The Australian National University
Institute of the Arts

Canberra School of Art

MASTER OF ARTS (VISUAL ARTS) by Research

2000

Nicole Chesney

SUB-THESIS
PRESENTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
MASTER OF ARTS (VISUAL ARTS) by Research
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS

CONSERVATOR-SCHOOL OF ART

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Nicole Cressy

SUBL-THESES

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MASTERS OF ARTS (VISUAL ARTS) BY RESEARCH
Abstract

LEARNING TO SEE: research into vision and perception using glass as a primary material with reference to contemporary glass and mixed-media artists such as Christopher Wilmarth and Rosslynd Piggott. Sub-thesis essays investigate blind artists and their artwork with reference to contemporary and historical discussions of vision, perception and creativity. A study taking the form of an exhibition of glass art works exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from March 9 to 19, 2000 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (80%), together with a Sub-thesis (20%), and the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.
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The following members of the University of Life, the University of Life and the University of Life. The University of Life and the University of Life. The University of Life and the University of Life. The University of Life and the University of Life.
seeing as perception
Perhaps it all started with an advertisement posted in the career resources center at the Massachusetts College of Art. It was a job listing for a part time teaching position at Boston Aid for the Blind. Ceramics and wood working were being offered to the clients of the center that semester. Ceramics did not strike me as an unusual course for blind students but wood working certainly did. I telephoned the contact person and after our conversation she encouraged me to apply for the position. As I wrote my cover letter and discussed the position with those who would provide references, I realized that after five years of undergraduate art school on the both the east and west coasts, I had never had a blind classmate. Why was this so, especially in Boston, a city known for progressive, mainstream education for the blind. Why not blind artists and craftspeople? Afterall, blind authors and musicians hardly raise an eyebrow. Unfortunately, Boston Aid for the Blind had their funding cut and would be unable to offer these
classes that year. While nothing was to come of my job application, the questions remained with me. Here in Canberra, the sub-thesis essay presented an opportunity for me to delve further into these questions.

When I originally proposed to examine blind artists and their creative output, I was met with some skepticism and a handful of smirks. There was a consistent level of resistance to believe that there even is such a thing as the a blind visual artist. I had approached this essay with certain assumptions of my own. Specifically regarding the art work I expected to encounter, I assumed sculptors would dominate the field and that clay would be the medium of preference. These assumptions seemed logical at the onset of my research, especially after my experience with Boston Aid for the Blind. Sculpture would

Joseph Benoit Suvee
Butades or The Origin of Drawing
circa 1971
oil on canvas
be the favored endeavor, it seemed to me, because it is so obviously inclined to the tactile information to which the blind artist responds. Clay seemed the most directly accessible and least dangerous medium in my mind. Sculptors I did discover but it was the range of mediums that was so unexpected. Marble and wood carved with power tools on a massive scale, vividly colored paintings and even photographs are being created by contemporary blind artists. Ironically, I encountered few blind sculptors working with clay, so much for assumptions.

Two key questions or issues had to be addressed in my mind before I could proceed any further. These are, “How blind is blind?” and “What constitutes an artist?” There was a risk of becoming immersed in neurology and ophthalmology in order to better understand blindness in it’s myriad varying degrees and causes. While these fields are genuinely fascinating to me, staying on the topic was imperative. For the purposes of
this essay, severe vision impairment such that one may be considered functionally blind, for example, was my working definition of blindness. The latter question was perhaps the trickier of the two. Does an art education grant one entry to the club of real artists? Does a full time studio practice define an artist? Is the test the aesthetic merits of the art work? And by whose standards will the work be judged? Must the artwork look like it was made by someone blind or should it be of a realistic nature so that the viewer would never think to ask if the artist has ever gazed upon the subject of the artwork?

Again, these questions alone could take my essay in a direction that was not truly my interest. I discovered my case studies through sources such as the Art Bibliographies Modern and occasionally, through someone telling me of a program on television, a newspaper or magazine article and even a

Sargy Mann
The Sluice from Falcon Meadow
1994
oil on canvas
film related to my essay. The identification and discussion of these individuals within the "art world" constituted sufficient status as an artist for this essay. With a fictional film character and two case studies sharing a common medium, I focused on blind photographers to examine how the methods and practices of these artists are similar to one another and to those of their sighted counterparts.

Jocelyn Moorhouse's 1991 film *Proof* examines a congenitally blind man, Martin, and his search for truth by taking photographs of his everyday experiences. As a young child, Martin was unable to trust that his mother tells him the truth. He was always trying to catch her in a lie. It could have been something completely trivial like whether the gardener was outside in the yard raking leaves or major life events such as her own death. When asked by his mother why she would lie to him, Martin replies, "Because you can." She has the privilege of sight and therefore she could lie to Martin without
reproach. Martin, despite an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability, gradually comes to trust Andy, a cook at a local restaurant. They form a friendship centered around Andy describing to Martin the photographs Martin takes everyday. It would seem that Andy would be the more observant of the pair. Yet it is only when Martin calls upon Andy to concisely articulate what he sees in the photographs that we observe how little attention Andy devotes to recognizing and absorbing what surrounds him. Andy means well and seems to have a basic understanding of the situation yet some of the crucial subtleties escape him (despite being the one who can see). These details fails to register consciously with Andy precisely because his vision carries him through the world. He has never encountered a situation which required such a degree of examination until he meets Martin. For example, in the following situation Martin stops by unannounced at the restaurant where Andy works to show him the photographs he had taken during their trip to a veterinary clinic several nights earlier.
Martin: Describe them to me. (He hands Andy the envelope of photographs.)
Andy: What? Each one?
Andy: Uhm. Look, I don’t have a lot of time.
Martin: All right then - you’d better be quick about it.
Andy: Uhm, right. Well, the first one is me and the cat.
Martin: They’ve all got the cat, I suspect.
Andy: Oh, yeah.
Martin: I’ll make it a bit easier for you, Andy. Try five different ways to describe how the cat looks.
Andy: Uhm, dead? Limp? Sick?
Martin: Limp. Andy holding limp cat in waiting room of vet.
Nine words. The photograph. (Martin puts his hand out for it.) Is this the right way up?
Andy: Ah huh. What are you doing?
Martin: (In his hand is a device with a large round dial and a trigger.) I’m labelling it.
Andy: Why?
Martin: Proof.
Andy: Of what?
Martin: That what’s in the photograph is what was there.
Andy: That photograph could be anywhere of anything.
Martin: Except it isn’t. I was there Andy. I probably know more about what was in that vet’s waiting room than you would. I know that there were two fluorescent lights...
because they have a distinctive hum. The fluorescent light
directly above us was faulty because it flickered
intermittently. I know the floor was covered in old worn
linoleum because I could feel it through my shoes and I
heard footsteps on it. I can tell you that there was a woman
wearing high heels and expensive perfume. And I could
also smell a mixture of disinfectant and sick animals. And
on you a mixture of detergent and garlic. (He pauses.) But
this (holding up the photograph) is proof that what I sensed
is what you saw through your eyes. The truth.

This scene embodies the difference between seeing as vision
and seeing as perception. Visual perception has been
analogous to knowledge and consciousness in Western
philosophy since Plato and Aristotle. It was during the
eighteenth century period of Enlightenment that the
relationship between vision and reason became imbedded
in our collective consciousness. Phrases used to convey a
sense of understanding often employ sight as a metaphor,
for example, “I see what you mean”. To solely equate sight
with understanding fails to recognize the interdependence of
the senses. Rudolph Arnheim acknowledges that sensations received through touch contribute to our awareness of space and volume but emphasizes that visually derived sensations must be considered the main source of awareness. Arnheim does not, however, allow for a situation in which there is a lack of visually derived sensations in his theory. Martin does in fact know more about the vet’s waiting room than Andy. As a result of being blind, Martin has learned to be more aware of his senses and the information they provide. Martin developed these skills during daily “excerises” with his mother. She would describe the garden or sky, and Martin would listen intently for the accompany sounds or feel temperature changes or discern other nonvisual clues, learning to assemble sensory information to create an understanding of his surroundings. This practice he continued into adulthood via his daily photographic documentation. By having Andy explain these photographs, Martin is able to “verify” his observations against Andy’s. It is not to say that Andy could not learn to
be more perceptive of his surroundings. He certainly could become more perceptive but he would have to work diligently toward this goal because he can rely on his vision to carry him through the world. To some degree Andy does develop a keener awareness through his “exercises” of describing photographs to Martin although he has yet to apply these skills to his own daily life.

Vision is perhaps the most dominant sense but certainly the loss of vision does not bring to an end a blind person’s ability to experience the world in which they live. William Molyneux offered this question in 1693, now referred to as the Molyneux question, “Would a blind man suddenly given the ability to see be able to tell the difference between a cube and a sphere, whose shapes he has only know through his fingers?” The answer is generally accepted to be no because the newly sighted man is unable to compare his new perceptions to any existing ones in order to answer the question. Stated
more broadly, if the mind relies upon sensory information, does each sense contribute a distinct form of knowledge that is then processed into a cohesive perception of the world?4 Each sense does contribute unique information and it is only through experience that we process this information into perceptions. Thus the newly sighted man needs to touch the cube, connecting his tactile understanding of the cube with his new visual understanding of the cube.

Underscoring the unique nature of visual understanding, Oliver Sacks points out that among the less than two dozen documented cases of vision being restored to those long blinded, almost invariably the patients became depressed and even debilitated by the new and overwhelming sense of sight. The sudden introduction of vision caused great confusion and anxiety for those who had become newly sighted. The disorientation they experienced at suddenly being able to see was not all together different from the experiences
of those who suddenly become blind. Furthermore, most of these patients chose to return to their familiar world of blindness rather than learn to adapt to this new sense.⁵

Diderot was one of the precious few Enlightenment philosophers who attempted to establish the contributions of the other senses to one’s awareness and was extremely interested in the Molyneux question. Diderot goes so far as to suggest that touch is as potent a source of knowledge as vision and that he would relocate the seat of the soul in the fingertips.⁶ A mobility aid, such as a cane, may be utilized by a blind person to provide clues about their surroundings but only after having learned to use these devices to gather such information. As we now understand, the assembly of these clues is the result of learned behavior.

“...The integrated memory of things once perceived... This is what a blind person does, and the reason a blind person is able to have much the same spatial experience over a
somewhat longer period of time as a sighted person. This is also why a blind child is able, when asked, to reproduce a very good drawn image map of the house in which he lives. The blind person possesses no strange “sixth sense” but that he simply learns to do two things: first, as is well known, he learns to utilize cues that the average sighted person shuts off because they appear either unimportant, redundant, or contradictory to the cues coming from another (the visual) modality; second, he learns to integrate dimensional information from all his other sense modalities to enable him eventually to create an accurate impression - however imaged - of an experienced environment."

Arnheim dissents from this suggestion of integrated memory with regard to the artistic process by implying the vision is an intrinsic part of art activity and that the ability to interpret life artistically “belongs to every sane person whom nature has favored with a pair of eyes.” I disagree that sight is the defining sense for an artist, indeed I believe the ability to see often actually limits one’s ability to examine their surroundings. After all the artist’s quest is not to mirror what is before them but rather to present an interpretation of their
world that is uniquely their own. Flavio Titolo, a blind sculptor working in England, concurs, “One of the advantages of being blind is that I don’t get over-influenced by my surroundings. It stimulates my visual memory. Someone once said to me that artists try to recreate the invisible world. I actually live in that invisible world, so in a way it’s an advantage.” I can not help but notice Titolo’s clarification of “visual” memory, thus distinguishing between various types of sensory memories such as olfactory and audio.

Andy: Ha ha. A blind photographer. Ha ha. Now that goes down as the weird sight of the week. Don’t get me wrong, Martin. I mean its good you do something creative. Handicapped people shouldn’t sit around feeling sorry for themselves. They should have a hobby.

Martin: My mother gave me a camera when I was a boy.

Andy: Were you blind then?

Martin: Yes.

Andy: Why did she give you a camera? Seems sort of cruel, doesn’t it?

Martin: I wanted a camera.
Andy: Why?

Martin: I thought it would help me to see.¹⁰

Photographers have captured images of blindness since the advent of the medium. “Perhaps the fascination with the absence of vision has its source in the fact that photography has as much to do with darkness as it does light.”¹¹ Parallels can be made between photography and blindness, for example unexposed film is kept in darkness while waiting for an image to capture, exposed film is processed in total darkness, and the darkroom is where an image is brought to life. Another interpretation of the blind subject genre presented by Michael Kelly is, “When an artist chooses a blind person or some image of blindness as a subject matter, what she draws in the end is an allegory for the process of drawing itself; for she is as blind while drawing the blind as is the blind person being drawn. Subject matter and process are one - blind.”¹²
What if the photographer, the catalyst of the "decisive moment", were blind? What would it mean if the creator of a purely visual product cannot see his own creations? "So much has been made of the 'eye' of the photographer... and the issues of composition and exposure that the existence of a blind photographer arouses both amazement and skepticism." As it turns out, Martin is not the only blind photographer who has come to my attention. While Martin is a fictitious film character and his photography functions as a form of daily documentation, Evgen Bavcar and John Dugdale are both professional photographers who exhibit their artwork. It is important to note that every blind artist I have encountered in my research has been adventitiously blind, unlike Martin's congenitally blind character in Proof. Unlike the hypothetical blind man in the Molyneux question, these two men have had the privilege of sight and then lost it. Thus almost inverting the Molyneux question to ask, "If
man is suddenly unable to see can he still imagine a cube or a sphere, whose shapes he can now only know through his finger tips?" The answer is yes. "What is an idea?" Voltaire asked of himself. His reply, "It is an image that paints itself in my brain... The most abstract ideas are the consequences of all the objects I've perceived. ... I've ideas only because I've images in my head." This commonality underscores the ability of the human mind to continue "seeing" and thus creating despite the loss of vision. Perhaps to better understand our sensory perception and its reinforcement through experience we should examine the cases of those who lack such experience.

Born in Slovenia in 1946, Evgen Bavcar, was blind by age eleven as the result of two separate accidents. As a secondary school student he began taking photographs. Later he studied aesthetics and philosophy of art in Paris which has since become his home. During the six month transition into
blindness which he described as a "long good-bye to sight", Bavcar collected images in his mind, "Thus I had time to grasp the most precious objects, the images of books, colors and the phenomena of the sky, and to take them with me on a trip without return." To be so perceptive at such a young age about his impending loss is quite remarkable in it's own right.

Evgen Bavcar
der Ruine der Kunste, Berlin
March 1990
Bavcar’s photographs are ghostly and utterly captivating. The construction of these images entails a very long exposure time during which he introduces paper cutouts of swallows, his own hands and even photographs of himself as a young boy.\textsuperscript{16} A layered, almost painterly quality is conveyed in each of these images due in large part to Bavcar’s actions in front of the camera during the actual creation of the image as it is recorded by the negative much in the same way a painter’s hand is always present in the brush strokes of the finished canvas. Within each is a complete and complex world, an almost dream-like place of mystery punctuated with rich dark blacks and stark white highlights. The viewer feels as though the brightly lit areas are being illuminated by a torch they are carrying through this nocturnal scene. There is a sense of that which is being revealed by this light. Something is being exposed by the light which allows the image to be captured on film. What the viewer is seeing is the contents of Bavcar’s mind: what he sees in his blindness. Bavcar seemingly reverses
situations with his viewer, Bavcar brings to light his images from the darkness that envelops the viewer. Michael Kelly does not directly account for blind artists in his interpretation of the blind subject genre. Bavcar does address this relationship between blind artist and model.

In an interview with Michel Ellenberger, Bavcar offers the analogous situation of Eros and Psyche to explain his relationship as a blind artist with his model.

While he is literally blind, Bavcar reiterates Michael Kelly's theory by saying, "Me, I am a mirror that does not talk back... (The model) is face to face with herself. I see her image in me." It is this removal of direct gaze or view between artist and model that Bavcar feels is the catalyst for the "unconscious things" that appear in his work.17 He said the images he produces "come from a world
without objects, that he builds using inner visions and rhythmic interventions from his hands, which gives them a spatial reality."

Much in the same manner as Martin (from Proof), Bavcar also often relies on a trusted guide to translate the visual into words for him. Martin chose Andy because ‘he liked Andy’s style’, its directness and simplicity but above all Andy’s honesty. Bavcar’s young niece, Veronika is his most trusted assistant, describing her as a translator between the visible and invisible worlds. Echoing Flavio Titolo’s comment about the influence of vision, Bavcar states, “I trust children’s vision... Because they can see that the king is naked, where as adults get (influenced) by appearances.” Not only does Veronika accompany Bavcar to events such as art exhibitions translating the visual into the verbal but Veronika also describes Bavcar’s finished photographs to him as part of his critical process in determining resolved works of art.
compares Veronika’s descriptions of his photographs with his own artistic intentions to determine which art works most completely convey his ideas to the viewer. Again this process is not unlike Martin’s utilization of Andy’s descriptions.

John Dugdale, 37 years old, is an American whose photographs are the result of years of professional development. Although having tested positive for HIV in 1985, Dugdale was fairly healthy until two strokes and the onset of a condition known as CMV (cytomegalovirus retinitis) caused him to become almost totally blind between 1993 and 1994. Physically fit once again, the primary clue to Dugdale’s vision impairment is the very thick-lensed glasses he wears to make the most of his remaining sight. 21

My initial interest in Dugdale’s work was through seeing his photograph, Farmhouse Inverted in Mark Isaacson’s Venini Vase, 1994. I was captivated by the purely visual nature of
this photograph. One can touch the farmhouse, the vase and even put a finger inside the vase to touch the water contained within it. But the moment captured is purely visual - the wonder of this image captured in clear water in a clear vase. It is a world captured inside this vase - much like a snow globe. Frozen is a moment of discovery, a moment of witnessing a scientific principle visible before one's eyes as though it is being seen for the first time. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Associate Curator of photography, Malcolm Daniel commented,

"The photograph expresses something about photography itself, and the way the world that we've created is reflected through art. What particularly appealed to us about this was the element of self-referentiality - it seemed to be about photography, and about light and images, and the way the vase acts as a lens to show the wider world that you don't actually see in the camera itself."
Perhaps because photography, specifically the camera’s lens has a mode of visual representation uniquely its own, it acts a bridge between the sighted and non-sighted worlds.

Many of Dugdale’s photographs utilize vases, goblets and other functional items crafted of clear glass to serve as the central focus of the image. These objects serve as transmitters of light rather than color. The removal of color from an object allows the sighted viewer to concentrate more deliberately upon the object’s form. The experience of an object’s form is also the blind viewer’s most immediate source of information about that object. When color is not of primary importance to the definition of the subject then the relationship between the blind artist and the sighted viewer in this situation is similar to that of Martin and Andy in Proof. The sighted viewer is presented with an alternative perception of a situation which they may not have arrived at through their own perception.

In keeping with Bavcar and Martin, Dugdale also employs
trusted friends to assist in certain aspects of his creative process. In an interview with David Furnish, Dugdale responds to the question, “How does your eyesight affect your work?”

John Dugdale replies, “A generous estimate would be that I have about twenty percent of my peripheral vision at the bottom of one eye. I can’t see up; I can only see down. So if I look at something, I have to scan it with my little bit of eye. I can touch the corner of something and feel the shape, then stand back and see it. I have two assistants who make the paper and help me with the printing. I don’t focus the camera. Other people focus it for me. Often people are afraid; they think they can’t focus an 8 x 10 camera, and I tell them, “Can you see if the television is clear or blurry?” They say, “Of course we can.” So I say, “It’s no different. Just roll the knob back and forth until it’s clear, there’s no magic, it’s no secret.” But I have the shutter release in my hand; it’s very important for me to trip the shutter.”

The “decisive moment” remains Dugdale’s just as Bavcar and Martin remain in control of the creation of their photographs. The blind artist’s need for the input of others
or assistance with the production of their work is different; different in kind as well as different in degree. The role of the studio assistant may be more central to the blind artist’s studio practice than a sighted artist. However, there are plenty of examples of artists throughout history who have delegated great amounts of responsibility to their assistants (and others even more removed from the artist such as factories) and for a variety of reasons. Charles Moore employed assistants to carve rough forms in marble in an effort to be more prolific. Dale Chihuly engages large teams of people in the creation of his art work for two key reasons: the scale of his projects demands it and an eye injury left his depth perception impaired. His role could be
analogous to a conductor of an orchestra. In either of these examples, the finishes artworks are credited to the artists who conceived of the ideas for them. Malcolm Daniel denies that Dugdale, "blind photographer," (and by extension Bavcar) is merely a novelty act. "It's not like the person who paints with their toes, where you say, "Isn't it remarkable for somebody who doesn't have hands to be able to do that just with their feet?" In terms of the critique of finished works of art, most artists rely upon a trusted circle of friends and colleagues for assessment of their work. Again, this is not very different from the blind artist's sighted counterpart for often an artist is unable to examine and assess objectively what is captured in their own work because of personal and emotional involvement with it. Viewer responses to artwork can make an artist aware of what may have been obvious to everyone except themselves or conversely aspects of the work that are obvious to no one except the artist. Far more eloquently, Wittgenstein said, "The aspects of things which are most
important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and 
familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is 
always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry 
do not strike him at all.”

While both Dugdale and Bavcar are indeed blind 
photographers, their blindness and artistic practice arose in 
very different manners. Bavcar, 
blinded in childhood, received his 
art education and developed his 
studio practice as a blind adult. 
Dugdale, a trained professional 
photographer, became blind only 
five years ago. His artistic style and studio practice has 
changed in this time but he is no less focused or prolific. If 
we disqualify these men from being considered visual artists 
because they are blind, what must we make of Beethoven, a 
deaf musician and composer?

Evgen Bavcar
Coresses de la nuit 1992
collotype
I feel that it is extremely important to note that I am in no way romanticizing or underestimating the challenges presented to the blind. What I seek to do is recognize that the similar ways in which the sighted and the blind collect and draw upon sources of inspiration. After all,

"Ones does not see, or sense, or perceive in isolation - perception is always linked to behavior and movement, to reaching out and exploring the world. It is insufficient to see; one must look as well."^{25}

In order to fully appreciate the artworks created by Dugdale and Bavcar, the viewer must leave behind any pity for or disbelief of the notion of a blind artist. The sighted viewer has a far greater distance to traverse to arrive in Bavcar’s and Dugdale’s world, for each of these blind artists were once sighted. After all, who seems less able to “see” the world around him, Martin or Andy?
Endnotes


14 ibid., p. 125.
15 ibid., p. 126.
16 ibid., p. 126.
18 ibid., p. 47.
19 ibid., p. 48.
20 ibid., p. 50.
22 ibid., p. 36.
out of sight
I have been fascinated by blindness for many years. When I first saw the advertisement in *Art in America* in March 1999, I was elated. It was a call for entries from blind artists working in any medium, the selected works to be shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Fantastic! I thought. Here was an opportunity to examine a group exhibition of blind artists presented at a major museum. I immediately had an image in my mind of the exhibition I hoped to encounter. My speculation was influenced by Michael Kelly’s *Artforum* article, “Shades of Derrida”. Kelly reviewed The Louvre’s exhibition, *Memoirs of the Blind*, curated by Jacques Derrida in late 1990. The works were selected from the Louvre’s collection of drawings, depicting fictional and historical images of blindness. Derrida uses the drawings to reveal philosophical ideas. I was familiar with The Philadelphia Museum of Art and it’s permanent collections of works by Marcel Duchamp (one of whose pseudonyms was Blindman). This knowledge gave my imaginary exhibition
a location in my mind. The authority that such a venue lends to its exhibitions would only underscore my belief that the blind artist has much to contribute through their unique perception of the world.

School of Guercino
1591 -1660
Della Scultura Sì, Della Pittura No
pen and ink
The advertisement requested slides, CV, artist’s statement and an explanation of the artist’s blindness. All of these items, save the last, are standard requirements for consideration for any exhibition. The contact details gave only a phone number without a mailing address. At first, this seemed unusual but after a moment I realized the communication logistics would be much simpler if preliminary inquiries and questions were answered via the telephone. Otherwise, audio or Braille versions of a prospectus would have to be produced.

I rang the telephone number in Philadelphia, asking to speak with the curator of this exhibition. Kathy answered the phone and said that she was the curator. I explained that I was calling from Australia and was interested in this exhibition as part of my research for graduate school and could make arrangements to come to Philadelphia sometime in May. She explained that by May all the works would be selected and would have arrived at the Philadelphia Free Library for the Blind where they are stored until the exhibition opens at the...
Philadelphia Museum of Art in late September. I was welcome, she said, to spend time examining the works and speaking with the curators involved.

At this point in our conversation, it became apparent that although the advertisement made it seem the phone number was for contacting the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it was in fact the Philadelphia Free Library for the Blind, the organization that oversees this exhibition. With this discrepancy resolved, Kathy explained a bit more about the project and its history. For twenty-five years, the Philadelphia Free Library for the Blind has been presenting an exhibition called NEBA, (an acronym for National Exhibition of Blind Artists). This exhibition is hosted biennially by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and then tours to various venues throughout the United States and on occasion internationally.

I would later learn that, founded in Philadelphia in 1975,
National Exhibits of Art by the Blind, as it was first called, was based on the premise that blind artists deserved as much recognition as blind musicians, authors and athletes. Additionally, it’s prime objective was to educate and expose the public to "the quality and potential of art work by the visually impaired." In 1976 as part of Philadelphia’s celebration of the United States bicentennial, the University of Pennsylvania and the Library for the Blind presented the, National Exhibition by Blind Artists. Attendance of almost sixty thousand people to this presentation helped attract enough support to create a Board of Directors comprised of members of the blind community, those associated with the local art community and museums, business people, and academics and thus insure the continuation of exhibition opportunities for blind artists. The organization’s name then became National Exhibition by Blind Artists or more often simply referred to as NEBA as it is commonly known today.
I confirmed this invitation as the date of my visit grew closer.

Upon arriving at the Free Library, I was told that Kathy was not in as she had a medical emergency that morning but was expected to return momentarily. While waiting, I perused some of the library's collection of materials. Notably absent from this area of the library were computer terminals with which to search the library's holdings. Circulation librarians, instead, search for materials requested by visually impaired patrons. Requests for materials can be made either in person or via telephone or post. Actually, the majority of library users do not visit the library at all. Most materials are posted to the visually impaired and returned through the mail as well. The Internet and other technological developments are striving to change the way the visually impaired can access information but this remains sometime in the future for most.
Standard printed newsletters from the Library of Congress listed the latest books to be available in both Braille and audio cassette formats. These selections range from the latest Stephen King novel to self-help books for exercise and weight loss to poetry anthologies to *National Geographic* magazines.

Over ninety-five percent of the library’s holdings are located in closed stacks and one of the library staff members offered to take me on a tour while waiting for Kathy. Seeing Braille books for the first time, I was struck by how enormous they are. I found them cumbersome to handle and far too large to consider carrying as reading material for a bus trip across town. Books on tape are becoming more and more common and increasingly the only format for some new books and serials. The Philadelphia Free Library, along with most larger libraries for the blind, produces a number of serials and books on tape in the recording studio located on site. The Library of Congress delegates specific texts to each library for recording and this division of labor throughout the US allows
for a greater number of publications available to the visually impaired community. During my tour, one volume of the *Star Wars* trilogy was being recorded. I was also told of the ongoing project that is the pride and joy of the production crew, *Playboy* magazine. The Philadelphia Free Library for the Blind produces, among other monthly publications, audio versions of *Playboy*. The reader describes the pictorial images, cartoons, and reads the articles (of course) in addition to the paid advertisements. In keeping with every American’s first amendment right to freedom of speech, the Library of Congress’s mission is to provide the visually impaired access to the full spectrum of published materials generally available to the sighted population. This experience gave me an enhanced understanding of the challenges presented to those who are visually impaired.

Kathy finally arrived and seemed to be in a rather cross mood. Unable to ascertain what the medical emergency was, I did
learn almost immediately that she was not in fact the curator of NEBA but the secretary for the director of the library, who was (of course) unavailable this day. I was very disappointed as I had very clearly explained the genuine nature of my research during several telephone conversations, that I was making the trip to Philadelphia from Canberra and very disappointed that she misled me as to her position with NEBA. I felt rather certain at this moment that if I questioned her about this misunderstanding (or misrepresentation as I felt it to be) that I would risk any access to the artworks and information about the exhibition. I believe she genuinely thinks of herself as a “curator” for this show, because she organizes the slides that are received from blind artists and distributes these materials to the NEBA jurors and Philadelphia Museum of Art staff. In addition to the staff at the Free Library for the Blind, NEBA receives coordination assistance from the Special Audiences program within the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In fact there was no curator involved, the person closest in
this capacity would be Carol Whisker of the Special Audiences
program at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Kathy took me to view the art works that had been selected for the upcoming exhibition which were stored on the fifth floor of the library. When the lift doors opened my heart sank yet again, this time even further. In front of me was several plastic skips on wheels, the sort used to collect rubbish in large office buildings, each measuring approximately a meter high, equally as wide and one and one half meters long. Parked along side cast-off furniture and obsolete computer equipment, piled in these containers were various boxes, packages and folios - the accepted works of the 1999 NEBA. No care had been taken in loading these skips, some canvases and flat works no longer protected by any packing material. Kathy showed no sign of dismay at this spectacle of disarray and as she ravaged through the bins to find something to show me it was clear that there was no protocol regarding
the appropriate storage and handling of works of art in practice here. In the dim fluorescent light and dust-filled air, I spent time looking at the artworks while trying very hard to pretend that I was doing so in the Philadelphia Art Museum only several blocks away. The range of mediums represented was indeed impressive including carved stone, plaster, and wood, oil, acrylic and watercolor, collage, prints, and pastels. Most unexpected was a welded stainless steel work by Steve Erra, a regular participant in NEBA exhibitions. After sometime, I gravitated to a small group of art works and returned the remaining pieces to their sorry storage bins. I began to project myself into the role of curator to explore what unites these works or the artists who created them. As would become apparent during my visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, my ideas were somewhat different to those involved with NEBA.
The next day I went to the museum to speak with Carol Whisker. I wanted to discuss with the curator their thoughts about this show. She said the works are selected by a jury that is informally assembled through the personal contacts of NEBA board members. The potential pool of jurors is limited to those who will participate for free as there is almost no budget for this exhibition beyond the catalogue. No brief as such is presented to the jurors (the number of which varies from year to year) and they are left to themselves to determine how the panel will select the works.

Then Ms. Whisker showed me where the NEBA show would be presented and gave me a guided tour of the Form in Art exhibition on display in the same area. Form in Art is the name of a class offered to developmentally challenged members of the Philadelphia community and the show presents works created by the students. The NEBA show is also presented in this area, the corridor of the museum.
through which wheelchair users access the building. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is an old building whose enormous entrance steps slow down most able-bodied museum visitors and absolutely prevent access for any wheelchair user. To conform with the Americans with Disabilities Act, a side entrance was built. After proceeding up a long ramp, one enters the museum through this entrance. The passage way from this entrance leads to the lifts that provide access to the main floors of the museum. This corridor is reserved for exhibitions coordinated through the Special Audiences program. In effect, the only people who are likely to see any of the works displayed in this area are the disabled, frail, elderly and those accompanying them.

The Form in Art exhibition that was in progress during my visit was not even mentioned on the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s exhibition calendar. This omission only bolstered my suspicion that very few members of the general public
purposely wander down to this remote area of the museum to view exhibitions. While it is certainly every museum’s duty to engage the entire spectrum of its constituents, I was saddened that NEBA was resigned to a basement hallway. The commitment, dedication and art works shown by the NEBA participants are truly inspiring and after a twenty five year commitment as the host institution, why are these works not presented to the larger audience of the Philadelphia Museum of Art patrons? The physical location of the NEBA presentation undermines the goals the show sets out to achieve, those being “to educate and expose the public to the quality and potential of art work by the visually impaired.”

Yet contrary to NEBA’s original intentions, continued placement in a second class (and almost subterranean) hallway gallery sends a message to the public that these visually impaired participants and their art work merit nothing more from the standpoint of the Philadelphia Museum of
Art. Further, this message says that these artworks can only be shown under the protective guise of “Special Audiences.”

The presentation of art works in a museum environment is intertwined with the educational contribution the presentation makes to that museum’s audience. NEBA and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, through the handling, treatment and presentation of the artwork effectively render the blind artist to be exactly what Malcolm Daniel of The Metropolitan Museum of Art assures that they are not - a novelty to be viewed with a sense of wonder or amazement.\(^5\)

The catalogue, which documents a portion of the works included in this biennial, is printed in black and white because of budget constraints yet much of the artwork is intensely colored, qualities which are entirely lost in black and white reproductions. The text of the catalogue consists of acknowledgements of those who helped coordinated, fund, and participated in the exhibition. A Braille version of this
brief statement also serves as front and back end papers for the catalog. Each artist included in the catalog has a caption beside the black and white image of their artwork. These captions are excerpts from artist’s statements and biographies and could contribute more to the viewer’s understanding of the exhibition through the addition of comments or insights from NEBA organizers.

NEBA has toured to a variety of venues including The Brooklyn Museum, Moore College of Art, Carnegie Institute and Associated Services for the Blind. This diverse range of exhibition locations has enabled a wide and varied audience to attend these biennial presentations. Yet it seems that even with such broad exposure to myriad arts institution professionals, no one has ever been sufficiently curious to question the context and critical presentation of this collection of art works beyond the scope of the Special Audience category. Or perhaps, it precisely because the show is labeled
Special Audiences from the onset that other arts professionals do not look more closely at its broader relevance. The blind artist is fundamentally different as Malcolm Daniel explains, “It’s not like the person who paints with their toes, where you say, “Isn’t it remarkable for somebody who doesn’t have hands to be able to do that just with their feet?” The NEBA artists are indeed different from those who arrive at their art practice through rehabilitation and the art works are of sufficient caliber to present outside the insulated sphere of “special audiences” yet this exhibition is continually relegated to that very category. As a result, the value of these works and the public perception of the artists who create them is diminished. Martin Jay in his essay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, shares this,

"Rather than erect another hierarchy, it may therefore be more useful to acknowledge the plurality of scopic regimes now available to us. Rather than demonize one or another, it may be less dangerous to explore the implications, both positive and negative of each. In doing so, we don't lose
entirely the sense of unease that has so long haunted the visual culture of the West, but we may learn to see the virtues of differentiated ocular experiences. We may learn to wean ourselves from the fiction of a "true" vision and revel instead in the possibilities opened up by the scopic regimes we have already invented and the ones, now so hard to envision, that are doubtless to come."

My conclusion after this visit was that NEBA has been afflicted by three primary problems. First is the physical placement of NEBA within the Philadelphia Art Museum. Second, the presentation of this show as being for "Special Audiences". Both of these factors greatly diminish the significance of this exhibition and effectively reduce the number of visitors to the exhibition. The third problem regarding NEBA is the lack of discourse surrounding the exhibition. These interrelated problems create a "catch 22" situation. The conundrum of this circumstance is whether NEBA does more harm than good by presenting these works in a established, mainstream art institution but in an atmosphere that seems rather
patronizing despite the well-intended organizers. I believe that by removing the label "Special Audiences" from the NEBA presentation, in time the exhibition attendance and in turn the discussion of this exhibition would increase. The Philadelphia Art Museum has already invested twenty-five years in this ongoing exhibition and increased attention to NEBA can only enhance the Museum's contribution to the general community.

While NEBA presents a range of artistic mediums and styles, three key points do in fact unite the works of these artists. Focusing on the works of five NEBA participants as examples (Mary Solbrig, Busser Howell, Steve Erra, Harriet Baldwin and William Cody) reveals that each had some degree of art education prior to the onset of severe vision impairments, the works of these artists are not the results of rehabilitative programs, and the continual adaptation of their studio practices to accommodate their changing vision. I left
Philadelphia having seen the works of NEBA and the NEBA location. Ideally, the NEBA artworks would have been installed in the NEBA location but that was not to be. Instead, I shall discuss selected works with regard to Dewey's requirements for the existence of a work of art, thus proving these works to be art rather than the products of therapy. By establishing this, the burden of the euphemistic "Special Audiences" is allayed. The viewer is then free to examine these works as they are - special because of the artists' abilities rather than their disabilities - visual art created by blind artists.

The commonality of the NEBA artworks is the deliberate intention of the artists to communicate with their viewers. Dewey discusses this as the first requirement for a work of art in this passage,

"Three elements must be present [for the existence of a work of art]. The artist sets out deliberately 'to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate process of
perceiving'. The first thing necessary, then, is a particular intention on the part of the artist. (That already involves, however, an anticipation of the attitude of the perceiver, which the artist ‘embodies in himself while he works.’)\(^9\)

Dewey intentionally avoids requiring either the artist or the audience to have the ability to see as he allows for other means of perception. Each NEBA artists discusses their intentions in a statement submitted with their art work. The first of Dewey’s requirements has been fulfilled by these artists. The second of Dewey’s demands, “Equally necessary are the making or the doing of ‘something visible, audible or tangible’...,” is met by the very nature of the art works submitted.\(^10\) Upon public presentation of these works, the third and finally condition, “Someone who by perceiving that something enjoys the experiences which the artist sought to communicate,” is satisfied.\(^11\)
One significant function of NEBA has been to highlight the artistic development of several artists whose work has been included in NEBA biennials rather consistently over the organization's twenty-five-year history. Many of the NEBA artists have visual impairments that are degenerative and their continued participation in the biennials documents their ever-changing view of the world as well as artistic adaptation and development. In his definition, Dewey does not require the growth or development of either the artist or their art. Yet in addition to meeting Dewey's stated demands, these five artists also demonstrate their continued commitment and ability to do just that. Trevor-Roper discusses the inevitable adaptations the blind artist must make to continue working.

"The gradual restriction of the field of vision could sometimes liberate the artist from the constraints imposed by a convention that required a near-photographic likeness of the subject he was trying to depict, and allowed him increasingly to emphasize the features that were to him
most relevant. The blind artist, having no such constraint, can express his feelings for the subject as soon as he has learnt to control his medium.” Thus the blind artist “freely expresses his experiences by introducing new elements of form, or by varying his own structural symbols.”

Germano Celant describes the unique contribution of these visual artists,

“the memory of perception is a secret, it cannot be transmitted, it can only be shared - as something marvelous and extraordinary that is imposed but not explained. It is a process that cannot be understood: everyone perceives, receives, and responds to these impulses; but no one is able to define the experience of this synthesis, which is a synthesis of opposites because it unites the non-unitable.”

These artists invest enormous energy critically examining their work precisely because of their vision impairments and convey an acute sense of their subject matter. Thorough consideration with every stroke or mark is inherent in the blind artist’s
methodology as they have to expend considerable time and energy to make assessments regarding their work. The sighted artist is not automatically required to make such inspections. When vision is limited or hindered, one thinks very carefully before making a mark. Assuredness is not tantamount to contrivance. This determination as can be seen in the work of the following five artists. In their own words, each satisfies Dewey's criteria for a work of art.

For example, Steve Erra was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa in 1979, during his last semester as a fine arts student at Parsons School of Design in Manhattan. He discusses his work as metaphoric,

"Door uses very dark shadows to depict an area that is much as I see it - dimly lit areas. The glinting glass door knob symbolizes the sparkling visual disturbances I always experience. Fence IV is part of a series of photographs and pastels that concentrated on shining coils of razor wire and
the interaction between the fabricated man-made sharpness with the natural foliage and landscape elements. Many of the coils were circular in nature, referring to the circular 'tunnel vision' that characterizes retinitis pigmentosa."

Defined within the pastel drawing, Fence IV, appear to be foreground, middle and background zones. Two stark white coil shaped marks contrast with the darkness and haze of the middle ground. In the distance, one sees soften outlines of two trees suggestive of Japanese ink landscapes.

In Harriet Baldwin's art work, Market Place, the contrast of the dark horse against the light background and the line quality with which it is rendered makes clear Baldwin's additive and subtractive process of painting. The mass and structure of the animal are further articulated by scratching through the image.
the painted form. She makes conscious decisions about composition while maintaining the sense of the wind blowing through the flags in the open Market Place of the painting. She shares this about her work,

“I start each painting with an ambiguous concept, but find each work evolves in its own direction and the excitement for me is in its process. The fulfillment is in the result.’ Harriet attended The Brooklyn Museum Art School, the Art Student’s League in Manhattan and The Roslyn Museum Art School in Long Island. ...”

William Cody’s artist statement echoes that of two other blind photographers, John Dugdale and Evgen Bavcar. Each uses the eye of the camera to augment their own vision. In Transplant, Cody forces the viewer to look closely at the subject’s scars. In daily life, a prolonged uninvited stare such as this would be considered rude. Cody’s impaired vision places him outside of the etiquette of vision. It is through his
(blind) eyes that the viewer gains this inspection of the subject’s scars. Cody speaks of his blindness and his photographs,

"My goal as a photographer is to use the camera as an extension of myself. Acting as a ‘flamour’ [sic] I venture into the world attempting to record my perception of images that you may not see...Ten years ago I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa. ...Manipulating the images I record in the processing stage or digitally through the computer, enables me to pursue particular themes and record my own unique vision...My camera is the primary tool through which I pursue my vision of the world."

A frequent contributor to NEBA, Mary Solbrig, now eighty years old, has one prosthetic eye and extremely limited vision in the other. Describing her vision as “mottled”,

William Cody
Transplant
photograph
color plays a vital role in her paintings and drawings as she is not able to discern crisp outlines.

"Colour is an important part of my painting. It is a mysterious thing to me. I am preoccupied with the colors as they blend, and as my eyes suffer from glare my work seems to develop. ... The less I see the more challenging (my work) becomes. With mottled vision I fantasize the areas that really don’t exist. I go with the flow and use many sizes of magnifiers and old horse sense to make it all believable."[17]  

Solbrig studied art at Indiana University as a young woman. A former school teacher, she has continued to paint throughout the course of her life, exhibiting regularly. Solbrig paints her impressions of what she knows about her Orchids. Her methods may differ somewhat from most painters but motivations are among good company. As Trevor-Roper points out,
The “truths that underlie our seen world, and which we habitually ignore, are indeed the stock-in-trade of so many great painters, who disclose what is there for anyone with perspicacity to apprehend. The brilliant and contrasting shadow-colors have been deployed by Impressionists and Post-Impressionists for nearly a century."

Busser Howell’s paintings are approximately two meters high and one and one half meters wide. A painting of this scale requires the painter’s physical interaction during it’s creation. For Howell, the act of painting is almost as active and animated as the scenes he captures on canvas. Howell discusses his paintings by saying,

“after years of painting people in stationary positions, abstracting them, combining them [and] dividing them...I finally settled into my dancing people which exhilarate and energize me as I work on them and I hope express inner joy and a sense of well being. These figures evolve in my head as I work and it seems each canvas has a life of its own as I apply more shapes and color. Various parts of the human anatomy and their apparel become bold shapes that are
more important to the whole painting then they are to the figure. When I work I memorize the size of the canvas and also the images as they evolve during the painting. Through limited peripheral vision I add details such as eyes and lips, but I cannot actually see what I am doing. My mind is where I see the image and I then allow my hand to produce what I am seeing. I can feel the wet paint on the dry paint and this too helps to establish a control for me.\textsuperscript{20}

Blindness is what unites these artists yet the aesthetic merits of these artworks are self evident. By forcing the viewer to be foremost aware of the artist's disabilities through the "Special Audiences" presentation, the viewer first marvels the disabled
person behind the art work rather than simply considering any artistic intentions this artist may have attempted to convey. It is the museum that reduces these art works to rehabilitative by-products. Classifying these works as "special" insures that no discussion of any kind occurs.

The image of the blind man has been used as a conceptual device in philosophical discussions by many philosophers both historical and contemporary, including Locke, Molyneux, Berkeley and Derrida as a means for the reader to inspect his own mind. These conceptual models of blindness are either romanticized truth tellers and clairvoyants or the damned and repentant suffering in darkness for their evil deeds. Conversely, NEBA affords the viewer a chance to inspect the minds, through the art work, of actual blind individuals as well as their own. In this situation it is the general public that could be considered the "special audience" because to better understand our own knowledge of sensory
processes we need to draw upon those who lack such experience.\textsuperscript{22} Certainly this is a rare situation in which the art work of blind artists is available in such regular intervals for examination and documentation. The art work serves in this instance as a valuable means to educate the sighted about the blind, particularly those with degenerative diseases. "We, with a full compliment of senses, live in space and time; the blind live in a world of time alone. For the blind build their worlds from sequences of impressions (tactile, auditory, olfactory) and are not capable, as sighted people are, of a simultaneous visual perception, the making of an instantaneous visual scene."\textsuperscript{23} Because perception can only be shared rather than explained, as Celant says, how better to achieve this exchange of perceptions than through the art works of NEBA.

There is richness of perception and a broad range of art work is represented in the biennial NEBA presentations. What
is absent is the inquisitive desire to explore the uniqueness of each artist’s experience. “Perceptual-cognitive processes, while physiological, are also personal - it is not a world that one perceives or constructs but one’s own world- and they lead to, are linked to, a perceptual self, with a will, an orientation, and a style of its own.” The oversimplification of the blind artist impedes the general public from gaining a greater understanding of the art work created by the visually impaired. Though, I have resolved that any presentation of an artist’s work is better than no presentation at all because it enables the artist to share their vision of the world- no matter how small or narrowly defined that audience may be.
Endnotes


4. ibid., p. 28.


22 ibid., p. 40.


24 ibid, p. 129.
addenda
Study program

Nicole Chesney
Sub Thesis
First Work Plan

“Perception, or the action by which we perceive, is not vision ... But is solely an inspection by the mind.”

-Descartes

Acorns fall from a tree in a seemingly random manner yet the pattern created on the ground is fairly consistent. A field of lichen-covered rocks form an even terrain belying the enormous complexity of detail. The pattern in which branches grow from a tree, the formation of the leaves on each branch and the structure of veins in the individual leaf are all related. It is this perception of the structure of nature that guides my art work. It is the periphery of an observation that motivates me. How the acorns are on the ground is my interest, not that they are on the ground. Why do the rocks encrusted with lichen appear uniform? Perhaps the way light rakes across the field is the primary reason.

Conveying these observations and investigations of order and structure in a way that is not illustrative or didactic but distilled and quintessential is my goal for my studio program.

“The aspects of things which are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike him at all.”

-Wittgenstein
Thematically my thesis will explore the understanding sighted artists can gain from the experiences and perceptions of blind artists and blind viewers. How much of the world does the sighted artist fail to see because of a dependence upon vision? What sensory information does the blind artist harness in the absence of sight? How can these two artists discuss each others’ art work in a substantive manner? These questions are points of entry into my exploration of the relationship between sighted and non-sighted artists and the results of their creative endeavors.

The artists I have become most interested in examining are working in a variety of mediums. These blind artists are painters, sculptors, photographers. All seem to have lost their eyesight or have failing eyesight as opposed to being congenitally blind. Currently, the artists I am focused on researching include:

Sargy Mann, a British painter influenced by the landscape surrounding his studio. He is legally blind and his vision continues to deteriorate. He has devised a system using a telescope to view his intended subject. He then records his observations into a tape recorder. Using this “audio sketchbook” in the studio, he sets about the timeless task of painting. He studies a work in progress through the telescope to compare the canvas to the vision in his mind. In 1994 he co-curated an exhibition of Bonnard’s work at The Hayward Gallery in London.

Blind by the age of eleven, Slovenian photographer Evgen Bavcar uses his art to examine his memories of vision. His technique of collotypes results in a richer, almost tactile, printed image. His photographs strive not to reproduce a world for to sighted viewers but rather to create a world that exists by being excluded from visual experience.
I am in the process of locating materials about several other blind artist, these include:

Sculptor Flavio Titolo
Painter Carolyn James
Textiles artist Jacqueline James
Sculptor Dorothy Dehner

Methodology

My initial assumptions are that because blind artists can not rely entirely upon looking outward for source material and subject matter they approach their art work in a psychological manner that is an inward examination of the world. The blind artist’ vision is the perception of which Descartes spoke. The uniqueness of their experiences is conveyed in equally unique languages which the blind artist must translate for sighted viewers.

I foresee a thesis centered around possibly three blind artists; their artistic intent and studio practice. First hand information is always preferable, therefore I will try to contact these artists if at all possible. Supplementing this, writings and interviews by the artists about their work will be considered most enlightening.

In the process of conducting my research, I will be compelled to consider other issues surrounding the visually impaired community. Specifically, access and assistance provided by art museums and galleries, art and rehabilitative therapies, and neurology are areas related to my topic only in so far as they provide a foundation for understanding the realm of the blind artist.
Time Frame

First Semester:
Upon the development of a program, the first semester will be a period of investigation and research conducted in a general manner. Books, periodicals, information clearing houses, support services and visually impaired people will be tapped as sources of information. The outcome of this broad inquiry will be a summary of approximately 5000 words highlighting the resulting primary issues.

Second Semester:
The development of the first draft will begin by employing the summary written in the first semester. This draft will establish the structure of the thesis and identify areas of further research.

Third Semester:
During the third semester I anticipate focusing primarily on the writing of my thesis with a reduced emphasis on my studio practice. The resolution of ideas and the tying together of concepts will be my main goal. Resulting from this semester will be the meat and bones of my thesis. Research will be concluded by the end of this semester.

Fourth Semester:
The focus of the fourth semester will on preparing the final presentation of my thesis. Time will now be dedicated to fine tuning the thesis as a piece of writing. My attention will shift to "housekeeping concerns" of the final draft such as checking footnotes, punctuation, etc.
Nicole Chesney  
Studio Practice Program Proposal  

Conceptual Development  

What is the difference between a stand of poplar trees and a line of telephone poles? A puddle on an asphalt road and a lake? To me they are essentially the same things. These elements, both natural and manmade, constitute the landscape in which I live. I strive to translate this landscape into a language that is uniquely my own. It is a process of distillation. This has been the premise for my work leading to graduate school. 

The future direction of this work centers around my learning to more keenly see the world. The translation from observation to tangible expression that is uniquely my own relies on me becoming a sponge for visual information. Seeing the world as far as possible without predetermining what is relevant and what is not is the non-critical vision I seek to develop. Once in the studio, I can then create artwork that sorts this information into layers, stripping away all that is excess and retaining only that which is essential. I trust the viewer’s mind to provide the rest. 

The artists I have come to admire seem to rely on human perception to appreciate the more subtle qualities of their work. I think of my sensibility as being midway between Andy Goldsworthy and Donald Judd. Anish Kapoor’s sculptures are like drawings in three dimensions. The surfaces of his pieces absorb light in such a way that keeps the viewer uncertain about the physical space they occupy. Morandi’s ceaseless examination of the same humble objects continually seeing them as fresh and new is something I can only hope to emulate. Obsessive use of
common materials to explore basic geometrical shapes is what I find most engaging about Jackie Winsor’s sculpture. Robert Ryman insists the viewer recognize the spectrum of visible light to see his paintings as more than being “all white”. These are just a few examples of artists whose work may appear rather simple and easily dismissed on first glance but grows increasingly complex upon further inspection.

My work must be strong enough to be viewed and critiqued in terms of contemporary art. I do not use qualifying labels such as “glass art” or “fine craft”. My references and influences have been primarily from the canon of Western art, historical and contemporary. Studying in Australia will undoubtedly challenge and expand these influences.

The “wax drawings” need to be pushed so they engage physical, three dimensional space in a more dynamic manner than simply a flat surface alluding to space. Yet, I want the drawings to exist on the wall (much like a painting.) This begs the question of the increasingly blurred line between two-dimensional and three-dimensional pursuits. Where does a painting end and a sculpture begin?

Working on the drawings from both the front and the back of the glass will be one starting point for examining this issue. Recessed areas within the picture plane could provide opportunities for micro and macro explorations within one drawing as well as create a three dimensional object. A group of drawings presented in relationship to one another, a grid for example, can also explore one idea from multiple perspectives. The scale of a piece such as this may be two meters on a side yet each element may only measure 250 mm on a side. The effect results in the
sum of the parts being greater than the whole. The scale of this work is dictated by my body; my arm span and physical strength, by what I can build and move around in my studio by myself. I want to create art in a very solitary manner - free from the dependance on assistance from others in order to create my work.

Material choices affect the connotations of the completed work, glass is both durable and fragile, weak and strong. It permits light through the drawings in a way that no other material is capable. Vellum would be too thin and fragile, canvas too firmly fixed in art history as a painter’s material.

Working Methods

The technical developments I intend to pursue begin with encaustic paint. I will learn how to make an encaustic medium for use in my work. Specifically, the arrival at an encaustic recipe that is sheer and fairly colorless. Once cool, the encaustic should be quite hard and accept a polishing with a soft cloth. The durability of encaustic has been proven over time and seems to address my desire to avoid additional protection of completed drawings. The surfaces of completed drawings should be no more delicate than oil paintings.

Time Frame

First Semester: Upon the development of a program, I will begin exploring three dimensional drawings. Research of encaustic recipes and ingredients will begin as soon as possible. Hanging methods that are structural sound will be investigated. Imagery will investigate my immediate responses to Australia. Readings will include current periodicals as well as more general texts related to the studio practice of other artists.
Second Semester:
Based on the outcome of the first semester, the drawings will continue. Sculptural concepts will now be given equal attention in both the drawings and objects. Exploration in the printmaking workshop will be employed to develop ideas. Begin to develop the workshop report.

Third Semester:
Studio practice will be focused on the development of a cohesive body of work. The structure of my workshop report will be finalized in this semester. Reading will serve the development of both my studio practice and workshop report.

Fourth Semester:
I shall focus on the creation of my thesis exhibition based on ideas generated in the third semester. The final draft of the workshop report will be completed immediately following my exhibition so as to include documentation, analysis and feedback resulting from the show.
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-Descartes

Acorns fall from a tree in a seemingly random manner yet the pattern created on the ground is fairly consistent. A field of lichen-covered rocks form an even terrain belying the enormous complexity of detail. The pattern in which branches grow from a tree, the formation of the leaves on each branch and the structure of veins in the individual leaf are all related. It is this perception of the structure of nature that guides my art work. It is the periphery of an observation that motivates me. How the acorns are on the ground is my interest, not that they are on the ground. Why do the rocks encrusted with lichen appear uniform? Perhaps the way light rakes across the field is the primary reason.

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“The aspects of things which are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike him at all.”

-Wittgenstein
Thematical my thesis will explore the understanding sighted artists can gain from the experiences and perceptions of blind artists and blind viewers. How much of the world does the sighted artist fail to see because of a dependence upon vision? What sensory information does the blind artist harness in the absence of sight? How can these two artists discuss each other’s art work in a substantive manner? These questions are points of entry into my exploration of the relationship between sighted and non-sighted artists and the results of their creative endeavors.

The artists I have become most interested in examining are working in a variety of mediums. These blind artists are painters, sculptors, photographers. All seem to have lost their eyesight or have failing eyesight as opposed to being congenitally blind. Currently, the artists I am focused on researching include:

Sargy Mann, a British painter influenced by the landscape surrounding his studio. He is legally blind and his vision continues to deteriorate. He has devised a system using a telescope to view his intended subject. He then records his observations into a tape recorder. Using this “audio sketchbook” in the studio, he sets about the timeless task of painting. He studies a work in progress through the telescope to compare the canvas to the vision in his mind. In 1994 he co-curated an exhibition of Bonnard's work at The Hayward Gallery in London.

Blind by the age of eleven, Slovenian photographer Evgen Bavcar uses his art to examine his memories of vision. His technique of collotypes results in a richer, almost tactile, printed image. His photographs strive not to reproduce a world for to sighted viewers but rather to create a world that exists by being excluded from visual experience.
I am in the process of locating materials about several other blind artists, these include:

- Sculptor Flavio Titolo
- Painter Carolyn James
- Textiles artist Jacqueline James
- Sculptor Dorothy Dehner

Methodology

My initial assumptions are that because blind artists cannot rely entirely upon looking outward for source material and subject matter they approach their art work in a psychological manner that is an inward examination of the world. The blind artist’s vision is the perception of which Descartes spoke. The uniqueness of their experiences is conveyed in equally unique languages which the blind artist must translate for sighted viewers.

I foresee a thesis centered around possibly three blind artists; their artistic intent and studio practice. First hand information is always preferable, therefore I will try to contact these artists if at all possible. Supplementing this, writings and interviews by the artists about their work will be considered most enlightening.

In the process of conducting my research, I will be compelled to consider other issues surrounding the visually impaired community. Specifically, access and assistance provided by art museums and galleries, art and rehabilitative therapies, and neurology are areas related to my topic only in so far as they provide a foundation for understanding the realm of the blind artist.
Time Frame

Second Semester:
I will spend this semester focused on the development and writing of my thesis. I need to be completely immersed in this process for it to be of maximum value to me as an artist. I will meet with Helen Ennis approximately every other week for her to guide me through this process. Meetings with her will help keep me both on track and on the subject. By the end of this semester I plan to have to bulk of my research completed. By the commencement of classes in March 1999, I will have completed a rough draft.

Third Semester:
After presenting the rough draft to my advisor for input, I shall begin the final draft of my thesis. Ideally, the final draft will be completed by the end of the third semester. After another review by my advisor, I hope to hand in the finished, completed thesis by August 1999. This allows me to apply insights gained during the writing of my thesis to my studio practice and the development of my art work.

Fourth Semester:
Having completed my thesis, I shall focus on my workshop report during this final term of graduate school. My studio practice will center around the creation of a cohesive body of work for my graduation exhibition.
Studio Practice
Context and Issues

Continuing to explore the notion of perception from a personal perspective, breathing and the conscious act of learning to breathe will be the focus of my work. With reference to artists such as Maya Lin, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Rosslynd Piggott and Christopher Wilmarth, I will continue to explore glass and encaustic as my primary materials. These artists create works that are intuitive, personal responses to observations and experiences. I expect that my art work will continue to exist on the wall. This raises issues concerning the intersection of painting and sculpture. Robert Ryman’s deliberate presentation of fasteners and other elements of construction in his paintings and Christopher Wilmarth’s almost two-dimensional etched glass and steel sculptures serve as examples of the blurred line between disciplines.

Methods and Outcomes

Exploration through drawings will continue during the course of this final semester as I work toward my exhibition. The specific method of presentation of my work (how it actually exists on the wall) will be resolved for each specific work. Therefore, some works maybe placed directly on the wall, some may involves shelves or brackets while others may involve the construction method I have favored.
so far. Other issues related to presentation concern scale, large sheets of glass will have to be resolved in a manner that is not only aesthetically appropriate but addresses safety issues as well.

**Sub-thesis Component 20%**

**Context and Issues**

My second essay focuses on The National Exhibition of Blind Artists (NEBA), a twenty-six year old organization based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I interviewed several people at NEBA and The Philadelphia Art Museum, the host institution for NEBA biennial exhibitions. My intention is to examine the art historical and critical contexts in which these curators and organizers view this exhibition and how these contexts have changed.

**Methods and Outcomes**

NEBA is the case study for this essay. Background research conducted for my first essay continues to be relevant for this essay as well. Derrida and Diderot, for example help to frame contemporary and historical discourses on vision, respectively. The resulting essay will be presented during Graduate Seminar.
Sup- Thesis Component 20% 

Context and Issues

My second essay focuses on the National Exhibition of Blinded Artists (NEBA) in twenty-six years of organization and, based on an exhibition program and education, the National Art Museum. The people of NEBA and the philosophy and exhibition history of this exhibition and how these contexts have changed.

Methods and Conclusions

NEBA is the case study for this essay. Based on research conducted for my thesis, I continue to provide a discursive framework for this essay and discuss, in conclusion, the exhibition essay will be presented during Graduate Seminar.
Curriculum Vitae

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Education

1998 Enrolled in Master of Arts (Visual Arts) by Research Degree Program (candidate, March 2000), The Australian National University, Canberra School of Art, Canberra, Australia

1997 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts

1992-1994 California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California

Selected Exhibitions

2000 The Drawing Show, Curator: Helen Maxwell, Spiral Arm Gallery, Canberra, Australia

Hsinchu International Glass Festival, Hsinchu Cultural Centre, Taipei, Taiwan

1999 Essentially Canberra, Customs House Galleries, Sydney, Australia, touring exhibition

Light Through Skin, Curator: Jon Clark, Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

New Directions: Emerging Glass Artists in Australia, Quadrivium Gallery, Sydney, Australia

SOFA NY 1999, New York, New York, presented by Chappell Gallery

Studio Glass of Australia, Chappell Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

International Juried Student Exhibition, Glass Art Society Annual Conference, Scarfone Gallery, University of Tampa, Tampa, Florida

Art of Glass Students: National and International Work, TCC Visual Arts Center, Portsmouth, Virginia

Annual MCA Foundation Benefit Auction, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts
Midway, Photospace Gallery, Canberra School of Art, Canberra, Australia

Ausglass Conference Juried Student Exhibition, Wagga Wagga City Gallery, Wagga Wagga, Australia

1998

Aperto Vetro - International New Glass 1998, Venice, Italy

International Juried Student Exhibition, Glass Art Society Annual Conference, Seto, Japan


Fire and Ice - Winter Invitational Exhibition, Chappell Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

Luminous Form, Curator: Susan Holland, Dodge House Gallery, Providence Art Club, Providence, Rhode Island

1997

Open Studios Group Show, The Revolving Museum, Boston, Massachusetts

Drawing - 14th Biennial Members’ Invitational Exhibition, Inviting member: Cindi Laukes, Dinnerware Contemporary Art Gallery, Tucson, Arizona

Elusive Mind, Curator: Cindi Laukes, Copenhagen and Elsinore, Denmark

Young Glass International 1997, Glasmuseum, Ebeltoft, Denmark

Beyond Material, Student Life Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts

Annual MCA Foundation Benefit Auction, Jurors: Judy Haberyl and Jeff Keogh, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts

International Juried Student Exhibition, Glass Art Society Annual Conference, Joseph Gross Gallery, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona

1996

International Student Exhibition, Glass Art Society Annual Conference, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts

1995

Annual Juried Show of the Students of the Massachusetts College of Art, First Expressions Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

1400* (and then some), Student Life Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts
Awards and Grants

1999  Canberra School of Art Drawing Prize
     Canberra School of Art Graduate Materials Award
     Institute of the Arts Student Association Grant
     Glass Art Society Conference Takako Sano Scholarship
     Ausglass Conference Student Award, Juror: John Perreault

1998  Canberra School of Art Graduate Award
     David Thomas Foundation Travel Grant

1997  Art School Alliance Trust Fund Award, Massachusetts College of Art
     Honorable Mention, Elusive Mind, Copenhagen and Elsinore, Denmark
     Honorable Mention, International Juried Student Exhibition, Glass Art Society Annual
     Conference, Tucson, Arizona

Professional Activities

1999  Coordinator, Elderhostel Program, Horizons, New England Craft Program, Sunderland, MA
     Coordinator, Canberra Goes to SOFA
     Panelist, AusGlass Conference, Wagga Wagga, Australia
     Contributor, Glass Art Society News
     Contributor, AusGlass Newsletter

1998  Coordinator, Essentially Canberra, touring exhibition catalog
     Contributor, Glass Art Society News
     Curator, The Cigar Box Exhibition, The Good Life, New Haven, Connecticut

1997  Artist’s Assistant to Mags Harries, Artist in Residence, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington
     Elected Student Representative, Glass Art Society Board of Directors
     Intern, spring semester, The Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

1996  Studio Assistant to Kiki Smith, Landscape, Huntington Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
     Contributor, Glass Art Society News

1994  Student Representative, Presidential Search Committee, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California
Teaching Experience

1997  Instructor, Kiln-Fired Glass Workshop, Elderhostel Program, Horizons, New England Craft Program, Sunderland, Massachusetts

Alumni Teaching Assistant to Laura Brown, Projects in Wood, Massachusetts College of Art

Alumni Teaching Assistant to Rick and Laura Brown, Wood Carving, Continuing Education Program, Massachusetts College of Art

Teaching Assistant to Rick Brown, Wood Sculpture, spring semester, Massachusetts College of Art

Teaching Assistant to Susan Holland, Sculptural Glass, Massachusetts College of Art

1996  Teaching Assistant to Rick Brown, Concepts and Processes, Massachusetts College of Art

1994  Instructor, Jewelry Workshop, Pre-College Program, California College of Arts and Crafts

Resident Advisor, Pre-College Program, California College of Arts and Crafts

Selected Collections

Glasmuseum, Ebeltoft, Denmark

MIRVAC Group, Canberra, Australia

MIRVAC Group, Melbourne, Australia

University of Arizona Medical Center, Tucson, Arizona

Pilchuck Glass School, Print Archives, Stanwood, Washington

Stephanie Chubbuck, Boston, Massachusetts

Richard Haen, Boston, Massachusetts

Noel Holub, Fort Worth, Texas

Jane Lang, Santa Rosa, California
Daniel Malone, Boston, Massachusetts
Kibbe Reilly, Providence, Rhode Island
Chris Ritkin, Hingham, Massachusetts
Takako Sano, San Rafael, California

Reviews and Publications


“Stand!“This Side Up!, number 4, winter 1999

SOFA NY 1999, exhibition catalog, Expressions of Culture, 1999

“A Glass Lagoon,” Saverio Simi de Burgis, This Side Up!, number 4, winter 1998


Essentially Canberra, exhibition catalog published by The Australian National University, 1998


“Drawing gets back to basics,” Kathleen Allen, Tucson Citizen Newspaper, 21 August 1997

“Making Their Marks,” Margaret Regan, Tucson Weekly, 21-27 August 1997

Elusive Mind Exhibition, Catalog edited by Cindi Laukes, 1997

Young Glass '97, Catalog designed by Dick Hale, Glasmuseum, Ebeltoft, Denmark, 1997
Daniel M. Maloney, Boston, Massachusetts

Kathleen R. Thomas, Providence, Rhode Island

Cora R. M. Higdon, Massachusetts

Takako Sano, San Rafael, California

Reviews and Publications


*Social Issues UDL, number 4, Winter 1999

*Soen, NR 1999, Social Implications of Experiences of Culture, 1999

*A Class Canadian National Farm, Summer 1998, number 4, Winter 1999


*Drawing Room to Picture a Family's Experience. 21 August 1999


*Canadian Mind: Experience. Calgary, Canada, 1999
Bibliography


Arnheim, Rudolph, Art and Visual Perception, a psychology of the creative eye, Faber and Faber, London, 1969.


Burdon, Gay, Comparison of Tactile Perceptions of Blind, Visually Impaired and Sighted Children, manuscript, 1974.


*Prospect - Photography in Contemporary Art*, Frankfurter Kunstverien, Frankfurt Am Main, Germany, 1996.


