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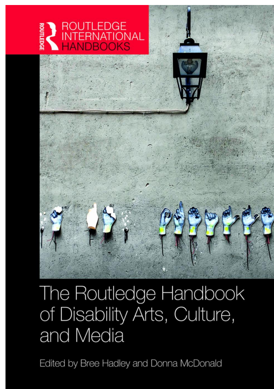

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Visual narratives

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3

Visual narratives

Contemplating the storied images of disability and disablement

Donna McDonald

Visual narratology

Most of us intuitively understand that attentive listening to other people's stories is an act of empathy. We also understand that when we read stories, whether they are fiction, non-fiction, or memoir, we engage in not only our imagined worlds of drama, romance, adventure, and so on, but also the affective worlds of fear, joy, love, horror, curiosity, hope – indeed the whole gamut of human emotions. Narratology, the theory and study of narratives, is well established and helps us to understand the interactions between the writer, the written text, and the reader. It also serves as a companion to a certain kind of knowledge, that which results from a person's insider viewpoint of events or issues, either as a witness or as a participant who has the lived experience of those particular events or issues.

As an arts psychotherapist and disability policy/studies researcher, I embrace these approaches for understanding the lives and experiences of people with disabilities. I rely on historic and contemporary memoirs (including texts, oral histories, and documentaries and films) of people with disabilities as a counselling, research, and teaching resource, as a way of talking back to stereotypes, and to challenge cultural tropes of sentimentality, most often in stories of inspiration and triumph over adversity. In doing so, I have learnt much about the literary representations of disability from disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) and others. My own memoir, *The Art of Being Deaf* (2014), was an act of pushing back against entrenched notions of what it means to be deaf.

In more recent times, and mindful of the argument by art philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (2013) that "the underlying mission of art [lies in] changing how we experience the world" (151), I have reflected upon the potency of visual arts narratives of disability. In this context, I am less interested in the aesthetics of those visual arts images and more concerned about how to build bridges of understanding between art psychotherapy, disability studies, art history, and art practice. In doing so, I have turned to critical discourses and teaching resources by disability studies scholars such as Ann Millett-Gallant, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tobin Siebers, and Petra Kuppers; art historians such as Richard Sandell, Joceyln Dodd, Keri Watson, and Jon Mann; and art philosophers such as Alain de Botton and John Armstrong. Millett-Gallant's (2000) book *The Disabled Body*

in Contemporary Art draws on art history and disability studies to analyse "contemporary artworks that feature visibly disabled bodies and [to] draw these images into longer visual traditions" (19). Garland-Thomson's (2009) book, *Staring: How We Look*, is a forensic examination of the act of staring at disability, disablement, and disfigurement as a "physical response, cultural phenomenon, social relationship, and knowledge gathering endeavor … [which] explores the history, social regulation and cultural contradictions of staring" (11). She draws on the visual imagery of photographs, paintings, films, and sculptures to illustrate her points. Siebers' (2010) *Disability Aesthetics* attempts "to theorize the representation of disability in modern art" (2), and he argues that "In the modern period, disability acquires aesthetic value because it represents for makers of art a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is" (3). Kuppers (2014), a disability culture activist and community performance artist, writes extensively about the interrelationships between disability and culture. Her book, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction*, is a textbook for scholars and artists, examining the work of disabled artists within a critical disability studies framework.

Art historians and museum curators Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd concern themselves with the potential activist role of museums and galleries in advancing improved ways of understanding the lives and experiences of people with disabilities. In their book co-edited with Garland-Thomson, *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, they consider creative and visual arts representations of disability in themes as diverse as the classical portraiture of disability, war, freakery, medicine and disability, mental illness, disability and sexuality, disfigurement, and human rights. Similarly, Watson and Mann's online art history teaching resource, *Disability in Art History* (n.d.), persuasively bridges the disciplines of art history and disability studies. In their work, they invite students to "look at examples of the disabled human body as it has been represented in art history" (Watson & Mann n.d., n.p.), and they provide 38 images of visual artworks to illustrate and demonstrate their three main themes: the historical representations of disability; freakshows, power, and privilege; and body, performance, and the post-human.

In this reflective commentary, I share my musings and speculate about the power – for a range of disciplines including art psychotherapy, research, and teaching, as well as self-awareness – arising from the exploratory contemplation of visual arts images of disability, disablement, and the experiences of disabled people. I am influenced in this task by Erwin Panofsky (1955) who reminds us not only that "we cannot analyze what we do not understand" (9) but also that "there is no such thing as the entirely 'naïve' beholder" (16). He suggests that we, as the viewers, have "something [or even] a good deal to forget, and something to learn" (16) before we can appreciate what we are viewing. Just as significantly, we may unconsciously bring our own contemporary cultural histories to our viewing responses without realising how our personal experiences influence our appraisal and interpretation of artworks of other cultures and from earlier times (Panofsky 1955).

Consequently, Panofsky expounds the iconographic-iconologic framework as an objective way of understanding and responding to what we are viewing. He explains that iconography concerns itself with the meaning of artworks rather than their form (26). Meaning is "manifested in images, stories and allegories" (29), while form is "manifested in artistic motifs" (29–30). Panofsky defines iconography as a process of describing and classifying images (31). He defines iconology as the process that finds meaning in the artwork by seeking to understand the principles "which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class or religious or philosophical persuasion" (30). He warns that the artist may be unaware of these principles and, indeed, that they may even be contrary to the artist's intention.

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Lenette (2016) has simplified and systematised Panofsky's principles in a four-step questioning process as a way of considering photographic images of refugees. I have adapted her process to my task of contemplating visual arts representations of disability. In addressing the form, subject, meaning, and purpose of a visual art image of disability and disablement, the four-step or four-question process consists of:

- Describing the image systematically (what can we see in the image?)
- Drawing inferences from the image (what fresh ways of understanding the social, political, and cultural experiences of disability and disabled people historically and/or contemporaneously can be obtained from this image?)
- Analysing the image (what meanings can be assigned to the artist's image of disability based on what we can see combined with what we think we know about the image?)
- Assuming the artist's intent and purpose in making the image (what was the artist's narrative intentions in portraying disability and the impacts of disablement?)

In short, I aim to explore the narratology of visual arts representation of disability, disablement, and the experiences of disabled people, i.e. the interactions between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer.

A glimpse back into history

But first, let us take a step back in time. Before the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the fifteenth century, most Europeans' knowledge was gleaned from what they heard and what they directly witnessed. By 1499, more than 2,500 European cities had printing-press houses, and 15 million books had been produced, which in turn drove the costs of books down and expanded the readership (Gornall 2009). Literacy was thus democratised for the general population, liberating reading and writing from the stranglehold of the monasteries, and disseminating knowledge throughout Europe. This brings me to my pivotal questions: to what extent did drawings, paintings, and other visual art forms historically reflect and influence people's understanding of their culture, society, and politics? More specifically, how did the absence and/or presence of images of disability and disablement in the visual arts influence people's understanding of disability by whatever term was used historically, e.g. cripple, handicap, impairment, disablement, and disfigurement? And how might those historical responses pertain to contemporary visual narratives and concomitant 'readings' of disability and disablement?

My musings were heightened when I stumbled across a 2013 documentary, *The Portrait of a Disabled Man from the 16th Century*, available on YouTube (selbstbestimmt1 2013), about a 2005–2006 research project, *The Painting of a Disabled Man—Study on the Representation of Disability and its Relevance to the Present* (Schönwiese & Flieger 2007). According to Schönwiese and Flieger (2007), this sixteenth-century painting, exhibited in the Kunst- und Wunderkammer (Cabinet of Wonders) at Ambras Castle near the city of Innsbruck, had apparently gone unnoticed by the scholarly community. It shows a naked man lying on his stomach on a dark green cloth resting on a table or pedestal. His limp and misshapen body is painted realistically (that is naturalistically), and great technical care appears to have been given to the colour tones of his body and also to the light and shadows within the room. The man's arms are placed downwards by the sides of his body, and his legs are bent up from his knees and crossed over at the ankles, pushing up against his lower back. On his head – which is twisted towards the viewer in a direct gaze – is a dome-shaped red hat with a small floral motif; a white ruffle adorns his neck. Despite the man's evident physical vulnerability, his direct gaze out towards the viewer

infuses him as a person, and the image as an object, with dignity. Indeed, forensic curatorial analysis of the work revealed that at that time, the image of this disabled man was decorously covered by a sheet of red paper; if a patron wished to see more, he or she could lift the sheet and look directly at the image (Schönwiese & Flieger 2007).

In their analysis of this painting, Schönwiese and Flieger were concerned with the visual representation of disability, and its relevance to everyday life and to science, from the past to the present. They suggested that this painting provides a historic perspective of 'the gaze,' bringing into sharp focus the deeply ambivalent gaze of the contemporary viewer, a gaze located between curiosity, fright, and detachment (Schönwiese & Flieger 2007). I was moved by this documentary, both professionally and personally. Professionally, I saw how this long-ago painting of a disabled man could teach us so much today about historic attitudes towards disability. Personally, I experienced, very powerfully, its lessons about the vulnerability of human dignity.

Separating the artist's work from the artist's biography

I pause now to explicate what I am *not* talking about. At the risk of contradicting my opening statements about my commitment to the 'insider perspective' of disability memoirs, I am not talking here about visual artworks exclusively produced by people with disabilities with the overtly deliberate and perhaps political intention of proselytising about disability, disability rights, and experiences of living with disability (Amanda Cachia in Chapter 16, Anne Millett-Gallant in Chapter 17, and Ann M. Fox in Chapter 18 of this collection will touch on more politically oriented work in the visual arts). Diane Kirkpatrick (1998), an American art historian, observes that through their artworks, disabled artists can "generate empathy for the hard and dazzling realities of life with disability" (439). De Botton and Armstrong (2013) observe that "Art builds up self-knowledge, and is an excellent way of communicating … to other people. Getting others to share our experiences is notoriously difficult; words can feel clumsy" (40). While important, these insights lead to an entirely different discussion, with a range of topic points including the perceived 'charity' and 'triumphal' status of disabled artists and their artworks. The focus on the artist's 'disability biography' can distract from or, more alarmingly, can be conflated with the artwork itself: the artists' disabilities become the default 'credential' for interpreting their artwork.

I am also mindful of Arnold Hauser's observation in his 1951 four-volume work, *The Social History of Art*, that "those who want to portray their own lives are social groups satisfied with their condition, not those who are still oppressed and would like a different life" (as cited by Eco 2007, 148). If we accept Hauser's proposition, then we need to acknowledge that the works of visual artists with disabilities as acts of protest and reclamation of their identity did not erupt into public attention until the disability rights movement of the 1960s–1970s. Artists such as Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close were early exceptions. This arguably means there is a gap in our understanding of the role of visual arts in telling the stories of people with disabilities prior to the rise of the disability rights movement.

Some visual artworks disclose something about disability either incidentally or to support the work's broader narrative theme. Other works with images of disability, disablement, or illness are comprehensively constructed as 'insider' manifestos calling out for disability rights, respect, or even just the simple acknowledgement of the existence and experiences of disabled people. This distinction matters for at least three reasons.

First, in my conversations about the representation of disability in the visual arts – how disability experiences are shown or 'recorded' in visual artworks and, by corollary, what the

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viewer can learn about the historic, cultural, social, and political contexts of people's experiences of disability – most listeners default to reframing this topic somewhat unctuously as a form of remedial therapy. Their focus deflects responsibility away from themselves, instead drilling down to the present-day clinical setting for the 'other,' that is the patient or client with a disability, and not on the self-knowledge they themselves might acquire from the precedent of many centuries of art history. The possibility that the historic visual narratives of disability might be a mainstream area for research and teaching across the fields of humanities and the social sciences as well as in health and medicine, or of interest and relevance for anyone other than a person with disability, seems to provoke benign incredulity at best and scepticism at worst.

Second, how we understand the interactions between the contemplative act of *viewing* images of disability and disablement in the visual arts, together with understanding the artist's motivation for *making* those images, seems to be an under-researched area, notwithstanding Rosemary Garland-Thomson's (2009) rigorously conceptual work, *Staring: How We Look*, along with her other similarly themed texts. Third, while contemporary art history explores the context and history of ideas such as Marxism, feminism, sexualities, queer theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory (see D'Alleva 2012), relatively little comparable work seems to have been done on the context and history of disability studies in art history. Ann Millett-Gallant's (2000) *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* and Tobin Siebers' (2010) *Disability Aesthetics* are the exemplary breakthrough texts in this latter field of study. The alliance between disability studies and art education also appears to be gaining traction (see Wexler 2009; Derby 2013; National Art Education Association 2017). Siebers' texts present perspectives on disability's cultural labour: how disability appears in art, architecture, literature; how its presence and relational web compels new insights into cultures, writing, and experience; and how criticism can offer readers tools for thinking anew about bodies in public space (Kuppers 2015).

Siebers' interest centred on the aesthetics of disability, rejecting the societal belief that disability cannot be beautiful (Levin 2010). My interest takes the next step, going beyond the question of beauty into the 'everyday,' 'ordinary' experiences of disability and disablement, and our responses to them.

A brief discussion of artworks across history, time, and place

I turn now to a small selection of artworks across history, time, and place: *The Beggars* (1568; also known as *The Cripples*) and *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (also 1568) by the Netherlands Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder; *Christina's World*, painted in 1948 by American artist Andrew Wyeth; and the *Schoolgirls and Angels* and *Alice in Wonderland* series of paintings by Australian artist Charles Blackman, during the mid- to late twentieth century.

I apply Lenette's (2016) adaptation of Panofsky's (1955) iconographic-iconologic framework and draw upon socio-historical critique by art historians and other writers in my discussion of these works. I have elected to write specifically about a selection of paintings, rather than rely on the generic but vague term 'visual arts,' to anchor more firmly my premise that the narratives within art images can engender fresh ways of understanding disability and the experiences of disabled people.

Disability as a metaphor for spiritual concerns

First, I consider Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Beggars*, which is also discussed by Watson and Mann (n.d.) in their online art history resource. Adeline Collange (n.d.)

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describes this image systematically (step one of the iconographic-iconologic enquiry process): "Five beggars and cripples are dragging themselves along painfully on their [stumpy, too-short] crutches in the sunny courtyard of a hospital built of red brick. They seem to be about to head off in different directions to beg, as is the woman in the background who is shown holding a begging bowl. On the back of the painting is an inscription in Flemish, "Cripples, take heart, and may your affairs prosper"" (n.d., n.p.). A contemporary viewer, such as myself, might regard this sixteenth-century image of disablement with dismay or revulsion.

In drawing inferences (step two of the iconographic-iconologic exploratory process), I initially made hasty judgements about social cruelty and even speculated upon Bruegel's contempt for these people, given his brutish, albeit detailed, portrayal of the impoverished beggars and their crudely carved crutches. A more objective and sustained analysis of this image (step three) required me to understand its historic context together with insights into Bruegel's narrative intent for his painting. Watson and Mann (n.d.) explain that the decline of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century resulted in the concomitant decline of charitable services, which in turn led to the rise of homelessness among the poor. They also explain that Christianity had two responses to people with disabilities: they were either sinners who had incurred God's punishment or saints who had a divine purpose. Nevertheless, irrespective of their status as sinners or saints, they were excluded from mainstream society. On further reading about this artwork, I found that several hypotheses have been proposed by art historians to explain the meaning or purpose of this work (step four of the iconographic-iconologic exploratory process), including its "allusion to Koppermaandag, the beggars' feast day held annually on the Monday after Epiphany, when the beggars would sing as they begged for alms in the streets" (Collange n.d., paragraph 3).

We can seek further clues to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's intentions for this painting by looking at his other works, such as *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (1568), as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew 15:14. Blind beggars were a recurring concern for Bruegel, reflecting his pessimistic view of life and humanity, and perhaps also denoting his moral view that "spiritual blindness" results in people's unhappiness (Bordin & D'Ambrosio 2011). Other interpretations of Bruegel's artistic intentions speculate on his bitterness with the Catholic Church and its lack of care for the tragic lives of people so impoverished and disabled (Karcioglu & Marmor 2002).

Physicians have also long been interested in Bruegel's works, as his masterly detail has enabled them to critically analyse the medical conditions he portrays in his paintings (Karcioglu & Marmor 2002). In his painting of the six blind beggars, ophthalmologists have been able to identify several possible causes of blindness, including corneal leucoma, atrophy of globe (eyeball), removed eyes (enucleation), pemphigus (conjunctival scarring) or pemphigoid (blisters), and photophobia (Karcioglu & Marmor 2002). Thus, contrary to my first judgemental reactions, Bruegel's detailed intentionality seems to signify his concern for his subjects rather than contempt for their lowly status.

My brief excursion around Bruegel's paintings raises further questions for enquiry. For example, how did sixteenth-century viewers respond to this painting? What can we learn, if anything, about sixteenth-century cultural, medical, and political attitudes to blindness and blind people? How might contemporary responses and attitudes differ, and why?

Disability: sentiment versus historical reality

Next, I consider Andrew Wyeth's (1948) 1948 painting, *Christina's World* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), which is claimed to be one of the best known images in

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twentieth-century American art (Hoptman 2012). First, we can see and describe the back of a young woman wearing a pale pink dress, with her dark hair tied back off her face (which is hidden from the viewer), sprawled across the bottom of a greenish-ochre-yellow grassy hill. The top half of her body looks lithe and supple, in contrast to her stretched out spindle-thin arms – one behind her, the other in front – in a posture of exertion and tension. The sway of her slim back leans away from the viewer, and her legs, which are mostly hidden at an awkward angle beneath the pink dress, seem inert. A farmhouse with outlying sheds or shacks sits distantly at the top of the hill, giving off an air of remoteness. The windows of the house and sheds are barely visible; the farmhouse door is shrouded in shadow. A pale grey sky hangs over the scene.

Second, we now try to draw inferences from this work. In the absence of prior knowledge, we might wonder at the young woman's twisted, almost prone, posture. Because the young woman's face is turned away from the viewer, she is infused with an anonymity that allows us to imaginatively fill in our own descriptive details. We are left to our own private contemplation of this scene; it looks and feels serene, if somewhat sentimental. Indeed, in the Museum of Modern Art's curatorial essay for this painting, the curator, Laura Hoptman (2012), is initially coy about Christina's personal history. She asks, "Who is this young woman, vulnerable but also somehow indomitable? What is she staring at, or waiting for? And why is she lying in a field?" (4).

However, our analysis – the third step of the iconographic-iconologic exploratory process – of "the meaning of *Christina's World* changes dramatically when we learn about the subject" (Griffin 2010, 32). On page 19 of Hoptman's (2012) curatorial essay, we find that "as a young girl, Christina [Olson] developed a degenerative muscle condition – possibly polio – that robbed her of the use of her legs by the time she was in her early thirties" (19). Christina refused to use a wheelchair, which would have been difficult to use in any case on those grassy slopes, and orthopaedic leather and steel leg braces were not invented until much later, in the 1940s. Instead, she crawled around the house and grounds. Wyeth was disturbed by Christina's half-paralysed body, and he reportedly "felt that when she dragged herself along, she looked 'like a crab on a New England shore'" (Griffin 2010, 35). *Apropos* Wyeth's comment, Griffin (2010) notes:

> As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) argues in her landmark study, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*, that kind of comment is consistent with the ways in which the physically disabled have often been cast as subhuman. *(35)*

Unfortunately, "that kind of comment" made in 1948 is reprised in Hoptman's 2012 curatorial essay when she writes that Christina has a "rather startling combination of girlish beauty and grotesque disfigurement" (25). Siebers (2010) provides a "disability aesthetics" framework for understanding such a conflicted response to Christina's body. He writes, "The senses revolt against some bodies, while other bodies please them" (1). He then poses the question, "Since aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection, what do objects representing disability tell us about the ideals of political community underlying works of art?" (2).

With this question in mind, when we proceed to step four in the iconographic-iconologic process, we see a glimpse of the "ideals of political community" in Wyeth's disclosure that he intended his painting "to do justice to [Christina's] extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless" (Hoptman 2012, 23). It is also useful to recall, as

Griffin (2010) does, that in 1948 "Wyeth did not have any visual templates of disabled women in art to emulate when he was painting 'Christina's World'" (39).

However, Wyeth's picture is significantly more than the story of one woman, Christina Olson. Contrary to Hoptman's sentimental assertion that the painting is "less a picture of a living individual than an allegorical figure of American womanhood" (21), the painting reflects the "era's heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the body. Christina's figure emerged from a society peopled with veterans who had recently returned from traumatic experiences in World War II and from widespread contemporaneous fears about polio" (Griffin 2010, 31). A medical history snapshot provides context to Griffin's claim: localised paralytic poliomyelitis epidemics appeared in Europe and the US around 1900, and then global epidemics occurred annually until about 1950 (Nathanson & Kew 2010). It was not until 1955 onwards, with the creation of poliovirus vaccines, such as the Salk vaccine, that the occurrence of polio declined and was eventually eliminated in the US by 1972.

Griffin (2010) concludes his essay by noting that "Christina's gesture of turning away from the viewer and the outside world distils the tyranny of the social norms that circumscribed and marginalised her, norms that can make the handicapped feel less than fully human" (47). Griffin's historically grounded insight contrasts searingly with Hoptman's sanguine conclusion that *Christina's World* embodies "the ideals of an America of Andrew Wyeth's creation and of countless viewers' imaginings" (41). What other interpretations or lessons might Wyeth's witness-perspective of Christina's life provoke about the medico-cultural legacy of polio in particular and the historical sociocultural responses to polio in general?

Deepening understanding of disability images over time

Finally, I consider a series of works by an Australian artist, Charles Blackman, acclaimed as having "drawn and painted some of the most brilliant images in Australia's modern art history" (Dickins & McGregor 2010, 9). I was a convent schoolgirl in 1970 when I first saw Charles Blackman's paintings, which is apposite given schoolgirls in hats and starchy uniforms figured so thematically in his work. Alice in Wonderland also dominated. Despite the schoolgirls' skipping postures and Alice's floral abundance, the vibrancy of those works was muted by an underscoring of loneliness, threat, and unease. At the time, and again now in recollection, Blackman's rendering of the girls' eyes was haunting. The girls' eyes – the schoolgirls' and Alice's – were rarely open. They were either cast in deep shadow (sometimes by the shade of their hats, sometimes by the turning aside of their faces, sometimes for no apparent reason at all) or shut tight in solitary meditation. Even when their eyes were open, they seemed sightless, as if they were staring into a middle distance without focus or attention.

When I was young, I did not draw informed inferences from this motif of sightlessness or question Blackman's artistic purpose. I liked Blackman's paintings for his expressionistic use of colour. I was a compliant and accepting viewer; I gazed and moved on. At most, I assumed Blackman's rendering of the schoolgirls' eyes was merely his artistic motif, his shtick, as it were. When I saw a painting of a girl – any girl – with closed eyes or eyes so deep in shadow that I could not see them, I recognised the painting as a Blackman.

Many years later, when I learnt that his wife, poet Barbara Patterson, was blind, I took Blackman's painterly portrayal of his wife's blindness for granted. It seemed a reasonable thing to do; I assumed he simply saw his wife's blindness and wanted to translate what he saw into those shadowy, haunting images. This shift in my responses to Blackman's paintings over time is consistent with the four-step questioning process in Panofsky's

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iconographic-iconologic framework. That is, I moved from the first step of a simple descriptive regard for Blackman's work, to the second step of drawing fresh inferences about his paintings based on my new knowledge about his wife's blindness together with my changed personal circumstances in that I was no longer a schoolgirl but a social worker specialising in disability policy.

More recently, I have undergone yet another change, involving a more contemplative regard for these paintings. This is consistent with Panofsky's third step in which we seek a deeper analysis and understanding of the visual arts image. My curiosity about the representation of disability in the visual arts has sent me squirrelling down many rabbit holes – much like Alice. One of those rabbit holes was the Queensland Art Gallery's exhibition of Charles Blackman's works, *Lure of the Sun*, 7 November 2015 to 31 January 2016. The Queensland Art Gallery's blog on 7 January 2016 (The Queensland Art Gallery 2016) states: "Barbara came to stand for Alice herself. Her struggle with her progressive blindness parallels Alice's efforts to conquer the mysterious circumstances in which she found herself."

It is worth reflecting upon this curatorial statement as it achieves a respectful balance between clarity about the artist's purpose ("Barbara came to stand for Alice herself") and explicitness of description ("Her struggle with her progressive blindness…"). In their chapter on activist practice in museums and galleries, Sandell et al. (2010) discuss the tensions and anxieties that museum staff can experience in their efforts to avoid causing offence "by inappropriately drawing attention to or stigmatising difference or by using language which might be judged disrespectful or outdated" (12). Some scholars advocate the social model of displaying and curating visual artworks, rejecting "individualist and medicalized ways of portraying disabled people" (16). However, Sandell et al. (2010) note that museums are well placed "to deploy diverse interpretative approaches" to understanding and learning (16).

Turning again to Panofsky's four-step framework for analysing visual arts images, we need to ask the fourth question: what were Charles Blackman's artistic intentions? What did he himself say or write about his painterly renderings of sight and blindness? In a 1967 interview, Blackman said he was influenced by Australian poet John Shaw Nielson's poems of schoolgirls:

> I thought them very beautiful, and very akin to what I felt myself, in some kind of way: the frailty of their image as such. And there was also the fact – though I did not realise it till much later – that he had very bad eyesight, and he used to write about these things using these emotional powerful throbbing colours … I was [also] then getting into a kind of vague feeling about painting something about Barbara's personality, because she didn't see as well: all these things seemed to coalesce in a kind of way.
>
> *(Shapcott 1967, 17)*

The striking thing about Blackman's statement is that he is so attentive to the 'aesthetics"' (to use Siebers' term) of his wife's blindness. Blackman's artistic intentions were not political or dramatic; he did not set out to paint 'blindness' as a psycho-medical drama, with the laden stereotypes that both blindness in particular and disability in general carry: vulnerability, invalidity, tragedy, alienation, segregation, or triumph over adversity (see Oliver 1996; Barnes & Mercer 2003; Shakespeare 2006). Rather, Blackman saw his painterly challenge more simply and truly. He wanted to capture the essence of his wife's personality. He wanted to understand and show her completely, not simply as a vessel containing the darkness of lost vision.

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However, in 1997, Barbara Blackman wrote dismissively of her (by then divorced) husband's "first-ever exhibition, that of the weird little schoolgirls" (Blackman 1997, 151):

> My blindness is my secret, a locked chamber because nobody has the key. Nobody asks the right questions. They [turn the] key in their imagination of blindness, the fear, the exotic, the dark into which we all go. But my blindness is luminance … Now the schoolgirls, the Alices, the family icons … they all fade in memory, invaded by light.
>
> *(Blackman 1997, 321)*

Barbara Blackman's words strike a tone of territoriality. She seems scornful that people do not understand her blindness because they (and it seems that she includes her former husband, Charles, in this group of people) do not ask her "the right questions." She describes her blindness as 'luminance' rather than 'the dark.' For someone who saw writing as her life's vocation, her words are cloyingly dense, hiding more than they reveal. Barbara Blackman goes on even more obliquely: "The schoolgirls are, after all, in transit between the home where they eat and sleep, and the school where they work and play. Transition is perilous. Falls the shadow" (321). How and why is the transition perilous? What shadow, what threat is she alluding to here? And how does this threat pertain to her life, if at all? Barbara Blackman's contrary responses to the schoolgirl paintings – and my questions about her responses – illustrate the wisdom of Panofsky's insight that none of us regards a visual arts image as an "entirely 'naïve' beholder" (16).

Conclusion

Pictures tell stories to viewers through visual elements and conventions, and they shape the way we understand each other (Garland-Thomson 2010). Visual arts narratives of disability and disablement offer us alternative means of understanding, contesting, and reconfiguring what we think we know about disability and the everyday life experiences of people with disability. The power of a single visual arts image, let alone a body of works over time, to illuminate a theme such as disability cannot be underestimated. Just as significantly but perhaps less well understood, the difficulty of accessing images in which people from historically marginalised groups in society can 'recognise' themselves demonstrably contributes to the continued marginalisation of those groups (Leavy 2015, 228). If people with disabilities are rendered 'invisible' or inaccessible both to themselves and to others, then the task of understanding their experiences becomes difficult, if not impossible.

In my discussion of a small selection of visual artworks across history, time, and place, I illustrate how artworks offer scope for critical reflective thinking about the experiences of people with disabilities. The iconographic-iconologic framework is a particularly useful process for contemplating visual arts narratives of disability. It can be applied as a single 'point in time' activity (as in my earlier discussion of the Pieter Bruegel and Andrew Wyeth paintings), or the process might unfold over several years (as in my discussion of Charles Blackman's paintings). It can also be undertaken either as a personal reflection or, for a practitioner, for teaching and research purposes in disciplines as diverse as psychotherapy, medicine, allied health, social sciences, and humanities.

Through this combination of reflection and analysis, we learn not only how "the art related to disability reflects the different ways people come to inhabit their bodies" (Sherwood 2006, 192), but also how artworks can signify the broader sociocultural contexts of disablement. In this way, the visual arts can move beyond merely reflecting the world as it once was, and now is, for disabled people. The visual arts can be an instrument of future disability

reform and change. They can be used to contribute to informed discussions in the classrooms, research domains, or even simply among friends and colleagues. Such discussions may yield nothing more than an occasional changed attitude or new insight about the prospects of better possibilities for people with disability. People's understanding about disability can be reformed by one painting at a time, one conversation at a time.

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