

Entering the Door

Johnson Simon

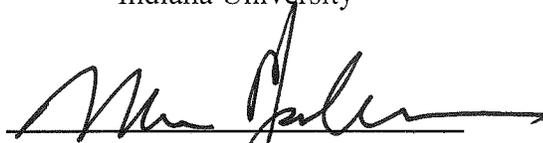
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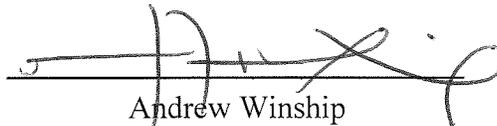
By  
Johnson Simon  
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design  
IUPUI  
Indiana University



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Marc Jacobson  
Professor



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Andrew Winship  
Associate Professor



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Danielle Riede  
Associate Professor

Accepted: May 2018



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Professor Valerie Eickmeier  
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

4-5-18  
Date

How do physical limitations affect the mind, and how can you overcome them? Imagine one day you wake up bound by physical limitations. What can you do? My research helps someone realize that having limitations isn't the end of the world. I myself have restrictions, yet I am defying the odds. My art became integral to helping me overcome limitations; because of this, my thesis research educates others on the reality of living with limitations by helping them connect with their own struggles.

## **WHAT IS OTHERING?**

My thesis work addresses the concept of *Othering*, which happens when one group or individual believes themselves to be better than another group or individual. It applies to many parts of social engagement. My research bridges the gap created by *Othering* by focusing on those who deal with it because of their mental or physical challenges. *Othering* happens when people alienate those different from them. But sometimes, we can alienate, or *Other*, ourselves by not engaging in our community. We prevent others from discovering who we truly are, almost like we are hiding something. American writer Gloria Jean Watkins, who stylizes her name "bell hooks," writes on this type of *Othering*:

Sometimes we are othered by people who are seen to be outside of the community that we are a part of. But a lot of times, we other ourselves, often as a defensive mechanism fueled by self-preservation. We want to protect ourselves and take care of ourselves, and in times and situations of high stress or high stakes, it is almost

instinctual to remove ourselves emotionally, socially, and physically by “Othering” ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

We can naturally *Other* ourselves by habit especially when mourning or going through a family crisis. We become too prideful to seek help. By creating an environment where people can easily communicate about the suffering of others and themselves, we draw closer to empathy, and this is what my work aims to do.

I accomplish this by translating conversations with my peers into visual art. I start by asking my peers questions about their experiences and listening to their responses. I look for both the invisible and visible struggles that people face. I do this because I want to have a better understanding of their circumstance and how they adjust to it, how they cope with it, and how they *Other* themselves. We *Other* ourselves by thinking we are alone in our experiences. We believe that we are fundamentally different from other people and alienate ourselves. We don't want to communicate our struggles to other people because we don't want to face judgment.

Through the media, we see what the world qualifies as “normal” or “ideal,” and we compare ourselves to this unreachable standard. Things like media advertisements cause people to *Other* themselves because they don't fit this perfect mold. When we *Other* those around us, it's the opposite. We meet people who are different than us and fail to include them, as if we are better than them. We don't like to think of ourselves as imperfect in the context of other people. I produce works that represent this interaction and the emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Ebonye Gussine Wilkins, “Plenary Panel Highlight: bell hooks,” Othering and Belonging, <http://conference.otheringandbelonging.org/plenary-panel-bell-hooks/>

connection that comes out of it. The visual outcomes are meant to help the audience be more open-minded.

In 2017, 12.6% of the US population was reported to have a physical limitation.<sup>2</sup> That's equal to approximately 1 in 8 people. This is a major reason why my work is important to help people better understand one another. As a person who has cerebral palsy, I understand what *Othering* due to physical difference feels like. While I was still in the womb, my umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, and there was a lack of oxygen delivery to my brain. This is a rare cause of cerebral palsy, accounting for 6-8% of all CP cases.<sup>3</sup> Because of my cerebral palsy, I have a shorter stride compared to most of the population. It also causes my muscles to be tight. My body cannot easily move the way I'd like it to, and people around me are quick to notice and often separate themselves from me. My work represents the communication between people who have physical and mental restrictions and everyone else. A struggle shouldn't define someone. To overcome *Othering*, we can defeat our judgmental nature with social artwork to create compassion and a better understanding of different points of view.

## **OTHERING IN PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY HUMAN SUFFERING**

Largely inspired by my struggle, my work represents the theme of the body. The journey began when I started my undergraduate research at Western Michigan University on

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<sup>2</sup> E.A. Lauer & A.J. Houtenville, "Annual Disability Statistics Compendium: 2017," University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability.  
[https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/user-uploads/Compendium\\_2017\\_Final.pdf](https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/user-uploads/Compendium_2017_Final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "Asphyxia and Oxygen Deprivation," My Child at CerebralPalsy.org, accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.cerebralpalsy.org/about-cerebral-palsy/risk-factors/oxygen-deprivation>

motion and movement. I worked with the dance department. As I watched them rehearse and sketched what I saw, I envisioned myself moving with them, even though my body cannot move with the command that I want it to. It was an out-of-body experience. I was discovering my physical boundaries and reasons I *Othered* myself.

In the beginning of my second semester of graduate school, I began painting portraits of my hands in motion, which also led me to include my torso. I took many pictures of myself moving, and wanted to respond to that image by showing the process of my body. I wanted to show the difference between an able-bodied person reacting and moving, and my body reacting and moving or doing different activities. My paintings represented the sensation of how my struggle makes me react moment-to-moment. Some moments I'll get frustrated and not accept the limitations of my movement, while others I feel at peace and will use them in an artistic format.

Something that influenced my research was an idea that came to me as I recall memories of being offered a glass of water. As I walked through my past, remembering when I was a guest at my friends' and families' houses. They would often ask me if I was thirsty, and this question triggered my brain. My first response was, "Yes, do you have a straw?"



**Image 1, left to right. *Drinking Spasm*. Oil Paint & Pastel on Canvas, 6' x 3'. *Drinking Spasm 2*. PLA Filament on Wood Panel, 1' x 1'.**

because this is the way I drink without making a mess. When they said no, another streamline of thoughts comes to my head. How am I going to drink the water? Do they have a cup with a lid I could use? Will I make a mess? Will my cerebral palsy take control? This scenario inspired the first piece in my thesis series, “Drinking Spasm” (Image 1).

I have no control over my muscles without a muscle relaxer, which can lead to spasms. Sometimes, I just don’t want to feel different or be reminded of my struggle, but situations like these cause me to *Other* myself. This example made me consider the struggles other people face that cause them to *Other* themselves – a struggle that is something as simple as drinking a glass of water but creates mayhem nonetheless.



**Image 2. *Breaking Out Within Myself.***  
Acrylic on Canvas, 5’ x 4’.

have so much weight on the self. In this painting, I showcase a distorted figure who struggles with the physical limitation of gravity on earth, and at the same time, does not allow the physical gravity to stop him or prevent him from fully expressing his inner self.

As Bacon used his abstract, distorted paintings of people to portray torment, “Breaking Out Within Myself” showcased the torment my soul faces as it desires to be free of the physical

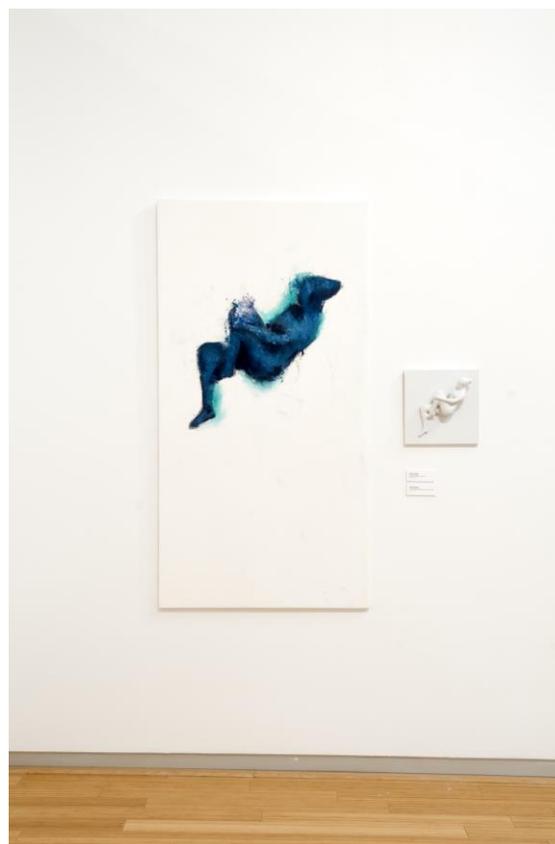
Francis Bacon’s work has inspired what I have been working on throughout graduate school. A painting of mine that is truly reflective of his style is “Breaking Out Within Myself” (Image 2). This painting depicts a tormented soul rising from the earthly physical struggle. The soul is going to heaven, where it was naturally destined to go. This world can produce

so many physical and mental issues and can

restrictions imposed by my earthly body and that contribute to feeling *Othered*. Bacon uses his work to represent situations where people are stuck in a place such as a mental institution for an indefinite period. From my perspective, his works bring out solitude in a way that people cannot overcome. He also found inspiration in people's darkest hours, when they felt most *Othered*, and created work based on it.

Several of my works show the sensation of crying out for help rather than the frustration itself, just like how Bacon paints "sensations." To some audiences, it can be viewed as something awkward or depressing. However, I think it gives you a different perspective. It shows how easily you can forget about someone else's internal struggle. I use my paintings to show how I envision myself without my physical restrictions. I believe that one day, I will be in a second life in which I will not be held back from what I truly want to express or do.

However, unlike Bacon's ideas, I don't portray my subjects as "stuck." From my research, I find Bacon's work to be a reflection of how he *Others* himself. Although I admire Bacon's work, my work shows that there is always a way out. I do this by examining my own self and how I deal with *Othering*. I put myself in the shoes of people who deal with different



**Image 3, left to right.**  
***Chondromalacia*. Oil Paint &  
 Pastel on Canvas, 6' x 3'.**  
***Chondromalacia 2*. PLA Filament  
 on Wood Panel, 1' x 1'.**



**Image 4, left to right. *Melancholy*. Oil Paint & Pastel on Canvas, 6' x 3'. *Melancholy 2*. PLA Filament on Wood Panel, 1' x 1'.**

realities from my own. Through conversation with them, I learn when they feel most *Othered* and how they move forward from that. In one of my cases, I found out one of the participants in my project got injured while competing in her sport. I learned how it made her feel and how she overcame it. Though it was only temporary, we could have a mutual conversation about having a physical limitation. I represent her struggle in Image 3. In her own words, she says, “Though I know lots of runners go through injuries, it doesn't take away from how isolated you feel, especially being on a team. Everyone else is going on runs at practice, but you're stuck in the

fitness room alone on a bike. The moment you're told you have to sit out for weeks or months is heavy. You have to motivate yourself to fight through it from a distance.” I formed a more accurate reality of what she went through, and she formed a more accurate reality of what I go through.

I also use 3D models in my work so that viewers face the physical representation of the participant's struggle as closely as possible. I then transition to painting on canvas to

emphasize the energy the struggle creates as the person faces it. This is how I create empathy.

Not all the participants face temporary struggles. Some must fight through the struggle even though they must live it. I address this in my work by portraying a participant who faces depression. I sat down and listened to how she said it comes in different stages. Sometimes it can be bad, and other times it can be bearable. In the participant's own words, "In each depressive episode, it takes an immense amount of energy to function, talk to people, and stay on top of schoolwork. Those who haven't experienced an extreme depression can have a hard time understanding how impossible it can be to see the world around you, but art is a language that can explain even the most difficult experiences." From my observations, she is up against odds and faces *Othering*, but pushes through these boundaries. By being open about her struggles, she stops people from *Othering* her. In this work (Image 4), I showcase the moment when this participant comes face to face with her deepest struggle.

## **HISTORICAL RELEVANCE**

Humans have a natural sense of segregation based on their social standing. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), things were difficult for people who had challenges. People with disabilities were *Othered* to the point of not being viewed as human. If someone was born with a disability in the 1800s, there was little sympathy for this person. In earlier times, giving birth to a person with a disability was a burden. The person was just

another mouth to feed because it was important for each person to contribute to making a living for the family, especially in poor countries where it is already difficult to get by.<sup>4</sup>

When I went overseas, I realized that London was not very accessible for people with disabilities because even today, it was difficult for me to travel around and access the hostel I was staying in due to the old architecture. The focus was not to accommodate people who need it. There was little opportunity for individuals who had disabilities to be social in the past because of the inaccessibility. They have recently been forced to provide accommodation because of the heavy tourism that exists in London, though it still fails to be fully accessible based on my experience.

There were few options for those born with disabilities before the 1960s. Any *Othering* they faced was much more difficult. Equal treatment began to emerge in the 1960s. According to Historic England:

In the 1960s and 70s, the civil rights movement in America inspired disabled groups to take direct action against discrimination, poor access and inequality. A 'social' rather than a 'medical' model of disability emerged and eventually, in 1995, the Disability Discrimination Act was passed.<sup>5</sup>

This legislation opened options for those who faced *Othering* from society. This was one of the first steps in getting those who face limitations to be viewed as equals, not only in England, but also globally.

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<sup>4</sup> “Parallels in Time: A history of developmental disabilities,” Department of Administration: Council on Developmental Disabilities, accessed May 1, 2018.  
<http://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/four/4a/1.html>

<sup>5</sup> “Disability Since 1945,” Historic England, accessed May 1, 2018.  
<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1945-to-the-present-day/>

## CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Individuals with albinism are a group of people who face *Othering*. People who want to put them in a category struggle to do so because albinism affects people of any race. Justin Dingwall is one artist who addresses *Othering* as it happens with albinism in a series called “Albus.” ArtCo outlines Dingwall’s work:

Dingwall’s pictures allow the viewers to rethink their own attitudes towards beauty; the photographer advocates that beauty comes in all shapes, sizes and caused by a lack of melanin – responsible for hair, eye and skin colour – albinism can affect people of any skin colour. With Albus, Dingwall also seeks to inspire a public debate on the taboo subject of albinism, as albinos are frequently discriminated and subject to superstition and violence throughout Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Human nature is revealed in this scenario. When we cannot find a way to categorize someone, it becomes controversial. When we see someone who is an albino person, it is out of the norm. It takes a second glance to process their appearance because we are unable to quickly put them in a category. This becomes the essence of *Othering*.

I address individuals who feel the weight of being different among peers with my work. In one of my paintings called “Cry Out of Me, Myself and I” (Image 5), I show how, in the moment, you can try to describe the experience, but no one will be able to feel exactly what you feel. Additionally, we see difference as a negative thing when it comes to various struggles. Like Dingwall questioning society’s idealized sense of beauty, I use my work to

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<sup>6</sup> “Justin Dingwall: Works,” ArtCo, accessed May 1, 2018. [http://www.artco-art.com/Justin-Dingwall/Justin\\_Dingwall.php](http://www.artco-art.com/Justin-Dingwall/Justin_Dingwall.php)

question what makes the perfect human being. Perfection is an illusion; there is no such thing as the perfect human being who does not face fault or struggle. I question what is normal. “Oh, he has a disability. That’s not normal.” What does that mean? What is normal? Is this society’s opinion or your own?



**Image 5. *Cry Out of Me, Myself, and I*. Oil Pastel & Oil Paint on Canvas, 25” x 36.5”.**

*Othering* today largely depends on society’s perceived norms, which can change over time. According to Canales, “Persons are categorized or ‘labeled’ according to perceived differences from the societal norm...when compared to the ‘ordinary’ and ‘natural’ attributes of persons perceived as socially acceptable, they appear ‘different’”.<sup>7</sup> By completing this research and putting it on display, I will help answer questions about *Othering* that naturally

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<sup>7</sup> Mary K. Canales, “Othering: Toward an Understanding of Difference,” *Advances in Nursing Science* 22, no. 4 (2000).

arise from viewers. As Canales writes, "It is through social interaction that these categories are established and maintained."<sup>8</sup> She writes on stigma:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. As a result, the stigmatized individual has an identity that is "spoiled" by the discrediting attribute; once stigmatized, full social acceptance will never be possible.<sup>9</sup>

Canales emphasizes that as human beings, we judge first and rarely ask questions. I know I am only one man, but through other people, we can come together and change the heart of society. Because society *Othered* me, I was devastated, but resilient. At a young age, I felt worthless and suicidal. However, everyone has a coping mechanism; mine became my faith. Here I find that my faith was how I coped with negative *Othering* from those who labeled me as different. Anyone who deals with physical and mental challenges does belong somewhere.

## PROCESS

One of the first projects that moved me towards the idea of *Othering* involved looking at how the body functions from a neurological perspective. How does the body adapt to a new capability? I was born with cerebral palsy, but some people encounter physical challenges later in life such as in car accidents, war traumas and sports injuries. These things sparked the idea to visually explore both the internal and external experiences that come with limitation.

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<sup>8</sup> Canales, 2000

<sup>9</sup> Canales, 2000

My primary objective in my thesis work is to help someone who faces *Othering* to be viewed as equal among their peers. It will help solve the issue of bullying, depression, and suicide. My secondary objective is to fulfill the void in society and bridge the gap between someone who faces physical and mental limitations and someone who has never experienced what it's like to have an issue. All of us face struggles, but we have not all encountered the same unique struggle. Learning about specific limitations outside of our own can still change our perspectives. This creates a better understanding between someone who faces physical and mental challenges and someone who doesn't to have a better understanding of each other.

Each struggle is a unique experience; as a result, you feel isolated. You can try to describe it to someone, but truly words cannot describe it. When you feel a pain and someone asks you how you feel on a scale of 1-10, you can give them a number, but they cannot truly fathom the pain that you feel. For example, no one understands what childbirth feels like until they experience it. Also, not all childbirth is the same, which furthers the idea that pain is an individual experience.

How do I accomplish my objectives? First, I interview each volunteer separately. I tell them about the representation I made of myself, which is based on my experience with drinking from a cup. I want them to see that I'm not just doing this research for my own benefit. I want to show them I also face challenges. The reason I'm doing this is to help voice what someone who faces a struggle goes through. As I interview them, I have more of an understanding of their situation, which helps me visualize the work I put together to represent that struggle.

Second, I ask my volunteers, “If we had a way to display your struggle, how would you display it?” This gives them the freedom to interpret their struggle and mold it together in a visual way. Instead of having volunteers do the art themselves as in art therapy, they are a part of the art with my project. Some people are intimidated by making art, so I get to be their instrument. Instead of just getting to talk about it, I’m helping them be a part of something bigger than themselves.

Next I schedule a day to do a 3D scan of their position or pose. I give them the opportunity to represent their struggle with gestures or a pose of their choosing, shown in Image 6. The goal is to capture the moment of isolation they feel with the 3D scan. For me, this moment is picking up a cup and not being able to physically do it. I think how quickly everything can become a mess, and that is out of my control, which makes me feel *Othered*.



**Image 6. Poses of participant and I representing our respective struggles for 3D scan.**

After the 3D scanning, I sit down in the computer lab and do some editing and mold it exactly how they tell me they envision it. With their pose, they show the isolation they tell me about – the isolation that comes from torment. For me, it is an invitation to see exactly what’s going on in their mind during that process. It’s like they open a door and let me in to their experience. This reminds me of the many times I have faced *Othering*. For example, I wanted to hang a canvas on the wall, but because of my physical limitations, I couldn’t do it on my own. It took me a while to be at ease and ask for help. It’s the mental process of knowing that I can’t do it that weighs me down. The last time I didn’t ask for help, I fell.

Next, I respond to the 3D model with painting based on all my interactions with the volunteer. I paint each volunteer on a canvas that is six feet tall and three feet wide. The reason I chose these dimensions is to create the illusion that the viewer is entering a doorway. Each volunteer's struggle is like a part of their diary – it's not easy to talk about. Lots of people keep this door shut. My work aims to let them know it's okay to talk about their situation. I want my audience to see every painting as an individual soul of someone they're likely to encounter. These people could be their family members, co-workers, and friends.

After the viewer sees the work, they walk away knowing they are not alone. During my thesis exhibition, some viewers walked away in tears. They leave after connecting with at least one of the works in the series. They feel inspired because they stopped feeling cut away from others. The thought of being different now puts the viewer at ease, and they walk away more aware of people they interact with.

## **CONCLUSION**

My research drives me to make a difference based on what everyone faces on a day-to-day basis. I want to display hope or a way someone could overcome their reality, as my participants and I have overcome our struggles. I want to use it as an inspiration to show people that it is possible. When I discovered my artistic talent, it gave me hope that I had a purpose in life and that I could use my work in a valuable way to inspire other people.

When I put my latest research project on display, which includes the work inspired by my struggle, the goal is that when people approach it, the painting and the 3D sculpture draws them in. After doing so, they realize that they are walking into the life of the person who is facing that challenge. People are quick to put a label on others without taking the time

to learn who they really are as human beings. People so often take the shortcut when they should really try to understand what is going on by “entering the door.” Doing so brings back memories of someone they know who faces limitations, or a time in their own lives when they have faced a challenge, so it will help them to realize that we all face different challenges. I want my work to be a benefit to society. I want to help break the barrier that lies between what society thinks is normal and abnormal.

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