

Designing From Within: An Autoethnographic Study of Autism-First Creative Practice

Reframing sensory storytelling through lived experience, illustration, and immersive design.

Abstract

This journal explores how autism can be utilised as a creative insight rather than a condition to be accommodated within design and educational contexts (Penketh, 2015). Drawing on my lived experience as a neurodivergent creative, this study embraces an autoethnographic approach drawing on the methods of Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) to dissect how sensory and emotional experience can inform visual storytelling, illustration, and immersive design. This research is concentrated around the development of a twelve-book illustrated series, created to visually communicate internal autistic experiences that are often difficult to express through conventional language.

Idiosyncratic Narratives, Observational sketches, personal reflections are used as forms of qualitative data, allowing the creative process to function as both a method of inquiry and a final outcome. In addition to these primary sources, this study draws upon a range of contextual references, including scholarly literature, relevant cinematic works, and visual culture, as well as personal recollections, to critically examine the construction of narrative surrounding autism. The paper argues for an autism-first approach to creative practice, one that moves beyond designing for autistic audiences and instead designs *from* autistic experience. This is explored through the work of Mullaney (2017) by using my voice in a visual and tactile way through the translation of the book series into an immersive environment, demonstrating how auditory and sensory design can deepen understanding through an embodied experience.

In doing so, the research demonstrates my wicked problem of how illustration, storytelling, and immersive design can be used to communicate autistic experience in more embodied and meaningful ways than what is currently available.

Introduction: Seeing Space Through an Autistic Lens

Autism is represented through external and often neurotypical-led perspectives, specifically in mainstream media, film, education, and children's literature. Despite the fact that many of these representations are widely recognised and, in some cases, celebrated for their depictions of autism, they often remain distanced from the autistic lived experience. Characters and narratives may be inspired by autism, autism coded through specific traits, or mounted around autistic individuals, yet somehow, they are rarely created from an autistic perspective. This research addresses the wicked problem of how design systems marginalise autistic sensory experience by privileging neurotypical perception. Personally, it feels as though someone is trying to create a version of me on screen, without actually finding out or asking what it's like to be me.

Mainstream examples such as *Rain Man* (*Rain Man*, 1989) and *Temple Grandin* (*Temple Grandin*, 2010) have played an influential role in shaping cultural understandings of autism, often positioning autistic identity through genius, savants, or behavioural difference. While these works have contributed visibility, they have also helped establish a narrow and often externally constructed framework of what autism “Looks Like.” On the other hand, works such as *Please Stand By* directed by Ben Lewin, and *Music* directed by SIA, demonstrate a more considered approach, particularly through collaboration with autism advocacy organisations, being created by an autistic individual and having a more sensitive understanding of autistic communication and independence.

This distinction is important. As autistic individuals who do not feel represented honestly on screen, we often locate ourselves within stories and spaces that were not made for us, however they fit us better than those created by neurotypicals. This could also be considered a form of Sensory Seeking, which is when an autistic individual is searching for a piece of dopamine to fill a little space of unease (Dydia et al., 2022), I would describe sensory seeking as the feeling before a sneeze, that fast need for something.

This majority of neurotypical led design extends beyond film and media into education, classrooms are not built for us, autistic needs are often added as an afterthought, using Tomlinson (2012) to argue that education systems often manage children as “surplus to labour requirements” rather than listening to their unique voices. We can also see the opposite effect of this argument in *The Story of Ron Clark* (2006), where a neurotypical teacher takes on the “Unteachable kids” and through ‘unconventional methods’ manages to not only teach them but excel them. My own autoethnographic research, through observational sketches, journal entries, and reflective art, repeatedly lands back in this problem.

As an autistic creative, I notice details, textures, sounds, rhythms, and visual disruptions that others may not observe at all. These details are not minor; they can shape the entire experience of a space. Most of my sensory overload experiences could be avoided if more thought were given in design (Visuri, 2024). This raises the important question: what could happen if autism were not just accommodated with design but used as the source for a design?

This question now forms the base of my creative practice. I developed this project as a response to the gap of autistic-led storytelling, and from a desire within to communicate the beauty, intensity, and complexity of the internal autistic experience. As an autistic creative, I am extremely interested in highlighting not only the challenges of autism, but its imagination, patterning, emotional depth, and sensory superpowers! Although autism is scientifically and socially framed as just a disability, within my creative practice it also functions as a source of insight, originality, and expressive power. I wanted to share my truth, my story, created by me for children who may face similar challenges.

At the centre of my research is a series of twelve illustrated children’s books, each based on a sensory, emotional, or social experience from my own memories of being a child with autism. These books address moments and needs of mine that were deeply significant to me as a child but impossible to communicate, rarely acknowledged, explained, or validated by the people and spaces around me. These books explore experiences such as the texture of food, the feel of fabric, the discomfort of eye contact, the confusion of sarcasm, and the distress caused by sudden change. Book 1 in this series, *The Loud Classroom*, draws on one of my earliest memories of school and attempts to visualise the cumulative overwhelm of that environment: the friction of my thick grey tights against the carpet. *When Plans Change*, explores the

emotional and physical disruption not caused by an event itself, but by the sudden collapse of expectation.

Developmentally, this work has extended beyond the page into immersive design. Rather than adapting the books into something new, I chose to preserve their original form while translating them into a multi-screen, movement, and auditory sensory environment. This shift from page to space allows the work to move closer to embodiment, offering a form of communication that is not only representational, but experiential.

Using my lived experience, reflective documentation, and creative practice as both method and material. By placing the lived experience of autism at the centre of illustration, storytelling, and immersive design, this paper proposes an autism-first model of creative practice that values autistic perception not as a problem to solve, but as a meaningful source of creative knowledge, according to Barrett (2007) creative research is driven by “emotional, personal and subjective concerns” which are legitimate sources of discovery and innovation.

Methodology: Autoethnography and Creative Practice

Autoethnography is the most fitting for my project because it gave me a way to honour my own deeply personal journey, through my creative practice, I was able to let my feelings, my memories, and my vulnerability guide the process – making the research not just an analysis, but a way to reconnect with myself and to deepen empathy for those who are different (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). I started this project angry, angry at having to fight so hard to be seen authentically, then as I developed the idea more, I realised that if I wanted to see myself somewhere, it is on me to get that done.

At the core of my research is the belief that autistic people should not only be truly represented, but should also be the ones creating, framing, and communicating those representations. Using the concept of “Epistemic validation” from (Penketh, 2015) I want to show the importance of knowing about the “other” through their own lived context and not through an abstracted medical lens. My creative practice is therefore rooted in personal experience, memory, sensory response, and emotional recall. Rather than beginning with an external theory of autism and attempting to apply it to creative work, this project begins with the internal experience itself. Autoethnography supports this approach by allowing personal life, reflection, and memory to function as legitimate forms of qualitative research. Reaching back in my memories to create honest work was difficult but felt very necessary. In this context, it provides a way of exploring what it means to design from autism rather than for autism.

At first, my research did not begin as anything more than a way of collecting my feelings, it grew out of my everyday life. I simply moved through my days, holding onto moments until slowly these fragments of experience became the foundation for what I could explore. It started with journal entries that became more of a sensory log, writing down as much of a sensory experience as I can remember, noting sounds and feelings, where I was and the time of day. These became the base of my research, incredibly open in ideas for this project. After days of intuitive logging, a turning point came in class, when my tutor asked the class to explore the building and roughly sketch a map, it could be directional or artistic, everyone’s map looked different but all a subconscious theme. However, mine caught me off guard, my map was a sensory guide to the building. Highlighting every feeling and atmosphere, loud noises, and

design calmness around each floor. My tutor said that this could be my project, *Through an Autistic Lens*.

The qualitative material for this project takes several forms. A large part of the research is drawn from my sensory logs, reflective journal entries, and observational sketches produced throughout the development of the work. These materials record recurring details that affect my experience, including environmental discomforts, sensory triggers, patterns of overwhelm, and moments of emotional or physical response. They also capture the details that often go unnoticed by others but remain highly significant within autistic perception. In addition to this personal documentation, feedback gathered from my test run in the immersive room also contributes a small but valuable layer of

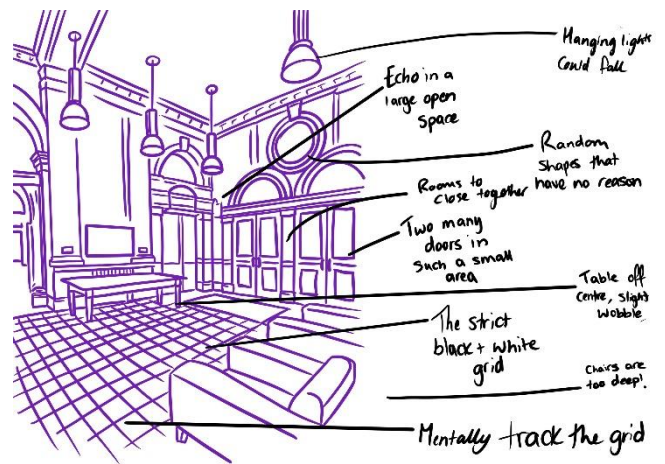


Figure 1 - Observational sketch, developed on from the in-class task.

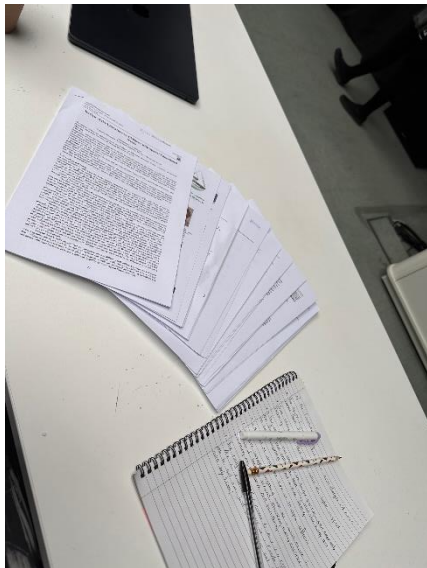


Figure 2 - Sensory Journal entry, Research papers in class.

audience response, helping to indicate how aspects of my work are received when translated beyond the page.

The books themselves became part of the research simply through the process of becoming what they are, they are not separate from the methodology or merely final outcomes, but active research artefacts shaped by memory, reflection, and visual translation. Each book is based on a real sensory or emotional experience from my childhood, and the process of writing and illustrating them became a way of revisiting, analysing, and communicating those moments. The books function not only as creative outputs, but as a way of investigating how autistic experience can be represented honestly and meaningfully through storytelling and design. Their value as research lies not only in what they depict, but in how they were formed.

A major strength of this methodology is that it allows for depth, honesty, and specificity, because the work is drawn directly from my own life, it holds a level of detail and authenticity that would be difficult to reach through more detached methods, like those of a neurotypical person. It

allows subtle sensory and emotional experiences to be taken seriously as research material and positions lived autistic experience as a source of creative knowledge rather than the most current anecdotal background.

On the other hand, this method also has limitations. Because the research is centred on my own experience, it can only speak from my perspective and cannot represent the full range of autistic identities or needs. Had this project used interviews, workshops, or collaborative methods, it may have incorporated the perspectives of parents, siblings, teachers, or other autistic individuals, creating a broader understanding of autism in relation to design and storytelling. Instead, this project remains intentionally focused on my personal memory and lived experience. While this limits its scope, it also protects the clarity and integrity of the work, as the books are based specifically on my own childhood and my own sensory world.

The methodology involved a continuous recording of subjective experiences and choices throughout creative process. Despite the initial difficulty, this approach proved invaluable, generating a detailed archive of modifications and strategic decisions which is preserved in the

form of annotated notes. One of my most intuitive notes is from the creation of *Book 4 – When Plans Changed*, I decided to use pencil to create this book to symbolise that the story is never set in stone and that things can change, another being that in *Book 1 – The Loud Classroom*, the background and speech bubbles fade because she is calming down. Lastly *Book 5 – The Playground Game*, in this book I wanted to try and capture movement, these illustrations are mostly movement based in some way and one of the ways I captured that was through the chalk on the floor and some of the angles I used. I was not originally going to make this book about movement, but I wanted to add some depth and perspective to my collection visually as well as emotionally.

In the end, autoethnography allows this project to do exactly what it sets out to do: create autism-first work from within autistic experience itself. It provides a methodology that is not only academically appropriate but creatively aligned with the aims of the project. By using memory, sensory documentation, observational drawing and reflective making as research tools, this study positions autistic lived experience as both the foundation and the evidence of work. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that autism must always be observed from the outside and instead proposes that some of the most meaningful creative insights come from within it.

Representing Autism: Media, Storytelling and Perspective

Mainstream representations of autism have played a significant role in shaping public understanding, but they have also contributed to a narrow and often externally constructed view of autistic life. This means that autistic people are often visible within representation, but rarely central to its authorship. As a result, many of the most widely recognised portrayals of autism are filtered through observation rather than lived experience.

One of the most influential examples of this is *Rain Man* directed by Barry Levinson (*Rain Man*, 1989). Often considered one of the first major mainstream films to place autism at the centre of its narrative, the film played a substantial role in bringing autism into public visibility. The character of Raymond was inspired in part by the real-life savant Kim Peek, and the film has remained culturally significant for its emotional storytelling and visual sensitivity. However, despite its importance, *Rain Man* also established a highly specific and limited image of autism in the public imagination: one tied closely to savants, exceptional memory and social distance, by using Raymond as the base of the movie, it relies on a narrative method that translates autism into observable behaviours that are legible to neurotypical audiences, rather than attempting to communicate internal sensory or emotional experience. As later commentary has noted, the film, helped popularise autism while also reinforcing the misconception that many autistic people are savants. In this sense, it is both historically valuable and critically limited.

A similar tension exists in *Temple Grandin* directed by Mick Jackson (*Temple Grandin*, 2010). Unlike many fictionalised portrayals, this movie is framed on the life and published work of Temple Grandin and has often been praised for offering a more thoughtful visualisation of autistic perception, it does this by controlling the visual sides of autism depicted, a lot of the movie is actually explaining the internal challenges and emotions of autism and that is what positions this movie at a higher intellectual display of autism. Reviews and production coverage highlighted its emphasis on visual thinking and its efforts toward authenticity, including Grandin's involvement in the project. This makes it one of the stronger examples of autism representation in mainstream media. However, it still exists within a representational structure

in which autistic experience is translated into viewable form for a broad audience, rather than authored directly through autistic creative control. This distinction is subtle but important, particularly within the context of this project.

More recent works such as *Please Stand By* directed by Ben Lewin (Please Stand by, 2017), suggest a shift towards more considered portrayals of autistic life, particularly through the inclusion of advocacy-informed consultation and a more sensitive treatment of independence, routine, and communication. At the same time, there remains a broader issue across media: autism is often represented as something to understand, observe, or support, rather than something that can actively shape narrative form, visual language, and creative methodology. In other words, autism is frequently treated as a subject matter, but rarely as authorship.

This becomes even more interesting when considering films that are not explicitly about autism, but which are widely read by autistic audiences as autism coded. Works such as *Labyrinth* created by Jim Henson (Labyrinth, 1986), *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium* directed by Zach Helm (Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium, 2007), and both earliest versions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – 1971 and 2005 (Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory, 1971), (Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, 2005), have developed a strong resonance within autistic communities. These films are often characterised by heightened sensory worlds, unusual social logic, intense patterning, eccentric characters, and a relationship to detail, structure, and imagination that many autistic viewers recognise intuitively. The way Mr. Magorium's toy store reacts to people's empathy is such a beautiful example of nonverbal communication, the design of the labyrinth is significantly logical to a neurodivergent mind, the doorknockers for example, one only tells the truth and one can only lie so the question becomes who do you ask?, this is autism coded in the difficulty of social understanding and literal thinking, in the same way that Willy Wonka's chocolate factory makes perfectly no sense to anyone but him. Their significance lies not necessarily in whether they were intended as autistic representation, but in the fact that autistic audiences continue to locate themselves within them, this suggests that autism is not always best communicated through explicit diagnosis or labelling, but can also emerge through atmosphere, perception, rhythm, comfort, and world building.

This idea is especially relevant to my own practice, I am not only interested in films that openly represent autism, but also in the visual and sensory strategies used by films that feel autistic in structure or emotional logic.

This is part of why *Music* directed by Sia (Music, 2021), remains important to me as a visual influence, even though it was also met with substantial criticism from autistic audiences over casting and its depiction of restraint. This movie actually highlights the tension between aesthetic innovation and ethical representation, which can be such a fine line, the beauty that was created in the musical sections of the movie are unlike anything we had seen before, however that was not as remembered as the choice to cast a neurotypical person to play a highly autistic character. Reporting at the time documented the backlash and Sia's public apology after autistic advocates criticised the film's portrayal and the casting of a non-autistic actor in the leading role. It would therefore be inaccurate to present *Music* as unproblematically "good" representation. However, what remains valuable to my project is its use of colour, internalised fantasy, performance, and sensory exaggeration to communicate a subjective inner world. Those visual strategies, separate from the film's wider controversies, are useful when considering how internal autistic experience can be translated into creative form.

This distinction between representation and inspiration is central to my own work. I am not attempting to reproduce mainstream autism narratives or simply add another version of autistic “awareness” to an already crowded media landscape. Instead, I am interested in what changes when autism is no longer interpreted from the outside but used as the starting point for making. This means moving away from a model in which autistic people are represented by others such as the character categories analysed by Prochnow (2014) such as the “Magical Savant”, and towards one in which autistic creators author their own visual and sensory languages.

The films and references explored here therefore function less as templates and more as points of tension. Some offer stronger examples of visibility or sensory communication; others reveal the limitations and politics of authorship within autism representation. Together, they make visible the wider cultural landscape into which my project sits. They also reinforce the necessity of autism-first creative practice, not simply because better representation is needed, but because autistic people are already capable of creating it for themselves.

The Twelve Books: Visualising Lived Autistic Experience

Children’s books were the most natural format for this project for several reasons. Firstly, they are the form of creative practice that I feel most comfortable working in. Illustration and children’s storytelling feel like a safe place for me to create (Schweizer, Knorth and Spreen, 2014), and because this project is so personal, it felt important to work within a format that already felt instinctive and emotionally secure. However, the decision was not only based on personal preference. Children’s books also felt like the most appropriate medium because many autistic sensory needs and experiences begin early in life, usually ages eight and younger (Prochnow, 2014), often before a diagnosis has even taken place. Childhood can be a confusing and isolating time when a child knows they are struggling, overwhelmed, or experiencing the world differently, but does not yet have the language to understand why. In that sense, children’s books offered a way of reaching the point at which these feelings often begin.

The decision to create twelve books was partly practical, partly instinctive, and partly rooted in the way I work as an autistic creative. Put simply, I had the time to make twelve books, and I had twelve ideas that felt fully formed and worth pursuing. I considered making fewer, but I found that I did not want to limit the project once the ideas had already begun to develop. One of the strengths of my own autistic creative process is that I often visualise an entire piece before I make it. Once an idea arrives, I can usually see the whole book in my head almost immediately, including its atmosphere, pacing, and visual language. Because of this, each book already felt complete in my mind before it was physically produced, and it felt more honest to follow that process than to reduce the series for the sake of neatness. The number twelve also felt calm and complete to me, allowing the collection to function as a rounded body of work rather than a fragment selection of experiences, according to Prochnow (2014) “seeking human connection through numbers” is a common trait of autism.

Each of the twelve books explores a different sensory, emotional, or social experience rooted in my own autistic childhood. Although they are connected by a shared visual and conceptual framework, each book focuses on a distinct aspect of autistic life that often goes unspoken or unexplained.



Figure 3 - Myself in my old school uniform, this photo encases the memory that a couple of my books are based on, specifically Book 1

The Loud Classroom explores the sensory overwhelm of a classroom environment that was never designed with children like me in mind. It draws on early school memories of mine, buzzing lights, clicking keyboards, overlapping voices, and the discomfort of clothing against surfaces, showing how many small sensory details can combine into something deeply overwhelming, I found it articulated the best by Dynia et al. (2022), she explains that all of these intense tactile or auditory stimuli are proven to have a significant impact on the ability to follow school routines and staying focused etc, its known as “Sensory Seeking patterns and tactile hypersensitivity”. *The Bright Shop* focuses on the sensory impact of retail environments, particularly harsh LED lighting, while *The Scratchy Jumper* explores the physical discomfort and emotional frustration of certain fabrics and textures, in this case a knitted wool jumper with shiny threads woven into it.



Figure 5 - Myself, on the exact day that inspired Book 4.

Other books in the series focus more directly on communication, routine, and social understanding. *When Plans Changed* shows the emotional and physical impact of sudden change, particularly the distress that can happen when a carefully imagined plan is unexpectedly replaced. *The Playground Game* explores the hidden and unspoken social rules of childhood play, showing how difficult it can be to join in when everyone else seems to understand a system that was never actually explained. *But You Said...* focuses on literal thinking and the confusion that can come from sarcasm, exaggeration, or language that is not meant exactly as it is spoken. One example in the book reflects on hearing the phrase “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse” and genuinely worrying about the horse. *Looking at You* addresses the discomfort of eye contact, while *The Big Feelings* explores emotional intensity, not as something wrong or excessive, but simply as something deeply felt.

The final group of books moves further into comfort, regulation, and internal processing. *The Thing I Loved Most* centres on a safe object and the emotional importance of attachment, routine, and repetition (Williams, Costall and Reddy, 1999). *The Food That Felt Wrong* focuses on food textures, foods touching, eating patterns, and the physical experience of certain foods in the mouth. *When I Needed to Be Alone* explored the feeling of social exhaustion and the need to withdraw, not out of rudeness, sadness, or anger, but from a genuine need to recover and regulate. Finally, *The Way I See the World* acts as a reflection on the series as a whole. Rather than introducing a new problem or challenge, it offers a reframing of everything that came before it. One of its final ideas, that “The world wasn’t too much, it was just very detailed, and I was built to see the details” became one of the clearest summaries of the project itself. It captures not only the difficulty of sensory overload, but also the beauty and intensity of autistic perception.

Illustration became central to this work because it can reach people in a way that words often cannot. This is especially important in the neurodivergent community, where communication is not always verbal, linear, or easy to explain, a beautiful example of this is how sound and light

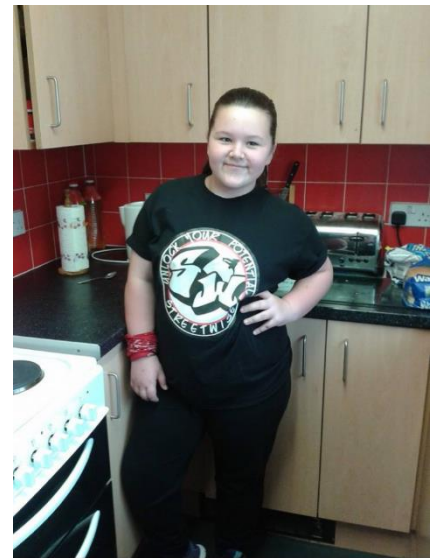


Figure 4 - Myself, heading to a dance class at 8 years old, this photo sparks the memory in which Book 2 is written from.



Figure 6 - Myself on my 6th Birthday, the day I received the toy that inspired Book 9

are being used in toys to aid those with nonverbal means of communication (Tseng, Tseng and Cheng, 2016). A single illustration can hold multiple layers of sensory and emotional information at once, often in ways that feel more immediate than written explanation. Through colour, shape, composition, repetition, spacing, texture, and visual rhythm, illustrations can communicate discomfort, intensity, confusion, joy, and regulation without needing to state them directly. This is why I decided to focus more on my backgrounds in this series of books, when there is a quiet background, it was intended and vice versa with the busy background.

For many autistic people, visual communication can feel more accessible, more intuitive, and more emotionally accurate than language alone. In this way, the illustrations do not simply accompany the books' meanings; they actively carry them.

This visual approach is also important because it reflects a wider understanding of autistic communication as something far broader than speech or text. Across the autistic community, there are many ways of communicating that fall outside conventional verbal expectations, and visual language is one of the most powerful among them. In my own work, the illustrations are not just decorative additions to a written story, but a primary method of expression. They hold a sensory detail, symbolic meaning, and emotional weight in ways that are often difficult to explain directly. This makes them especially suitable for a project concerned with translating internal autistic experience into something that can be seen, felt, and recognised by others.

Ultimately, the purpose of these books is not simply to describe autism, but to create recognition. More than anything, I want autistic children, and anyone else who may see themselves in these experiences, to feel seen. I want them to know that they are not the only person who feels this way, and that the things they struggle with are real, valid, and worthy of understanding and conversation. These books were created to offer the kind of recognition I did not have when I was younger: a sense that there was nothing wrong with me, only a unique way of experiencing the world. That difference is not something I see as a creative. It can be difficult, yes, but it can also be beautiful, imaginative, deeply observant, and powerful. If these books do anything successfully, I hope it is that they allow autistic children to feel not just understood but valued.

In creating these books from memories of my own I realised that I had not yet spoken about my full design inspiration for them. Growing up I was introduced to a wide selection of stories and characters but one has always stuck with me, through adolescence to adulthood and that is the story of Sali Mali (Jones, 2005) – a Welsh collection of stories that explore curiosity, exploring the world and feeling safe and at home. These books are simple and beautiful in design, soft and smart in colour choices and so calming.

From Page to Space: Translating Autism into Immersive Experience

Taking the books into the immersive room was about trying something new and testing my own capabilities as a creative, but it was also about something much deeper than that, I wanted to see whether my books could move beyond being something that is simply read and become something that is felt and experienced. The aim was to create a lived experience of autism, through the use of my books, allowing the audience to not only understand the stories intellectually, but to sit inside them physically and emotionally. After reading (Visuri, 2024) I wanted to use the

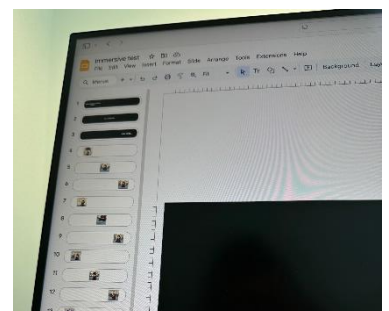


Figure 7 - Progress photo of my Immersive room test, receiving tutor feedback.

immersive room as a “social simulator” where I feel secure enough to explore new social boundaries.

This shift from page to space felt important because so much of autism is sensory, embodied, and environmental. It is not always something that can be fully communicated through text or illustration alone. Within the immersive room, the books move across three screens in a simple and readable rhythm, allowing them to remain as books while also becoming spatial experiences. To deepen this translation, I also created a soundtrack made up of small, everyday classroom sounds that I personally find overwhelming. Thus, the audience is not only reading the books but also hearing and feeling aspects of the sensory overload portrayed in the book.

The immersive room created a feeling and environment off the page that worked harmoniously with the pages themselves. What had once existed as a book became an experience, and that felt like such a beautiful thing. The illustrations still held their original purpose, but the room gave them another layer. It allowed the books to exist in a space that could hold sound, movement, atmosphere, and physical presence, all of which helped deepen the emotional and sensory impact of the work. Rather than replacing the books, the room expanded them and their ability to provide a lived experience of autism. It created a way for the audience to enter the world of the story more fully and experience something that felt closer to how those memories and sensory moments exist in my own mind.

Importantly, I chose to keep the work in book format rather than turning it into a full animation like my tutor suggested, this was a very intentional decision. Books are my safe place. Ever since I can remember, books have felt like home to me, and that feeling is deeply connected to my nan. She was a librarian when I was a little girl, and she made the world of books feel so beautiful, safe, and magical. That is where I fell in love with books, and thankfully that love still connects us now. We still give each other books, talk about them over a cuppa and a marshmallow, and now I am in a position where she gets to see the books I have created, which is a beautiful full circle moment. Thanks to her, I have lived in Hogwarts, I have walked the moors with Jane Eyre, made chocolate in the Chocolate Factory and I have danced in the living room with Miss Honey. I have fully experienced other worlds through books, and I wanted this project to honour that. Keeping the work as books, even within an immersive environment, allowed me to stay rooted in the format that has always felt safest and most meaningful to me.

The use of sound became one of the most important additions to the immersive room. The soundtrack was built from small, specific sounds that I personally found overwhelming in the childhood memory in which the story was born from, and these were layered considerably alongside specific pages in the books. Although it was difficult for me to compile as an autistic creative, because the sounds themselves are drawn from genuine lived experience, adding them into the room brought a new level of honesty to the book.

The sound did not exist to dramatize the books, but to make them more real. It created another layer of the experience and helped communicate autism in a ways that moved beyond visual communication. In particular, within *The Loud Classroom*, sound became a way of placing the audience closer to the internal reality of sensory overload, rather than simply asking them to imagine it from a distance.

This process also allowed me to think more carefully about what it means to communicate autistic experience through atmosphere rather than explanation. I knew from the start of this project that I did not want to force a feeling onto anyone. I was not trying to tell the audience

what they must feel. However, I was interested in whether the immersive room could create sensations such as discomfort, unease or overwhelm, because those are feelings that are often present in the experiences I was trying to communicate. In that sense, the immersive room was not only about showing my books in a new way, but about testing whether sensory storytelling could create an emotional and bodily response that moved closer to lived experience.

The audience feedback suggests that this was a successful, particularly in relation to *The Loud Classroom*. Although several viewers described the experience as focused or even hypnotic at first, many identified a clear shift once sound and sensory layering increased. One participant stated that the environment became overwhelming

“when multiple loud sounds and bright lights hit at once,” while another identified the sound as the exact point at which discomfort began. The feedback also suggested that the experience helped some viewers reconsider how a classroom might feel for an autistic child, with responses describing the environment as “chaotic and stressful” and noting that the narrative made them think differently about how space can be perceived.

These responses suggest that the immersive room did not simply display the books but helped activate the bodily and emotional dimensions of the experience itself.

A similar pattern appeared in the responses to *When Plans Changed*, although in a different emotional register. Rather than focusing on sensory overload alone, this experience communicated the emotional and physical disruption that can happen when expectations are suddenly altered.

Audience responses frequently referred to disappointment, loss of control, and powerlessness, with one participant describing the experience as creating “a total lack of control” and another noting the loss of “anticipation and expectation” when the plan changed. I wanted the viewers to become “active participants” which I believe was achieved, the feelings I got through

the responses tells me that everyone was present and open to accepting the new feelings I conveyed in my work (D’Amico and Lalonde, 2017).

Others reflected on the importance of structure and routine, recognising that the distress was not about disliking the new plan itself, but about the sudden disappearance of the imagined one. This is especially important to the logic of the book, and the feedback suggests that the immersive format helped communicate that internal shift more clearly than the page may have done on its own.

Ultimately, the immersive room allowed the project to move from representation into experience. The books remained the foundation of the work, but the room gave them another life, one that involved movement, sound, environment, and audience response. What began as a series of illustrated stories became something more embodied and sensory led, without losing the emotional safety and structure that books have always given me. In that sense, the immersive room did not replace the books at all, it simply allowed them to become the kind of world I have always known books could hold.

Ethical Considerations: Representing Autism Responsibly

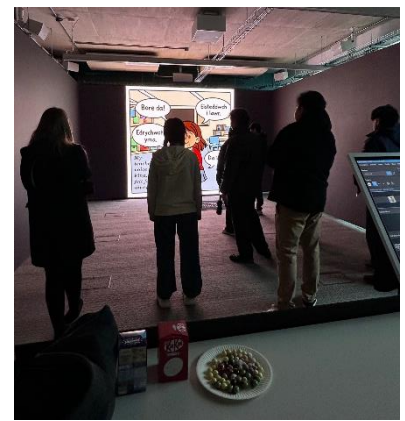


Figure 8 - Immersive room test, specifically Book 1 with full sound.



Figure 9 - Immersive room test, specifically Book 4 with full sound, notice how most of the audience sit down at the beginning of the story, very relaxed.

Ethics are an important part of this project, particularly because it is rooted in personal lived experience and in the representation of autism. One of the central reasons this project exists is because so much mainstream autism representation has historically been created from the outside, often by neurotypical people attempting to explain autistic lives without fully understanding them. Because of this, I was very aware throughout the project that I did not want to recreate the same kind of distance within my own work. I wanted the books and immersive experiences to come from a place of honesty, care and lived truth rather than assumption.

At the same time, even though this an autism-led, it is still important to acknowledge that my experience is only one autistic experience. Autism is broad, deeply individual, and impossible to reduce to one fixed narrative. The sensory needs, emotional responses, and social experiences represented throughout my books are true to me, but they are not intended to stand in for every autistic child or every autistic adult. This was an important ethical consideration throughout the making process, as I wanted the work to feel specific and truthful without presenting itself as universal. In that sense, the project does not claim to define autism, but rather to offer one honest and creative account of living within it. Which is why the detail of my series that I kept the same was my main character, she is me, from the age of 6-18, she grows throughout the stories to fit the memories on which the books are based, I loved this idea and it felt very natural to visually put myself in these stories too.

This also connects to my position within the research, I am not approaching autism as an outsider, observer, or detached interpreter. I am creating from within my own neurodivergent experience, which gives the project a different ethical grounding to much of the mainstream work discussed earlier in the essay. However, this position also comes with responsibility. Being close to the subject does not remove the need for reflection. Instead, it requires me to think carefully about how my own memories, emotions, and experiences are being translated into work for an audience. Because this project is autoethnographic in nature, I had to remain aware that personal truth and emotional honesty still need to be handled with care when turned into visual and immersive material.



Figure 10 - Immersive room private test with my tutor, the first time I saw this work in this space.

The immersive room introduced another of ethical consideration, particularly around sensory discomfort. Part of the purpose of the room was to create a stronger lived sense of autistic overwhelm, especially through the use of sound, light, and environment intensity. However, I did not want the work to become distressing for the sake of being distressing. The intention was never to shock, punish or force discomfort onto the audience, but rather to create a space where sensory and emotional responses could be felt more clearly and understood more deeply. There is an ethical difference between creating awareness through embodied experience and creating unnecessary discomfort simply for impact, and I was mindful of that distinction throughout the development of the immersive work.

Through my research I found that autism is often represented through deficit, crisis, or struggle. One of my ethical aims was for this project to avoid reducing autism to all the negative challenges, it may look like I didn't complete this, but I actually did, the more you look at my books the more you will see, like with autism... it's all in the details. When looking at my books you will first see that they talk about the negative challenges of autism, but when you look harder you will see that I am actually showcasing the superpower aspect of it, when talking

about how loud the classroom is, its visually clear through the use of speech bubbles that what I hear isn't mumbles but rather every single word. When the plans changed, your first focus is on the fact that I am upset by the change but visually you can see the superpower of internal vision, by the use of the film strip above my head. These stories are layered, that is how I wanted them to be, autism is not 2D, it is much more than that. Ethically, I felt it was important not only to show what autism can feel like when the world becomes too much but also show what it means to move through the world with heightened detail, sensitivity, and creative depth.

Ultimately, the ethical responsibility of this project was not just about avoiding harm, but about representing autism with dignity, honesty, and care. This meant be truthful about the difficulty of living in a world that was not designed for you, being the only neurodivergent in the classroom because your school did not have a SEN classroom. Not being understood is a horrible feeling, but when we are made to feel like we have to be accommodated all the time instead of just living life like everyone else, that hurts too.

Discussion: What Happens When Autism Comes First?

At the centre of this project is a remarkably simple but important shift: autism was not treated as something to accommodate after the work had already been designed, but as the starting point from which the work was created. That change matters. When autism comes first, the outcome is not simply a more "inclusive" version of an existing idea. When creating these books, the honesty used functioned as my pen, in both text and illustration, I was telling my truth. Not someone else's, my work stopped trying to explain autism and started expressing it instead. The intricate details became not so small, and the work itself became more sensory because it was built around how autism feels not how it looks.

Autism can also be imaginative, observant, emotionally rich, visually powerful, and deeply creative. It can be a way of seeing the world with unusual depth and detail. Throughout this project, I found myself returning to the idea that autistic people are often built to notice what others miss, and that this can be both overwhelming and extraordinary. My autistic way of seeing helped me make work built around details that are small to others but are often the exact things that shape an autistic experience, it allowed me to translate sensory and emotional experiences into visual language, using illustration to communicate things that can be difficult to explain through words alone. Neurotypical people may see autism as a topic, I see it as a texture, a sound, a timing, a physical reaction and even a pattern of both discomfort and comfort.

This is where my work differs from much of what already exists. Mainstream autism representation often focuses on what autism looks like to other people, stereotypes, meltdowns, and diagnosis. My books and immersive room do not try to flatten autistic experience into a list of symptoms or recognisable traits. Instead, they focus on the quieter and more specific realities of autistic life: the buzzing light in a classroom, the texture of a jumper, the panic of a changed plan, the comfort of a safe object, the weight of eye contact, or the exhaustion of needing to be alone. The most raw and honest sides of living with autism.

These are not always the experiences that dominate mainstream representation, but they are often the experiences that shape everyday autistic life most powerfully.

The project also highlights what design and education continue to get wrong. Too often, spaces, resources, and systems are created around neurotypical expectations first, with autistic needs only considered afterwards. This means that many autistic children grow up in classrooms,

books, and environments that do not reflect how they actually experience the world. I have lived this life, and it can be a very lonely place, which is why I loved dancing in the living room with Miss Honey and walking the moors with Jayne Eyre, I wanted to create a safe and welcoming place for the kind of kid I was. The issue is not always a lack of care, but often a lack of perspective. When autism is not involved in the making of design, education, or storytelling, something important is lost. The result may be well intentioned, but it can still fail to feel true. This project suggests that a more meaningful form of inclusion begins not with adjustment after the fact, but with autistic experience being part of the creative and conceptual foundation from the beginning.

In this sense, I do not believe the success of this project depends entirely on whether every viewer or reader fully understands every detail of the work. What matters most to me is that it begins a real conversation, start asking why, why are autistic needs not prioritised in design. If all this project does is encourage people to ask what might change if autism was placed first, then I would consider that meaningful. It asks designers, educators, and creatives to think differently about whose experience is shaping the work, and whether autistic people are being treated as audiences to support or as voices to listen to.

This is also where the wider significance of the project lies. The books are personal and rooted in my own memories, but the idea behind them reaches beyond me. They suggest that lived experience is not something secondary to design practice, but something capable of leading it. They show that creative work can communicate forms of knowledge that are difficult to express through conventional academic or verbal means alone. In this case, sensory storytelling, illustration, and immersive design became ways of making autistic experience visible, not as an abstract concept, but as something emotional, detailed, and embodied.

Rather than asking autistic people to fit into systems, stories, and spaces that were not built with them in mind, autism-first creative practice asks what might happen if those systems, stories, and spaces were allowed to begin from autistic ways of seeing in the first place. This project does not claim to answer that question fully, but it does offer one clear response: when autism comes first, the work becomes more truthful, more sensory, and more alive.

Conclusion

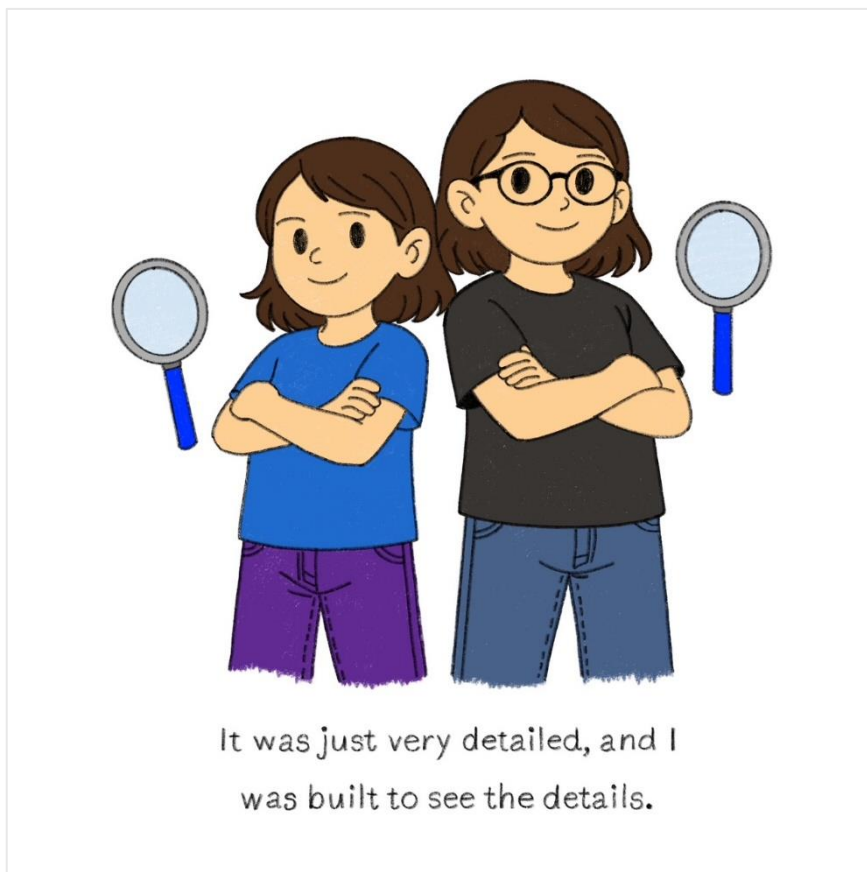
Through autoethnographic research, illustration, sensory storytelling, and immersive design, this essay has explored what changes when autistic lived experience is treated not as something to interpret from the outside, but as the foundation for creative practice itself. Across the twelve books and their translation into the immersive room, the work has shown that autism can be communicated more honestly when it is created from within, rather than merely represented from a distance.

This research has demonstrated that autism can also function as a creative strength, a way of seeing, noticing, imagining, and feeling the world with unusual intensity and depth. By placing sensory detail, emotional truth, and autistic perception at the centre of the work, the project has offered an alternative to more external or deficit-led models of representation.

The twelve books became a way of documenting and translating everyday autistic experiences that are often overlooked, while the immersive room extended those stories into a more embodied and affective space. Together, they created a body of work that does not simply describe autism, but attempts to make aspects of it visible, tangible, and emotionally

recognisable. I translated my autistic lived experience into something you can feel, not just read or observe.

Ultimately, this study does not claim to represent every autistic experience, nor does it attempt to offer a universal answer. What it does offer is one honest and practice-led contribution to a wider conversation about authorship, representation, and design. Sometimes, the most truthful and powerful work begins when autistic people are simply given the space to tell their own stories first. Autistic people should not always have to wait to be interpreted by others. What I have made is not an explanation of autism, but a piece of what it feels like to live inside it.



"The world wasn't too much. It was just very detailed, and I was built to see the details."
– *The Way I See the World*, Book 12.

Figure 11 - The final illustrated page of Book 12, closing my series of children's books.

Terminology

Autism – coded

A term used to describe characters, environments, or narratives that reflect autistic traits or experiences without explicitly naming autism. I use this term to talk about recognition rather than diagnosis.

Sensory Overload

A state that occurs when sensory input (sound, light, texture, movement) becomes overwhelming. During overload, my ability to process information, communicate, or make decisions is reduced.

Sensory Seeking

The active search for sensory input that feels regulating or comforting, such as pressure, movement, sound, or visual repetition. Sensory seeking helps me feel grounded and safe.

Neurotypical

A term used to describe people whose neurological development aligns with societal norms and expectations. I use this term descriptively not critically, someone who does not have autism.

Neurodivergent

An umbrella term describing people whose brains process information differently from the societal norm, including autistic people. Neurodivergence is a difference, not a deficit.

Safe space

An environment that supports regulation through predictable layout, controlled sensory input, and emotional safety. Safe spaces allow me to function rather than simply endure.

Special interest / safe object

An intense and sustained interest in a particular subject, activity, or object. Special interests provide comfort, structure, joy, and a way to understand the world.

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Ai tools were used to assist with essay outlining and structural development – in accordance with my assignment brief.