one, but multiple biological causes. As previously discussed, examination of relatives continues to suggest a genetic factor exists in the disorder since prevalence rates are much higher among siblings and highest among identical twins. Also, chromosomal abnormalities have been discovered in 10% to 12% of people with the disorder. Some theories of biological causes included in studies that have linked autism to prenatal difficulties or birth complications. Others proposed that a postnatal event (i.e. the MMR vaccine) might produce autism in some children, although subsequent research has found no link. Researchers have also identified specific biological abnormalities that may contribute to the disorder, particularly in the cerebellum.¹⁰

According to some theorists, psychological causes might also be a factor in determining the causes of autism. Since people with autism have a central perceptual or cognitive disturbance, one theory holds that individuals fail to develop a theory of mind, an awareness that other people base their behaviors on their own beliefs, intentions, and other mental states, not on information they have no way of knowing. Repeated studies have shown that people with autism have this kind of “mind-blindness”.¹¹

PDD are a group of disorders marked by impaired social interactions, unusual communications, and inappropriate responses to stimuli in the environment. These disorders are long term disorders meaning that the disorder emerges early in life, before the age of three and are

⁸ Ibid., 320.

⁹ Ritvo, Jorde, et al., (1989). The UCLA – University of Utah epidemiologic survey of autism: Prevalence. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 143, 862-866.

¹⁰ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eight ed., pp.544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

¹¹ Ibid., 546.

likely to continue unchanged throughout a person's life.¹² The central feature of autism is the impairment in social interaction, and the individual's lack of responsiveness, including extreme aloofness and lack of interest in people. Children with this disorder are extremely unresponsive to others, uncommunicative, repetitive, and rigid. They have marked impairment in the use of multiple non-verbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures to regular social interactions. They contain a lack of social or emotional reciprocity and fail to develop peer relationships appropriately.¹³

Language and communication problems take various forms. Children with autism have a delay in, or total lack of the development of spoken language and in individuals with adequate speech, there is a marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others. One common speech peculiarity is echolalia, the exact echoing of phrases spoken by others. Another is pronominal reversal, or confusion of pronouns.¹⁴ They use stereotyped and repetitive language or idiosyncratic language and lack the spontaneity of make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to their developmental level; this has been called a "preservation of sameness".¹⁵

Many sufferers of autism also have a restricted repetitive and stereotyped pattern of behavior, interests and activities. They have a preoccupation with one or more restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal with intensity or focus and become very inflexible to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals. Many sufferers become strongly attached to particular objects – plastic lids, rubber bands, buttons, water – and may collect, carry, or play with them constantly.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 547.

¹³ American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁴ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eight ed., pp.544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

¹⁵ American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁶ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eight ed., pp.544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

Children with autism also conduct repetitive motor mannerisms and may be perceived as very unusual. These motor movements are often called “self-stimulatory” behaviors and include jumping, arm flapping, and making faces.¹⁷ Unfortunately, children with autism may engage in self-injurious behaviors especially when the child may at times seem over-stimulated and/or under-stimulated by their environments.

Sadly, as many as 90% of children with autism remain severely disabled into adulthood and are unable to lead independent lives.¹⁸ [However, people with autism certainly improve as they grow older, some dramatically, especially if they receive competent support and education, but they continue to need some form of assistance for the rest of their lives.] A 1985 study assessing the outcomes of 14 men with autism verified this conclusion.¹⁹ Treatment can help people with autism adapt better to their environment, although no known treatment totally reverses the autistic pattern. Alternate forms of therapy including behavioral therapy, communication training, parent training, and community integration, allow for people with autism spectrum disorder to successfully live a more normal life.

Behavioral therapy and behavioral approaches have been used in cases of autism to teach new, appropriate behaviors, including speech, social skills, classroom skills, and self-help skills while reducing negative behaviors including self-stimulatory behaviors and tantrums. Most often, therapists use modeling and operant conditioning. Given the recent increases in the prevalence of autism, many school districts are now trying to provide education and training for autistic children in special classes. Sometimes, however, most school districts remain ill equipped to meet the

¹⁷ American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁸ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eighth ed., pp. 544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.

¹⁹ Rumsey, J. M., Rapoport, J. L., & Sceery, W.R. (1985). Autistic children as adults: Psychiatric, social, and behavioral outcomes. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24, 465-473.

profound needs of these students.²⁰

Even when given intensive behavioral treatment, some cases of autism remain speechless. Many therapists then include communication training such as sign language and simultaneous communication, a method of combining sign language and speech into therapy. They may also use augmentative communication systems, such as “communication boards” or computers that use pictures, symbols, or written words, to represent objects or needs. Such programs now use child-initiated interactions to help improve communication skills.²¹

The most important improvement comes in the form of parent training treatment programs where involvement by parents of children with autism are taught in a variety of ways. For example, behavioral programs train parents so they can apply the above behavioral techniques at home.²² A project evaluated the effectiveness of a TEACCH-based home program intervention for young children with autism. Parents were taught how to work with their preschool autistic child in the home setting, focusing on cognitive, academic, and prevocational skills essential to later school success. To evaluate the efficacy of the program, two matched groups of children were compared, a treatment group and a no-treatment control group, each consisting of 11 subjects.²³ Results demonstrated that children in the treatment group improved significantly more than those in the control group on all skills. This suggests that the home program intervention was effective in enhancing development in young children with autism.

In addition to parent training, individual therapy and support groups are becoming more

²⁰ Comer, R. (2013). *Abnormal Psychology* (Eighth ed., pp. 544-547). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 544-547

²² *Ibid.*, 544-547

²³ Anderson, S. R., Avery, D. L., DiPietro, E. K., Edwards, G. L., & Christian, W. P. (1987). Intensive home-based early intervention for children with autism. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 10, 352–366

available to help parents deal with their own emotions and needs. Another longitudinal, ethnographic study of the psychosocial adaptation of parents of children with autism show results that indicate most parents have experienced improvements in terms of their own psychological well-being, the social experiences of their immediate family members and their relations with members of their extended family. They also reported changes to the stressful situations they experience and their strategies for coping with them. Stigmatizing reactions of non-family members have also declined.²⁴

Lastly, community integration is especially important in today's school-based and home-based programs for autism. They help teach self-help and self-management, as well as living, social, and work skills to kids with autism spectrum disorder. In addition, greater numbers of group homes and sheltered workshops are available for teens and young adults with autism. These programs help individuals become a part of their community and also reduce the concerns of aging parents.

Art therapy is a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. One goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being. Art therapy practice requires knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as human development, psychological, and counseling theories and

²⁴ Gray, E. David. (2002). Ten years on: a longitudinal study of families of children with autism. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*.

techniques.²⁵

Today art therapy is widely practiced in a wide variety of settings including hospitals, psychiatric and rehabilitation facilities, wellness centers, forensic institutions, schools, crisis centers, senior communities, private practice, and other clinical and community settings. During individual and/or group sessions, art therapists elicit their clients' inherent capacity for art making to enhance their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Research supports the use of art therapy within a professional relationship for the therapeutic benefits gained through artistic self-expression and reflection for individuals who experience illness, trauma, and mental health problems as well as those seeking personal growth.²⁶

Art therapy is practiced in mental health, rehabilitation, medical, educational, forensic, wellness, private practice and community settings with diverse client populations in individual, couples, family, and group therapy formats. Art therapy is an effective treatment for people experiencing developmental, medical, educational, and social or psychological impairment. Individuals who benefit from art therapy include those who have survived trauma resulting from combat, abuse, and natural disaster; persons with adverse physical health conditions such as cancer, traumatic brain injury, and other health disability; and persons with autism, dementia, depression, and other disorders. Art therapy helps people resolve conflicts, improve interpersonal skills, manage problematic behaviors, reduce negative stress, and achieve personal insight. Art therapy also provides an opportunity to enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of art making.

Work with individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is a growing area

²⁵ (2012). AATA. *American Art Therapy Association*. Retrieved September 26, 2013 from <http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-aboutus.html>.

²⁶ Ibid.

of significant interest for many art therapists.²⁷ Art therapy has been a very successful therapeutic tool for children with autism and is becoming even more evident in the school system today.²⁸ The mode that is of particular value in our inquiries into children's drawings and their meaning making, storytelling qualities is, as is clear from its name, the narrative mode, for it is in the flow of events and lived experience that children and art making come together.²⁹ Many children with ASD are non-verbal and have a hard time processing language and reading faces/body language. Different research, including a study involving three children with various levels of ASD and one child with Down syndrome, comprised an art therapy group. Thirty-eight bi-weekly group art therapy sessions were conducted. Qualitative pre and post art therapy measures were utilized. A behavior scale served as the quantitative measure that measured group social skills, positive peer interaction, self-esteem and negative behavior. The results of this research indicated that students with ASD and Down syndrome improved their socialization skills by taking part in bi-weekly art therapy sessions.³⁰ Another pre-posttest design was implemented to measure vocabulary, comprehension of familiar text and unfamiliar text, poetry, research, and writing skills. Results indicated significant gains in vocabulary and comprehension of familiar text.³¹

Children create art and draw because it is rooted in the need to relate to their world.

²⁷ Martin, N. (2009). Art therapy and autism: Overview and recommendations. *Art Therapy*, 26(4), 187-190. doi:10.1080/07421656.2009.10129616

²⁸ Osborne, J. (2003). Art and the child with autism: Therapy or education? *Early Child Development and Care*, 173(4), 411-423. doi:10.1080/0300443032000079096

²⁹ Kellman, J. (2001). *Autism, art, and children: The stories we draw* (4). Westport, CT US: Bergin & Garvey.

³⁰ Kanareff, Rita Lynn, and Ursuline College. *Utilizing Group Art Therapy to Enhance the Social Skills of Children with Autism and Down Syndrome*. Masters Abstracts International, 2002. Print.

³¹ Mims, P. J., Lee, A., Browder, D. M., Zakas, T., & Flynn, S. (2012). Effects of a treatment package to facilitate English/Language arts learning for middle school students with moderate to severe disabilities. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 47(4), 414-425.

However, children with autism have difficulty relating. Through numerous case studies of art therapy with individual autistic children, results suggest that art therapy provides an avenue for nonverbal expression and enables the children to increase their communication and social skills.³² Children with ASD have an extraordinary ability to think visually. A study aimed to stimulate communication, social interaction, and symbolic play through the use of rhythm and movement based rituals and sand play demonstrated increased verbal expression, engaged and sustained social interaction, and increased symbolic, spontaneous, and novel play. The study suggests that creativity based interventions provided a complementary approach to behavior/social skills based intervention models prevalent in schools working with children with ASD.³³ This study revealed the perceptions of stakeholders about art and autism that informed the access these adolescent artists had to art education and art materials. These perceptions included varying ideas of competence, ability and struggle associated with an identity as ‘autistic’. In the examination of these adolescents’ experiences, the engagement with art making and the role of art in the lives of these artists is explored. It is shown that art functions as communication and a way of connecting to the world around them, acting as a form of literacy through the visual text of their artwork. This study offers a paradigm for inclusive art education that operates within the social model of disability and considers strategies for full inclusion with art curriculum and art materials.³⁴ It was noted that children with ASD use play and art as a way to negotiate the world, and as a way to communicate with others. Often, these displays and artwork were integrally connected, and both served as a way

³² Christopher, S. (2011). Review of: Nicole martin: Art as an early intervention tool for children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41(5) doi:10.1007/s10803-010-0994-y

³³ Lu, L., Petersen, F., Lacroix, L., & Rousseau, C. (2010). Stimulating creative play in children with autism through sandplay. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 37(1), 56-64. doi:10.1016/j.aip.2009.09.003

³⁴ Burdick, C. (2012). *Old broken crayons: Adolescent artists with autism in art education*. ProQuest Information & Learning). *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 72(7-). (2012-99011-024).

to connect peers in a way that they were otherwise unable to do because of the affects of ASD on social interaction skills. What makes artwork, and the work of other young artists special, is that they draw upon something important in their lives and transform the experiences of thinking and learning and playing into art that conveyed specific interests and ideas to others.³⁵ The relationship of children art imagery to narrative is complex. Children may invent, describe, interpret, and negotiate social transactions and personal art.³⁶ Children with special needs also reflect in their imagery aspects of their situation, drawing with greater or lesser fine-motor control than their peers, for example, or creating images that appear more or less sophisticated than those of their contemporaries.³⁷ The intimate connection between the young artist, art, and narrative is an especially fruitful one for both the child and the audience, for it provides the child a means to share stories with others at the same time she facilitates the artist's own cognitive development in the creation of images that also function in several types of important individual and social transactions.³⁸

Narrative, the ordering of events or experiences into a structure that contains past, present, and future, carries with it the sense of many things – a story, a shared discourse, a means of personal or group meaning making, a way to arrange in a comprehensible manner the event's of one's life. We have seen that visual images (one way of relating narrative), and visual thinking do not necessarily require language to impart meaning. However, the intuitive link of words and images, illustrated in picture books (in which the story, first told in images, can be retold in words),

³⁵ Weed, R. A. M. (2006). *An exploration of identity: Art and autism*. ProQuest Information & Learning). *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 67(1-). (2006-99013-004).

³⁶ Kellman, J. (2001). *Autism, art, and children: The stories we draw* (4). Westport, CT US: Bergin & Garvey.

³⁷ Engel, S. (1995). *The Stories Children Tell*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

³⁸ Kellman, J. (2001). *Autism, art, and children: The stories we draw* (5). Westport, CT US: Bergin & Garvey.

in teaching images (in which concepts are encoded in shapes), and in maps, charts, new photos, and films, all suggest that image and language must surely share some vital aspects of our minds and memories.³⁹ The charm of these drawings and the eagerness of children to share with and explain their contents to adults, have also increased interest in discovering patterns in image production, links between imagery and cognitive functioning and emotional states, and the function of art making in children's development.⁴⁰ Vision, a complex process that is still being explored, engages a full half of our brain's capacity;⁴¹ it enables us to create the world we see in an immediate and useful manner, describing the physical world and enabling action.⁴²

Unlike artists without autism whose vision becomes shaded by the confusions of conceptual thinking at the very instant that they recognize an object, artist's with autism are likely afforded a clearer view of visual world because of their less intrusive ability to conceptualize.⁴³ In other words, they have an extraordinary ability to think visually. Much of the artwork created by these children give deeper insight into their individually unique abilities and challenges. Rather than approaching the art of precocious young artists with autism as enigmatic and symptomatic, their work is explored as having its origin in human physiology and in the intrinsic human need for meaning. The narrative images in these young artists' exceptional art serve as both evidence and focus, allowing us to see the commonalities of all art and image-making. No art has been considered more enigmatic than that of young children with autism, for their often extremely early drawings intrigue viewers with their vivid, visually-based, perspective emphasis. Such art, often

³⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Hoffman, D. (1998). *Visual Intelligence*. New York: W.W. Norton

⁴² Kellman, J. (2001). *Autism, art, and children: The stories we draw* (20). Westport, CT US: Bergin & Garvey.

⁴³ Ibid., 17.

spontaneously produced by artists frequently considered retarded, is difficult to understand within the usual constructs of drawing pedagogy that emphasizes the necessity of practice and experience for mastery. However, it is a useful means of expressing one's interior self and of sharing with others a tale of one's own creation. Finally, this expression forms enduring links with other people in the common human language of lines and forms.⁴⁴ A study to reexamine the creative artistic ability of children with autism, by investigating the character of the expressive content in their art, showed that the children did not limit themselves to just the visible forms they created but included observations of the interplay between their perceptual and cognitive processes while making their artwork. After investigating the art activities of three children with autism, the study finds that these children not only have the same creative artistic ability as children without autism, they excel through art even further. These children with autism used their abilities to make personally meaningful visual narratives that captured their ideas and feelings through their creative use of line, shape, and composition. In addition, this study found that artistic development occurred in interactive social environments and through well planned art lessons. This study also suggests that in order to understand the creative artistic expression of children with autism, it is important to know the children as whole beings. Only by truly knowing each individual child with autism is it possible to design an appropriate art lesson tailored to the child's unique learning style and needs to develop his/her innate creative potential. Additionally, fostering each child's latent creative artistic ability with well planned art lessons may mitigate their symptoms of autism.⁴⁵

Understanding children and adolescents with ASD can be initially perplexing and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁵ Koo, S. (2009). *Reexamining the creative artistic ability of children with autism*. ProQuest Information & Learning). *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 69(11-). (2009-99090-008).

mysterious. They present a challenge to their families and professionals who attempt to engage and teach them. This challenge is due in part to core difficulties in social understanding and communication. Individuals with an ASD do not easily comprehend the needs or feelings of others or know how to share their internal experiences. Gaining a clearer picture of this population is imperative to develop and implement effective intervention practices.⁴⁶ Client-artists are introduced to materials, process their own expressions and, as developmentally appropriate, diagnosis as a means of helping them discover their latent selves. As an art therapist, the therapist encourages this engagement for the purposes of making and expanding social connections. Case examples presented reflect the practice of enthusiastically following client-artists' creative lead. Through the introduction of novel methods, the expansion of passions by these artists with autism are discovered. The case study capitalizes on opportunities to enhance an individual's ability to better differentiate color and form. The client-artist develop symbols and better communicate ideas through this artwork. As flexibility, tolerance of a shared creative experience, and communication of ideas grows over time, membership in a community of peers with similar strengths and needs, such as in a group, is made possible.⁴⁷ Over time, it is shown that these exercises in novel work and color help with facial recognition of separate emotions and the child's ability to respond accordingly.

Given the high prevalence of autism spectrum disorder, there is a need to find effective treatment options. Art therapy can be a valuable addition to the multidisciplinary treatment approach for ASD. The current findings on the efficacy of art therapy as a supplementary

⁴⁶ Gabriels, R. L., & Gaffey, L. J. (2012). Art therapy with children on the autism spectrum. In C. A. Malchiodi (Ed.), (pp. 205-221). New York, NY US: Guilford Press.

⁴⁷ Goucher, C. (2012). Art therapy: Connecting and communicating. In L. Gallo-Lopez, & L. C.

intervention option for ASD is very promising. Many of the above reviewed case studies show a high correlation between improvement in a child's non-verbal, personal bonding, ability to manage sensory issues, and their fine motor skills. The following review of research also points on how art therapy improves the ability to relate, socialize, and improve on a lack of joint attention skills with individuals with ASD. Children with ASD's extraordinary ability to think visually is a key point to helping understand and treat the main hampering symptoms that dictate the disorder of ASD.

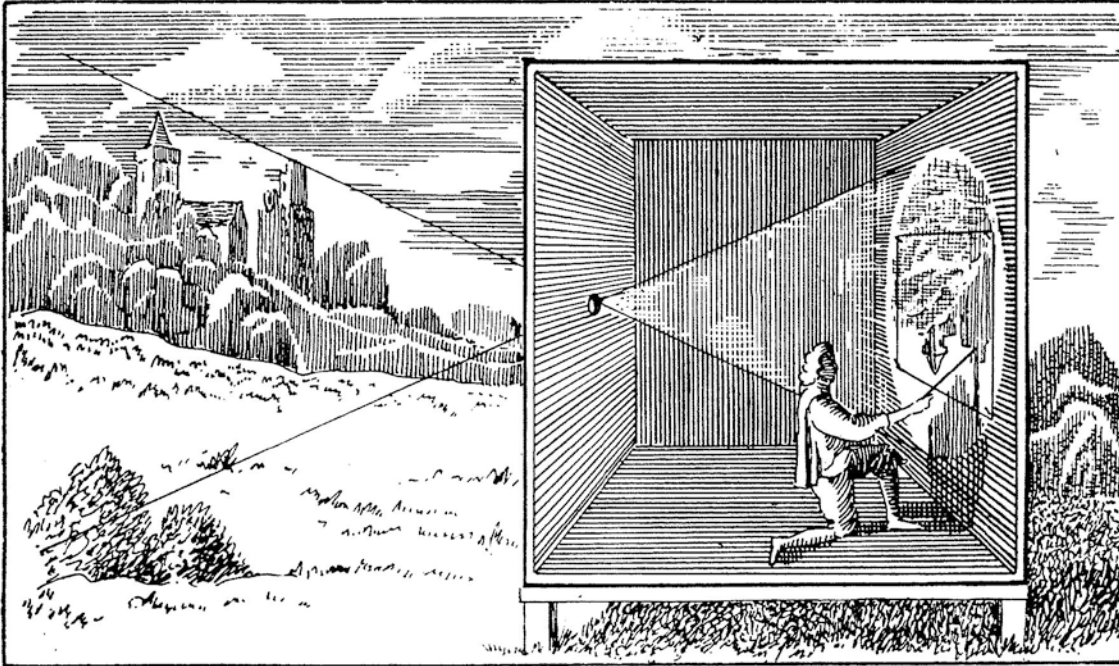
Chapter 2: Art History

The history of art is the history of any activity or product made by humans in a visual form for aesthetical or communicative purposes, expressing ideas, emotions or, in general, a worldview. Over time visual art has been classified in diverse ways, from the medieval distinction between liberal arts and mechanical arts, to the modern distinction between fine arts and applied arts, or to the many contemporary definitions, which define art as a manifestation of human creativity. Throughout the centuries, many advancements and technologies have been discovered that has made art more accessible and more dynamic. Simple discoveries that are seen as trivial now were huge advancements in their time. The discovery of the chemical turpentine that allowed oil based paint to be carried in a tube allowed for artists to take their work outside or wherever they desired.

Another very pertinent discovery was made in China more than 2000 years ago; paper is one of the most versatile and widely used artistic materials. Artists have employed it for two-dimensional media such as painting, drawing, calligraphy, printmaking, and collage, as well as sculpture and conceptual art. Paper has two great advantages as an art medium: it combines lightness with resilience, and it is inexpensive to make. Before the invention of paper, artists used vegetable-based supports such as papyrus and textiles including silk. Paper added greatly to the repertory since it could be made in sheets of almost any size and in a variety of textures, weights, and colors. Paper was crucial to the nineteenth century development of photography, and played a prominent role in several twentieth century Western art movements.⁴⁸

Before photography was considered an art form, its history started with the camera obscura: a device that enables an image to be projected onto a flat surface inside a light-sealed chamber and then be traced. Enjoying its heyday in the seventeenth century and still used by artists today, camera obscura led to the development of photography in the nineteenth century. The principle of the camera obscura (Latin for “dark room”) was noted by Aristotle, who observed how an image of the sun projected through wickerwork. In its simplest form it consists of a box into which bright light reflected from external objects enters through a tiny hole. Later, more sophisticated versions of the device, the use of convex lenses and mirrors enabled the projected image to be flipped the right way round and projected onto a sheet of paper for tracing.

⁴⁸ Bird, M. (2012). *100 Ideas That Changed Art* (34-35). London, UK: Laurence King Publishing.



Leonardo da Vinci realized that the eye functions like a camera obscura, receiving inverted images on the retina. Out of this conventional piece of machinery in the early nineteenth century, however, came a new art form, photography – which means, literally, “drawing with light.” In 1827, by placing a plate coated with light sensitive bitumen of Judea inside a camera obscura, the French scientist Nicéphore Niépce captured the view from his window. The grainy geometry of roofs and walls is the earliest known photograph.⁴⁹

Later, in the 1840s, photography seized the public imagination as an almost magical new technology that would supersede representational art, although it took another art century for photography to win acceptance as an art form. The history of photography has been one of creative reciprocity between mechanical and manual image making.⁵⁰

The term photography, meaning “drawing with light,” was coined by the British scientist John Herschel in 1839. Photography took the technology of the camera obscura a definitive step

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94-95.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 132.

further by introducing a light sensitive medium on which the projected image of reflected light could be captured and extracted from the device to produce a photograph. Photographs could be hung on the wall like paintings or bound in albums like prints. Like drawings, they provided a portable visual record of observations. However, photography did not rely on the artist's skill to copy the projected image inside the camera: mechanical and chemical processes did it all.⁵¹

In photography's early years, what the camera "saw" nonetheless often resembled a painting. Portraits, still lifes, landscapes, street scenes – photographs seemed to confirm that the visual world really was organized and framed like art. In this two-way relationship, artists welcomed photographs as a useful source of reference material. Artists also responded to photography by concentrating on what couldn't be captured by a camera – such as the play of light on water or through leaves, to which Impressionist brushwork lent an illusion of ungraspable movement and evocative color as yet beyond the photograph's scope. At the same time, they mimicked photography's emerging conventions, as in the cropped compositions favored by Edgar Degas, which appear as though momentarily caught in the frame rather than posed squarely within it.⁵²

Photography, now, is so much a part of our everyday lives, and is practiced by so many people, that anonymity nowadays is the rule rather than the exception. The fact is, however, that even if it comes out of a machine, every photograph requires someone to take it. And yet instead of proclaiming their authorship, some photographers allow their names to disappear into a vast crowd of nameless image makers, unwarranting of public attention and with no wish to be distinguished

⁵¹ Ibid., 133.

⁵² Ibid., 133.

because of mechanical, impersonal results of what is basically just a hobby.⁵³

Like photography, the role of the artist also went through changes throughout history. In its original sense “artist” meant a skilled practitioner, whether in the arts, sciences, or some other discipline. In modern usage the term encompasses genius, originality, an ability to transform ideas into objects and images, or simply to make attractive or interesting things that have no use value. The idea of the artist combines traditional mystique with constant slippage in definition. The ancient Greek notion of *techne* or skill seems straightforward: sculptors, painters, and architects were, like metal workers or potters, employed to practice their craft. At the same time, Greek sculptors such as Pheidias and Polykleitos became famous for pushing technical boundaries and giving form to ideals. The concept of the artist as innovator, seeing and representing the world anew, begins here.⁵⁴

Interestingly however, in photography there are four broad types of photographers that can be identified: the professional, the snapper, the amateur, and the artist. The professional takes pictures to make money and, whether they are wedding photographs or advertising shots, they are used in particular social circumstances; the snapper spends money to make pictures for specific social reasons, to document holidays, family, friends or special events. Both artists and amateurs fall between these two poles: the artist, whose subject matter is not directly tied to specific social functions, still hopes to make money, but amateurs lack both an extrinsic social context for their activity and the possibility of financial gain. Amateurs alone, artists without pretensions but with a simple faith in their medium, are defined by social and professional uselessness of their work.⁵⁵

Essentially, though, however much their skills were valued artists continued to be regarded almost

⁵³ Garat, A. M. (2013). *Found Photography* (1). New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Inc.

⁵⁴ Bird, M. (2012). *100 Ideas That Changed Art* (114). London, UK: Laurence King Publishing.

⁵⁵ Stallabrass, J. (1996). *Gargantua* (14). New York, NY: Verso.

everywhere as manual workers. Now, artists are felt to have a stronger grasp of such absolutes as truth or beauty than could be gained through reason. Yet while artist became preoccupied with awe-inspiring natural phenomena such as mountains and stormy seas, the theorization of this subject matter as “the Sublime” was largely taken over by philosophers.⁵⁶

Artists, especially those with autism, rely, sometimes heavily, on the narrative. Where as stories are diachronic – they take time in the telling and involve the unfolding of events through time – visual images work synchronically, being interpreted almost instantaneously by the viewer. Visual artists have therefore developed a wide range of strategies for the task of storytelling. Telling stories is a universal cultural activity. In education, religion, community life, politics, advertising, and entertainment, stories are the means of communicating messages and inculcating values. As narrators, artists usually either present a new slant on a story already familiar to their viewers or employ well-established visual conventions to tell an unfamiliar story. Even simple narrative scenes and sequences require interpretation on the part of the viewer, and once their content or artistic conventions cease to be common currency, they can lose their power to communicate or, conversely, gain a completely unforeseen meaning. It also does something beyond the reach of literary art by allowing multiple viewpoints and keeping up a carefully orchestrated background theme of constant, purposeful military activity and ascent toward conquest.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Bird, M. (2012). *100 Ideas That Changed Art* (114). London, UK: Laurence King Publishing.

⁵⁷ Bird, M. (2012). *100 Ideas That Changed Art* (20-21). London, UK: Laurence King Publishing.

Chapter 3: Contemporary

People with autism are categorized over a range of symptoms and behaviors, variously as high-functioning persons with Asperger's syndrome, as persons evincing behaviors described somewhat vaguely as pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), as hyperlexic, which includes early development of reading skills, and as low-functioning persons who need consistent care and may harm themselves unless controlled.⁵⁸ Then there are savants. Savant syndrome is a rare, but extraordinary, condition in which persons with serious mental

⁵⁸ Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, eds., *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (New York: New York, 2006), 110.

disabilities, including autism, have some 'island of genius' which stands in marked, incongruous contrast to overall handicap. As many as one in ten persons with autistic disorder have such remarkable abilities in varying degrees, although savant syndrome occurs in other developmental disabilities or in other types of central nervous system injury or disease as well. Whatever the particular savant skill, it is always linked to massive memory.⁵⁹ Neuroimaging studies have suggested that entire areas of the brain of people with autism are virtually dormant while activity is channeled into limited domains.⁶⁰

Andy Warhol's image of a tin of soup repeated across a canvas has always been thought of as Andy Warhol's ironic response to popular culture. However, there is growing evidence that the late pop artist's love of repetition was actually a symptom of autism. According to a paper submitted to the National Autistic Society, many of Warhol's artistic and behavioral traits bear marks of the condition. His social ineptitude, care to use the minimum of words in speech, difficulty recognizing friends and obsession with the uniformity of consumer goods are each thought to be clues that Warhol was autistic to some degree.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Darold A. Treffert, "The savant syndrome: an extraordinary condition. A synopsis: past, present, future." *Biological Sciences*, (vol. 364 no. 1522 1351-1357).

⁶⁰ Lyle Rexer, *Jonathan Lerman: Drawings by an Artist with Autism* (New York: Tien Wah Press, 2002), 11.

⁶¹ Thorpe, V. (1999, March 13). *Arts Correspondent*. Retrieved November, 11, 2013 from theguardian.com.



There are common beliefs that higher functioning forms of autism are often associated with prodigious talent and even with artistic geniuses such as Warhol. The theory has quickly gained ground among experts, some of whom were already working on the relationship between autistic behavior and creative talent.⁶² Warhol's routines are typical. It is the kind of thing people will have seen in Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an autistic man in the film *Rain Man*. He refuses to wear his brother's underpants because they are not bought from K-Mart.

Most people are familiar with the savant syndrome of autism disorder, thanks in particular to Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of a man with autism in the movie *Rain Man*. Without doubt; Raymond Babbitt is the best-known fictional autistic savant.⁶³ Raymond, or as his brother called him, Rain Man, is able to count 246 toothpicks in the instant they fell to the floor, memorize the phone book through the Gs, and calculate numerical expressions at lightning speed. However, the original inspiration for the savant portrayed in *Rain Man* is a now 62-year-old male named Kim Peek who

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Yewchuk, C. (1999). Savant syndrome: Intuitive excellence amidst general deficit. *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin*, 27(1), 58-76.

has memorized over 6000 books and has encyclopedic knowledge of geography, music, literature, history, sports and nine other areas of expertise.⁶⁴ Kim Peek lived at home with his father and thrived as he traveled around the world teaching his commitment to the golden rule. He punctuates this message with a call for universal acceptance of differences, recognizing that, “you don’t have to be handicapped to be different.”⁶⁵

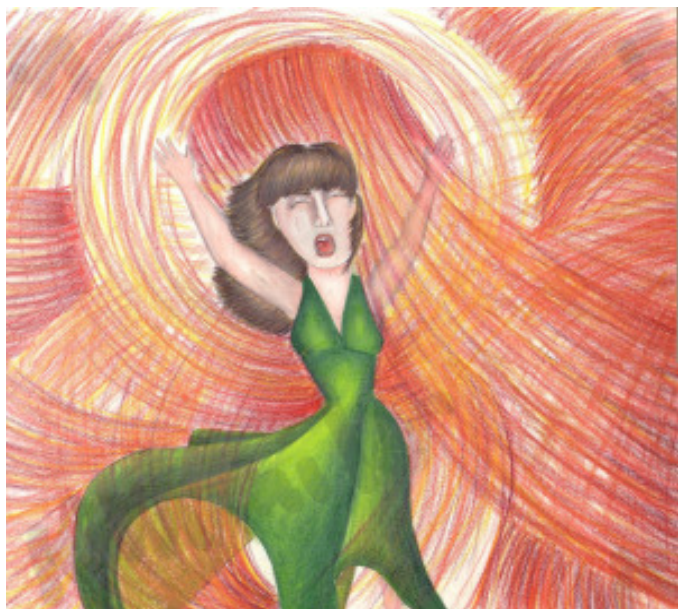


The above statement by Peek holds true for many children suffering from ASD yet are not considered “savant”. *The Girl Who Spoke With Pictures* tells the story of Kim Miller, a child with autism who initially does not communicate through conventional use of spoken language. Instead she speaks through pictures, and overtime her pictures were collected and analyzed to provide a clue into how Kim perceived the world around her. Kim became a prolific drawer from the age of

⁶⁴ Peek, F., & Hanson, L. (2008). *The Life and Message of the Real Rain Man: The Journey of a Mega-Savant* (pp. i-vi). Port Chester, NY: Dude Publishing.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, i.

3.5 years, producing thousands of pieces, often depicting persevering topics and leaving these pages around the house.⁶⁶



Then there is Stephen Wiltshire; diagnosed with autism at an early age, his talent for drawing emerged as a way of expressing himself. Using his drawings to help him learn and encouraged by his family, Stephen created a series of 26 coded pictures to help him speak, all of which corresponded to a letter in the alphabet. Yet, he is most known for his astonishing 18ft drawing of the world's most famous skyline: New York. He created this masterpiece after only spending just 20 minutes in a helicopter gazing out at the panorama. The unbelievably intricate picture was drawn at Brooklyn's prestigious Pratt Institute from Stephen's memory, with details of every building sketched in to scale. Landmarks including the Empire State Building and the

⁶⁶ Wright, J. (2010). Review of 'the girl who spoke with pictures: Autism through art'. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 45(1) doi:10.3109/13682820902733368

Chrysler Building can be seen towering above smaller buildings after just three days in his spellbinding creation. He has done other skylines including Rome, Hong Kong, Frankfurt, Madrid, Dubai, Jerusalem and London on giant canvasses. Exquisitely, when Wiltshire took the helicopter ride over Rome; he drew it in such great detail that he drew the exact number of columns in the Pantheon.⁶⁷



Unfortunately, not of lot of artwork has been created by artists inspired by those who have autism. Many other minorities spark fires for artistic inspiration: religion, history, race. In fact, esthetic inspiration for this thesis project came from Kara Walker's work, which is layered with images that reference history, literature, culture, and the darker aspects of human behavior. Connecting all of her work is an examination of power. The characters in her environments display

⁶⁷ (2009, October 29). *Daily Mail Reporter*: Mail Online. Retrieved November 11, 2013 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1223790/Autistic-artist-draws-18ft-picture-New-York-skyline-memory.html>

power struggles of all kinds: physical, emotional, personal, racial, sexual, and historical.⁶⁸ Kara Walker is drawn to literature ranging from historical romantic fiction to 19th-century slave narratives for their depictions of the antebellum South. Books such as Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, and Harriet Jacob's "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" published in 1861 all use different language to convey history and the horrors of slavery. Walker's interest in these epic tales has evolved into her own versions of imagined histories that she displays in large-scale wall murals.⁶⁹

In one of her works, *Slavery! Slavery!* she constructs a story in the round, by presenting silhouettes in a 360-degree installation modeled after the 19th century cyclorama. A cyclorama is a large, cylindrical painting. The artist experienced this antiquated art form during her youth in Atlanta, where a 400-foot cyclorama of the infamous Civil War conflict, the Battle of Atlanta is on display. Like the Atlanta panoramic mural, the scale of *Slavery! Slavery!* insists that the viewer participate in the story by walking across the periphery of the landscape as if spying on the events taking place. Additionally, the circular structure of the work eliminates a clear beginning or end to the story.⁷⁰ In the artist's words, “ *Slavery! Slavery!* was the first time that I had a completely circular space to surround the viewer and kind of build a narrative that doesn't actually start on the left. I didn't want for it to be read from left to right like the pieces that were on a flat wall.”⁷¹

Kara Walker is perhaps best known for her cut-paper silhouettes. A silhouette is the image of a person, an object or scene represented as a solid shape of a single color, usually black, its edges matching the outline of the subject. The interior of a silhouette is normally featureless, and the whole is typically presented on a light background, usually white, or none at all. The silhouette

⁶⁸ Walker, K. (2013). *The Art of Kara Walker*. Retrieved November 11, 2013 from <http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker?n=Main.HomePage>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kara Walker, from Sollins, Susan, Exec Producer. *Art21: Art in the 21st Century*. DVD, PBS Home Video Dist, 2003.

differs from an outline which depicts the edge of an object in a linear form, while a silhouette appears as a solid shape. Silhouette images may be created in any visual artistic media.



The history of paper-cut portraits dates back to the court of Catherine de Medici in the late 16th century in France. This decorative practice, which grew increasingly popular during the second half of the 18th-century, was named for Etienne de Silhouette (1709-1767), Louis XV's widely unliked French finance minister who cut black paper portraits as a hobby. Beginning in the 1700s, silhouette-cutting gained credence as art form in the United States because of its popularity among the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie. However, by the mid-1800s, "shadow portraits" had lost most of their prestige. Being deemed a craft rather than an art form, secured this portriature

technique a place at carnivals and in classrooms devoted to the training of “good ladies.” During the early 20th-century, silhouettes gained favor as sentimental keepsakes and souvenirs at fairs.⁷²

The viewer's ability to recognize a silhouette heavily relies on negative space. Negative space is the space around two- and three-dimensional forms. It is the space within or against which positive forms are denied – the white page around a silhouette or the gap between the arms and torso of a statue. Artists often exploit perceptual ambiguities in the distinction between negative and positive space. Our ability to read visual images depends on being able to distinguish between figure and ground. An oval black blob on a white page will look like a hole (negative), whereas if it has lumps on one side suggesting a forehead, nose, and chin it will resemble a head (positive) surrounded by empty (negative) space. The clear distinction between figure and ground can be deliberately destabilized: this is the basis for simple optical illusions in which shapes continually shift between negative and positive.⁷³

Like Kara Walker, this thesis will contain some black silhouette cut-outs, however the project will be heavy photography and paint based. Many of my pieces will be very intricate, with heavy detail in the background almost to create a more fantastical feel so the audience is truly transported to the world that had been described to me. Others will be more simplistic with a less is more approach. A common theme in both Eastern and Western mystical traditions is losing in order to find, letting go in order to attain; the desire to make art using “the minimum of operating means” has been repeatedly voiced, but in practice it is never a straightforward matter. Whether in terms of the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi* (“austere natural beauty”) or of Minimalist sculpture, it challenges the artist to endow voids, absences, or limitations with significance. This project hopes to achieve effects outside the scope of contemporary Western painting, with its concern to fill the whole frame

⁷² Walker, K. (2013). *The Art of Kara Walker*. Retrieved November 11, 2013 from <http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker?n=Main.HomePage>

⁷³ Bird, M. (2012). *100 Ideas That Changed Art* (20-21). London, UK: Laurence King Publishing.

with incident.⁷⁴ The poetic tendency to Minimalism – its sensitivity to structural and spatial rhythms – connects it to other types of studied simplicity in art such as the silhouette with its rigid black outline and contour.

This artwork will also be presented as a series, each piece working off of one another. In a group of works presented as a “series,” each work has its own identity while being explicitly linked to other. Since individual works are situated within a larger conception, their full meaning derives from the relationship between the parts and the whole. As an assemblage in a series, they gain a further level of meaning as a moral narrative. In a series, it is the unifying concept or narrative that binds the individual works together.⁷⁵ This series format will give this thesis a more controlling hand in the interpretation of the work: discovering the connections between images, and the sequence in which they should be viewed, means accepting the story that is intended to be told.

As well as this thesis being presented as a series, since there are multiple medias involved as well as multiple dimensions, the artwork will be arranged as an installation. An installation can be any deliberate arrangement of an enclosed space, usually – though not always – an interior. In contrast to the idea of art as consisting of isolated special objects, installation requires the spectator to step inside the work and experience it as an environment. It is a type of participatory theater without performance.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid., 176.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 159.

Chapter 4: Position

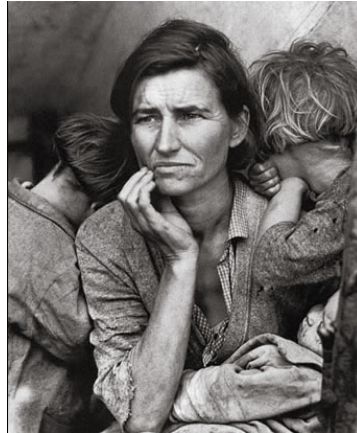
My passion as a student at the Claremont Colleges is to help Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder grow and learn as normal children and to help prepare them for life outside the Autism Center at Claremont McKenna College. In my thesis project, I am exploring the concept of silhouettes through photography and my perceptions of the stories told to me by the children I teach. Each child has a specific interest, and sometimes obsession if you will, that encapsulates their mind and fully invades all creative imagery. One child, a little girl eight years old, is fascinated with princesses and especially those in Barbie's Fairytopia. If given the chance, she

would talk all day and make stories about how her and “her friends” explore the lands and seas of this mystical and make believe place. However, unlike her peers and teachers, this place is very much real for her and when she describes her adventures and her surroundings as if she had actually lived them, I find myself fascinated and hanging on every word. How one child so young, and according to science, so “disabled” can feel and imagine such incredible things is the inspiration for my thesis. Essentially, I take in every story she tells me and after photographing her, I turn her stories into reality by creating this make believe world around her through painting and drawing.

Another child, this time a nine-year-old boy, also amazes me. He is considered a savant in his knowledge of the solar system. He knows everything from mass of the sun and the percent that takes up in the solar system (which by the way is about 99.86 percent). He is familiar with all of the planets, stars that used to be considered planets (Pluto), and how many moons each planet contains. I could go on with the endless knowledge that is spilled to me everyday, and honestly, I can only wonder, how one cannot be inspired by such genius.

For my thesis, I propose to take my visual abilities as a psychologist further. I am lucky to have access and be able to work with such wonderful and creative children. By using silhouettes and changing the mediums from photography, to paint, to black paper cutouts I take the focus off the child with autism and focus it more on my personal perceptions and inferences that I have made from these descriptions they have so in detail described to me. With the anonymity of the children, I also hope to accomplish that this is not a research project turned “artsy” and that I am not trying to have a discussion on Autism. If as much as possible, I want to limit these children from becoming victims in my work or becoming just mere characters because victimization is a very strong concern for many a photographer. “The Assignment I’ll Never Forget” by Lang goes into deep substantial detail about the famous shot captured by Dorothea Lange: The Migrant Mother. “There

she sat in the lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.”⁷⁷



Although I find this shot beautiful, I think Lang is not accurate at all or does not understand the brevity of the situation. Lang divulges that this woman became a “symbol” and that the shot is no longer her own but the woman’s. First of all, the woman in the photograph really does not get any credit to my knowledge so therefore how could it be hers? The piece is actually an ugly representation of how people have to work incredibly long, hard and in horrible circumstances just to feed their children “frozen vegetables” and then the next day sell the tires on their cars for more food. If anything I believe the essay by Susan Sontag is more accurate in her recording of elicited photography. She writes about how American photographers were on the look out for the new pretty, which was ugly. “Whitman thought he was not abolishing beauty but generalizing it. So, for generations did the most gifted American photographers in their political pursuit of the trivial and

⁷⁷ Lange, D. (2009). *The Assignment I'll Never Forget* (152). Retrieved November 11, 2013 from <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/1klichfall13/files/2013/09/Lange.pdf>

the vulgar.”⁷⁸ Yet as Sontag reiterates, “in photographing dwarfs, you don’t get majesty and beauty. You get dwarfs.”

Sontag’s point on the subject of the photograph is completely accurate. When Lang photographed the pea picker mother, she was not trying to help the woman, but instead help herself. She was sent out to photograph these workers and she did. She did not beautify the horrible situation by capturing a touching moment; she objectified the woman and her three children. Therefore, this shot is part of victim photography because this woman is being used to help others say, “as long as that is not me.” Bottom line, when people see this photograph, do they do anything about it? Most likely not, and although it’s a great photograph and will be reproduced for years to come, this woman and her three children were victimized and objectified for the world to see.

In a way, I also must be aware of the other downfall to photography. Today, there is a striking contrast between the unassuming ideology of the photographer’s aesthetic and the extreme mannerism of most of the results. This has always been a danger in amateur photography; governed by rules, enamored of clichés, it has been an isolated pursuit of the aesthetic which has generally adopted the norms of an average taste. Now, when the pursuit is under pressure, amateur skills are pushed towards extremes and a saturated mannerism, amounting to boredom, becomes ever more prevalent in the work. Although simplicity is sometimes featured as one style among many to be cultivated, the modesty of work like that of Atget’s before its subjects is forgotten. The field becomes increasingly fragmented among a variety of specialized disciplines and techniques.⁷⁹

So the question for me becomes, by photographing these children with autism, are they just “children with autism in a pretty picture,” or can I present them in my artwork and sincerely represent how I perceive their stories. Although my goal in life is to promote autism awareness and

⁷⁸ Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography* (29). Received November 11, 2013 from http://www.rcsam.com/uploads/4/1/9/6/41960/sontag_on_photography.pdf

⁷⁹ Stallabrass, J. (1996). *Gargantua* (22). New York, NY: Verso.

its growing prevalence not only in the United States, but the world, I find it necessary to not have that particular discussion while presenting this thesis.

Hopefully, in the spring, if I am lucky enough to improve and further my thesis, I would add more stories from different children at the Autism Center. Also, I find it interesting and curious to see if adding a light element would amplify the visual experience of the audience. This light source would be placed in front of the photos at a distance so that when the viewer walked up to look at the pieces, their shadowy silhouette would become a part of the artwork so that, in a way, they are interacting with the series in a way that they could not before.

Conclusion

The discussion on Autism is generally increasing year by year due to its growing prevalence in children. As mentioned before up to as many as one in 160 children will be diagnosed with some form of Autism. Without continuous research and the drive to open educate the outstanding population on this pertinent issue, these children will fall behind. In order to make the best use out of these children with autism abilities, it is necessary to explore the possibility of implementing an art therapy program into their daily routine. Also, by teaching not only therapist but parents as well the benefits of art therapy, expense costs and transportation will diminish. It would be far less expensive, and also a greater bonding experience for families and their children if they could learn to communicate to each other not only through art, but through verbal and non verbal speech after continuous therapy.

By photographing these brilliant children and highlighting their strengths and adolescents, I hope to open the minds of those not only viewing my thesis, but the outside population as well. Although my project is not meant to shine a light on the negative aspects of autism, I do hope that people will leave with the understanding that autism does not make a child bad or misbehaved. The child is merely locked inside their own mind, speaking almost their own language, trying to desperately to communicate with their peers around them. Through art and other therapies, it is very possible to help these children grow into successful and very happy individuals.

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