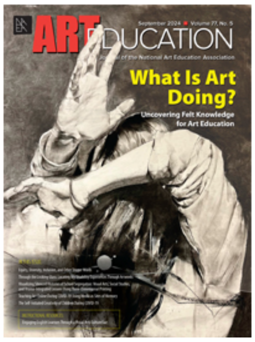

Art Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/uare20

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To cite this article: Shivani Bhalla (2024) Through the Looking Glass: Locating My Disability Experiences Through Artworks, Art Education, 77:5, 15-22, DOI: 10.1080/00043125.2024.2352296

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2024.2352296

Through the Looking Glass:

Locating My Disability Experiences Through Artworks

Shivani Bhalla

LIVING WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS (MS) and growing up witnessing my family's struggles with their disabilities made me realize early on in my life that disability impacts not just one person, but the entire family. I see disability as a fog enveloping and coloring everything, every relationship around me, its effects seeping into all aspects of my existence. Often, my disability experiences are so perplexing and intense that artmaking becomes the only way for me to acknowledge and analyze my experiences and cut through that fog. My artworks witness how I experience disability both inside and outside—at an emotional level and in terms of my relationships with my environment, as well as with the people around me.

In this article, I explore the importance of artmaking in expressing the complex and multifaceted nature of disability experiences and the relevance of this topic to the field of art education. First, by referencing my artworks, I acknowledge the potential of artmaking in expressing the trauma and feelings of loss and pain associated with the disability experience. Then, analyzing my experiences from the theoretical perspective of disability studies (DS), I write about DS's significance in providing me with a comprehensive understanding of disability experience. I also examine DS's role in looking at my artworks as autoethnographies, a form of research that uses self-reflection to explore personal experiences and connect the analysis to wider cultural and social understandings (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997). While doing that, I explore how my autoethnographic artworks help me analyze my disability experiences by functioning as a looking glass to my life's experiences around harmful social and cultural beliefs about disability and developing a positive disability identity. Finally, situating myself as a researcher in art education, I demonstrate how the field of art education, through a DS perspective, can assert the significance of the voices of people with disabilities (PWDs) through artmaking.

Encountering DS

My MS diagnosis largely impacted my decision to conduct research within art education through the perspective of an artmaker to explore my disability experiences. My diagnosis had a devastating impact on my self-image as well as on my career as an artist and art educator. All this changed when I began to study DS literature.

Encountering DS scholars like Susan Wendell (1997), Tobin Siebers (2008), Alison Kafer (2013), Eunjung Kim (2017), and Eli Clare (2018) during this struggle felt like a ray of hope. DS revolutionized my understanding of disability. By critiquing the ableist perspective that views disability as a problem in a PWD, the DS perspective acknowledges the root of the challenges around disability in unaccommodating environments. Like the use of stairs instead of ramps in a building, ableist attitudes assume that some people are superior and normal, and others are inferior or abnormal, resulting in institutional discrimination and biases (Goodley, 2012).

Among the work of DS scholars, Kafer's (2013) political–relational model stating that disability is experienced "in and through relationships" (p. 8) resonated most with me and provided a framework to analyze my disability experiences. I realized that my family members' disabilities have always impacted me and continue to impact my decisions and choices living with a disability. It also made it evident to me that my artworks are testimonies of my disability experiences through familial relations. After reading the works of DS scholars that stressed the importance of the voices of PWDs in disability discourse and the importance of claiming disability identity for the physical and psychological well-being of PWDs (Kafer, 2013; Wendell, 1997), I realized the significance of sharing the disability experience and claiming my

> **My artworks witness how I experience disability both inside and outside—at an emotional level and in terms of my relationships with my environment, as well as with the people around me.**

Figure 1. Shivani Bhalla, *Vestigial Structures*, 2014. Gouache and watercolors on rice paper, 24 × 32 in. Set of four artworks. Courtesy of the artist.

disability identity. I was also encouraged to explore the role of artmaking in establishing a disability identity.

Encountering DS scholars like Susan Wendell, Tobin Siebers, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Eli Clare during this struggle felt like a ray of hope. DS revolutionized my understanding of disability.

Situating Myself

My disability experience occurred in many different stages. Although my diagnosis with MS altered the trajectory of my life and informed my decision to work with the theme of disability, my challenges of living with disability started far before my diagnosis with MS while witnessing my parents' struggles with their disabilities. This experience compelled me to see disability negatively, as a taboo and misfortune that must be hidden at any cost.

Lately, my experience of disability has been dominated by daily struggles living with this invisible chronic illness, which gets further complicated being a full-time graduate student at a research university and a care provider for my mother in hospice. However, my most recent encounter with the DS scholarship as a graduate student facilitated a healthy relationship with my disability identity. It significantly altered my attitude toward disabilities and facilitated the development of a positive disability identity. This experience instilled a desire to conduct art education research through the perspective of disability experience and explore the intersection of artmaking and disability.

Looking at the trajectory of my artworks, I realized that artmaking played an important role in sharing my disability experiences and claiming my disability identity. This shift in my attitude toward disability encouraged me to seek art educators whose scholarship aligned with the DS perspective. I was thrilled to discover the works of art education scholars like Derby (2011, 2012), Eisenhauer (2009; [Eisenhauer] Richardson, 2017), Keifer-Boyd (2018), and Wexler (2009, 2022). These scholars championed the DS perspective in art education by creating awareness about the intersections of art, education, and disability, challenging stereotypes around people with disabilities and the deep-rooted ableism in visual culture. These DS-focused art educators' work has deeply informed the foundation of my scholarly, artistic, and educational practices.

Looking at My Artworks as Autoethnographies

DS scholarship also significantly influenced my decision to comprehend my artworks as autoethnographies around disability experience. Reading about the disability journeys of DS scholars, I was encouraged to share my disability experiences. I also became aware of the importance of artmaking in documenting and sharing my disability experiences from an autoethnographic perspective.

One day, I experienced an epiphanic moment as I revisited my artworks from the past. It was as if I was looking at my life experiences through a looking glass—looking outside from inside the artworks; I felt something uncanny about those familiar settings, as though they were turned inside out. In that moment, I realized that my artwork has always been instrumental in sharing my inner turmoil about my family's struggles with disability. Around this time, I also encountered scholarship about the research methodology of autoethnography and saw this as a way to conduct research about my experiences as an artist, educator, and scholar with a disability. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay's (1997) definition of "autoethnography [as] a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text" (p. 60) resonated with me, as I see my artworks as reflections of my family's history and as indicators of the social hierarchies that have shaped my life as a PWD and as a woman from India living in the United States. Looking at the trajectory of my artmaking practices, I feel they have helped me locate myself, record my experiences around various epiphanic moments of my life, and analyze how the world around me impacts me.

Reading Stacy L. Holman Jones et al.'s (2013) description of autoethnography as a form of research that uses personal experiences to critique cultural practices and embraces vulnerability to establish an empathetic connection with audiences, I could not help but acknowledge the potential of artworks to function as autoethnographies due to artworks' innate ability to provide a window into artists' inner landscapes and emotions, to appeal to spectators' emotional intelligence, and to critique social and cultural settings.

Knowing Myself: Analyzing My Artworks

Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) stated that "some knowings cannot be conveyed through language" (p. 10), and she urged us to "acknowledge the existence of forms of knowing that escape the efforts of language to reference" (p. 10). My art practice has always been a means to understand, explore, and express complex emotions that transcend the limitations of verbal language and logical thinking. Artist books and paintings have become a place to readdress some difficult and subjective memories around disability, which otherwise would have been difficult to acknowledge and share. Artworks bear witness to how I experienced a particular event and carried its memory in me at physical and subtle levels of my existence that are too intense to share in any other format.

My artworks have often been key to learning about myself. Retrospectively looking at my artworks made me aware of the recurring depiction of disability in them. Often structured around my childhood memories, they reflect oppressive social hierarchies and silenced narratives around the presence of mental illness in my family. One key work, called *Vestigial Structures* (Figure 1), is about my paternal grandfather (Bhapa Ji), who was often ignored and forgotten in the house as we went about our daily lives.

Bhapa Ji lived with mental illness and died when I was very young; therefore, I have a very bleak and vague memory of him. Even as a child, I realized that Bhapa Ji was at the bottom of the hierarchy and was often avoided by family members. He was always aloof. No one spoke to him, nor was he encouraged to speak; it was almost as if he did not exist in the house. I recently realized that he lived with mental illness, which our family was too ashamed to acknowledge. He was often locked up in his room during the psychotic episodes so that no one could see him; even the window of his room was permanently sealed.

Revisiting my artwork recently, I was inspired to write a poetic description of my memory of him. The innocent and naïve perspective, as if written by my younger self, gives an unbiased description of the social settings from a child's eye and makes evident the ableist attitude and biases against mental illness:

Bhapa Ji

You had this habit of sneaking up on people without them knowing.

I imagined you sneaking up on me through the latticework on that door.

Maybe I wanted you to pay attention to me while everyone else in the house was busy and trying to act sane and important.

I don't remember you ever talking to me, but I remember your presence in our house.

But I remember you slightly less than our veranda with moss growing between the cracked brick floor, Papa's blue Luna parked at the corner of that veranda, the money plants climbing up and almost covering the entire wall, and the intoxicating smells of the white-plastered walls after the rain.

Unlike you, Mata Ji (grandmother) was good at making her presence felt.

She was always busy doing something or the other, often sitting on her old broken plastic chair relentlessly watering the plants with the hose pipe.

I think she loved and cared for her plants more than she cared for anyone else.

The plants slowly forced their way out of the terracotta pots, their roots trying to sneak out of the container by slowly cracking the pots.

The patch of the small garden and potted plants felt more alive than you, Bhapa Ji!

In those warm summer afternoons when I wandered around the house in my school uniform trying to kill time, you were often invisible, but I imagined that you were looking at me through the latticework in the door.

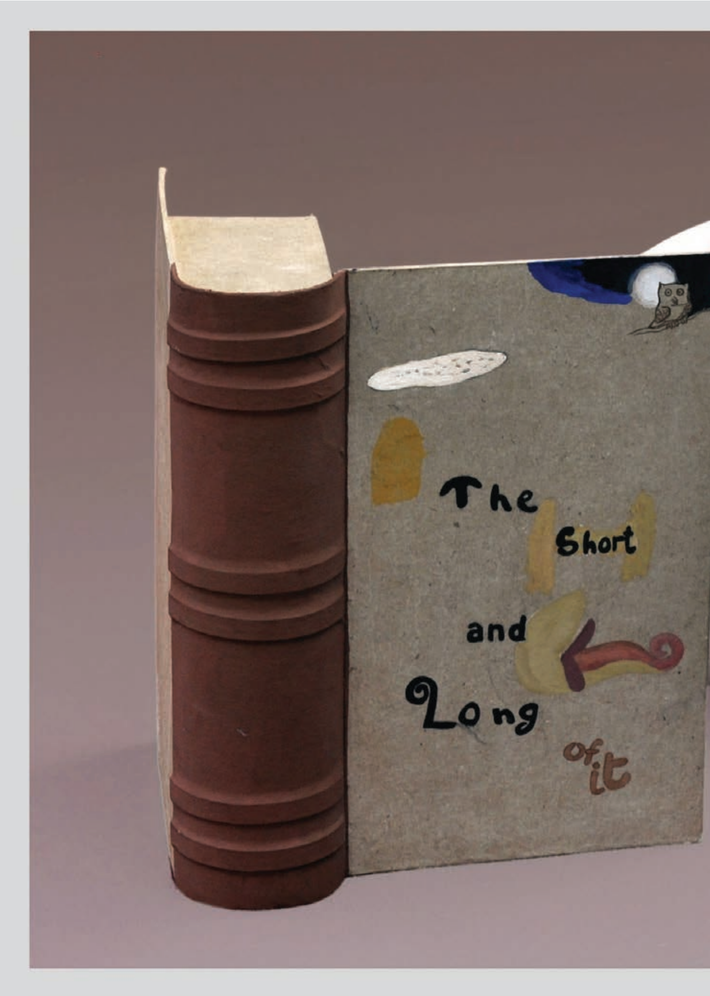
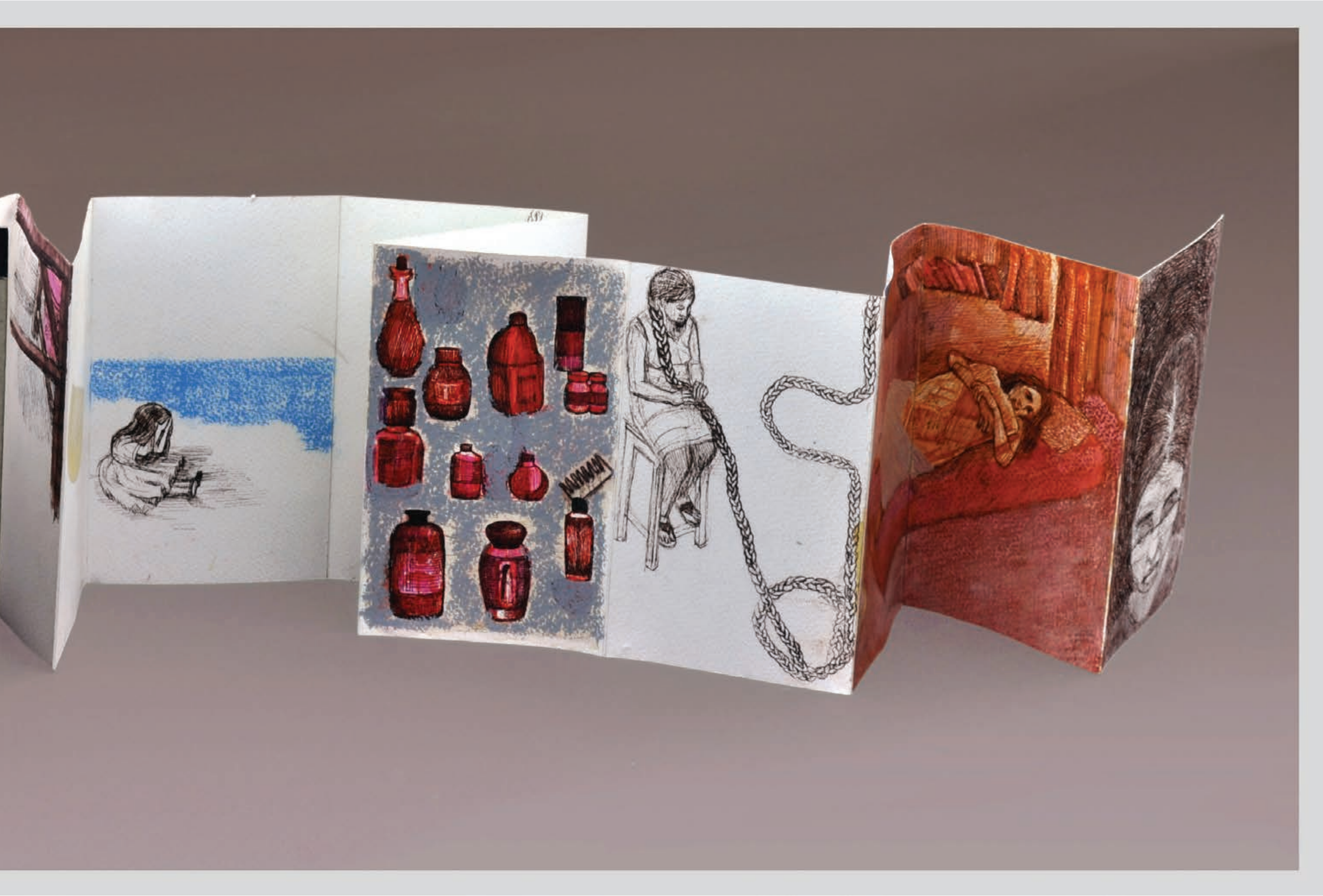


Figure 2. Shivani Bhalla, *A Long Tail Cut Short*, 2012. Accordion book, 55 × 7 in. Courtesy of the author.

Trauma, Disability, and Artmaking

DS scholars Kafer (2016) and Siebers (2010) acknowledged the trauma embedded in the struggles of living with a disability. Focusing on the relationship between trauma, disability, and the visual representation of trauma, Siebers (2010) contended that aesthetic representations of disability experience should also acknowledge the "fragility of human beings and their susceptibility to dramatic physical and mental change" along with "psychic impairments, psychological injuries, and mental traumas" (pp. 102–103). Growing up in a family with a prevalence of mental illness, I experienced disability through trauma embedded in ableist attitudes against mental illness, the compulsive need to hide our disabilities, and the constant fear of being found out and judged by others.

Kafer (2016) also acknowledged the need to express pain, loss, and trauma associated with disability within the DS context. A survivor of an arson fire who acquired a disability due to this traumatic life event, Kafer (2016) quoted Susan Brison, stating, "Attempting to limit traumatic memories does not make them go away, [but] narrating a traumatic memory can help to defuse it"



(p. 18). The act of narrating traumatic memory also aligns with the idea of seeing my artworks as autoethnographies around various epiphanic events around disability and trauma.

Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) emphasized the importance of sharing traumatic experiences. Anzaldúa contended that the creative arts are driven by a desire to communicate, make sense of the world, and act on the knowledge gained through life experiences. Further stating the importance of sharing one's painful experiences for the benefit of the community at large, Anzaldúa (2015) stated, "By redeeming your most painful experiences, you make them something valuable.… [S]hare it with others so they, too, must be empowered" (p. 117).

Reading the works of these scholars, reanalyzing my experiences through a DS lens, and looking at the trajectory of my artmaking practices, I realized that visual formats helped me share traumatic aspects of disability experience without being too literal. Artmaking allowed me to retain some amount of ambiguity in my work, which created a safe distance for me to revisit those memories.

The accordion book (Figure 2) was made a few months before my official diagnosis of MS and captured my struggles of living with the undiagnosed illness and the physical and psychological symptoms like pain, fatigue, and depression it caused. Because MS is an uncommon disease in India, it took a long time for doctors to diagnose my symptoms, which worsened my anxiety, adding to the already existing symptoms. This accordion book captures my struggles with MS symptoms and my unsuccessful attempts to find a cure and relief, ranging from multivitamins and herbal medicines to alternative treatments. Overall, this book allowed me to address various aspects of my disability experience and the trauma embedded in the situation. Finally, through Maurice Stevens's (2009) reference to trauma as a "cultural object" (as cited in Ionescu & Callus, 2018, p. 21), and whose meanings far exceed the boundaries of any shock or disruption, I assert that this accordion book, along with my other artworks, acts as a cultural object where extreme pain overflowed the boundaries of time and space.

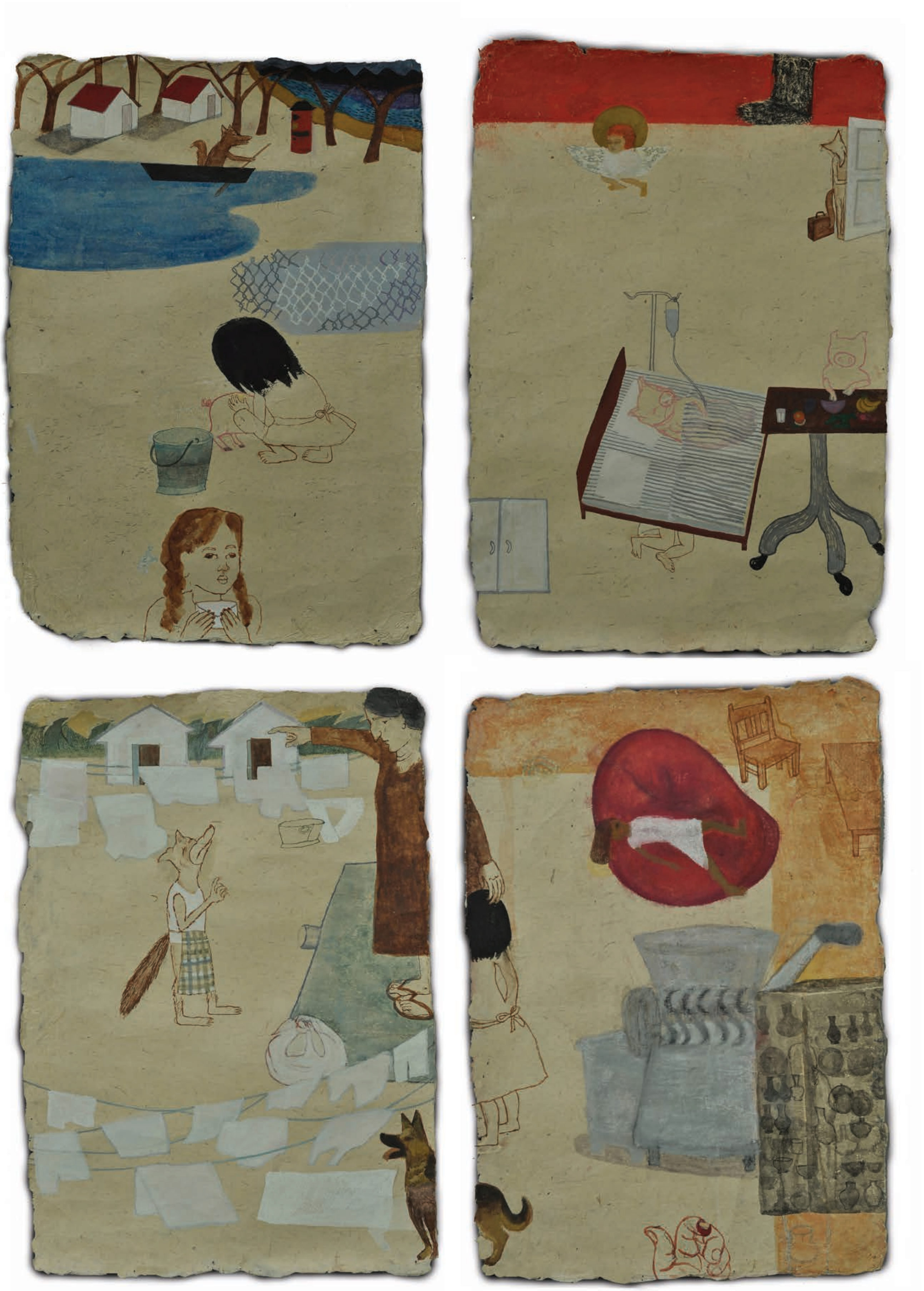


Figure 3. Shivani Bhalla, *A Clever Fox That Was Not So Clever*, 2013. Gouache and watercolors on rice paper, 15 × 22 in. Set of four artworks. Courtesy of the artist.

Subjective Renderings of Life Events

My artworks are not mimetic representations of life situations or events; instead, they are subjective renderings of the events through which I try to capture the essence of the situation. Using metaphors and symbolism helps me maintain ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations so that viewers can enter the artwork from their own standpoint. Ruth Leys (2000) stated that because consciousness and memory are in a state of shock during trauma, the trauma memories often return belatedly in the form of flashbacks. Hence, I often see my artworks as flashbacks that came into existence many years after the traumatic incidents.

These visual narratives rarely emerge linearly; multiple panels (Figure 3) help me give structure and address various aspects of that event. Sometimes these various panels try to capture the passage of time; other times, they try to capture the various emotions I experienced around that event and the essence of the situation. So often, the past, present, and future get conflated to create a narrative that has a timeless existence of its own.

I created the artist's book *Summer of 95* (Figure 4) almost 3 decades after my dad's death. It is based on my memory of our struggle as a family with his mental illness and, ultimately, his disappearance from our lives. We, as a family, chose to maintain silence around this event, fearing that we might hurt each other with memories of this phase. But moving away from home to a different city for work created a physical and psychological distance from my home and family and allowed me to revisit some of the traumatic memories from my childhood around the disabilities in my family. The small book format resembling a family album felt very intimate, making it a safe place to depict these personal memories.

In this book, I consciously acknowledged my experiences around my dad's illness and death for the first time since his passing away. Creating this artwork gave me space and time to explore and address trauma, pain, and the complex emotions associated with that event. It also gave me the courage to share those experiences with my sister, who lived through this traumatic experience along with me. Showing that book to her initiated conversations around those silenced narratives from our childhood.

Working as an educator, artist, and researcher in art education and exploring the role of artmaking in sharing the complexity of disability experiences, I feel art education has created a safe space for me to revisit some difficult memories from my past. This experience has made me cognizant of the fact that the field of art education can play a significant role in creating safe spaces for students to share their experiences through artmaking and engage in critical dialogue with themselves and their surroundings.

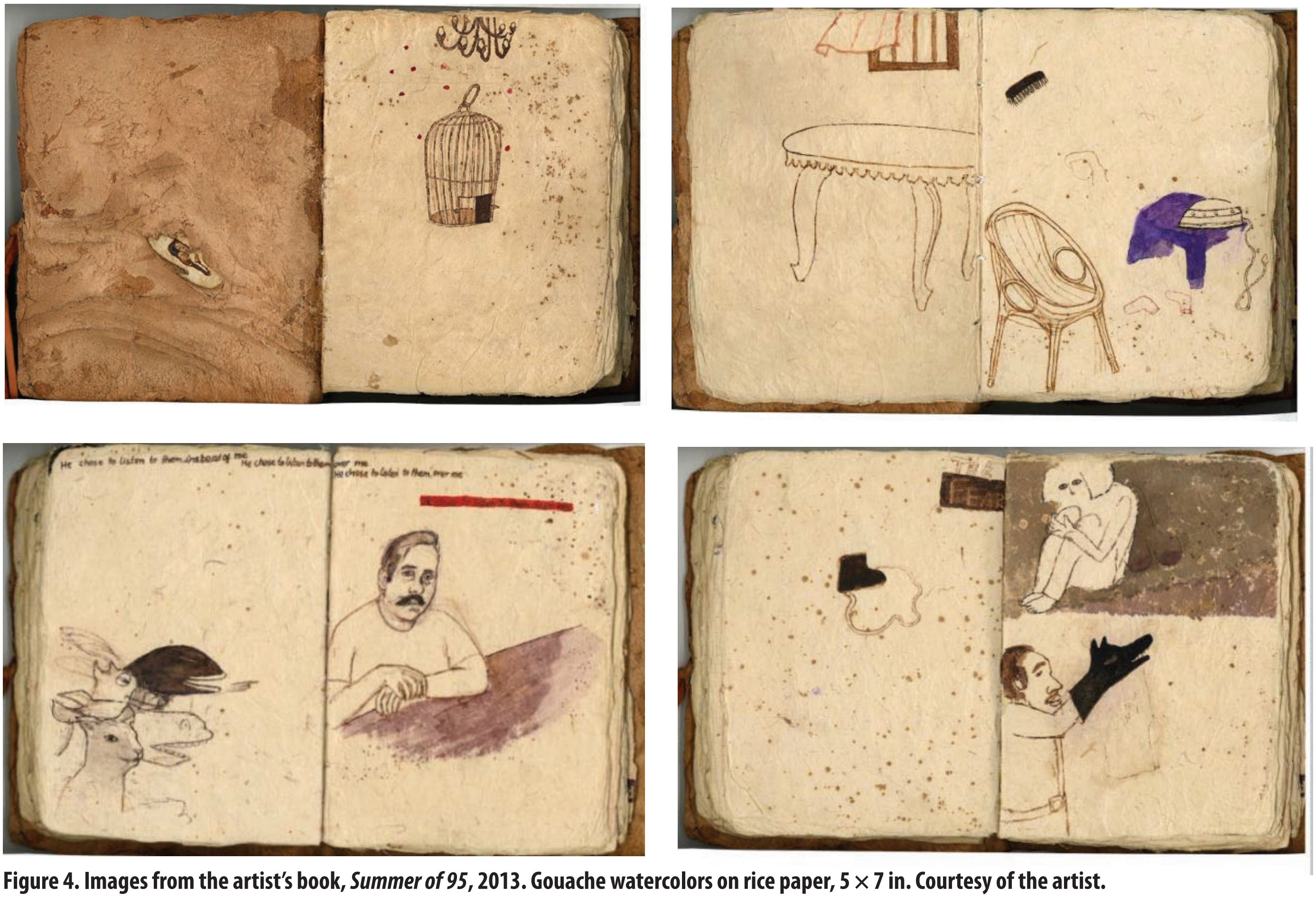


Figure 4. Images from the artist's book, *Summer of 95*, 2013. Gouache watercolors on rice paper, 5 × 7 in. Courtesy of the artist.

These visual narratives rarely emerge linearly; multiple panels help me give structure and address various aspects of that event. Sometimes these various panels try to capture the passage of time; other times, they try to capture the various emotions I experienced around that event and the essence of the situation.

Conclusion

In this article, aligning with the DS perspective, I have reiterated the importance of artmaking in sharing one's disability narratives and creating a positive disability identity. I also refer to the significance of artmaking for artists with disabilities as a driving force toward self-actualization and fulfilling the need for self-expression. Artmaking can play a significant role in facilitating an individual's creation of a sense of agency by challenging social stigmas and finding value in their uniqueness and differences.

The field of art education, by establishing artmaking as a site for knowledge production, self-discovery, and a place to understand one's relationship with their environment, could significantly impact how disability is understood and perceived in society. By creating physical and intellectual spaces in art classrooms through artmaking activities and encouraging discussion around individual narratives, art educators can work against the stereotypes surrounding disability and play a critical role in steering students toward a socially responsible and constructive way of participating in society.

Finally, quoting Keifer-Boyd (2018) on the importance of individual narratives within broader disability discourses, "Art educators can facilitate art projects that challenge master narratives of oppression and produce multivocal cultural narratives, helping students to learn about lives that are different from their own" (p. 48), I would like to say that art educators can encourage students to create visual narratives to bring forth personal stories and contribute to the discourses around disability and other differences. Also, by encouraging students to share their experiences and listen to others, art educators might make students more mindful of the fact that there is often more than one version of a story. This attitude can prepare them to be more empathetic and tolerant toward others' perspectives and life experiences, which eventually might play a critical role in steering students toward a socially responsible and constructive way of participating in society. ■

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