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INTERVIEW: BECCA AND PETER KHALIL

CRAIG PEARSON (/BLOG?AUTHOR=59AC71BEBE42D6564F0967E6) · OCTOBER 29, 2017

Becca and Peter Khalil are lawyers by training who have, most recently, joined forces to create Beadtography (<https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/Beadtography#>), a craft business specializing in accessible mixed-media art. This husband-wife duo combines photography and beading to create unique pieces of art that feature Braille poetry to engage all on the visual ability spectrum.

Before creating their business, Becca and Peter were both invested in issues surrounding visual impairment. Becca has raised and socialized guide dogs for the blind since she was in the sixth grade, and has raised more than 20 puppies in training. She has volunteered as a puppy raiser for Guide Dogs for the Blind (<http://welcome.guidedogs.com/>), Guide Dogs of the Desert (<http://guidedogsofthedesert.org/>), and Guide Dogs of America (<http://www.guidedogsofamerica.org/1/index.php>), for which she currently serves as one of the Vancouver, WA/Portland, OR area volunteer group leaders. Peter has had keratoconus, a degenerative corneal condition, since high school. During this time, he has had to adapt to visual distortions, variations in visual acuity, and a number of different treatment methods, the most recent of which was a corneal transplant. Peter's efforts to adapt to a chronic vision condition have made him a passionate proponent of accessibility in all aspects of life.

In this interview, Craig Pearson talks with Becca and Peter about the inspiration behind their artwork, their creative process, and Braille itself.

Craig Pearson ::: Your artwork integrates Braille with art in such a dynamic and immersive way. Where did you first get the idea to create this kind of artwork?

Becca and Peter Khalil ::: We had been toying with the idea of combining Becca's love of

beading with Peter's photography for a while, and we actually created our first piece of embellished photography quite some time ago. We immediately loved the contrast between the texture of the beading and the depth and imagery of the photography. One of the things we noticed while Becca was beading was how unique the beads felt when we ran our hands over the surface of our work, and it struck us that some of the beads (the smaller seed beads) felt a bit like Braille dots. Becca has been raising and socializing guide dog puppies in training for Guide Dogs of America and other organizations for over 20 years (Peter started puppy-raising in 2011), and around the time the two of us started collaborating and combining our beadwork and photography, she was working to help develop a conference presentation on access to justice for victims of crime who are blind and visually impaired. The ideas of accessing artwork and incorporating Braille into our mixed media creations developed quite spontaneously as the connection between the feeling of the beads and the concept of accessibility coalesced.



With work that contains both visual and tactile elements, you must consider the experiences of both blind and sighted audiences. How do you create work that engages people across the visual ability spectrum?

Peter is the photographer in our collaboration, and he has a unique perspective on perception and photography. As a result of a condition called keratoconus, Peter's vision has undergone a number of changes over the course of his life. Some of his photographs are more abstract, capturing some images in a way that is inspired and informed by his uncorrected vision as he experienced it at various points in his life; other photographs portray images that are crisp and precise; still others contain enhanced color and texture; and others utilize the interplay of light and subject to create different visual effects. Each of these styles appeals to different individuals across the range of visual ability. We use our beadwork to emphasize elements of the photographs, or to incorporate poetry or prose in

Braille. We strive to choose beaded elements that enhance the photography and, when we use Braille, to select words that complement the image in some way.

What does your creative process look like? How does a piece of artwork go from concept to reality?

We'd love to say that our creative process is tidy and organized, but in truth it is often barely contained chaos that seems to come together whenever the creative spirit chooses to strike! Peter takes lots of fantastic photographs, sometimes specifically seeking out certain subjects or methods of shooting that we want to focus on, and he and Becca together select the ones they want to embellish with beadwork and/or Braille beading, once Peter is happy with the way the photography looks and feels. Becca generally takes the lead on all beaded embellishments and Braille additions. With the Braille specifically, she selects the poetry or prose that will go on each piece and creates the Braille templates to transfer the Braille onto the photographs once they are printed on canvas. Creating the Braille templates is a process that is essentially the opposite of using a stylus to emboss Braille on paper. First, we transfer the Braille cells onto paper (black dots in the appropriate places in each cell). Next, we use a small hole punch to make a hole in the paper over each dot. The whole thing is then turned over and used as a stencil to mark on the back of each canvas where the Braille dots will go. Finally, Becca uses durable beading thread to "sew" an individual seed bead in the location of each Braille dot.

With advances in auditory accessible technology, Braille education has experienced somewhat of a decline. How do you think your artwork contributes to the conversation surrounding the preservation of this tactile language?

This is an interesting question, and one that we really can't address other than from the perspective of sighted individuals who appreciate Braille – we know that Braille literacy is a matter of some debate, and we don't have the background to weigh in on that topic in a knowledgeable way. That being said, we hope that our art prompts those who experience it to think about art, language, and the experience of reading in new ways. Both of us enjoy reading traditionally printed novels, as well as listening to audiobooks, and it can be a drastically different experience to interact with language in these different formats, even when engaging with the same literary work. Braille is a form of interacting with language that many sighted individuals often do not experience in a significant way, and we like that our Braille pieces challenge those who experience them to relate to the art of language using touch, rather than using vision or sound. No matter where on the visual spectrum a person may fall, he or she can experience our art in any combination of ways: the photograph itself may be arresting and intriguing, the texture or appearance of the beading may be what draws you in, or perhaps the words themselves that are included in Braille speak to you. On any given day, in any given moment, you can choose to interact with our art in a number of different ways. Not many mediums convey meaning visually, auditorily, and tactilely; Braille is one of the forms of language that contributes to its flexibility and accessibility, both as a form of communication and as a basis for art.

What sort of feedback have you received from people who purchase your pieces? Has

anything surprised you?

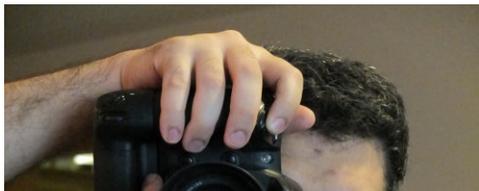
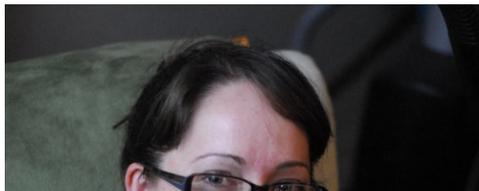
Curiosity is one of the most common emotions we see from those who experience our art for the first time. *They are pretty, but what are the beads for? Do they mean something?* Most people we have met are intrigued by the idea of reading in Braille, whether as a different medium or as a type of “secret” inherent in the work itself. The surprise of sighted individuals when they realize that the beads are used to include poetry or prose in Braille is always a treat, especially when they then begin to touch and engage with the words by feeling the letters. Everyone “sees” Braille in their everyday life, but it can be rare for a sighted person to really take the time to feel it and experience it, and that is a really fun thing to witness. To date, we don’t know if any of the purchasers of our art have been visually impaired – we would love to hear their reactions!

You’ve highlighted the fact that people can interact with your art in a number of ways. Do you have any favorite art pieces or museum exhibits you’ve witnessed that fall into this multi-sensory category?

We are big fans of interactive museum exhibits. Some people may not consider these to be art per se, but they nevertheless evoke emotions, ideas, associations, memories, and discussions through interaction with working installations. Some of our favorite exhibits include the permanent offerings at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (<https://www.oms.edu/>) (OMSI) and at the New York City Transit Museum (<http://web.mta.info/mta/museum/>). In the latter museum, a participant can step into different eras of urban train travel by walking into vintage New York City subway cars restored down to the last detail. One is invited to look, hear, feel, and even smell the quintessence of the eras represented by each of the cars. The permutations of experience are virtually limitless when one is invited to immerse him- or herself in an exhibit this way. It is this sort of invitation that we strive to extend with our own work.

Our community at Exceptions contains many aspiring artists. What advice or thoughts do you have for people interested in developing their own artistic voice?

We consider ourselves to be aspiring artists, too, as our voice and style continue to evolve. Our adventure was inspired by our desire to explore and, more importantly, to enjoy our creative impulses. We encourage anyone pursuing art to live both in the moments of creation that accompany any artistic effort and in the periods of interaction and exchange that come with the honor of being able to share your creations with other people. Art is a social experience; becoming an artist means inviting people to take part in your creations and savoring the discourse that follows.





For more on Becca and Peter Khalil's art, visit the Beadtography Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Beadtography>) and website (<https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/Beadtography?ref=l2-shopheader-name#>).

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