

Artist Statement

Gillian Moore

1 April, 2019

Introduction

The spoken language is a wonderful gift. It allows you to communicate your ideas, thoughts, and feelings with other people. However, communication isn't always easy if you have a disorder that hinders it. Speech disorders are a main obstacle to clear communication. They are caused by many things: strokes, brain injuries, illness, but many are unknown. According to the National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders' (NIDCD) website, about 5% of children at the age of five have some sort of speech disorder, and the majority of the causes are unknown.ⁱ Others disorders like Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) can cause communication issues as well. For example, too much stimuli in the environment can cause a person with SPD to shut down, hence, unable to speak. According to one study done by Roianne R. Ahn, Lucy Jane Miller, Sharon Milberger, and Daniel N. McIntosh, one in twenty children have SPD.ⁱⁱ While a study by Sensory Processing Disorder Scientific Work Group state that one of every six children experience sensory issues that can affect daily life.ⁱⁱⁱ The goal of my artwork is to make the viewer aware of the difficulties people with invisible disorders face, including the process of undergoing therapy, and the often unexamined emotional toll.

Personal and Family Background with Speech Disorder

In my family, three out of four children have a speech impairment. Additionally, my two nephews also suffer from this disorder. The cause for my brother's and my impairment are unknown, however, part of my sister's speech impairment is a result of being born tongue-tied. Her two children also inherited this birth defect, and have other speech disorders as well. I was personally diagnosed with articulation; which is when an individual has problems making sounds. My siblings and I have spent years (sixteen years in my case) in speech therapy learning to correctly pronounce words. Luckily, my parents were very dedicated to getting my siblings and I the speech therapy we needed. We also spent our summers at camps such as CTC (Comprehensive Therapy Center) and SRC (Central

Michigan University's Department of Communication Disorders). These camps provided options for year-round therapy.

Types of Speech Disorders

Some of the major speech disorders are apraxia of the speech, dysarthria, and speech and sound disorder (for example, issues with articulation and phonological processes). Apraxia is when the message from your brain to your mouth becomes disrupted. Thus, while a person may know a word, they will have trouble getting their mouth and tongue to pronounce it correctly. Dysarthria is a motor speech disorder that impairs the movement of the muscles used in speech production. Articulation is a disorder in producing sounds. Sounds are typically left off, substituted, added, or changed. Most will be familiar with the example of saying “wabbit” instead of “rabbit.” Phonological process disorder is characterized by left-off sounds—for instance, saying “poon” instead of “spoon.” It is completely normal for young children to show signs of articulation and phonological process disorder while learning how to speak; however this is not acceptable after a certain age, depending on the sound.^{iv}

Speech Therapy Made Visible to the Viewer Through Process

Overall, speech therapy really didn't change much over the years. I would go to therapy two to three times a week for 30-45 minutes. Therapy generally involved playing games or reading out loud, and repeating words from lists containing my specific problem sounds including /r/, /sh/, and /l/. The therapist made sure I placed my tongue and lips at the proper position, for each sound. If I didn't pronounce the sound correctly, I would have to repeat the word over and over again until I achieved 80-90% accuracy. This pattern was repeated every few days, and continued throughout my formative years.

The goal of the series of paintings entitled *Repeat* was to visualize all aspects of speech therapy.

I cropped the face to feature the lips and tongue making the /sh/ and /l/ sound. My process includes producing a set of basic painted images, I then scan them into the computer, and print out multiples of each painted image. Using gel medium I glue the image facedown on wood. After the printed image is dry, I take water and scrub the paper off the wood. The gel medium absorbs the ink leaving an almost perfect print on the wood. The repeating image represents the repetition of speech therapy techniques. I also added mirrors to the piece reiterating the word “repeat.” This allows the viewer to see themselves mimic the movement of the sound, helping make them aware of how difficult it can be to form the correct mouth position to produce a specific sound.

Listening and Self-Monitoring

Communication involves both a speaker and listener. However, it may be difficult for “normal” language users to understand someone with acute speech impairment. This can lead to several problems. First, the listener may get frustrated with the speaker, hence writing off their thoughts, or may consider the speaker to be intellectually incompetent. Secondly, the speaker can also get frustrated and simply give up on attempting to communicate. Thus, the wonderful ideas and personality of the speaker remain locked away.

In speech therapy a person with a speech disorder is trained to self-monitor speech patterns with the goal of self-correction. However, people who are hard of hearing or deaf are unable to self-monitor. Thus a hearing test is imperative for diagnosing a speech disorder.

I have created two paintings based on a hearing test. Both paintings have a central frame with a girl wearing large headphones. Flowers are substituted in place of the different tones (beeps) employed within the hearing test, and the beads connecting all of the frames together represent sound waves. Color also plays a key symbolic role. The achromatic painting has a central panel with three flowers, each a different scale, thus associating size with volume. The sharp texture of the plastic flowers is

meant to stand for the harsh sounds used during a standardized hearing test. In other paintings, synthetic flowers of different colors are used to represent the varied intensity and quality of various sounds.

A Speech Disorder Isn't Cute!

Most of the materials for my paintings come from my family and my own experiences with speech disorders, but I also became curious about the experiences of others. I watched several videos on YouTube of people with speech disorders talk about their own experiences. In one video, Cali H describes an exchange between two friends. One of the friends mispronounced a couple of words. The other friend laughed at her mispronunciation.^v Cali H was very emotional in her video, trying to explain why this was so hurtful. In yet another video, MissTina420 posted a video about five years ago about how annoyed she gets when people say her lisp is cute, when really she thinks it the farthest thing from being cute.^{vi}

These videos prompted me to make my *Cute Girl* painting. I painted a girl with pink hair in pastel colors on a wooden board with a doily-type patterned frame. I cancelled out most of the girl with white paint, leaving the mouth to serve as a signifier for speech. I then attached a string of pastel colored beads. The beads flow from her mouth to serve as a metaphor for speech. The pearl-like beads stand for the saying “gems of wisdom.” Many people with speech disorders have wonderful ideas and thoughts—the pearls are to represent those thoughts.

Anime Influence

There are many opinions on the Japanese Anime Style (known as anime) in the art world. Some are positive, some are negative, and some say it comes with a lot of baggage. The most common argument I hear for anime not being “fine art material” is that all characters look exactly the same. The exceptions being that the hair and clothes are different. I believe this to be a very weak argument. Comic book theorist Neil Cohn explains this best, “Copying this style does not just mean imitating an

individual, but entering into a community of visual language speakers who share a common graphic vocabulary and through it, a social identity as a 'visual speaker' of Japanese visual language.”^{vii}

Others may assume that I'm recreating a character from a popular anime or manga (fanart), which is not the case. I'm using the characteristics of Japanese anime style, including the big eyes and pointed chin, to create the protagonist featured in my paintings. Other than simply enjoying the aesthetic of this style, it also confers an “adolescent girl” fantasy feeling to my work. Most of my ideas and experience with speech struggles come from adolescence. The style connects the awakening of adolescence with the struggle to find one’s place in the world.

Kitschy Objects

In all honesty, most of the kitschy objects I select for my paintings I find aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, the wooden frames I use are more affordable than their more expensive counterparts. I partly feel that I gravitate to these objects because they remind me of my adolescence. My childhood was filled with crafts, DIY projects, and watching home improvement shows. These shows were all about reusing items, or using cheaper objects and transforming them into “higher class” items. I also spent a decade working at a dollar store. My life has been surrounded by kitschy items, so it becomes second nature to find a way to incorporate them into my art.

These kitschy objects make my artwork less dark and serious, adding an element of playfulness. While I want the viewer to take the subject of my painting seriously, I also want to add a sense of humor and beauty to my art. Every human has some kind of issue or a disability. However, we strive to make the most out of life, and see the beauty that life brings, not just the hardships. The art I make is about the internal struggle with language, but this struggle is not all of who I am.

Sequenced Imagery

The sequenced image is central to my art. Influenced by anime and a desire to narrate my own struggles, it is only natural that my work would incorporate a story telling structure According

to Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, there are six modes of panel to panel transfers: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur.^{viii} I tend to use the aspect-to-aspect transition. Aspect-to-aspect transitions are used to describe a scene or to show a passage of time. For example, picture a beach. Now picture everything you do and see at a beach: the water, a beach ball, lighthouses, suntan lotion, sand, etc. Then imagine all of these aspects of the beach in a comic book, each aspect having its own panel. For example, my painting *Repeat* uses multiple frames to represent different aspects of speech therapy.

I have also been exploring the use of moment-to-moment transition. It takes the action or moment through every step. For example in baseball, a pitcher throws a ball to the batter. The imagery would show the pitcher winding up the ball, bringing his arm back, letting go of the ball, and the batter hitting the ball. American comics use these transitions rarely, but in manga it is a common transition. I use a moment-to-moment transition in my painting *Frustrated Thoughts*. The painting shows a conversation between two people. The first panel depicts a girl with blue hair mispronouncing her words. The girl with the brown hair in the second panel is confused by what the first girl has said. The four little panels show the blue haired girl repeating the words several times before the brown hair girl understands what she is saying. However, in the last two panels the brown haired girl says the mispronounced words, but has misunderstood, thus leaving the blue haired girl feeling defeated.

I'm still exploring different ways to use sequenced images in my work. The use of what McCloud calls the "gutter" (the spaces in between comic book panels) might play a part in my work.^{ix} Just like in a movie, sometimes the part that isn't shown is more important than the part that is shown. This use of the "gutter" might take the form of tangled beads going in and out of the ears of the figures within the panels to represent the mispronounced/misunderstood words of the speaker.

Sensory Processing Disorder

When my youngest nephew, Jay, was two and getting evaluated for speech delay, the therapist

noticed something strange. Jay was constantly dragging his head across the floor, pressing very hard into a person's body, and was being very rough with things. The therapist asked my sister if they could test him for sensory processing disorder (SPD). SPD is when the brain cannot process sensory information correctly, such as sound, touch, movement, etc. There are three main categories for SPD: Sensory Modulation Disorder, Sensory-Based Motor Disorder, and Sensory Discrimination Disorder.^x Sensory Modulation Disorder deals with a person who over and under responds to sensory information. They also could seek out sensory feed back. Sensory-Based Motor Disorder (SBMD) is when a person has posture issues. They have an impaired perception of body position and core stability, making them seem clumsy or have poor posture. SBMD also includes Dyspraxia, a disorder when it is hard to think, coordinate, and execute movement. For example, a person may not be able to ride a bicycle or learn simple dance moves. Sensory Discrimination Disorder is when a person's brain scrambles environmental stimuli: auditory, visual, tactile, etc.^{xi}

After testing, my nephew was diagnosed with Sensory-Based Motor Disorder, along with several speech disorders. I was drawn to research SPD after a visit when my family was comparing the way my nephew acts to the way I acted when I was younger. They always told stories of how I hated being around crowds, needing to have a strict schedule, not sleeping thought the night until I was six, and was always screaming bloody murder as young child. Similar to how my nephew acts, except now my family knows the cause of his distress and has the tools to deal with any potential meltdown. I came to the conclusion that what is comfortable for one person, may not be comfortable for another, especially if they have an invisible disability like speech impairment or SPD.

The theme for my immersive art installation, *Altered Perceptions*, was based on this concept of being comfortable but uncomfortable at the same time. On the walls of my installation two distinct images are repeated forty times each. One image is of a girl holding her hands over her ears to represent the experience of being overwhelmed by too much sound. The other image is of the same girl

pressing against the edge of the frame indicating either a desire to get away from unwanted sensory stimuli, or trying to increase sensory pressure by squeezing her self against the wall. Similar with my artwork on speech impairment the repetition of the image represents the life-long continuation of the disorder, even after the therapy. While there are tools and strategies that may help to control feelings of being overwhelmed by sensory information, such persons will also always have SPD.

One of the tools people use to help calm themselves when they are having a sensory overload event is a weighted blanket. For people like my nephew, a weighted blanket helps to calm them down by providing the pressure that they crave. Hence, one of the objects constructed for this installation is a weighted blanket. The blanket is comprised of repeated images of a girl laying down cuddling with a snake. Most people shy away from snakes because they find them creepy, however, the constriction a snake has on its prey is something my nephew would seek out. On the underside of the blanket is a soft fuzzy fabric for comfort. To contrast the softness of the blanket, it is paired with a headboard made out of sharp straws. Inside the straw sculpture are lamps that cause the straws to glow pink thus emphasizing the sharpness of the materials.

SPD is about sensory information; I wanted viewers to be able to touch objects in the space. I designed two beanbag chairs with objects attached to them. Each chair has a soft fuzzy texture. The white longhaired chair I surrounded with succulents and sharp straws spray-painted white. The viewers are allowed to sit in the chair, but due to the sharp objects surrounding the normally comfortable chair, it is suddenly uncomfortable. Similar with my painting *Beep Beep Beep* the succulents are supposed to represent sharp sounds. Although, whether or not the viewer understands this connection is unimportant, instead I just want them to realize the flowers are not a source of comfort despite being beautiful. On the other chair I repeated the image of the girl with the snake. On the seat of the chair, I added flowers made out of rubber bathmats. The flowers give the chair a slimy texture, making viewer question whether they really want to occupy the chair at all. To add to the sensory elements in the

space, I covered the floor in white tissue paper. Not only does this make the viewer question whether or not they are allowed into the space, it also makes them uncomfortable because they don't want to risk “ruining the art” by moving into and through the space. Underneath the tissue paper is bubble wrap. The loud popping of the bubble wrap represents the loud noises that can cause someone with SPD to have an attack. Pink lights were installed as a way of unifying the installation space. I chose the color pink because it is a color found inside the body and SPD is a disorder that revolves inside the brain.

Closing

My hope for my artwork is to open people's minds about a group of people who might have an invisible disability like a speech impairment or SPD. We are living in a fast-paced world where everything comes at us quickly and can access information easier than ever. However, a person with a disorder may not be able to communicate their thoughts as quickly as a normal person, and both parties can get frustrated. Everyone is entitled to speak his or her mind. It should not matter if a person is considered cute or takes longer to communicate ideas, everyone has the right to be heard. My advice for normal people talking to a person with a speech disorder or SPD, is to be patient with them.

-
- i "Statistics on Voice, Speech, and Language." National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorder, Accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/pages/vsl.aspx>.
 - ii "About SPD." Star Institute For Sensory Processing Disorder, Accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/about-spd>
 - iii "About SPD." Star Institute For Sensory Processing Disorder, Accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/about-spd>
 - iv "Child Speech and Language." Child Speech and Language. Accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/ChildSandL.htm>.
 - v "Having a Speech Problem Isn't Funny," YouTube, Accessed March 01, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9aGBK0V-0A>.
 - vi "I Hate Having a Speech Impediment," YouTube, Accessed March 01, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rq02sI1T_XI.
 - vii Neil Cohn, "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga," (2007), Accessed March 22, 2016, http://www.visuallanguagelab.com/P/japanese_vl.pdf, 6.
 - viii Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994) 60-81.
 - ix McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 60-81.
 - x "Subtypes of SPD." Star Institute For Sensory Processing Disorder, Accessed October 8, 2018, <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/subtypes-of-spd>.
 - xi "Subtypes of SPD." Accessed October 8, 2018, <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/subtypes-of-spd>.

Bibliography

- “About SPD.” Star Institute For Sensory Processing Disorder, Accessed October 10, 2018,
<https://www.spdstar.org/basic/about-spd>
- "Child Speech and Language." Child Speech and Language. Accessed
February 29, 2016, <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/ChildSandL.htm>.
- Cohn, Neil, "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga," (2007), Accessed March 22, 2016,
http://www.visuallanguagelab.com/P/japanese_vl.pdf, 6.
- “ Having a Speech Problem Isn't Funny," YouTube, Accessed March 01, 2016,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9aGBK0V-0A>.
- "I Hate Having a Speech Impediment," YouTube, Accessed March 01, 2016,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rq02sI1T_XI.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*: New York: Harper Perennial, 2010, 60-81.
- “Statistics on Voice, Speech, and Language.” National Institute on Deafness and Other
Communication Disorder, Accessed December 7, 2015,
<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/pages/vsl.aspx>.
- “Subtypes of SPD.” Star Institute For Sensory Processing Disorder, Accessed October 8, 2018,
<https://www.spdstar.org/basic/subtypes-of-spd>.