

Be True

Ashley Hannan, 2018

RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive, RIT Archives



Student Curators: Abbi Bush, Noelle Perry, Samuel Williams-Healy

The item we have chosen for this project is a piece of artwork by Ashley Hannan, titled “Be True.” Created in 2018, this work is part of a 17-piece collection known as “Rise Up: Silent Margins.” For a period of time during early 2019, “Be True” was displayed along with the full collection in NTID’s Dyer Arts Center. It was during this exhibit that our NTID Librarian, Joan Naturale, acquired the piece for the RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive in the RIT Archives. She took a particular interest in this work because it features a cochlear implant. Though a component of many individuals’ Deaf experiences, cochlear implants are somewhat lacking in representation. For this reason, Joan thought Hannan’s work to be rather unique.

This work initially caught our attention because of its beautiful, bold design. Upon taking a closer look, we began to identify several of the motifs that we have discussed throughout the semester. In fact, it was the motif of a bald-headed figure which first led us to recognize the piece as one of Hannan’s. Hannan explains that this bald-head motif is representative of vulnerability and allows the viewer to relate more deeply to her work. Throughout this piece, Hannan incorporates a number of other motifs commonly found in De’VIA. For example, the figure in the painting is using sign language to express the word “true.” This word is indicative of Hannan’s message--to be true to oneself. The sign is complemented by the image of a butterfly progressing through the stages of metamorphosis. This progression, beginning within the figure’s head and blossoming fully at the figure’s hand, amplifies the idea of discovering one’s deaf identity and expressing oneself from within.

Hannan also uses the butterfly to represent the Deaf Community and the optimistic nature of her discovery. The bee on the figure's shoulder is similarly indicative of the Deaf Community because both bees and butterflies are deaf and use non-auditory methods of communication. This array of symbolism continues through the background as well. The audiogram on the right represents Hannan's personal experience as a Deaf individual by showing her hearing both before and after cochlear implantation. The left half of the background is a green gradient that progresses from dark to light. According to Hannan, this is meant to convey the envy she once felt toward hearing people and how discovering her Deaf identity has caused that envy to fade into a "new beginning."

Further research led us to discover a quote from Hannan regarding this piece. During an interview for her "Rise Up: Silent Margins" exhibit, Hannan states.

It took me many years, maybe three decades, to realize that all I needed to do was 'be true' to myself. Reject the envy of being 'hearing' and nurture the 'flaw' I have, my deafness. Emerge into something beautiful that has always been there.

Ultimately, Hannan's "Be True" is a valuable addition to the RIT Archives. As Joan mentioned, cochlear implants are underrepresented in De'VIA. Therefore, it is vital that items reflecting this representation are appreciated and included in our historical records. It is wonderful to know that such a stunning piece will be preserved for many years to come.