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Portraits of Disability and Difference

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Depicting Grace and Dignity in Disability

The art of portraiture has traditionally been used to depict those who society deemed the most dignified: generally white, upper-class, able-bodied men and women. These people were, and in many cases still are, seen as the epitome of class and therefore worthy of being subjects within portraits. People with disabilities, on the other hand, are more often than not viewed in society as lacking the same grace and beauty that characterized their able-bodied portrait subjects. This idea is especially seen in portraits of dancers, with disabled people rarely being considered as graceful and fluid in movement as their able-bodied counterparts. Through her use of movement and perspective in her portraits of William Shannon, Alice Sheppard, and Nicola Griffith, Riva Lehrer seeks to dismantle the idea that being graceful and disabled are mutually exclusive.

Lehrer makes use of movement within the portrait *William Shannon* to depict her subject as moving with grace and fluidity in his dance, arguing that these traits of motion are not exclusive to able bodies. The portrait features Shannon dancing on the street with his crutches, in what appears to be a swaying movement supported by the aforementioned equipment. His movements are shown as being delicate and precise, his crutches tipping just slightly under his weight while only his toes on one foot and

heel on the other make contact with the ground. The balance and movement depicted in the portrait helps the reader imagine his body swinging to the left before he catches himself and engages in another part of his dance. Meanwhile, Shannon appears totally engrossed in his performance, gazing off to the side without acknowledgement of the audience, as if he has entered his own world as he dances on the sidewalk. With an otherwise simple background, Lehrer focuses the audience on Shannon's movements alone, portraying his dance with fluidity even within the context of a still image. Lehrer uses this perspective and focus on Shannon's work in her portrait to show the audience a method of dance they would likely be unfamiliar with, and in doing so supports the image of beauty and grace within disability. By witnessing her use of motion in the portrait, the audience is drawn in, looking to learn more about how the dance would appear in real time, and thus Lehrer engages her viewers to learn more about both Shannon and the idea of disability in dance as a whole. Though the popular image in society of disability is that of stilted movements and a lack of fluidity, Lehrer contradicts this point by demonstrating examples of graceful movements carried out by disabled bodies, thus working to subvert the expectations of what dance can look like.

Lehrer continues to subvert the ideas of beauty and dance through her next portrait, *The Risk Pictures: Alice Sheppard*, in which she uses motion and color to prove that Sheppard deserves to be seen for more than her wheelchair. In this portrait, Lehrer portrays Alice Sheppard, a disabled dancer like Shannon, but who, unlike Shannon, uses a wheelchair rather than crutches. Rather than assigning Sheppard to the role of simply wheelchair-user, Lehrer notably takes as much attention away from the chair as possible, positioning Sheppard on top of it as if it were simply a piece of furniture.

Underneath Sheppard, her faint grey shadow can be seen curled in the position of sitting in a wheelchair, an image in stark contrast to the bright colored lines running over the page and bold position which Williams takes atop the wheelchair. While the shadow of Williams curls into the background of the photo, the real Williams and the colors around her bring energy and life to the portrait, demonstrating the dichotomy between how she is viewed in society and the bold, graceful version of herself which she knows to be true. Williams refuses to be subjugated to simply being seen as her disability, a point which Lehrer emphasizes through her use of color and movement in juxtaposition to the shadow in the background.

As in Shannon's portrait, where Lehrer focuses on movement to demonstrate grace in the dancers, the realism she uses in Sheppard's portrait additionally allows the viewer to sense the flexibility and precision with which Sheppard holds herself as she poses atop her wheelchair. The portrait invites the audience to imagine Sheppard dancing with her wheelchair, introducing them to, like in the case of Shannon's portrait, a style of dance that may be unfamiliar, but does not exoticize disabled bodies. In representing both dancers as beautiful and perhaps unfamiliar, but not exotic, Lehrer empowers the two to redefine what it looks like to be a dancer, and at the same time subverts the ideals of traditional portraiture as being a static and motionless medium meant to portray dignity only through able bodied subjects.

In her portrait, *Nicola/Snow Leopard*, Lehrer makes use of visual perspective and connections to revered wildlife to continue the argument she established in her portraits of Shannon and Williams: that disabled bodies are beautiful and deserve to be respected. Lehrer shows her subject, Nicola Griffith, with her arms outstretched and

what appears to be a puppet-like cutout of a snow leopard between them. From her arms, two crutches reach out of the painting, acting as extensions both to her arms and to the limbs of the snow leopard as they reach out towards the audience. With these details, from the connection between the snow leopard and Griffith to the outstretched crutches reaching towards the audience, Lehrer adds a sense of beauty and dignity associated with the leopard and makes the audience feel as though Griffith herself is reaching out to connect across the painting. The image of Griffith's outstretched crutches additionally gives the sense of her being a real and tangible person within the lives of the audience, connecting with them despite the divide of both disability vs ability and audience vs subject. Further, the image relates Griffith to something graceful and mysterious, suggesting that, like a snow leopard, she encompasses these aforementioned traits, and seeks to prove this correlation to Lehrer's primarily able-bodied audience. By relating her subjects to revered aspects of nature through portraiture, Lehrer subverts the ideas about disabled bodies and what can qualify a body as being beautiful and graceful.

Using a combination of creative strategies, ranging from her use of motion to her association between animals and people in her artwork, Lehrer is able to subvert ideas about the limitations of disabled bodies. By portraying her disabled subjects as being dignified and graceful, especially within the context of an art form that is defined by these traits, Lehrer works to redefine the image of disability in society.

Lehrer, Riva. *The Risk Pictures: Alice Sheppard*. 2016. 2 layers of Mylar acetate with mixed

media and collage. Accessed 27 September 2020.

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Lehrer, Riva. *Nicola/Snow Leopard*. 2013. Charcoal, mixed media, steel pins and dimensional

collage on board, rice paper. Accessed 27 September 2020.

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