

BLINDESIDES

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Variations

Darcey Bella Arnold, Jordan Dymke, Kieren Seymour and Mark Smith

A few questions...

What are the purposes of our major art institutions?

Indeed, what is the purpose of art? Google suggests a variety of answers; but some common ones are to understand our world better, to inspire others, to better humankind and to increase empathy in others.

How are any of these possible when our collections represent mostly white, male artists? The percentages range from mid-seventies to high eighties, while around half the population does not identify as male. Furthermore, most represented artists are able-bodied. The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Australia's oldest and most visited art museum has, since it was founded in 1861, had only male directors, so I guess it really isn't that surprising. We want diversity in the leadership of our arts, media and creative organisations.

A good question to ask an art curator is "why this kind of show now?" So why have I focussed on disability? I'm trying to redress the balance! Hence, the title I have chosen for this exhibition is *Variations*, something I believe is sadly lacking in the major art world.

In 2017, the Australia Council for the Arts found that around 9% of practising artists identify with disability and that the majority of these artists say that disability affects their creative practice at least some of the time.¹

It is important for me to acknowledge that I too have disabilities, so the narrative voice is someone who is coming from a similar place. My aim is to not only present the work of disabled artists, but to also represent how the artists see themselves, thereby giving them agency, voice and empowerment.

The focus of the exhibition touches on the relationship between the disabled artist, their lived experience and their choice of artistic expression. I chose this particular theme to advocate for disabled artists, as they are generally under-represented, and often lack a say in how they are

¹ Throsby D & Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*. Australia Council for the Arts. <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/arts-disability-research-summary/> (accessed -7.11.2021)

presented. Their work is rarely placed front and centre. Often their inclusion is a token gesture toward equality.

It is important to me that all four artists have had some input into the works that were chosen, as well as a voice to complement their works. Also, it is important that all the work I chose was based on artistic merit. The fact that all four artists are disabled (apart from one, who is working with their mother) is not the point. Instead my aim is to shine a light on a certain part of the spectrum of humanity that is too often put in the shade. I believe this can enrich our lives.

The artists represented in *Variations* are: **Darcey Bella Arnold, Jordan Dymke, Kieren Seymour** and **Mark Smith**. In looking across the work of all four artists, similar themes emerged – the representation of the body and the environment it inhabits, the use of words and the appropriation of art history. This is often done with a playful attitude.

In the case of **Darcey Bella Arnold**, the disabled person is their mother, Jennifer. She has an acquired brain injury, and for roughly seventeen years Bella Arnold has been one of her carers. Bella Arnold said, "I feel being a carer and artist for me are intangibly linked." Their work reminds one of concrete poetry, an avant-garde movement that evolved in the 1950s. The work *e-dit* looks like a word play game of words beginning mostly in "en". Perhaps, as a past teacher, Jennifer is using some of the conventions for showing pronunciation. The work is both literal and symbolic at the same time.

"Continuing to think about text, because the text in some of my paintings is unconventional, the viewer might be left with a feeling of puzzlement. I use text to some degree as a patterning device to create the composition, and so it is abstracted and is not designed to be read like a traditional page, left to right, but your eye darting around the image to gather information. So, a painting might display as visual information, but what is occurring on the canvas is these two elements at play."

In *NorthWestern Mental Health*, the work at first seems to be merely a medical letter. However both works are elevated to the status of a work of art in that they are done with the medium of acrylic on a canvas board that is framed and massively over-scaled. In the latter work, a formal printed letter from the Neuropsychiatry Department at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, Bella Arnold presents us with the letter after it has been proofread by their mother, but ironically her corrections render the text harder to understand through its "incorrecting" of what was already correct! However for their mother and the world she inhabits, it is in fact paradoxically correct! In *There's nothing wrong with drinking tea: Disability, memory and language* Bella Arnold, through an essay, gives us a moving and at times humorous personal account of Jennifer's life since her surgery, and like the previous works, Jennifer's corrections appear throughout.

Much of **Jordan Dymke's** work focuses on investigating the body and interrogating the notions of what is indeed perfection. *Vitruvian Man II* appropriates Leonardo da Vinci's 1490 work *Vitruvian*

Man. In Leonardo's drawing he explored the concept of the ideal human body proportions, according to the Roman architect Vitruvius. Dymke, who has cerebral palsy but doesn't see himself as disabled, challenges the view of this very concept, asking us what is or isn't perfect, and does such a thing even exist? Why does it even matter anyway? Isn't it the character of the person that should be the most important attribute? Indeed, we all live in an imperfect world, so why on earth do some of us feel the need, sometimes even through surgical intervention, to have this faked perfection?

When asked about Vitruvian Man II, Dymke responds, "What is perfect? I'm not perfect. Here I am!"

In his upper torso self-portrait he proudly presents the viewer with his body up close. The portraits of his hand are also really self-portraits of the artist, as the hand is the tool of his creativity and is also a motif for his disability. This is very much a key part of the aesthetic style and character of much of his art, including the ceramic work. He says the reason he keeps most of his works untitled is to allow the viewer to make up their own interpretation so that "they might see their own experience in them."

In **Kieren Seymour's** three paintings, just a snapshot from the twenty-three paintings from his 2021 exhibition, *Autism, Bitcoin and the Four Seasons*, the artist creates a universe which is inhabited by an array of characters. Some of these are human; perhaps the artist himself or people he knows, yet they seem out of proportion, which makes everything feel a bit odd. Others are fantastical creatures, maybe mythological, or from the artist's own imagination. Perhaps they are used as symbols, and/or allegories, for Seymour's exploration of the act of being different, as a result of his and his friends' autism. He says, of the works included in this exhibition, "... they're about getting by, surviving, socializing." The varying scenes present to the viewer the spectrum that is autism. It is a multitude of conditions, and no one person with autism is the same as the next. The bitcoin of the exhibition title, as well as the work *Watching YouTube*, gives the scenes an up to date relevance, a zeitgeist for our times! Bitcoin also refers to the artist selling digital versions of each of the paintings as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) alongside the real thing.

When asked about showing work in an online exhibition and where he sees digital technology taking his work, Seymour responds "Digital is cool. I like metaverses. I want to do more digital painting when the tech is better. Like full scale tablet kinda thing."

The work *Choose A Mask* is something I can personally relate to, as someone who is also on the autism spectrum and has felt obliged to consciously put on what I feel is a correct persona for the particular social situation. Also relatable is the work *Dinner Table*, where the subjects appear to find the circumstances overwhelming. The four seasons of the exhibition title may suggest that one's life, in its entirety, is always fluid and constantly changing. Seymour says "... I read that we change constantly so our relationship to all things changes simultaneously."

Life-affirming is what comes most to mind when looking at the work of **Mark Smith**. Disabled due to a car accident after completing his VCE, Smith discovered the cathartic applications of art. His style is directly a result of this one life-changing event, with his lack of coordination and control of his fingers resulting in his distinctive thumbprint. He works frequently with words, across the media of soft sculpture and ceramics, and leaves his work deliberately ambiguous. Smith cites Dadaism as an influence, with their use of collage, sound poetry and cut-up writing. If one considers his life's journey, significance can be attached to the words he has chosen to highlight to the viewer, especially when more than one of his word works are seen together.

Consider the works *Contribute* and *Nevertheless*. A certain dialogue starts to emerge of a person who has overcome many hurdles in his life. Perhaps, the voice of someone proving to others, who doubted him, that they were wrong: I can, despite a major setback, “nevertheless” “contribute” to society. These word works can of course still be read individually, with motivational posters coming strongly to mind.

In Smith's work, *Ugly/Beautiful*, the artist's hands and feet, as well as some innards, come bursting out towards the viewer. There is this joyful feeling of “This is me! Take it or leave it! I really don't care!” The colour palette and dynamism is reminiscent of a baroque altarpiece, perhaps a connection to Smith's Christian faith.

“After my accident I was told I'd never walk again. I proved them wrong. I consider limitations and barriers imposed onto me as an invitation/motivation to fuel my determination to create and succeed. My works are ambiguous to the viewing public however, my greater intention is to break down preconceived understandings of disability. My life's experiences are definitely inspiration for my artworks.”

Michael Camakaris, 2021.

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