

# Summary of AANM Discussion #2: Exploring Difficult Topics in Your Artwork with Stacey Abramson

by Sara Arenson

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This discussion session was held on Tuesday, January 9 at 6:30 PM CST via Zoom. The facilitator was Stacey Abramson. There were 18 participants at one point, including the facilitator, Jenel Shaw, and Sacha Kopelow. The evening consisted of a 15-minute presentation, followed by a group discussion.

## Presentation

Jenel introduced Stacey, then she introduced herself in her presentation. She is a visual arts educator, performer, video artist, and writer. She has a BFA (2004) from U of M, has worked for MAWA and in the music industry, and was formerly the visual arts critic at the Winnipeg Free Press, among other accomplishments. More recently, after earning a BEd (2009), she has been working as a Grade 9 to 12 art teacher. In 2019, while setting up for a massive school art event at Maples Collegiate, she was informed of her multiple sclerosis diagnosis over the phone.

Stacey described “difficult topics” as things we need to be talking about: the ideas, people, and experiences that make us human and remind us that others are human, too. Difficult artwork can be difficult for ourselves or for the audience. She spoke of difficulty as a spectrum, dependent on context, comfort, and experience. She provided examples of people with MS who document their medical journeys, such as Kirsty Stevens who makes laser etchings of her brain lesions (turning the experience of seeing “very bizarre and beautiful images of your brain and spine and seeing them morph” into something relatable) and Sara J. Winston who takes photographs of herself receiving medication infusions. She also described numerous pieces of “tough art” from students, including:

- An installation where students could just be weird and bizarre, let go;
- A Grade 11 student crocheting a blanket while someone playing her grandmother tore it apart – a piece meant to explore her sexuality; and
- A Grade 12 class art installation about MMIWG: a portrait with police reports and silhouettes of women around it, which was important “for us to gain empathy and maybe look at what advocacy looks like in a new way”

Prior to the session, participants had received links to an article and video about the work of Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim. Stacey spoke about this work, showing an image of Sun Kim's piece about "deaf rage" (e.g. "Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World"). When she first saw this art in New York at the Whitney Biennial in 2019, she was "floored by it because it was just so in your face". Stacey herself wears two hearing aids, and has thought about what life would have been like if she were Deaf. "[Sun Kim's work] just got me thinking about her advocacy and rage, and the slight humor that there was in it, because it's so blunt, right?" She encouraged the participants to check out more of Sun Kim's work.

Before wrapping up her presentation and starting the discussion portion of the evening, Stacey threw out the following questions:

**What is helpful to know or explore for your practice?** i.e. is there something you are wondering about? Is there something you may be nervous about, maybe have always wondered about creating?

**What levels of comfort do you have with topics you want to explore?** For example, she herself does not know if she's ready yet to explore her MS in art, despite having notes and screenshots.

**What does success look like for you?** "Success" not as in "driving around in a Rolls-Royce", but as in "feeling good about your work, understanding different types of work, exploring different ideas".

## Discussion

The discussion was centered around a series of questions, some thrown out by Stacey, some by the other participants.

### How do you get your work out there?

A participant spoke about how, despite having created a large body of work and applying to numerous arts councils and galleries, they had only gotten a few bites. They wanted some advice and resources. They weren't interested in only displaying in the disability art community, even though they love "this community that has just opened up for me, and is just so wonderful and interesting."

Stacey highlighted that a problem can be that work about experiences with disability is often lumped together into a "show about disability".

Jenel praised the artist's work, which had been shown in the AANM gallery, and suggested she find artist run centers, which the artist is already doing. University art galleries and dialogues with students were also brought up.

Stacey mentioned how communication is very important, including having people who will tell you if something is not working or needs adjusting.

## What are some difficult topics in your own artwork?

Some of the topics that were brought up in the evening:

- Sexual violence
  - One participant had worked in that area for 26 years and said that the work *is* the art. “You know... Front line. On the ground. Response. Inclusion. That's part of the art.”
- Mental health/illness
  - One participant spoke about how the art that they did was art done previously while in hospital, and how they didn’t feel comfortable sharing “such a personal intimate thing” until they found the disability community.
  - Another participant wrote in the chat that they find depression hard to represent in photography.
  - Stacey felt that work on mental health can often be quite “stereotyped” and “washed down”, that despite being talked about a lot in schools, the conversation doesn’t do justice to how multifaceted these issues are.
  - One participant brought up addictions recovery, eating disorders, and “struggles with inner darkness”.
- Motherhood / Disability / Mother Wound
- Fatness
  - One artist decided to make sculptures only of fat bodies, “because everybody is so mean to fat people, and as a fat person I’m so fucking sick of it.” Through this work, they found an “aesthetic beauty in fatness which [they were] not expecting,” despite the “bizarre” reaction of audience, who “thought that art had to be beautiful and fat bodies weren’t beautiful, and so why was I doing this?”
- Multiple Chemical Sensitivity

## What are people’s experiences with difficult topics and funding?

A couple of artists spoke on this subject.

*Unfunded project:*

- One artist spoke about how they were having trouble finding funding for their project, “the Blue Dress Project”, but wasn’t sure how to elaborate on that.

*Experience with arts councils:*

- The artist who previously asked about getting your work out there spoke about how the Ontario Arts Council has been easier to talk to than the Canada Council. They were turned down by the latter for a \$20,000 grant to make their work accessible, and then found no one there to discuss it with. Meanwhile they have done well with the Ontario Arts Council Deaf and disability grants, \$5000 per year. Both Councils provide funding for application assistants, but the Ontario Arts Council provides considerably more. They are still waiting to hear about a grant for an artist residency that would cost them three times as much as a non-disabled artist, e.g. because they have to fly business class in a prone position.

## What was an experience in making or viewing art that you found difficult?

Stacey threw this question out for people to address in the chat. The answers:

- *Being on a jury.* One participant wrote about how difficult it is, being on a jury reviewing grant submissions, “to be honestly critical of a work of art ... if the artist has physical or mental issues”. Stacey reiterated her earlier point about making sure you have someone to tell you if something is working or not.
- *Talking about one’s art.* Another wrote about how, despite enjoying making art about the “difficult parts of life” such as spinsterhood, disability, trauma, etc., they “hate the part where I have to vocalize what it’s about”. “It’s like art making and statements, writing are safe spaces, but talking is scary.”
- *Artists spilling blood.* Another mentioned “performance artists spilling their own blood as part of the performance, from a self-inflicted wound”.
- *Vito Acconci.* Stacey felt that when she went to see his work in New York, instead of in books or little stills as in art school, she realized that it crossed a comfort line for her.
- *Yoko Ono.* About Ono’s performance artwork *Cut Piece*, a participant said: “Yoko offered people to do whatever they wanted to and it’s quite horrifying. I couldn’t stand it. You see the discomfort in her face, right? The sadness in her face throughout that.”

## Does it matter what the viewers think?

The question here was whether art should be done for its own sake, to help the artist explore and process experiences, or for the benefit of an audience, for example art that makes Stacey’s students better and more empathetic people by having them work through difficult things.

Several participants expressed the opinion that art should be authentic and that concerns about its reception can take away from process. “I make my work for me. It has to be totally pure and honest,” wrote someone in the chat. Stacey spoke about a drawing professor who had her make giant self-portraits, which taught her about making art from your own experience. Someone else

said that “when we are in the studio making art, that’s not the time to think about the viewer because you can’t predict what the viewer will think.” Thinking about the final product can alter a work in progress, said Stacey. “If I worry about the audience, I would never show anything, right?” another participant typed.

A related theme was the idea that the artist need not explain their work, with participants speaking appreciatively about Diana Thorneycroft, who essentially tells the viewers that it’s their job to figure out her work, but is not rude about it.

On the other hand, Jenel spoke about how she really values seeing work “that’s personal, visceral, really like in your face of personal experiences”, because it makes her think about what she’s been through and how she can relate. She cited as an example Susan Aydan Abbott’s piece *Shock of Woman*, which she found very “immersive” and “open” with Abbott’s experiences.

## Who decides what’s difficult?

The group discussed how what is difficult to someone depends on various factors, including cultural norms, personal experiences, and social position. The status quo changes over time, and therefore some things that used to be difficult, e.g. feminist themes, are not as difficult, while some things, like rape, remain universally hard. For Stacey, speaking about MS is difficult, because it is so fresh for her, while for others it wouldn’t be a difficult subject to make art about. Someone asked: “Aren’t those most harmed by society the experts on what is difficult?” Stacey responded by citing a chapter in the book *Whitewalling*, which describes how Dana Schutz, a white artist, was criticized for a painting of Emmett Till in his coffin.<sup>1</sup> This was not Schutz’s experience to illustrate, explained Stacey, again bringing up the idea of authenticity.

## How do we show care for ourselves or viewers when making difficult work?

Some of the ways that participants said artists and galleries can show care to their audiences:

- Trigger warnings
- “Showing care by making work with much care,” which is care for both the audience and ourselves (a form of self-care)
- Providing informational resources in order to help people grapple with their emotions, like “a little thing on the wall saying if this topic is of interest to you, here’s some groups that are

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<sup>1</sup> Emmett Till was a 14-year old black boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. *Open Casket*, Schutz’s painting of his dead body in its coffin, led to protests inside the Whitney Museum of American Art, where it was exhibited in the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

working on it, here's some ideas of how you can become an advocate more effectively", etc.

- Accessibility features
  - Stacey extolled the Cluny Museum (Musée de Cluny) in Paris, a medieval museum that has excellent accessibility features, including elevators even between a single level, Braille or an audio component with every artwork, and interpreters, which made her think about what conversations artists are having or galleries are inviting now. "I was just, like, I couldn't get over it. My husband was like, calm down. I was like, yeah, but there's just so much."

## What (legal) protection is there for artists who are making difficult work?

Sacha wondered if there are any protections against artists "getting slapped with slander or mischief or things like that", losing their jobs, or being "tossed off of disability".

Someone said that CARFAC has a legal advisor for artists and the organization is not expensive to join. Nick Slonosky mentioned the free Manitoba Legal Clinic for the Arts, which was formed after they were finding that artists and arts organizations were not coming to the Kerry Vickar Business Clinic, as many didn't identify as businesses, but as creators or, in northern Manitoba, makers. He said he would provide some information about this, which Jenel said she would circulate to participants.

## Final thoughts: In praise of Winnipeg's artist community

Towards the end of the discussion, participants expressed their appreciation for the richness of the Winnipeg arts community and how it allows for meaningful discussion and feedback, including about making difficult art.

"Manitoba is just very, very fortunate. There are so many artists, so many creatives, and interesting things happening in Manitoba," said one participant.

Stacey said: "One of the beautiful things about Winnipeg in this brutally cold winter that we finally got, is that we band together, right? We create artist groups, we create discussion groups, we find power in community." Finding "your people" lets you get feedback and have others to work with, she explained.

Jenel spoke about how today's discussion group attracted people from all over – from the US, Ontario, and the East Coast, "so Winnipeg's reach, I guess, goes further, and we bring the whole world into our community."

Stacey urged people to come visit Winnipeg, talking about the cheap flights and good food, and offering to show them around. She mentioned an article in the Globe and Mail comparing Winnipeg

to “the cool kid in high school that you should have been friends with, but you weren’t, but then afterwards you realized they were the most fun.” She added: “So we do explore a lot of difficult stuff in our work here, but we do so with heart, and you know ... that’s where it becomes meaningful, right?”

A few former Winnipeggers, one in New Brunswick and one in Alberta, reiterated how “amazing” the Winnipeg arts community is, how one kept Winnipeg on the “down low” at a conference so not everyone would want to come here, and how another is finding it challenging getting into the arts where they now live.

Stacey hoped that tonight’s discussion was helpful and would open up conversation about how participants approached their own and others’ work. “If we didn’t have difficult conversations, difficult topics and art, we wouldn’t be creating the art we are today, right? That’s just the reality of it,” she concluded.