Incidental Exposure

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Incidental Exposure
By
Laural Hartman

Thesis submitted in
Partial fulfillment of the
Degree of Master of Fine Art Studio in Fine Arts

College of Art and Design
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

11/03/2020
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
The School of Art | Fine Art Studio
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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of my lack of environmental and situational accessibility as a Deaf person. I will be identifying and highlighting how my life experiences differ from my hearing counterparts by utilizing visual elements from my personal collection that I’ve accumulated over the years. In this thesis, I will discuss how I give the viewer an interactive way to experience incidental exposure, what I learned about the importance of experimenting with different mediums and techniques, and how I found the combination of medium and technique that best emulates and reinforces the impression of my own incidental exposure. As a result, this thesis consists of an in-depth analysis of my incidental exposure experiences growing up, and how it creates the beauty and intimacy manifested by my work.
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Introduction

Incidental exposure is defined as the sum “of all the ways a person acquires information through informal, indirect and unplanned communicative interactions with others.” For people who are hearing, incidental exposure is a significant and influential part of one’s social development and world knowledge\(^1\). However, for a Deaf person like myself in a predominantly hearing society, I am not privy to this incidental exposure unless I am surrounded by others who converse in American Sign Language (ASL). When I am in a spoken-language environment, aural opportunities to learn and understand become inaccessible to me.

Prior to the advent of smartphones, navigation systems, and other electronic devices, my sources of information consisted mainly of physical ephemera—paper maps, letters, notes, sticky notes, business cards, advertisements, photographs, newspapers, and magazines—all of which I have kept in an ever-growing collection. As a child, I read relentlessly, while also taking extra care to create mental maps of my environment, associating one visual thing with another in order to sear details into my memory. The printed word—and the visual and geographic elements that often accompanied it—was my most-cherished source of information about the world, and forever shaped how I understood things. My dependence on all things visual is, without a doubt, the source of all my reasoning; I know, understand, and create art based on the principle that what I see equals what I understand.

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Contextual Influences

My thesis work stems from maps and nostalgia for California, to which I have a deep emotional attachment. Prior to moving to New York for college, I lived in Los Angeles for 18 years, which is the longest I’ve ever lived in one city. Since then, I’ve led a nomadic, untethered lifestyle, moving a total of 16 times, bouncing from one place to another, while coping with the unique challenges presented by inaccessibility and discrimination. While I’ve created some happy and joyful memories, it was a daunting road getting to where I am today. Since returning to Rochester for my career and to raise a family, the feeling of home has become difficult to describe, and I often reflect on—and question—the nature and significance of this feeling. I used the process of mapping, incorporating a bank of visual and geographic elements, to help me rekindle my understanding of why I remember things the way I do and how that has shaped who I am as an artist. I see mapping, more than anything else, as a process of depicting place as a phenomenon that can be translated from a three-dimensional location to a two-dimensional abstraction. In using this approach in my work, I follow in the footsteps of Richard Diebenkorn, a California-based artist whose work I discuss later in this paper.

Memory is a huge part of a person’s human experience; the ability to remember past experiences gives us the power to reflect on, and ultimately change, our current behavior. Through my dependence on memory to compensate for the aural incidental exposure inaccessible to me, I find that I have acquired the ability to manipulate, retain, and filter previously learned facts, experiences, and information to the point where I am able to link them with different visual graphics and textures, found objects, and physical ephemera in order to create a personal narrative. Sensations and phenomena like the crumbling brick on the sidewalk,
billboard signs, the feeling of the sun searing my cheeks, the smell of chemicals in my father’s dark room, the chlorine in my grandma’s pool, and the copious amount of receipts, notes, and paper maps in the backseat of my parent’s car are all examples of the sources of my unique incidental learning. My process of using the physical remnants of a particular place and time in order to evoke both at a later and distant location, is an approach borrowed from Robert Rauschenberg, another important artistic influence whom I discuss later in this paper. When I talk about certain memories of a time or event with my hearing counterparts, they often speak of conversations with people, including accents, sounds from the environment or music that recurs in their life—things to which I cannot relate. The realization of just how integral sound is to the lived experience of hearing people—such that true silence is almost unthinkable to them—has led me to experiment with different mediums and techniques to see which combination will best emulate and reinforce the unique experience of my own memories.

The Evolution and Process

**Found Objects and Imagery**

The first person I was inspired by from the beginning of my MFA career was Robert Rauschenberg, an artist who boldly used unconventional objects, photographs, and prints in his work in various combinations. One of my favorite Rauschenbergs is *Untitled* (Gagosian Gallery, 1983) (figure 1). The vibrant, mismatched color of the US flag, the juxtaposition of colors, and the scale of the gold umbrella created a striking overall effect. In this work, I recognized that the layers of visual information overlapping each other mirrored and informed my own concept of mapping using objects and memories that have value to me. In an interview with Billy Kluver, Rauschenberg stated, “I always thought about materials as whatever I use, whatever the results are, however I use them, that the method was closer to a collaboration than these materials being
in the service of art.”

I can relate to this sentiment, and used it when I created my sculpture, *Transmigration of the Gold Plate* (figure 2). In the creation of this piece, I carefully curated my objects, including hearing aid molds, a slinky, jumping rope, and electronic wires, as if they were links to a map with secrets waiting to be unlocked (figure 2.5).

As the year progressed, I found that my limited knowledge of printmaking hindered opportunities for more spontaneous play, so I chose to focus on developing a set of skills within that discipline. In both *Losing my Poppies* (figure 3) and *Here and There* (figure 4), I experimented with fusing drawing and painting with printmaking. I started out by manipulating some of my photographs that included documentation of architectural details into shapes and patterns, often by pushing the contrast of values. Once printed, I further manipulated the print with paint, oil pastels, stencils, and mark-making to evoke the feeling of memory being fleeting.

**The Physical Road**

I felt an instant connection to Richard Diebenkorn, a California-based artist, because when I see his work, I think of home. For me, it is home. His work evokes a very familiar and freeing feeling that I am still exploring today. In Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park* series (figure 5), I became fascinated with his way of painting the same location from different perspectives and vantage points. Mirroring Diebenkorn, I was able to blur the lines between memory, time, and space in my work. *3044* (figure 6), *Conejo Valley Days* (figure 7), and *Whistle Stop* (figure 8) were the first three paintings I did as a graduate student. During a critique for *3044*, a faculty member asked me, “Do you understand it?” At first, I was baffled by the question but as I mulled

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it over, I realized that while the painting was aesthetically beautiful, I didn’t understand it at all, and therein, my work had no significant value. I stripped the painting and started over. I wanted to rekindle the feeling of recognizable place even if it was somewhere I had never been. I often think about certain landscapes, maps, and events—whether they’re co-located in time or space or not—and intuitively play with the idea of straddling the line between abstraction and representation. Stripping and painting that work was a defining moment of my MFA career.

Another defining moment came when considering Diebenkorn’s approach to the boundaries of the space he would come to explore; as writer Olivia Laing asserted in 2015, “The more restrictions he could create for himself, the freer he could be in improvising his way to a solution.” This triggered the decision I mentioned earlier to explore printmaking, which allowed me to simultaneously broaden the number of mediums available to me for expression and narrow my technical allowances. I enjoyed the challenge of painting directly on a screen and combining images of city details, linear mark-making, and landscapes while working to solve the geometry of pictorial space (figure 12).

For my LA series (figure 9) and Seventy Bucks (figure 9.5), I wanted to create a visual map of the experience of being in the car during the daily commute through Los Angeles, where I worked to associate one thing with another in order to impress details into my memory. Some of the visual and geographic elements in those pieces were observed from the back seat of the family car while on the 101 and 405 freeways. Since this commute happened years ago, there were gaps in my memory that required me to manipulate the details of the images in order to

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make them a complete picture. My work, in that sense, pleats time and space in much the same way as you might fold a road map.

As my work evolved, I embraced the idea of leaving blemishes, splotches, and traces of the pen marks that have gone before in my work. By adding, subtracting, and layering, a new road was revealed to me, a phenomenon I enjoy. *Glencoe* (figure 10) is an example where, as I scrape off layers of paint and wax, I see the colors and marks that were made, then covered up earlier in the process, become revealed. I get excited by seeing the beauty of small dabs of color reappearing when they were previously masked (figure 10.2). Through this process, the juxtaposition of colors, lines and shapes emerge in ways I could not have predicted, creating a spontaneous relationship between print and paint. What starts as a landscape of my grandmother’s property in Venice transpires into a fully abstract map of a place I have not yet traversed.

**The Body of Work: Incidental Exposure**

As a formative assessment of what I’ve worked on during my MFA journey, I have created a body of work that turns the tables by giving the (hearing) viewer an interactive way to experience my version of incidental exposure at a specific time and place in my life. My initial vision was to have the viewer enter a space where they see a curved pathway between hundreds of small glass discs hanging from the ceiling. Printing on glass wasn’t a feasible option due to the cost of glass and not having access to the kiln. As a result, screen-printing on plexiglass seemed to be the best solution. I screen-printed 300 clear and colored discs using different photographs and visual elements accumulated over the years (figure 11). The visual and geographic elements were of things and places I remembered from my childhood. Some of the
discs are repeats of pigeons, maps, and city signs to imitate the feeling of routine, by showing the same information over and over again (figure 13).

My first experience of hanging discs in the studio was not successful, as the strings by which they were suspended kept getting tangled. I had to reconsider the spacing of the discs and to create a barrier of some sort to prevent the viewer from touching them. I also experimented with lighting from the ceiling and underneath to allow the images, text and color from the discs to project onto the wall, gifting the viewer with two different approaches to acquiring visual information (figure 14). The swaying of the colored discs coruscating in the light gave the space a capricious feeling. Space was also a factor because I didn’t know how much space within the gallery I would be given until at a much later date. I couldn’t design and build my platform until the second semester of my second year.

Conclusion

The second semester of my last year of graduate school was halted by the coronavirus pandemic. When we were all asked to pack up our studio and leave the premises immediately, the first thing I thought of was my thesis exhibition. It was a painful thought – four years of hard work being thrown into the unknown. Because of the pandemic, I did not get the opportunity to see the audience interact with my installation. However, I am optimistic that my time to formally exhibit my hard work will come. On a positive note, the pandemic has given me the opportunity to rethink my process and how a once-simple concept has evolved into something much more tangible. For example, the lockdown instituted in response to the pandemic restricted my communicative interactions with others and disrupted my schedule to the point where my days began to meld together, leaving no distinction between the week and weekend. When
opportunities to learn and understand become inaccessible to me, I investigate and use incidental learning as a concept and as a guide to exploration; this has held true during the pandemic. At the same time, this process has allowed me to confront my insecurities and tendency for self-deprecation. I have become much more patient and kinder to the work I create. I am excited to continue my journey as an artist and to see my work continue to evolve in unexpected ways.
Bibliography


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