

OUT FROM UNDER: Disability, History and Things to Remember

Brief Synopsis

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In December 2006, three faculty members in the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University launched a seminar focusing on Canadian Disability History. Restless with conventional pedagogies of "teaching by telling", they issued an open call, inviting participants to arrive not with their heads full of ideas but instead with an everyday object of each person's choosing, an object that had some particular resonance in relation to disabled people.

In response to their invitation, a diverse collective of students, alumni, activists and scholars was formed, and an enterprise of creating disability history began *from the ground up*. In the months that followed, participants in this innovative collaboration explored important questions about the nature of history and how it comes to be recorded and recognized, at the same time as they grappled with the social and ethical importance of recovering lost or invisible histories.

The research, reflection and discovery that unfolded from this process gradually took the shape in which it is presented in this exhibition, ***OUT FROM UNDER: DISABILITY, HISTORY AND THINGS TO REMEMBER***. Thirteen unique objects are presented, and in their presentation, moments and struggles in Canadian history are illuminated from the perspective of disabled citizens. A history that has never before been recounted takes up its place as an emerging *public* history, one that will enrich understandings not only of disabled people's experience, but of Canada's broader social and cultural legacies.

OUT FROM UNDER chronicles stories of shame, neglect and disenfranchisement at the same time as it illuminates a proud history of resistance and survival. Taken together, these installations pay tribute to the resilience, creativity and civic and cultural contributions of disabled Canadians.

Each of the histories is titled with a single word, a participle that suggests an action continuing from the past into the present. A short text that accompanies each object sketches out its historical significance in a voice that is neither detached nor polemic. The texts probe gently but resolutely for revelations of a different quality from those frequently associated with disability --

pity, inspiration, oddity. The texts are both declaratory and searching, inviting viewers to locate -- and begin to reckon with -- their own place in the living history of disability.

- **Digging** traces the evolution of the shovel, from its use in forced ‘therapeutic’ labour, to its use in sod-turning ceremonies for the construction of congregate care facilities, then finally to new adapted designs for accessibility and independent living.
- **Labouring** focuses upon the unpaid work of three women who lived most of their adult lives at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane during the early 1900’s. The installation queries regimes of “labour therapy” -- practices which dramatically reduced operating costs for what would otherwise have been paid work by seamstresses, laundry workers and kitchen staff.
- **Dressing** features 16 identical grey logo-free sweatsuits – one for each of Ontario’s 16 residential institutions. The contributor chose these articles as material symbols of the featureless nature of institutional life. The installation reminds viewers that the people who wore such clothes were, indeed, denied the right to make choices in their lives.
- **Fixing** features a souvenir program from the 1948 Shriner’s circus in Montreal. The promise of fun and laughter suggested by the cover gives way to a narrative of judgement and condescension when the page is turned. The contributor queries the extent to which imperatives of rehabilitation and cure are mobilized by prejudice and stereotype.
- **Measuring** features an authentic Stanford-Binet intelligence-testing kit, 3rd edition, circa 1960. Once again, objects that might appear on first glance to be toys, turn out to be “manipulatives” – tools used to place children in hierarchies of ‘intelligence’. The contributor recalls exclusions and foreclosures that have too often become embedded in these categories.
- **Naming** features a shocking poster from a public education exhibit produced by the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1924. A tool of the early eugenics movement, this poster is a sample of many which purported to teach the public the myriad ways in which people with particular disabilities were responsible for social ills.
- **Breathing** spotlights Reverend Roy Essex, who took his daughter, a polio survivor, out of an iron lung and back into her community with the help of a portable breathing machine. Out of necessity, he became a ventilator repairman, and for 30 years traveled throughout Ontario using the skills he developed to help his daughter in the service of others with respiratory paralysis.
- **Remembering** sprang from the existence of a single document: the death certificate of the contributor’s daughter, Kristen Anne Inwood. Kristen was the victim of a deliberate fatal overdose of the heart drug, digoxin, at the Hospital for Sick Children in March 1981. The

infant's bassinet provides a bed for the Grange Report, a public document reviewing the events surrounding this and other deaths at the hospital.

- **Packing** presents a wooden trunk and a list of its required contents. When a 7-year-old-boy was sent away to the Orillia Asylum for Idiots in the early 1950s, this trunk contained every possession he was permitted to keep – and every wish, fear and hope that he must have harboured.
- **Trailblazing** features a Perkins Braillewriter and a Braille watch, both of which belonged to the intrepid Mae Brown, the first deaf-blind Canadian to defy low expectations and earn a university degree in 1972.
- **Struggling** elevates a common workplace bulletin board to iconic status in recognition of the long history of engagement between organized labour and disability activism. A simple poster spells out the commitment of the labour movement to being and becoming truly and meaningfully inclusive.
- **Leading** honours the memory of Al Simpson, gifted lobbyist and political strategist. In an uncharacteristic stance of protest outside the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa at the 1996 First Ministers' meeting, the normally diplomatic and jovial Al found an opportunity to publicly express his feelings about exclusion and service cutbacks.
- **Aspiring** presents the original Canadian flag that flew from the Peace Tower in June 1992, when Bill C-78, An Act to Amend certain Acts with respect to Persons with Disabilities, became law. The contributor queries the thin symbolism of both the flag and the Omnibus Bill, as it was called, and contemplates the excruciatingly slow progress toward real, substantive equality for disabled people in Canada.

In its elegant design, its confident posture and its insistence upon a fearless and respectful engagement with lived histories, Out From Under fashions from thirteen disparate objects, a site for learning history's hard lessons and celebrating its steady progress.