Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 51: Disabled Artists

Guest: Jeff Thomas

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, all you gorgeous humans! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Can you believe we've had 50 episodes already? Time flies, my friends. Thank you for being on this journey with me.

Episode 51 features an interview with Jeff Thomas, an urban Iroquois photographer, artist, researcher, public speaker, and curator based in Ottawa, Ontario in Canada. Jeff will talk about racism, indigeneity, colonialism, and how his photography re-contextualizes historical images of First Nations people. We also talk about how art weaves in the past, present, and future. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away. We. Go.

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

So, Jeff, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

JEFF THOMAS: Oh, it's my pleasure.

ALICE: And Jeff, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself, if you don't mind.

JEFF: OK. I'm Indigenous, from the Six Nations Reserve in Southern Ontario. I became a visual artist in 1980, following a car accident. I was 24 years old at the time. I fell asleep at the wheel, lost control of the car. And luckily, my wife only had bruises and that, and my son, he's fine today. When I went to the hospital, and I was paralyzed from the chest down. They didn't believe that I was, in fact, I had a spinal cord injury. I have really big shoulders, and it was hard for them to get an x-ray. They said, "Well, it's just shock, and you'll get over it" and things like that. But there was also always this undercurrent of things like being asked was I drinking? Was I on drugs and this kind of thing? One of the doctors had said that I was a malingering patient, and in my mind, that was kinda code for this is an Indian guy who is just here, trying to get out of going to work or whatever. It was like one of those things, "lazy Indians" and that. They were trying to get me animated, to get me moving, pulling me up out of the bed. And here I had a fracture, and my spinal cord was being compressed.

So, luckily, I got out of that hospital after a couple of days and ended up back in Buffalo. They did the same thing in terms of they made my condition worse by putting too much weight on the traction that I was in. And I made a vow. I said that if I can walk out of this hospital, I'm gonna do

something. I'm gonna make a contribution to the world around me, to people that are a part of my world. And so, my idea of being out in the world and using a cane and having a limp and that and being kind of off center and off balance, I'm always conscious of people looking at me, thinking, "Oh, just another tragic Indian story" or whatever.

So, the idea of being marginalized because you're Indigenous and then being marginalized again because you're disabled has been really, really, really challenging in the sense of how do you continue to move forward in the face of those attitudes? So, it's been really important for me to always be conscious of what it is that I'm working with and trying to address and to use that as motivation to keep myself going. I don't think that without the help of the people around me and that, that I would've been able to do that. But I'm still working after all these years and proving that a disability like that can lead to something that's far more positive than how it began.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Well, that's another example of resistance and survival and how there's a lot of beauty in that as well.

[cheerful acoustic guitar music break]

What art did to help explore life as a disabled person

ALICE: And what did art do for you in terms of helping you explore this new phase of your life as a disabled person?

JEFF: It got me out of the house. I began to really explore the world around me. I've gotten out to see the world in a way that I may not have otherwise. I'm still working, but each year gets more difficult. And my ability to physically get out and photograph has been greatly impaired, so I've accommodated over the years. And now, I shoot from the car.

ALICE: Great. Thank you for that. I think a lot of people, they go to art school, and then they learn these techniques. But tell me about being a self-taught artist.

JEFF: Being a self-taught artist has been really good in terms of not having the pressure to conform to a specific way of looking at the world through the camera. So, I began simply by following my instincts in terms of what I wanted to photograph, how I wanted to photograph, and I didn't really think that I needed to go to school in order to develop my technique or my craft. Because I really knew at 24, 25 what it was that I wanted to accomplish with a camera because my interest in photography and those types of issues began when I was still in high school. I really began with an artist-run center back in Buffalo, New York called CEPA Gallery, and they welcomed me into their collective. And I didn’t have to take workshops or whatever, but I just asked questions and learned and taught myself along the way.

Mentors, elders, and artist inspirations

ALICE: Thank you for that. Are there any mentors or elders that you’d like to mention that really supported you and helped you, showed you the way?

JEFF: I was very fortunate growing up in the city that, at a certain point, I was raised by my paternal grandmother, and I would accompany her to the Six Nations Reserve quite often for weekends and summers and things like that. And I was exposed to family elders who had a particular way of looking at the world. My step-grandfather, Bert General was a lifetime farmer, and his sister, Emily General—they ran a family farm together—was really academically motivated. She was a teacher on the reserve, she organized a theater company, and she also

was a social activist as well for Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, land rights in Ontario. And I translated what I learned from them into what I would pursue with my photographic work. My grandmother was another influence on me as well, in terms of the work ethic.

I also had a mentor in Buffalo. His name was Milton Rogovin, and he was a social documentary photographer. And I had several visits with him, and he also inspired me as well, in terms of the craft, of integrity, about how you treat people, how you wanna be treated, and to have really a social-minded voice in terms of what you wanna be able to accomplish with your work.

[mellow acoustic guitar break]

ALICE: Are there particular Indigenous artists that you're really excited about, their work that really inspires you?

JEFF: The Indigenous arts movement is so young in terms of we're talking like three or four decades of actual work that's been produced and recognized. But there was one artist in the beginning. His name was Carl Beam. He was from Southern Ontario, Ojibwa artist, and I remember seeing his work in an art gallery one time. It just kind of blew the door open for me because of the way that he collaged his work, photographs, historical photographs, drawings, paintings, and things to come up with what appeared to be kind of an abstract way of looking at the world. But in fact, I found that it was a very clear path to understanding the world from an Indigenous perspective in that there was storytelling involved in his work. And I could see how he created a platform for people to engage with one another, and that had a very strong impact on me. And it was also very much a part of how I saw the arts world as well, is that it wasn't about the prestige of being a recognized artist or whatever. Because the reality for Indigenous people in North America is that our history hasn't been told. And consequently, the dominant culture really has no sense of Indians in a way, of who they are and their own history.

The past, present, and future

ALICE: Yeah, I do think that the majority of Indigenous culture and media representation about Indigenous people is set in the past, you know. I'm curious about how your art acknowledges the past, present, and future of Indigenous people.

JEFF: The past, the present, and the future has always been something that's been integral to Indigenous cultures. I mean I understood the fundamentals of that growing up and that, but there was one time when I was visiting my grandmother on the reserve. We were invited for Thanksgiving one year, and my step-grandfather was husking and braiding white corn. You know, I've seen that before, but for some reason or another, there was something very poignant about what was taking place. So, I made photographs of him husking and braiding the white corn.

And what I realized is that it came to be emblematic of the work that I wanted to do, which was to say that the past is incorporated through my research with historical photographs, and one of the reasons why I ended up in Ottawa was because I wanted to work at the library and archives here and to research historical photography. The present was really about looking at being honest about identifying who you are and where you come from. And for me, it was to say that I was born and raised in an urban environment, I'm Indigenous, and so this is the part of my life that I'm working on in terms of an ongoing kind of conversation. And then there's the future as well, and how is that incorporated? And I would say that all Indigenous cultures say that, as a part of their philosophy and in terms of how they look at decision making and that, they take into consideration the impact that their decisions today will have seven generations into the future.

I think about the preservation of the work that I'm doing and that it will reach into future generations. I did a lot of public speaking and that with school groups and things like that to inspire youth to be able to think about these concepts as well and that they are, in fact, the future. And so, I developed a series of works that bring into a framework images from the past and images from the present. Let's say for youth who maybe, 10 or 15 years from now, I can imagine are still gonna be addressing the issues of urbanization and the lack of historical content in our lives. So, I think about my work and how could it impact somebody in a classroom via the Internet, via my website, and have an impact on youth who wanna understand or feel that they can understand the issues that I was looking at when I was working.

[mellow acoustic guitar music break]

Seize the Space

ALICE: Yeah, speaking of your website: I had a chance to look through a lot of your projects, and I wanna say that I really liked your Seize the Space project, in which over 200 community members participated in a series of photos of front of the monument of Samuel de Champlain. And what was kind of the statement you wanted to make?

JEFF: I came to Ottawa in 1992, and it was in the wake of a road trip I made across the United States during the period of time that Christopher Columbus's 500th anniversary was being celebrated. And I wanted to get a sense of what commemoration means, how the landscape has been transformed and that. And I felt really dismayed by what I didn't see. And I realized that I could've driven across the United States and back through Canada and not have seen another Indigenous person, and that was quite frightening to me. So, I was kind of like, well, what am I gonna do? How do you photograph the invisible?

So, a friend said to me, "We should go to Ottawa. There's a monument there for this famous French explorer/colonist, Samuel de Champlain." And at the base of the monument is an Indian figure kneeling, life-size. And so, we came up, came up to Ottawa, and then I saw the monument. There's of course, about 20 feet in the air, there's the heroic French explorer; at the base of the monument is a nearly naked Indian man on one knee, looking subservient and that. And so, the question was, is how do you address commenting on such a prominent and stable public monument? And there was no marking or plaques or anything around to say who the Indian was or what he represented or whatever, so it was left open to the public's imagination. And of course, the public has a limited imagination about Indigenous people, so I wanted to challenge the monument.

I envisioned in my own kind of fantasy way of the Indian—I called him the Indian Scout—and him actually leaving the monument to where would he go as a 16th Century figure? My imagination really began to percolate. And by 1996, there was a protest held at the monument by the Assembly of First Nations, which in Canada represents all of the reserves across Canada. They wanted the Indian figure removed, and so, three years later, here he was finally removed and placed across the street in another park called Major's Hill Park.

I invited a friend of mine to come up and pose on the platform, and he was a performance artist. His name is Greg Hill. He came up in 2000, and we made some photographs. And he made a life-size canoe that was made from a series of cereal boxes. So, we mounted it on the platform, and the Indian was kneeling because he was supposed to have been placed on the monument, but they ran out of funding before they could complete it. So, he was left for all of these decades looking like he was kneeling at the feet of Champlain.

So, over the next few years, I invited friends that I knew, academics, artists and that, to come up and to pose on the platform just to take part in an action calling into question monuments and history and that. And in 2013 was really the highlight of my project. Greg Hill was curating a very large exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada called Sakahan. So, over the course of four different dates, the gallery would announce what was going on at the Champlain monument, and anybody could go up to the monument and pose. And so, I had a couple hundred people in the end who came up and posed, and I would give them a history lesson on the monument and things like that. And they contributed. Some contributed some feedback in terms of their observations of the day and what took place. And each participant also received a digital and analog print from me in return for posing.

In the earliest part of the project, some of the art historian people had a hard time because they said, “We’re so used to analyzing the past or the present in terms of art and not being participants.” So, it was really interesting to me as a project to begin breaking down those barriers and engaging people and trying to have something to say over all about the project.

ALICE: These monuments and statues, and you know how buildings are named, the streets are named, we kind of forget how they glorify colonizers, racist white supremacists in our history. I am kinda curious what you think, what you want your audiences to think about when they are questioning or interrogating thoughts about Indigeneity and just the history of Canada.

JEFF: Mmhmm. There was one interesting sitter that I had during the project in 2013 that was very interesting. And he came up, and he said, “I’d like to pose for you, but I’ve lost track of my family. So, if I can get them together, will you wait for us?” So, I said, “Yeah, sure.” He eventually came back, and he had brought his wife and five kids. So, we got them all on the platform. And so, we’re talking, and I was telling him about the history of the monument with his children and that. And so, we finished, and he went across the street to Major’s Hill Park where the Indian Scout now is, and he proceeded to tell his family all the things that I had told him. And I only found out about this after I sent him the photographs, and he sent me back a text that really kind of outlined exactly what had taken place. And I thought that was probably the best scenario for me in terms of looking at that monument and the impact that it has because they were not Indigenous. And so, here was a father figure talking about Indigenous issues with his children, and I thought this is really how a monument should work.

And there was another instance where I photographed several university classes around the platform as well. For some of the classes, they were students that came from all over the world. So, they were getting a different view, and they were participating as well. And I would think about how that would spread from those students, and the story would be told over and over again. That’s the best situation for me.

For the most part, people don’t pay attention to them unless they are the ones that have been marginalized because of what those monuments represent. I’m always amazed when I’m watching news in the United States, and they’re talking about people from Mexico and from the southern part of North America. They’re talking about Asian people, about African-American people. And in those kind of lists of people, of marginalized people, they never hardly ever mention Native American or Indigenous people. So, this is really what I wanna be able to do is to say that we’re here. And to also inspire our own youth in our own communities to do the same thing, to take the initiative. So, there’s also a lot to celebrate as well.

ALICE: Yeah. And I also feel this, as a disabled person, just this overwhelming need to document who we are and what we’re doing and our images.

[cheery acoustic guitar music break]

Documenting First Nations people

ALICE: What are some of the images that you would like to see in the future in terms of documenting the full range and beautiful diversity of First Nations people?

JEFF: What I'm looking at now is more introspective in terms of looking at my own disability in terms of how it's affected my work. How do I begin to incorporate my history as a disabled artist into my work in terms of looking to the future now? If I can't get out and make photographs, then how do I begin to make photographs in my office in a more detailed way?

One of the things that I've found that's always been very difficult is just to look at myself in photographs in that, for whatever reasons, I haven't been able to do that. And so, this is the next challenge, is how do I begin to be able to look at my own body and my own limitations in a way and continue to move forward in terms of my body of work? I don't know if people, when they see me and they think, you know, this is Jeff Thomas. "He does this type of work, and he's also disabled." I've never heard anybody refer to me in that way. And so, I've been wondering whether or not it's time to turn and the focus more on that. Because I think it's important for people in our own communities to know that we have lots of challenges, whether it's a physical disability, whether it's a mental disability. We just have to look at the number of youth that commit suicide across Canada and the United States who are Indigenous, and it's alarming and it's scary. And what can we do to help prevent that? How do we begin to inspire youth in our own communities as role models? And there's no escaping that once you take your work, and you put it out into the public, you are a role model, and you do represent your community in one capacity or another. So, it's really about opening up those senses.

I'll give you an example as well. I've also curated exhibitions in many institutions in Canada and some in the United States and some in Europe as well. In 2000, I was commissioned to curate the first photographic exhibition on Indian residential schools. And as a part of my research, I began to look into the history and to the kind of the mindset that led to treating Indigenous children in such a horrific way in these schools. And it was really alarming, and so as a part of my work, the idea was, is how do we get survivors who went to residential schools in our own communities to begin sharing their stories and passing them on to their children and to their relatives and that? And to the larger world as well in terms of being able to talk about those issues associated with that. But it was really, I think in terms of pulling back the layers of colonialism and how insidious it is and how quickly you can actually lose track of your identity and your sense of self and your place in the world. So, how do we begin to bring that back into the conversation? And this is what I've been wanting to be able to do as well with my work.

The residential school exhibition opened in 2002 here in Ottawa, and we did a traveling exhibition that's still traveling, criss-crossing Canada to this day and having an impact on communities. So, through those photographs, those historical photographs that really were produced in terms of propaganda for the schools, now they've been looked at and refocused on well, how do they speak to the issues that we're dealing with today? And although they don't show the horrors that took place in the residential schools, they do open up a window in terms of showing what the schools looked like, how children looked in relationship to those schools, and also the program of work that was beginning to take place.

ALICE: Yeah. And I think it's about naming ourselves and claiming all of our identities and trying to be our full selves wherever we are. That's still a struggle for a lot of people. There's a lot of shame. There's a lot of pain involved, trauma, just a lot of also, I think, clearly social pressure

that we are undesirable, that we take too much space, that we don't belong. A lot of people who are marginalized have to work up to the sense of becoming, accepting yourself, loving yourself, and also putting a name to who you are and what you stand for. Which is kind of a lifelong journey for most people.

[cheery acoustic guitar music break]

Final words

ALICE: Is there any final words you'd like to share in terms of being a artist and just what your hopes are for the future, just maybe your dreams, your own dreams?

JEFF: I suppose that the biggest thing for me in terms of my work, my dreams, my aspirations is that I can inspire people to look differently at the world around them. That people can take into account looking at an Indigenous person who's been able to overcome challenges set before him and to use it in a positive way. That even though we're limited in one way, the whole world is open in another way that we can continue to move forward. Especially, you know, working in my instance of not only the loss of mobility but living with the constant pain is that I've tried all of the drugs and therapies and things like that, and nothing has really worked effectively except for my work. And whether I am speaking as I am to you right now or whether I'm speaking in front of an audience in a museum or at an opening of my exhibition or engaging people with my photographs, that helps me to forget about it for a while and to just act and engage in a way that is, you know, that feels good. I live by what my elder had told me. Because I would ask her lots of questions and that, and she didn't have the answers, but she would always say that if you're not comfortable, if you don't like something, don't complain about it. Do something to change it. And so, that's what I've been doing on many levels, and hopefully that story that I wanna be able to tell will resonate to a larger audience in that way. And of course, that's why I do this.

ALICE: Well, Jeff, thank you so much for talking with me and sharing your work and your thoughts and your story with me. I really appreciate it.

JEFF: I appreciate being invited to speak to you as well.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Jeff's work on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Lord knows where I'm heading
It's hard out here for a gimp ♪