

Katie Miller's Wynn Newhouse Award Winning Essay

Category : Perspectives

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Disabilities: Autism Spectrum Disorder (Asperger's Syndrome),
Prosopagnosia (face-blindness), Tourette's Syndrome,
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

I have spent my entire life as an artist, but only the last few years knowing that I am autistic. Perhaps this is why the content of my work has developed without conscious regard to autism or disability. However, everything in my life is influenced by the way my brain works. Many features of my artistic process are curiously shared by both non-autistic artists and non-artist autistics. I do not use my work to comment on my personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences, but I wonder if I am predisposed to paint what I do, in the way that I do, because of who I am.

I am not a savant. I do believe that being autistic is central to my creative process. I had an intense preoccupation with making art at a young age. As a child, I threw fits if my drawing wasn't as good as I thought it should be – disregarding the praise from others. In high school, I often painted 12 hours a day on weekends, neglecting calls from my friends. While the deficit in my social skills increased, I certainly made good progress with painting! In the autistic community we call this a 'perseveration on a special interest.' I feel lucky that my special interest is drawing and painting, which is likely more valuable to society than, say, memorizing train schedules. Somehow, I've managed to 'pass for normal,' if there is such a thing, for most of my life.

Still, I've never felt I had to be like my friends or fit in with my classmates. In fact, I was well into my adolescence before the concepts of peer pressure, trends, conformity, and embarrassment made any sense to me at all. An inability to feel social pain can constrict one's opportunities in many arenas, but artistically, it creates freedom. I am not interested in trends so they don't influence my choices.

My autistic brain interprets the world differently from a neurotypical brain. My senses are hyper-acute. I enjoy and take advantage of my sensitivity to color, shape, and detail, though my sensitivity to sounds, smell, taste, and touch is disabling and painful. In daily life, I see only small details of things before I see the whole. The environment can be so overwhelming that the people around me barely register as anything more than moving obstacles to avoid and occasionally respond to. Before I begin a painting, I scrutinize hundreds of photographs and carefully select the gestures, facial expressions, and subtle nuances of light and color, which put together, will achieve the look and feel I want the piece to have.

Oddly, in a state of single-minded focus, I filter out all other thoughts and sensations. Alone in my studio, nothing else exists except what I'm working on. The tics and clicks of Tourette's stop and my busy mind is quiet. Intense focus is essential to my work, but I often cannot recognize if I am hungry, have sore muscles, or need to use the bathroom. My mind shuts down that input until my body reaches a state of emergency. Even so, I would never want to be without the ability to call on that kind of intense concentration.

I struggle to understand people and sometimes even to like them, but people have always been my favorite subject. Making eye contact with others feels unnatural and threatening, but in my work, I prefer figures who stare out of the painting with a confronting gaze. I am face-blind, yet the face is, and always has been, my favorite thing to draw and paint. Whether there's a relationship between these circumstances, I don't know, however, it seems to be more than a coincidence.

My work reflects my thinking, and I am intensely interested in the relationship between the mundane and the surreal. I favor ambiguity to a linear narrative. Aesthetically, I prefer literal representations to more abstract or painterly renderings. I am interested in the dichotomies of childhood such as the contrast of innocence and a sense of threat. Through painting children, I explore the fine line between the disturbing and the comforting, the innocent and the provocative, the powerful and the vulnerable.

I am interested in the gawky, beautifully awkward imperfection shared by newborns and adolescents, as well as idealized images of children depicted as pure, innocent, and angelic. The identities of the children I paint are inconsequential. It doesn't matter if they're family members or strangers, as long as they have the right look for the painting. I have been asked if I like children and infants. I like them very much. Children are more human to me than adults with their self-imposed social rules, strange habits, and cryptic language. Perhaps I see a complex, self-aware human being in a child more easily than I see through the polite, guarded exterior of an adult.

Like many artists, I struggle with how much personal information to make public. I believe my work stands on its own merit, and I don't want facts about me to distract from it. Art should be judged on its merit alone, and artists, disabled or not, should not feel they must filter their biographies to preclude this from happening. I chose to share what I have here because I have realized that my disabilities are more relevant to my art than I previously thought and because I am proud of who I am. I prefer to be thought of as an artist, not an autistic artist. The latter implies special consideration, and I don't need that. To a certain extent, my art reflects who I am, but to a greater extent, it says nothing about who I really am as a person.