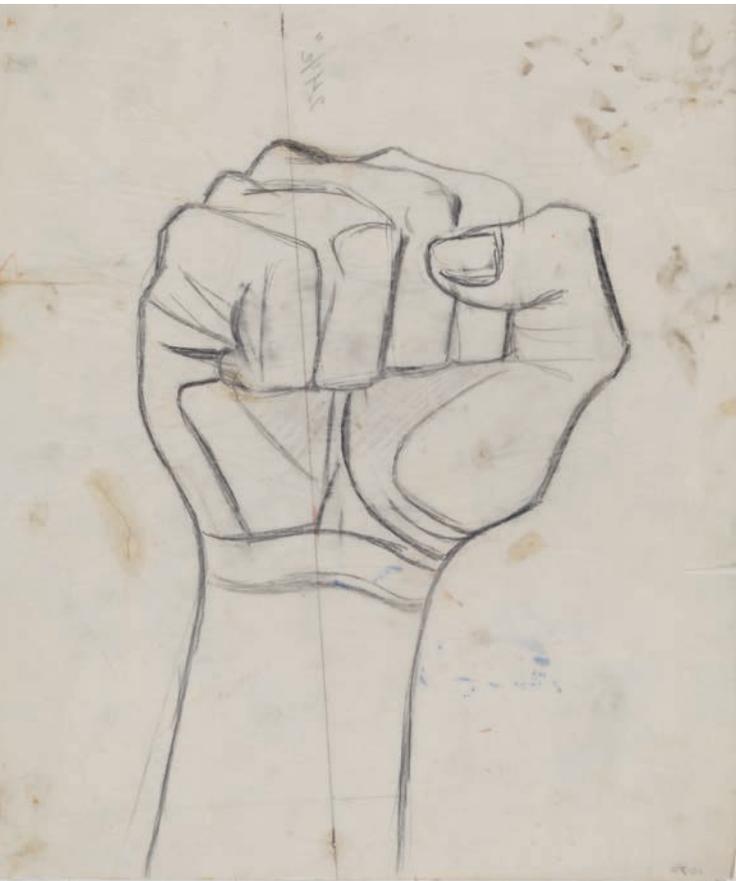


# Images of Disability



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 103

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Disability is about perception as much as it is about a medical diagnosis. People with disabilities have to contend with societal assumptions that they are less than. Triumphant narratives of people “overcoming” their disabilities to accomplish ordinary tasks, such as getting a job, playing sports, or creating art, are frequently used as feel-good human-interest stories in the news. Recently, activists in the disabled community have started to challenge the beliefs that their stories, and lives, are “inspiring.” Keeping in mind stereotypes about people with disabilities, this exhibition explores how people with disabilities are represented in works from the Hood Museum of Art.

Mikhael Subotzky's *Kwabla and Yaovi Ahotor* depicts two blind men standing on a beach with dark storm clouds in the background. The camera angle emphasizes the eyes of both men, despite the fact that they cannot see the photographer. The ominous storm clouds in the background

may prompt one to wonder why they are on the beach exposed to the elements as a storm looms. Though the portrait's subjects are visibly disabled, the imminent storm in this image raises questions about topics beyond disability.

Daniel Heyman's *Disco Mosul*, from the *Amman Series* of the *Abu Ghraib Project*, portrays a man who became disabled after sustaining injuries and experiencing torture in the Iraq War. During the project, former detainees from Abu Ghraib, a US-run military prison during the war, were interviewed for a civil lawsuit. While lawyers conducted the interviews, Heyman etched images of the subjects onto a copper plate. In *Disco Mosul*, Heyman wraps text from the man's account of being injured around the etched portrait; the only work in the series to depict the sitter's full body, it clearly showcases the injuries he sustained during his time at the prison. Though the artist did not name the individual in *Disco Mosul*, he included the man's story alongside a fairly realistic sketch. For people with visible disabilities, physical characteristics can define how the world perceives you. In these etchings, the subject is given more agency to shape his story, though it remains mediated by the hand of the printmaker.

Alen MacWeeney's *Old Man in a Field, Sligo 1965* addresses themes of aging as well as disability. In the photograph, an elderly man who uses a cane holds a cigarette in his mouth, which helps to highlight his facial deformity. Though the man needs a mobility aid, his posture and body language convey a sense of importance and dignity.

Rauf Mamedov typically employs actors with Down syndrome in his photographs. In *Games on Window Sills: The Wisdom Attempting on Innocence*, the actors are playing with bubbles. Recently, individuals with Down syndrome have begun to challenge long-held beliefs that they are incapable of making informed adult decisions. This activism has led to an end to mandatory institutionalization in almost all cases. Mamedov simultaneously represents individuals with Down syndrome while leaning on stereotypes about their childlike nature.

Disabled artists may choose to highlight or de-emphasize their own disabilities in their work. Martha Honeywell, on the one hand, marketed her talent in paper cutting as well as

her congenital disability by inscribing “Cut by M, [sic] Honeywell with the Mouth” into many of her works. On the other hand, John Brewster Jr. and José Clemente Orozco often made art without explicit reference to their disabilities, though their works may have been informed by their unique experiences. Brewster’s portraiture, for example, is known for strong facial expressions; it is possible that he focused on the faces of his subjects because that was the only way for him to communicate as a Deaf artist. Orozco, who lost his left hand in an accident while making fireworks, made many sketches of hands in preparation for painting the *Epic of American Civilization* in Dartmouth’s Baker Library. Orozco’s accident may have contributed to his focus on hands; however, many artists execute hand studies because hands are notoriously difficult to render accurately. It is possible that a viewer’s response to this drawing might depend on their knowledge of Orozco’s disability.

In mining the Hood Museum of Art’s collection for this show, I discovered that the museum has a limited number of objects related to disability. In an online press release from August 16, 2018, the Center for Disease Control estimates that twenty-five percent of Americans have a disability. Yet I found that only a small portion of the Hood Museum’s 65,000 objects address the topic. These works are much more likely to depict visible disabilities than chronic illnesses, autoimmune disorders, learning disabilities, or other invisible disabilities,<sup>1</sup> and the collection contains very few representations of women or people of color with disabilities. Additionally, the objects that feature disability are rarely identified by this theme in the museum’s cataloging.

The works on view in this exhibition bear the burden of representing a diverse community with complex histories. Representation matters, especially to people who are typically reduced to single narratives. *Images of Disability* attempts to challenge and problematize classic representations of disability through works that raise questions about who is disabled and that explore individuals’ agency in shaping representations of themselves.

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#### NOTE

1. For a discussion of works in the Hood Museum of Art that address trauma-related invisible disabilities, see the brochure for Kensington Cochran’s 2020 *A Space for Dialogue* exhibition, *The Soul Has Bandaged Moments*, <http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/explore/print-archive/space-dialogue-100>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Little, Nina Fletcher. "John Brewster, Jr., 1766–1854: Deaf-Mute Portrait Painter of Connecticut and Maine." *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 25, no. 4 (October 1960): 97–104.

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Sandell, Richard, Joocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, eds. *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

## CHECKLIST

Carlo Lasinio, Italian, 1759–1838; published by Società calcografica, Florence, active about 1790–1805. *Carlo (Blind Beggar)*, *Domenico Bartolini (Blind Musician)*, and *Claudi (Blind Lute Player and Singer)*, about 1790, mezzotint and etching on wove paper, proof impressions; and *Domenico Bartolini (Blind Musician)*, about 1790, mezzotint and etching, hand-colored, on wove paper, all from the *Suite of Florentine Street Characters*. Purchased through the Jean and Adolph Weil Jr. 1935 Fund, the Julia L. Whittier Fund, and the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; 2010.42.2, 9, 10, 14

John Brewster Jr., American, 1766–1854. *John Colley*, about 1820, oil on canvas. Gift of the Estate of Lydia G. Hutchinson, wife of Paul L. Hutchinson, Class of 1920; P.985.17.5

Martha Honeywell, American, 1786–1856. *Unidentified Woman* and *Unidentified Woman*, about 1830, cut black paper mounted on buff paper. Gift of Carolyn Kelley Evans, Class of 1978; 2019.87.1–2

Otto Dix, German, 1891–1969. *Blinder (Blind Man)*, 1923, lithograph on paper. Purchased through the Robert J. Strassenburgh II 1942 Fund; PR.999.38

José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949. *Study of Hand for Modern Migration of the Spirit (Panel 18) for the Epic of American Civilization*, about 1930–34, graphite. Purchased through gifts from Kirsten and Peter Bedford, Class of 1989; Jane and Raphael Bernstein; Walter Burke, Class of 1944; Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard, Class of 1953; Nathan Pearson, Class of 1932; David V. Picker, Class of 1953; Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; Kenneth Roman Jr., Class of 1952; and Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; D.988.52.209

William Witt, American, 1921–2013. *Difficult Journey*, negative 1951; print 1978, gelatin silver print. Gift of Marina and Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2018.26.14

Rauf Mamedov, Azerbaijanian, born 1956. *Games on Window Sills: The Wisdom Attempting on Innocence*, 2003, color coupler print. Anonymous gift; 2018.37.215

Daniel A. Heyman, American, born 1963. *Disco Mosul*, from the *Amman Series* of the *Abu Ghraib Project*, March 2006, drypoint. Purchased through the Anonymous Fund #144; 2007.37.10

Mikhael Subotzky, South African, born 1981. *Kwabla and Yaovi Ahotor*, 2007, gelatin silver print. Gift of Marina and Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2013.67.5

Alen MacWeeney, Irish, born 1939. *Old Man in a Field, Sligo 1965*, 1965; published 2011, black and white inkjet print. Gift of Julie and Michael McTernan, Class of 1986; 2016.37.10

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The exhibition *Images of Disability*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, September 9, 2020–January 24, 2021.

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Cover image: Mikhael Subotzky, *Kwabla and Yaovi Ahotor*, 2007

Inside left: José Clemente Orozco, *Study of Hand for Modern Migration of the Spirit (Panel 18) for the Epic of American Civilization*, about 1930–34

Inside right: Carlo Lasinio, *Domenico Bartolini (Blind Musician)*, about 1790

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