Deaf Cuban-American Male Making Art

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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“Deaf Cuban-American Male Making Art”

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Thesis Abstract

The Spirit of Language

I am an artist who harvests from nature and the industrial remains of humans. As in Esiaks: “The dust shall return to earth as it was.” Before becoming dust I hope to give the remains a new life. Breathing a new life into visual language is the opportunity to be shamanic which is a welcoming thought. Shamans are known as people who understand their culture and community well and respond to it by using symbols and meanings. They are also known as intermediaries between human and spirit world, people like Beuys, Kandinsky, Smithson, Rauschenberg and Duchamp themselves are known shamanic artists.

My instincts act accordingly with the advantage of language, and being deaf, allows me to rely on the most primal language - the visual language. Cave paintings had hands of shamans spray on the walls. Thousands of years later those primal senses are carried on today. Life has given me an amazing gift. Deafness has defined me as a human who wants to share life’s stories as we see it. The stories come from several sources of language - visual, American Sign Language, English, and stories translated into English from places far away.

Gathering stories as I work on my artwork will bring my thesis to life and that is to be shared on 3/12/2009.
"Deaf Cuban-American Male Making Art"

For Nutbrowm who was a peaceful dog who echoed the truth of "A man of violence will come to a violent end." (Tao Te Ching, 42) Also, for Annette who has always been on my side through my school and witnessed a beautiful death.
Introduction

Being a human, the whole of you is formed by the environment in which you are born, and that also shapes your values and perceptions. This then becomes part of one’s projection into the world. The mind is formed by what surrounds it and by the ideas that become part of our conscious and unconscious. As an artist, the output from deep inside the collective unconscious is important to me. This is a tale of one who grew up stimulated by nature in northern California and who was fortunate to be Deaf. For most people, the idea of being deaf may seem like an unfortunate circumstance. However, in the big picture, for me, it has turned out in retrospect, to be a wonderful lifetime opportunity because I believe that my deafness is an integral part of the skills that I have acquired. Upon reflection, I realized at an early age I was very happy to be Deaf in this world, and I have always enjoyed the different perspectives that it encompasses. I cannot imagine ever being any different. My profound deafness is a vital aspect of my being. From this experience I have formed a powerful intuition, and I use this intuitive nature as a guide. It leads me towards a deeper meaning that takes me in the direction of a way of seeing and responding to my own work. The four primal elements: fire, earth, air, and water are important tools from which my work elicits basic human emotions. These are truths to me that build the visual language of humanity.
Origin of Presence

We are born into a culture that holds language, values, and assumptions about our surrounding environment that has a profound influence upon our lives. The very environment we are born into shapes us as human beings; it builds the psychology of each one of us. "Culture is indeed an evasive and complex concept. It is evasive because we are surrounded by culture and we live deep in it; in a practical sense, culture is the air and water we breathe and drink day in and day out." (Wang) This is why I want to share my story of who I have become. I was raised in Willits, a Northern California town of 5,000 people 36 miles off the Mendocino coast. It is known as the gateway to the majestic redwoods and long before it became a fad, I was surrounded by information on organic farming, solar living, tree hugging, recycling and growing your own food. That is just how everyone there happened to live. As a kid, riding my bike all over town, seeing things like solar power festivals, I was always inspired by the possibility in harnessing the power of the sun to produce our own energy. I was taught and I soon understood how close we are to the earth.

There is a story my mother tells from around the time when I was just starting to walk. Near the property where we were living, a neighbor sold the redwoods to a lumber company, and the day they came to cut them down was the day I cried so hard. It was almost unbearable to feel the earth screaming. Being a child at such a young age
responding strongly to the events around me in nature shows that it is in my soul; this is who I am.

The ideals that were to become popular today I was already exposed to daily from a young age. From the guy down the road who gave me his homemade goat cheese to the sight of my uncle who used everything on his land to become fully sustainable; all of these things I absorbed at an early age. I lived in the country where we chopped wood to keep warm; where riding a bike two miles outside of town most often lead to a world of exploration. This is a place where houses are not right next to each other, but there is breathing room. This is a place where creeks and rivers provided lots of good swimming holes during the hot days of summer. Those opportunities to play as a kid in such a natural environment helped me to develop a passionate relationship with the earth. This connection was special, most particularly, at Eel River in the redwoods where all the elements come into play at the campfire. This special relationship with the environment is, in a sense, blessed in a Deaf world where the state of mind cannot be altered by sound. That is because I was given the gift to fully use my visual sense and to use my spiritual connection with the earth to understand things. “Earth is submissive; it means flexible, receptive humility.” (Cleary, 43) The earth takes in all children who choose to pay attention to the energy that is there. It was easier to communicate with nature when I saw how the world interacted with Deaf people. I was able to move among the earth so as to prepare myself to communicate with all walks of life. I was able to use an array of communication tools like gesture, mime, pointing or writing. But I also realized that many people could not understand these very basic communication modes. Water flows
and hits banks, roots and rocks, but it just keeps flowing. I am water in the world of nature where obstacles are humans.

Being Deaf with a capital "D" has truly been my life. At a very early age I learned that being Deaf was a way of life in itself. I was born with the ability to fully hear but at two years of age, I contracted spinal meningitis, which caused my deafness. A hearing aid was put on me, one minute only to find them down the drain the next. My mom knew I was saying, "I don’t need those." Even then, I knew this was not something where I was going to allow any kind of limitation to be put on me. The perception I have is that I am a human being living among other human beings. It never really mattered that I was Deaf, or a first generation Hispanic in America, or male- I have always considered myself a human. So being Deaf to me was nothing exceptional, deficient or unusual. There were always options as to which tools to use in the world. I believe we are born with senses and a soul- now this vehicle is what we have. Mine happened to not come customized with sound, so my senses shifted towards the others to enhance my experience in the world. The eyes have become the mothership and the other 3 senses are ready to take in the information gathering from the world. Thus, my brain does not understand the meaning of a dead end. I am alive with sensations and the world has plenty of stimulation for each of the senses.

Through the visual, my skills evolved around my deafness, allowing me to bond with the world and to create within it. I saw almost everything or perhaps, I could say that I saw everything with a special intensity and awareness that only the Deaf can know. Nothing escaped my wide vision, no movement, no color, no expression. Perhaps, this skill is impossible for a hearing person to achieve due to the sound that can always
distract. The visual sense when focused towards nature became my best friend. I was uninterested in people who spoke at me like I was deaf-mute, which, unfortunately, happens regularly growing up in a hearing environment. This image is strongly portrayed in Susan Dupor’s “Family Dog” (fig. 1). Instead of being a dog, I wandered to places where nature was more welcoming. This explains my search for a relationship with nature and animals, as they never second-guessed me. During family gatherings or at a friend’s home I always sought the animals in the household. I became a good companion to many dogs and cats because they were seeing me as a warm and friendly being- not a threat and not an unfortunate being. Cats, especially, were always part of my household, and I had a special cat who was blind named Blindmelon. She had no eyeballs, yet, she hunted, climbed trees, and existed. When I would call her for her food, she would be outside like any other cat and run towards the house- never having to take more than two steps to hit the stairs. This creature taught me that the world could be sensed in so many different ways. For Blindmelon her feeling and hearing was far superior so that she mastered and lived life wonderfully. Life is an amazing thing, there are so many ways to generate ideas in order to exist in the world. I got to love an amazing being who reinforced my being could be full of life.

Vision is one of the most primal human skills that I take advantage of. Above all, for me this world runs on a visual level, and I am equipped to take this on by translating the vast amount of information gathered into another visual language - Art. Namely, being able to communicate with art, in a visual way, allows one a unique way of seeing a person’s point of view without the actual person being present.
Projecting Core Values

The core values in humans are always progressing and sadly, sometimes, disappearing, every minute becomes a past and there are opportunities to learn from those times. Those are moments that are absorbed into the mind and spirit which allow us to look at what is breathed in and filtered through our mind. The information we filter is what we feel is the most important - lessons, pain, love, beauty, and so many other variables eventually mold our values. Most of you, who are probably able to hear, value the function of the ear so highly that much of the information gathered is taken in almost exclusively auditorially. Consider, for example, the daily driving experience where the radio is on and the mind wanders listening to music or the news. When someone leaves my radio on and I drive alone, the speakers annoy my tactile sense and my visual thoughts are distracted. Another example is the cell phones with heads looking down instead of looking up. This shows how much listening dominates the mind for those who hear, while for me having one less sense forces me to invest all my energy into the other 4 senses, but especially, the visual one. Many of our values are learned through our eyes and then, stimulated by the other senses that channel ideas into our core being. In my work, it is my wish to express what I have visualized through my unique experience as a human who values the visual language of the world.

By watching our technology’s amazing progress over the last few years, I have noticed we have begun to lose some of our skills and perspectives. Our dependency has changed so much that the need for society and community through technology has
connected us to others on the other side of the world! Yet, as I stand watching this, the inside of me puts on the brakes and takes a look at our humanity. “When a person arrives in the world as a baby, says one Midash, ‘his hands are clenched as though to say,’ Everything is mine. I will inherit it all.’ When he departs from the world, his hands are open, as though to say, ‘I have acquired nothing from the world.’” (Dillard, 19) As the human part of this evolution is influenced by technology, choices are present and it is a desire of mine to remain true to the basic skills of survival just like an animal would. Our progress should be embraced, while at the same time, we need balance. Technology is a tool and should be used. However, with new tools we should not forget the other primal skills we have acquired during our time of survival. We should be able to garden, preserve food, and understand how to survive in the primal sense and embrace these skills instead of abandoning them. Opening my mind up to both our exciting evolution and the thousands of years behind us, gives me the ability to evolve and live with the earth in harmony. This has allowed my perspective on the world to come through two filters- our excitement of humanity entering such an advanced era, while at the same time, maintaining the primal skill of gardening, preserving food, and respecting the earth so as to greatly reduce the waste put into it from our progress. Being able to take a step back and reflect on my experience from both new and old ways has given me the desire to live a simpler paced and less needy lifestyle. My artwork has taken the same path.

An example of this is my use of found materials in my sculpture, painting, and installation. Barilla has arrived in my hometown of Avon, NY and the railroad tracks from Avon to Henrietta got new ties and tracks. The old ties ended up in a big pile at Vonglis Farms, which I pass by often looking for things. I know that these ties brought
labor in a time with less technology and transported things that helped advance to human affairs. The ties, piled high were calling to me- their time has come again. Ever since then, ties became an important element in my artwork because they carry a weight of the past that I reuse. I also reuse other things that have a past life like bones or industrial remains. People in my community know that I collect such things for art. An interpreter was having her windows replaced and happened to find two well-preserved birds. They are now used in tower 2 with a new life of their own. The concept that every human is valued and earth is valued plays a strong influence on how my artwork evolves. Still, being Deaf has always kept my interest in the visual medium- even when I was an ASL Literature performer, I told stories about the value of the earth.

I co-founded the Deaf Poet’s Society in Seattle in 1998 and my own performing troupe, Illusion of ASL (American Sign Language). These were two visual art mediums associated with theater and poetry. My mastery in ASL Literature, especially ASL poetry, has a focus that echoes, once again, my strong relationship with the earth. “Two Trees”, “H2O” and “Men Mighty Proud” are popular ASL poetry performances that tell a story about our beautiful earth and the destruction of it. Interestingly enough, this is still powerfully reflected in my exploration of this new visual medium these past six years of art school. My message has always remained focused on the fact that the world’s treatment of the earth itself bothers me greatly. My communication mode when I was doing theater was to a limited audience - the Deaf community, ASL interpreters, and interpreted performances for the sign impaired. Through art school the audience has become broader due to the fact that art’s visual language is a universal. A Japanese person looking at art does not need to understand the title of the artwork to appreciate it.
because the piece itself if it is successful it is visually able to stand alone. This goes back to my values and my belief that the presence of one is far more valuable than the noise of one.

My MFA thesis exhibitions consisted of two venues. I first exhibited at Dyer Arts Center February 1-27, 2010 in the two rooms on the 2nd floor. In the front room there were two human scale towers and seven wood burned and painted with pigments (fig.2). In the rear room there were four sculptures hung on the wall and two paint on canvas and a furnace blasted steel sheet (fig.3). And at the Bevier Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology March 15 to April 7, 2010 were 4 larger than life size pieces on display. There were three towers arranged in a row about 5 feet apart from each other (fig.4). Tower 1 (fig.5) hung from the ceiling about ten feet off the ground, tower 2 was on the ground with two well preserved birds hanging from it in the middle (fig.6), and tower 3 (fig.7) was on the opposite side of tower 2. All towers were burned to a char like color with sand placed inside of the ones on the gallery floor. “Earth’s Cry” (fig.8) is a post and lintel structure connected by fabricated brackets with a shower liner made into a “belly” forming the middle of the structure 8 feet above. The belly was filled with sand that continually cascaded drips down into a burnt wood piece meant to represent the abstract form of a person. The action of the artwork in and of itself became a kind of dialogue with the spectators, as it was life size and it simulated the senses. While I was observing this interaction it gave me such a satisfied feeling because I had no need to interact with the viewer on any level; therefore, I didn’t need to use my interpreter. Regardless of any barriers that the hearing world has created for us Deaf people, art has broken that barrier
and can, even more so, give people the chance to interact with a deeper language- a visual one.

I believe that the artist is a visual person and carries sincerity towards the pulse of life. This was evident during the showing of “Earth’s Cry” because there wasn’t any need for my intervention to communicate my thoughts. The artwork had a visual strength on its own as some people circled it, looked at it from different angles, and waited for the sand’s flow to change the mass of the dune. While people were busy interacting with the artwork, I became almost invisible and enjoyed watching the impact of the artwork. This is also the path that, I want my poetry and performance to take. It reflects my love and respect for nature’s pace, as nature will not think about the audience that it has – it just is.

By just being, the goal is to capture that primal emotion while looking at the work of art and having that emotion triggered. Without that trigger, it would probably be necessary to become a bit noisier by using a verbal or resort to some other aspect of language and trying to explain the meaning behind the work. The placement of the artwork is in fact a statement of sincerity as I breathe in all my senses from the world and breathe out the sub-consciousness of life. For a person to approach the artwork and get some kind of primal emotion triggered without my presence achieves precisely what I intended.
Using a Primal Skill

Many years before our advancements in technology we had to rely on a different set of skills for survival purposes. It is natural for us to respond to the environment at present. Our skills in the computer era have changed how we use our skills within our human environment. With the comfort of the tools we have today we find it less necessary to use our intuitive skills to respond. Once the comfort is achieved the feeling is that there is no need for the “older” skills such as craft or self-sustainability to any longer be used. Instead, in our surrounding nature the shells of technology comfort us. Before this, our intuition gave us the momentary response needed within our environment during our daily routines. My intention is to continue the skill acquired as a young person by using my visual language to respond to my environment. “His intuition, the creative intuition, is an obscure grasping of his own Self and of things in a knowledge through union or through connaturally which is born in the spiritual unconscious, and which fructifies only in the work.” (Maritain, 83-4) Being Deaf has also allowed old skills to come to fruition again in our technologically advanced era by relying on the survival skills of a human to succeed.

When one looks at my artwork I want a primal emotion to be summoned. The reason for this is because it is a sense that we can all evoke, if we so choose. Everyone has it and it is there inside of us responding to things that we might not even realize. Carl Jung believed there is a deep unconscious inside us called a “collective unconscious”. To
know there is an emotion that lies within us makes it easier to connect to others based on that common experience and emotion. Symbols are one example of provoking our basic emotions. A good example of this is a religious icon. When one feels a strong connection to a specific symbol or religion one feels that almost unexplicable strong primal bond. Symbols can elicit emotions that are both negative and positive. The swastika, for example, is a strong icon used in Indian religions. However, it elicits a completely opposite response, as equally provoking, from someone of the Jewish faith. Not only does it evoke a different response, but the response, also, comes from the same place that is within all humans. Our primal response, usually, comes from the experience of senses that we take upon using in our environment. We like to think spoken language is the most dominant language in our society, but we forget how much we live in a world that offers more than sound. If we can become more oriented towards the other aspects of ourselves, we will find that we will act accordingly by starting to develop the more primal part of our being. This, in turn, can influence our environment to bring us back to the basics of life. The more I seek simple activities like gardening, reusing, eating hormone free meat and taking less from the earth the more my artwork is influenced. "I suspect that the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself." (Hugo, 5) I am always seeking the next canvas from a piece of wood, road kill, bones, and just simply by visualizing when the earth seems to be giving me something. This is a very important part of my process because it is not just about art, it is about seeking the pulse of life. Life itself is a constant search for triggers that in my mind becomes my calling. The way I choose to lead my life directly influences the path that my art takes.
Using a visual medium to capture the audience’s intuitive emotions and my own, obviously reflects the most sincere and authentic emotion of the artist. No matter how a simple, manmade thing is broken down, someone created it and people will respond to it. The Towers, for example, prompted responses that triggered a range of primal images such as being reminded of the World Trade Center attack, a campfire, or a burned down house. If the towers were moved to a different place or time like after London was bombed in WWII or after a medieval city burned, I believe that you would see the same types of responses because the primal sense is timeless. The ability to portray information on burnt wood allows us to engage our primal emotions so as to communicate with what we see or smell. This comes back to why any language is actually powerful in many mediums; it is more universal in the visual medium than a spoken language because it can reach so many audiences. As an artist that translates the world using visual languages, I believe that reaching a broad spectrum of people is extremely important. This mode of communication is what I have found to satisfy me the most.
Creating art requires tools, and the tools can vary according to the trade. Before using any kind of tools, the mind itself needs to manifest an idea, which causes the brain to think, to dream, to improvise, to experience, to consider, to find, to seek, to observe, to argue, to satisfy, to exhaust- the mind is complicated. Yet, it is pretty clear that a hammer, nails, a welder, screws and the less complicated basic construction type tools help me assemble my artwork. My goal is to have a minimalist approach to the construction which allows complicated thoughts to express themselves in a simple form. Once I have the form assembled, the four elements of nature are brought into play. The use of the four elements reinforces my circle of life as a human interacting with nature while using my visual ability to take the pulse of my surroundings. The four elements also represent the timelessness of human beings; as long as we are alive the connection between humans and the elements will exist. The elements are alive within and around us, and that forms the specific kinds of basic emotions we have as humans like happiness, surprise, fear, love, and disgust. Human nature is predicable on a certain level. The goal is triggering the audience’s emotions through very basic human needs and knowing human nature is predicable on that level.

The first element is the earth, or the mother which we, also, know it to be called. As the mother has a womb, things are born. This is where materials come to life. The earth provides me with wood, metal and sand. Sand is a powerful metaphor in my artwork of everything and nothingness just like the earth, where things begin and end.
The next tool is fire which in itself is an energy of destruction and rebirth. It, also, projects the light we need to assist us in achieving things, and to see what is important which corresponds to the visual aspect. I, also, use fire as a brushstroke that gives off visual and olfactory stimulant. "Rudolf Steiner spoke about human responses to carbon being on two levels; the feeling and the thinking. The feeling instinct- connected to one’s soul- is repulsed, withdraws; while the thinking instinct- connected to one’s spirit- is attracted and advances." (Nash, 134) Once I construct the materials from the earth the fire becomes a paintbrush with the same ability to change surface color. When the towers were first constructed they did not seem like art. They looked like a post and lintel structure built for no reason until the fire burns into it a charred color and texture. (fig.9). During the burning, I observed what is happening closely so as to decide the right time for the artwork to be arrested. This is where the water element comes into play; you usually won’t see it in the gallery. Nonetheless, it is an integral part because it is what makes time stop for the artwork. As the creator, this energy helps me balance the tool of destruction. The final element is what we breathe, so if I were not breathing air I’d just fall down and die. If I am not able to breath then there will no longer be artwork from this particular creator. No air means there is not a space for the work to be set. This element is also critical to the placement of art in the gallery so as to get the right balance of the surroundings. With this energy I am, also, able to balance the tool of destruction. Clearly, the construction is basic and using the 4 elements to create artwork is like playing creator. The use of primal construction tools and primal elements leaves me, a primal artist, creating a visual language to communicate the strong values of nature. The ability to just be is my driving force towards sharing stories with the viewer of any kinds.
Conclusion

My hope is to reveal my story as a human. My goal is to demonstrate that creating and achieving things is possible by being purely human. By reacting to the environment that surrounds us you see me as whole. Being whole allows the purity to come out openly and enhances my ability to express and communicate. Perception can be off. Am I a deaf white male? Am I a first generation Cuban-American who is Deaf? Perceptions and stereotypes are so strong in our society. That makes me want others to perceive me as a human being more than anything else. To see me as a human being is to fully see that my artwork is also about my humanity. Certainly, my upbringing in northern California and being Deaf played a huge role towards what I have become. I am just another human being who wants a better world for ourselves and who seems to be a creature of nature. This entails respect and responsibility as I understand it. Our primal skills and emotions are our reminder of our true wild side that only a few have the courage to look at, to reflect upon and to acknowledge.
Susan Dupor, Family Dog, 1991

Figure 1
Tower 3, 2010  
Figure 2.a

Burned to Core, 2010  
Figure 2.b
Burned wood painted with pigments, 2009/2010  Figure 2.c

Shadow of Tower 3  Figure 2.d
Gift to the Wood, 2009

Figure 2.b
Offering #3, 2009  Figure 3.c
Ashes to Ashes for Nutbrown

Figure 3.d
Firedancer, 2008

Figure 3.e
If Heaven Bleed Yellow, 2009

Figure 3.f
Furanced, 2009

Figure 3g
Towers, 2010
Tower 1

Figure 5
Tower 3, 2010

Figure 7
Earth’s Cry, 2010

Figure 8
Burning Tower, 2010

Figure 9
Bibliography


