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Disability in British Art research group: Becky Beasley

October 12, 2022 - by [Becky Beasley](#)

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Disability in British Art is a new Research Group of the British Art Network (BAN) led by independent artist and curator Ashokkumar Mistry and Disability Arts Online CEO Trish Wheatley. The second meeting on Thursday 16th June 2022 explored lived experience of disability in relation to British Art. Artist Becky Beasley was invited to present the following paper, examining how her late autism diagnosis became a lens through which she situated her artistic practice.





H. S. P. (or Promising Mid-Career Woman) 27.11.21—05.02.22 Plan B, Berlin. Exhibition installation view of main gallery.

My solo exhibition, *H.S.P. (or Promising Mid-career Woman)* took place at Gallery Plan B, in Berlin from November 2021 to February 2022. The following essay examines my work through the lens of atypical neurology and feminism – with a focus on my neurotype, Autism – as an artistic dynamic.

Some years ago, someone came up to me at an opening and said that they had thought I was a man by my work. I didn't know what they meant, but I liked that there was some confusion. Hello, person. As a child they called me sweet, shy, creative, smart, sensitive, too sensitive, a tomboy sometimes, a smarty-pants, a know-it-all. They said I'd need to toughen up, to thicken up my skin, not to take things so personally, to be less sensitive, to relax, to cheer up, to pray, to meditate, to take more drugs, to drink less, to be more grateful, to speak up, to shut up. As a teen and in my twenties, they said I was an odd ball, a bit weird, unusual. I was also called unstable, needy, obsessive, controlling, demanding, intense, scheming, a monster, a witch.

My work has always been quite queer, quirky. I have always been quite quirky, queer, *quer* is the Germanic root. I am odd, oblique, off-centre. As I said, quirky. It turns out – could you even believe it? – I am actually autistic. Oh, and progesterone intolerant.

Neuro-queer was not an option within mainstream when I was twenty, born in 1975 and raised Catholic in a small seaside town on the South coast of England.

H.S.P. (or Promising Mid-Career Woman) was a coming-out exhibition which I staged after realising my autistic identity. *H.S.P.* expressed the joys and complexities of an entirely autistic life, understood only in retrospect. *H.S.P.* – an acronym for Highly Sensitive Person – is an ode to the highly individual process of being a person in the world. Through the sensitivities of photographic, ceramic, and linen surfaces, the three centrepieces of *H.S.P.* were installations, through which the human need for intimacy manifest in alternatives that have since become my trademark minimal approach to art making.

Room 1 is the atrium, the room you step into from outside. I have always loved these rooms, a space between the outside and the inside, a moment to compose oneself, to regulate the nervous system. Darkrooms are tricky spaces when one is highly sensitive to light, to darkness, the red light, the daylight, or electric lighting outside the darkroom. In and out; in and out, lights on, lights off. For an autistic person, this can be exhausting. This room utilised a curatorial formula which I love – the 3-part invention – here, a linoleum floor, a digitally printed photograph, and a sculpture. The 3-part equation is literally the stuff of fiction; of fairy tales.

Four years ago, I made my previous exhibition, prior to *HSP*, at Gallery Plan B. It was titled *Depressive Alcoholic Mother*. The title – always comes to us first in press releases – proposes a figure. A figure which each individually and, very privately, processes, imagines somehow, through the filters through which it is perceived. Perception emerges as a series of questions: what figure is this? Who is this? On first entering the exhibition, this title as figure becomes ground.

This reprise of my last show at Gallery Plan B, 'Depressive Alcoholic Mother' (2018), came in the form of the linoleum floor-work, *Highly Sensitive Person (H.S.P.)*, is an intentional déjà vu. The slight disorientation therein offers a tangible, uncanny



H. S. P. (or Promising Mid-career Woman) 2021 Linoleum Pink Granite and Petrol 1m diameter text circle, room dimensions variable

experience of my own experience of late-diagnosis autism in the winter of 2020. My research over the last two years had led me deep into an entrenched history of medical negligence in female and hormonal healthcare and moreover, the ongoing misdiagnoses of atypical neurology. Undiagnosed progesterone intolerance and masked autism. Words are so clean.

What is the societal impact when we use language as an identifier of disability? Debilitating depression, serial burnout, exhaustion, systemic ableism, stigmatisation, bullying, gas lighting, social death, social exclusion and bewilderment. Being endlessly bewildered by others is terrifying. To be bewildered is, etymologically and experientially, to be sent into a wild place without a road map. It is to be astray in oneself. Previously, I had described my late autism diagnosis as 'possibly one of the strangest of happy endings– not exactly happy and certainly no end.'

The three curtain structures, H, S and P are visible here in the exhibition map. A pair of small gelatin silver-prints of a striped shirt hang tenderly, back-to-back within the two spaces created by an 'H' shaped curtain structure. A photograph of a 1930's ceramic Ilford photographic film processing tank hangs alongside *Me as Andy*, within the intimacy of curved spaces of an 'S' shaped curtain structure. Eleven works in the show are titled *BACK!*, hanging within the P-shaped room.

H: The nape of a wrap shirt which I made when I returned to sewing a few years ago is the subject, with small objects laid onto this imaginary back. The nape, a sensitive place on a woman's body, the site of both tenderness and fear. The appearance of silver gelatin prints creates a moment of difference: experiential, a real and quantitative experience of their surface, qualities, depth, texture, self-presentation.

S: A 25-year-old, un-exhibited photograph, *Me as Andy* (1996), made by Beasley at the age of 20, shows her made up, wearing a wig, looking directly at the camera. *Me as Andy*, shot on color film when I was 20 in 1996 and color-printed then myself when I was learning how to practice within, and later abandoned, the colour darkroom. The shift from pitch-black darkness into light was more than I could cope with. *Me as Andy* was a print I returned to again last year, post-diagnosis, aged 45, finally able to understand myself and my experience: despite my middle age. This heightened self-awareness connected me to the younger Gen Z – I to their activism in making visible the other invisible within the mainstream, the hitherto manifold nuance of individual and specific difference: pronouns being a very visible example. I had my print scanned and reworked from copy, rather than the original negative, to acknowledge the progression I had made as a person and artist from when I was young.

P: *BACK!* (Ilford Ceramic) sits alongside *Me as Andy* within the S shaped curtain structure, its porcelain surface mirroring my whitened face make up. The photographic series, 'BACK!' is formed of seven life-sized photographs of a German-branded glossy black paint pot – used to paint her early sculptures for photographs made in Berlin in the early 2000's – each of which has been toned a muted colour, creating a uniquely

personalized pastel 'rainbow' which circles the walls of the gallery's main room. My 'over the rainbow' palette is inspired not from Disney, but from an inter-war watercolour by British artist, Eric Ravilious, *The Bedstead* (1939). By incorporating the prism-like colours of *The Bedstead*, I celebrated all our returns; the exhibition, a celebration of diverse collective recoveries.

I want to finish with some words on support. I took up ceramics in 2019. I loved it from the first. Over the first intense year of learning the basics and looking at others works, often in books, I was guided in my own ceramic journey. When I came to make these sculptures, I took the books I had learned the most from and used them as supports, or plinths on which to sit my fledgling works, acknowledging both their guidance but also my own confidence in my decision to show my first ceramic pieces in public. The journey into ceramics is a life study and so this moment of my own journey two years in both in making and in my relationship with deceased female ceramic artists is expressed here, tenderly, joyfully.

This book, beautifully designed, is a monograph of Valentine Schlegel, who was under-appreciated in her lifetime. The book is called *Je dors, Je travaille*. I Sleep, I Work. So too, my autistic life.



Me as Andy (1996) 2021 Archival digital print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag 52 x 36.5 cm.



'Je dors, je travaille' (I Sleep, I Work, 2021)

Public space has been so vital to the joy I did experience in my life prior to diagnosis. My private life was always distressing and stressful, full of confusion and exclusion and acute suffering. Public space remains the space I want to be social in, through my exhibitions. My autistic, artistic life. My joy therein. Je dors, je travaille.

To find out more about the artists' work visit BeckyBeasley.com.

British Art Network (BAN) is supported by Tate Plus and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

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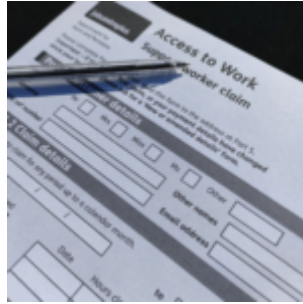
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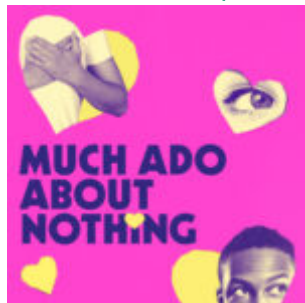
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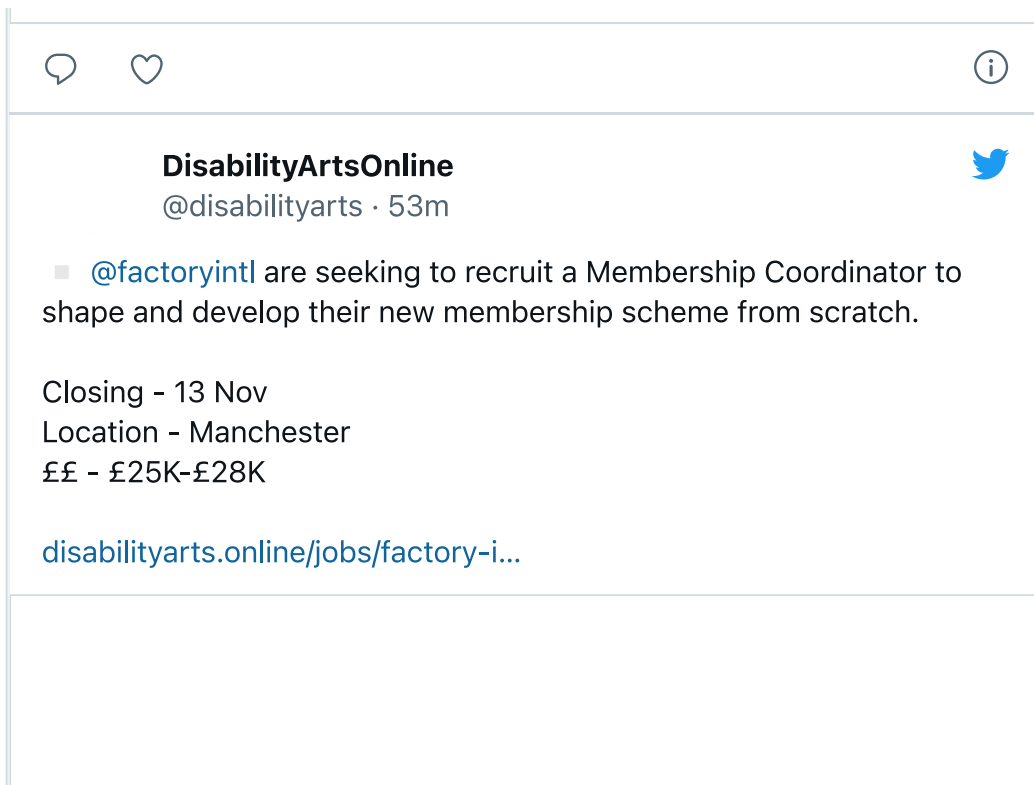
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