



Disability Art and Re-Worlding Possibilities

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Disability Art and Re-Worlding Possibilities

By Eliza Chandler

Fredric Jameson writes, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." In conversation with Jameson, Rod Michalko offers, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than a different one," referring to the way that a life with disability is too-often understood as the end of a life, a life not worth living. It is easier to imagine the end of our life, and the end of the world, than a life with difference and the creation of a different sort of world. In the midst of such ableism, disabled people have always demonstrated that a life with difference—and a different sort of world—is possible.

Disability art is vital to the disabled people's movement for its imaginings and perpetuations of new understandings of disability and new worldly

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arrangements that can hold, even desire, them. Critically led by disabled people, disability arts allow disabled people to take control over our own representation, though not necessarily in a didactic way. Similarly to how Susannah Mintz positions disability life writing, disability art is not always concerned with representing disability accurately or debunking stereotypes (132–33). Indeed, the project of disability arts is occupied not with replacing “bad” representations of disability with “good ones” but with replacing a single representation of disability with multiple and diverse ones (Adichie). I am drawn to disability arts because they enable me to assert agency over my representation. Disability is not always the subject of my art, but claiming myself as a disability artist, in community with other disability artists, contributing to a collectively built art-sector, crip aesthetics, and accessible curatorial practices, advances an understanding of myself and other disabled people as creative, political, and full of vitality.

My art, curatorial practice, and studio-based research program focuses on the imbricated relationship between the cultivation of disability art and the achievement of disability rights and justice. Central to this relationship are the multifaceted ways that disability arts creates and perpetuates representations of disability that are full of vitality and, correspondingly, chart out new worldly arrangements. I draw critical inspiration from a number of multidisciplinary Indigenous and disability artists working today in Canada|Turtle Island. In this essay, I reflect on what I have learned and unlearned about re-worlding in relation to the work of two artists in particular: Kent Monkman and Carmen Papalia.

In his exhibition *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, which was on display at the University of Toronto Art Centre for the first two months of 2017 during Canada’s sesquicentennial anniversary of confederation, Swampy Cree artist Kent Monkman engages in re-worlding. *Shame and Prejudice* retells the story of confederation from the perspectives of the First Peoples in a way that aligns with Deena Rymhs’s description of Monkman’s installation *The Big Four* as “gestur[ing] to worlds that push out from the static, ironized representation of the museum tableaux” (473). In recasting this history as one of colonial genocide rather than colonial settlement, Monkman implicates us in the creation of a future led by Indigenous resurgence. As Monkman writes in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue for this show, “Could my own paintings reach forward a hundred and fifty years to tell our history of the colonization of our people?” (3). Monkman’s act of reaching forward in order to reach back comes through in his painting *Daddies of Confederacy*, which features Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, a Two-Spirited trickster who reoccurs in Monkman’s work to bear witness to the trauma of Indigenous peoples, in the center of a room full of “daddies” (Figure 1). The figure is nude but for high-heeled shoes, their strong arm raised upwards. Miss Chief is not an Indigenous object on display; they are not a concubine,



Figure 1. *The Daddies*.

they are a powerful embodiment of Indigenous resistant, one who is not only present but who centralizes themselves and their people within seminal discussions that enact processes of colonial genocide. Referencing Robert Harris's painting *Fathers of Confederation*, Monkman's painting offers a new, queered interpretation of this event from the perspective of First Peoples, events so often told through a colonizer's perspective, and narrates First Peoples as being absent from these discussions or skillfully duped by colonizers. Monkman's retelling of these events reveals their violences through the inclusion of smallpox blankets and the gazes of the colonizers, who clearly outnumber First Peoples. The frontispiece of the exhibition announces this collection of work as Miss Chief's memoirs, and here, in this painting, they are witnessing the trauma of Indigenous people; Miss Chief engenders Indigenous resurgence. This is not a straightforward counternarrative in which power moves from one group of people to another. Power, represented through queer looking-relations, is ambiguously redistributed, since it is unclear who is seducing whom. It is clear that First People, though outnumbered, are centered in the events while colonizers are startled because their assumed power is undone and uprooted by Miss Chief in this moment.

I am drawn to Monkman's work because it brings together "memoir and cultural archiving" (Rymhs 466) to give us a different account of history, which urges us to produce a different sort of future. His re-worlding project is not creating a new world but returning to a world lost through colonization in order to cast a future led by Indigenous resurgence. Like many, I was galvanized by this exhibition, and experiencing Monkman's account of history has changed how I participate in projects of re-worlding. His art has taught me that as a white settler living on stolen land, my participation in re-worlding should not be directed toward creating a new world; I should be working in

solidarity with Indigenous resurgence¹ and decolonial actions, which hold different worldly arrangements, in order to collectively create a livable future.

Artist and “non-visual learner” (357)² Carmen Papalia imagines new meanings of disability and new worldly ways of receiving difference, engaging in a re-worlding project that is more autobiographic and less archival than Monkman’s projects. It strikes me that both artists are generating and exhibiting new knowledges that will change worldly arrangements in the present in order to build for a different kind of future, rather than just imagining one. These artists are engaging in similar world-making projects but from different temporal vantage-points: Monkman is, to paraphrase, “reaching forward in order to reach back,” connecting historical Indigenous genocide and current conditions of colonial violences as well as Indigenous resistance in order to forecast a future built upon Indigenous resurgence, whereas Papalia’s performances draw attention to present conditions in order to structure a world that is not precariously inclusive of difference but of centers and is led by difference. As a disabled artist committed to building a future led by the desire for disability, I am excited by what I am naming Papalia’s dystopic project, particularly for how it is action oriented and public facing.

Papalia’s public performances animate his experience negotiating an ocular-centric world, an experience that often elicits unwanted (and often unseen) benevolent interactions that are more disorienting than helpful. Playfully, Papalia remakes, repurposes, and altogether rejects his white cane³ because, as he says, “the white cane entrusted a sighted community with my care when all I needed was to be supported in learning through my nonvisual senses” (357). The white cane gives Papalia tentative access to a world in which his nonvisual learning style is not imagined. This inclusion is disruptive to Papalia while leaving the normative world intact. The tension between Papalia’s presumed desired access to the normative world and his actual desire for a new kind of world is the theme for many of his performances. In *Long Cane*, Papalia walks down a sidewalk with a twelve-foot-long white cane fashioned together from standard-issue white canes (Figure 2). Throughout the performance, he lifts this cane up and sprawls it out around him, taking over the sidewalk in a dramatic display. While this absurdly long cane does little to help him navigate, it does serve the purpose of “establishing a buffer that would keep unwanted help at bay” (358). “Even better,” Papalia continues, “I could throw a bit of difficulty of negotiating public space as a cane user back at the world by becoming an imposing moving obstacle for others” (358). With this long cane, Papalia attempts to “unpack the troubling dynamics at play and invent a more suitable system of access” (357)—a re-worlding of sorts. Disabled people are often told we take up too much space as we are forced to fit ourselves into the normative world: our access needs take up too much room in budgets; accessibility codes take up too much time in city planning. In the context of a culture that demands, but does not allow,



Figure 2. *Long Cane.*

nonnormative embodiments to fit in, Papalia’s performance of taking up too much space and, through this, moving into a world that is led by difference is one that I read as liberatory.

As Jameson and Michalko’s conversation evokes, it is difficult to imagine a different kind of world. In the midst of living in a world in which our presence is at best unanticipated and at worst provocative of the desire to expunge us, it can be tempting to want to fold ourselves into the world such as it currently exists. As seductive as normalcy is, we must act through the recognition that for many disabled people, particularly those whose oppression comes from the ways ableism is imbricated with settler-colonialism, inclusion into the world as it is currently arranged is not possible. When we instead attend to and deliberately provoke the ways in which the inclusion of disabled people—all disabled people—disrupts normativity, we engage in projects of enacting different worlds. With their heuristic potentiality and creative horizons, disability arts and other forms of activist art are full of such re-worlding possibilities.

Notes

1. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi Hawai’i scholar Aikau writes, “Indigenous resurgence is about restoring and fortifying those connections while seeking to restore Indigenous responsibilities and respect for one another, land, and culture through everyday acts of resurgence” (656). Aikau continues, “Indigenous resurgence focuses on those things that restore a sense of individual and communal responsibility for

our language, histories, territories, ceremonial cycles and intellectual practices” (656).

2. Papalia, who might typically be recognized as blind, identifies as a “non-visual learner.” Papalia writes, “Stumbling upon the term *nonvisual learner* allowed me to recognize the value in my process of gathering a sense of place and was the catalyst for a body of work that realizes disability experience as a liberatory space” (347).
3. Otherwise known as a guide cane or an identifier cane.

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