

Contemporary Challenges

Victoria Goddard, Fine Art

Digital Presence

www.instagram.com/the.other.victoria

As an autistic person I have limited capacity for social interaction and my digital- and real-lives both draw on the same source of energy. Using social media to create a digital presence for my work has not been an easy experience.

My Facebook account has been dormant for 6-7 years and I have consciously avoided Instagram as a response to recognizing my limitations and attempting to take better care of myself. However, peer communication for my course all takes place on an Instagram group chat so I had to set up an account mid-way through the first term to maintain social links and benefit from peer support.

Surprisingly, although Instagram is arduous it is less stressful than other social media platforms because it is less personal. At this point it is proving slightly easier than I expected to create a profile that exists only to objectively market myself as an artist while maintaining some authenticity in a way that feels psychologically and emotionally safe. Having said that, I cannot use any kind of social media/digital communication (Instagram, What's App, email, any kind of direct or group messaging) when sensorily or socially overwhelmed.

I am trying to post my work on planned days to normalize it and build a predictable routine. I am framing Instagram to myself as a 'cost of doing business' and an experiment which I can pause or end at any time. It is useful for research and generating ideas and I am actually enjoying the arm's-length sociability. I have also responded to an open call and had a piece of work selected for a small exhibition.

I think that I would be more comfortable with a website than Instagram but it would be difficult to drive traffic without a commitment to marketing and realistically that it best done online as a companion to social platforms. I have researched domain names and intend to build a website next term.

Contemporary Challenges: Artist's Statement for Exhibition

'A Perfectly Good Zebra', 2023

Found objects, vitrine, photography, plaster, wire, audio

This work is an exploration of Victoria's lived experience as a late-diagnosed autistic woman. It centres on a toy tea set and playful use of scale to describe how she has reconnected with her childhood self. She speculates on the process of assessment and diagnosis of neurodivergent adults as a careful interpretation of signs akin to a kind of retrospective fortune telling, particularly the reading of tea leaves.

Victoria considers the gendered perception of neurodiversity with the tea set as both a link to her authentic autistic self and as a mechanism for learning to perform femininity and thereby mask autism.

The zebra head and title refer to a recognition that our differences can make us 'perfectly good zebras' rather than strange horses. The head is placed under the vitrine, alluding to the secret worlds of neurodivergent women and girls.

www.instagram.com/the.other.victoria

Contemporary Challenges: Exhibition Work

'A Perfectly Good Zebra', 2023

Found objects, vitrine, photography, plaster, wire, audio

This work explores my lived experience as a late-diagnosed autistic woman. It centres on my mother's toy tea set, which I played with as child, to describe how the process of assessment and diagnosis has allowed me to reconnect with my pre-school self and uses the visual metaphor of a zebra to represent the validation that diagnosis has brought about. I also consider the gendered perception of neurodiversity, with the tea set as both a link to my authentic autistic self and as a mechanism for learning to perform femininity and thereby mask autism. I speculate on the process of assessment and diagnosis of neurodivergent adults as a careful interpretation of signs akin to a kind of retrospective fortune telling, particularly the reading of tea leaves.

Found objects

The willow pattern tea set was my mother's and I loved to play with it as a child. It holds many happy memories and records family history: a brownish glue is visible on one cup handle which was broken

when my mother was a child and mended by my grandfather, and later my mother mended the lid of the teacup with a clear glue when I dropped it as a four-year-old. My mother and I would sit together looking at a plate or saucer while she told me the story of the willow pattern and how the fleeing lovers were transformed into doves. In this work the tea set represents my authentic self during a very happy period in my life.

Women and girls are now considered to be vastly underdiagnosed in comparison to the male cohort of the neurodivergent population, and this is thought to stem from a gendered expression and perception of traits (Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, 2015) (Hendrickx, *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, 2015). I have chosen a very formal layout for the tea set that is stereotypically autistic; in a girl this is traditionally interpreted as simply a perfect housewife in the making, while a small boy lining up toy cars or trains is the archetypal image of autism. I find the clean, orderly layout aesthetically appealing.

The tea set also alludes to the reading of tea leaves for predicting the future, with the retrospective analysis of the child's behaviour looking for signs of autism and other neurodivergences.

Vitrine

I have chosen to place the tea set in a vitrine for practical, conceptual and aesthetic reasons. Practically, it protects something that is very precious to me but also makes a visual reference to museums. The process of assessment for autism focuses on childhood traits and this felt rather like visiting a museum of my own past. My experience of traditional museums is that they are a place of belonging for autistics: quiet, orderly, predictable, a place to indulge niche special interests.

Photography

I sought help from Adam to photograph my outstretched hands. The hands reference the delightful haptic experience of playing with the tea set but also suggest palmistry as another method of fortune telling or reading of signs. Siting a photograph above the vitrine recalls the documentation of objects in museums I remember from childhood.

On the wall opposite the vitrine is a large-scale print of the full-sized willow pattern cup and saucer that I now use daily containing a cup from the toy tea set. It's difficult to describe but the action of placing the small cup into the larger felt potent and ritualistic, as if it might invoke something powerful, which feels somehow appropriate alongside the references to divination.

Zebra Head

The zebra head draws on a metaphor originated by the Twitter account @omgimautistica's response to the question of why adults feel the need to be assessed for autism and other neurodivergences:

"Why do you need a label?" BC there is comfort in knowing you are a normal zebra, not a strange horse. BC you can't find community w other zebras if you don't know you belong. And BC it is impossible for a zebra to be happy or healthy spending its life feeling like a failed horse.

@omgimautistica

6.58 PM August 29 2022

I have chosen to position the zebra under the vitrine as a suggestion of the often secret and overlooked world of neurodivergent women and girls.

Audio

The audio is comprised of three overlapping layers of spoken word: my voice reading from a guide to fortune telling with tea leaves (Minetta, Tea-Cup Fortune Telling, 1972), Laura's daughter Jaya reading some words I composed and Jaya reading the willow pattern story. My voice is in stereo while Jaya's is from the right. I intend the audio to suggest the interpretation of signs and a dialogue between child and adult. The juxtaposition of the decorative, nostalgic tea set and the modernity of the headphones is deliberate and pleasing to me and another reference to the aesthetics of museums. From an autistic perspective, I do not want to experience my work as constant noise pollution in the studio and I think that the headphones offer a more intimate listening experience.

Scale

The change of scale from the toy tea set to the huge print is playful and childlike, by contrast to the formality of the vitrine.

Location

I requested the area outside the third years' studio because it feels comparatively separate with the feel of a quiet corner of a museum and the alcove is a perfect fit for the vitrine. Initially I hadn't planned to put work on the wall opposite the vitrine, looking at the alcove as a space in itself, but stepping out into the stairwell I appreciated the entrance way as a complete space which needed to be unified. The doors open outwards, ruling out three-dimensional work, and I felt that anything other than a photograph could lack visual coherence in a small space.

Bibliography

Silberman, S. (2015). NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently. London: Allen & Unwin.

Hendrickx, S. (2015) Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

A New Popular Handbook. (1972). Tea-Cup Fortune Telling: The Signs Illustrated & Simply Explained by Minetta. London: W. Foulsham & Co Ltd