

**Student Name: Oscar Owain Fox**

**Student Number: 1902209**

**Programme of Study: Illustration**

**Module: Ways of Perceiving (ADAD4019)**

**Tutor: Jonathan Pugh**

**Word Count: 1533**

### **Gallery Title: Leading Divergence; A Neurodivergent Curation**

The gallery I've curated will be centred around neurodivergence, how neurodivergent people perceive and create artwork, and the way in which our brains function. Neurodivergency is a broad term, one which covers a large spectrum of "different" brains. Most commonly it is used to refer to people who have some form of neurodevelopmental disorder such as ADHD, autism, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, and others. As someone with both ADHD and autism, I will mostly be focusing on artists who also have or were speculated to have had these conditions. I feel that having these conditions affects the way in which I produce, perceive, and communicate through artwork, making it a large part of who I am. I think it's a very important topic that should be talked about more often in media as it affects a large amount of people whose struggles are often overlooked or not acknowledged when viewing their artwork and their process.

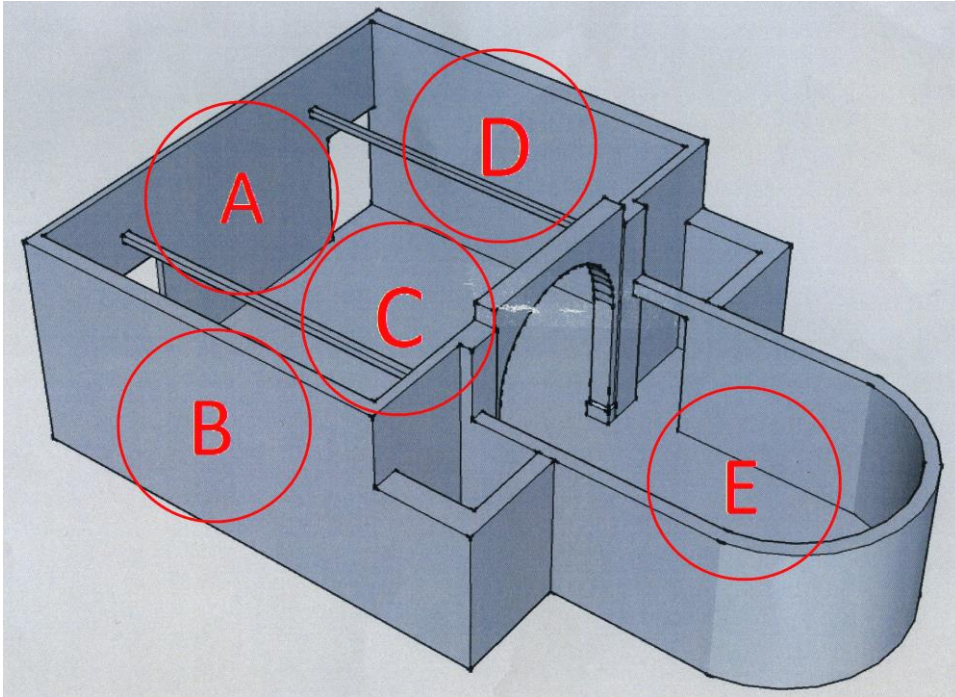
The theme of my gallery is a very personal one to me, as it is my livelihood, something I've lived through since birth and had to adapt and grow into a society that often overlooks the struggles of people like myself. I chose it as I believe my ADHD and autism play an integral part in how I make my art as it can cause great struggle and stress, in many more different ways compared to what a neurotypical (NT) person would experience. NT people, those without any intellectual disabilities, often have a more straightforward way of completing their artwork whereas in neurodivergent (ND) people, getting work done can be literally physically painful for us if we don't know enough about the project we are to work on. As a disclaimer, when I say 'we', I am talking about my personal experiences that I'm sure many other ND people can relate to, but every single ND person experiences their trials and tribulations differently and should be listened to by NT people and not be generalised or stereotyped.

Simply existing as an ND person is difficult enough, but many people go undiagnosed with their conditions for years before getting the help they need. Not only does the person or someone in said person's life need to first notice that they are struggling, but then having to go through the diagnosis process is another feat in and of itself – if going through the NHS can take longer than five years unless you're able to afford going private, and even then, "[the diagnosis process]... hardly attempts to observe the individual's ability to perform in non-academic tasks." (Sibay, 2020). The diagnosis process for ADHD and autism are mostly focus on how well a person functions in a neurotypical society, not considering anything other than whether we're able to pass tests in childhood and work a 9-5 job in adulthood or not.

Sonia Boue is an autistic writer and multiform artist, one of which I've included the artwork of in my imagined gallery. In one of her articles from 2020, she talks about how "little about the way many ND artists work best is reflected in neuro-normative professional practice," and that "there can be a great deal of unlearning to do in unshackling ourselves from these tyrannies." I agree with both statements, the first one being about how ND artists are often forced into a box, to simply be like everyone else despite our brains being wired differently. We work in our own ways of which neurotypical people often don't like or understand, but we each need to be treated as individuals and be given help with each of our corresponding struggles. The second statement really hits home for me, as I feel I am constantly masking myself to fit in with others, rather than just accepting and being who I really am, which can very negatively affect my work and process. Unlearning every harmful thing that's been hammered into us since birth is a great struggle, one that I think should be taken more seriously in the arts.

Regarding the curation of my gallery, I've picked artworks that I can link together, following "contexts within existing contexts that are interconnected" (Lind and Gillick 2005). I am able to see an intrinsic connection between each

artwork I've chosen, all of them being produced by artists of a different nature than most artists in the spotlight. The meanings behind each of the chosen works all come from similar places, even though none of the artists may know each other. It's something that is unwittingly known amongst neurodivergent people, things that we all experience – just in different ways. I've used the floorplan of the Mission Gallery for my imagined curation, shown below – each labelled space being for a different artist.



*Gallery Space*

**A - Sonia Boue**



*Neurophototherapy by Sonia Boue*

As mentioned previously, Sonia Boue is a multiform artist who is autistic. This specific piece of hers really spoke to me as I see a lot of meaning behind it that I can relate to. The top half of the picture being her now and the bottom part of the image being her as a child reminds me of that childlike innocence a lot of ND people keep well into adulthood. It feels reminiscent of a childhood that we may have lost due to our neurodivergencies, a childhood that was meant for someone else. The bread may also be symbolic in this piece, as autistic people often have comfort foods, which are often carbohydrates as they taste and feel the same every time causing no stress to our overbearing sensory problems. Looking at the image from top to bottom, the “eyes” on the bread seem like Boue is looking back on her childhood, all the good and bad times, and gives an almost melancholic feel.

#### **B – Ben Fearnside**



*Bounce by Ben Fearnside*

Ben Fearnside is an artist with ADHD and works mostly on canvases with metal. His art is very erratic, and often includes geometric shapes. I chose this piece of his in particular as it very much reminds me of my brain. It's like my own feelings put down on a single canvas. In a post on his website, he talks about the pros and cons of his ADHD, how his hyper-focusing on art is often useful when creating, but means he's always jumping from canvas to canvas, always working on more than one thing which can often get stressful. He also states "I can't stick to one thing. Before the paint is even dry, I'm onto something new." I've noticed that this is something many artistic people with ADHD struggle with, often becoming excited to start a new project and then quickly losing interest after starting it. It feels like an endless cycle.

**C – Shawn Marie Hardy**



*A Romantic Checklist for an Intergalactic Honeymoon by Shawn Marie Hardy*

This intricate collage was done by Shawn Marie Hardy, a mixed media artist with ADHD. It's quite an abstract piece, one which must have taken a lot of time and concentration to complete. ADHD can manifest in many ways and I think that this collage certainly looks the part, small details everywhere you look. In an interview with Thea Fiore-Bloom, she says "Originally I had heard such negative connotations about people with ADHD that I didn't want to find out for sure if that's what I had too" (Hardy, 2019). Hearing negative connotations is not something that is rare when it comes to being neurodivergent, but it gave explanation to Hardy why she felt her work process is erratic and chaotic, and something that she allowed herself to grow with and work on in a more positive light.

#### **D – Mahlia Amanita**



*Flashing Lights (Sensory Overload) by Mahlia Amanita*

Mahlia Amanita is an autistic artist who was diagnosed in late 2015. Since her diagnosis she has been looking at life from a new perspective, one which many ND people experience after realising that there isn't something "wrong" with us, we're just different. This painting depicts what it feels like to have a sensory overload, something that many autistic people undergo. It perfectly shows how overwhelming sensory overloads can be, and how even the smallest things like a flashing light, or a few people talking at once can cause our senses to go into overdrive and shut down. The use of somewhat controversial complementary colours, red and green, feels like pure chaos which I believe is exactly what Amanita was aiming for when painting this. It's bright, it's uncomfortable, and, for many autistic people, it's an unfortunate reality.

**E – Mikaela Sheldt**



*Unnamed painting by Mikaela Sheldt*

This is a 6 by 4 foot painting by Mikaela Sheldt, an autistic artist. In an interview with New Sincerity, she states “I don’t paint what something looks like – I paint what it feels like. When it feels right – then it’s finished.” (Sheldt, 2019). This statement encompasses what it’s like to be an artist who is autistic – I can’t get behind it if it is simply ‘doing’ something, I need there to be an emotional reaction in get invested. Autistic people often find eye contact to be uncomfortable, so many of us suffer with face blindness, as well as not being able to understand emotions upon a person’s face, and because of this we are often stereotyped as being robotic or devoid of emotion. This painting proves that stereotype wrong, as we may not show much emotion outwardly, but expressing emotion through our art can be much more powerful.

## **Bibliography**

- Amanita, M. (n.d.). *On A Spectrum - an exploration of Asperger's syndrome* [online] Available at: <https://www.mahliaamatina.com/on-a-spectrum> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Boue, S. (2020). *A critical look at critical reviews of disabled artists*. *Disability Arts Online* [online] Available at: <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/a-critical-look-at-critical-reviews-of-disabled-artists/>. [Accessed 15 Apr. 2021].
- Citrawireja, M. (2019). *Mikaela Sheldt Finds Catharsis in Painting Human Emotions*. [online] Available at: <https://newsincerity.us/mikaela-sheldt/>.
- Fearnside, B. (2018). *Art and ADHD*. [online] benfearnsideart. Available at: <https://www.benfearnsideart.co.uk/post/art-and-adhd> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Fiore-Bloom, T. (2019). *Artists and ADHD: Myths, Realities, True Stories & Resources*. *The Charmed Studio Blog*. [online] Available at: <https://thecharmedstudio.com/help-for-artists-with-adhd/> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Lind, Maria, and Liam Gillick. 2005. *Curating with Light Luggage: Reflections, Discussions and Revisions*. Frankfurt am Main: Revolver. [[Google Scholar](#)]

- Sibay, A. (2020). *The Diagnosis of ADD/ADHD is Debilitating Prospective Artists*. *Big Easy Mag*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bigeasymagazine.com/2020/01/15/the-diagnosis-of-add-adhd-is-debilitating-prospective-artists/>. [Accessed 15 Apr. 2021]

### **Image Sources**

- Amanita, M. (n.d.). *On A Spectrum - an exploration of Asperger's syndrome* [online] Available at: <https://www.mahliaamatina.com/on-a-spectrum> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Boue, S. (n.d.). *Neurophototherapy Project*. Available at: <https://www.soniaboue.co.uk/neurophototherapy> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021]
- Fearnside, B. (n.d.). *Bounce*. Available at: <https://www.benfearnsideart.co.uk/copy-of-work-for-sale?pgid=jh4rs48j-800b75b6-56a5-11e8-a9ff-063f49e9a7e4> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Hardy, S. (2020). *A Romantic Checklist for an Intergalactic Honeymoon*. [online] Available at: <https://shawmariehardy.com/artwork/4810940-A-Romantic-Checklist-for-an-Intergalactic-Honeymoon.html> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021].
- Sheldt, M. (2017). *Artist With Autism Creates Intense Portraits of Facial Expressions*. [online] Available at: <https://themighty.com/2017/03/mikaela-sheldt-artist-autism/>. [Accessed 16 Apr. 2021]