Berklee

Berklee Institute for
Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Podcast Episode 41: May Ling Kopecky

[Introduction music by Kai Levin plays]

[Dr. Bernard] Hello, everyone, and welcome to the ABLE Voices Podcast. I'm Dr. Rhoda Bernard, founding managing director of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, and I'm proud to present this podcast featuring disabled artists and arts educators. We are inviting artists with disabilities to be guest hosts for the ABLE Voices Podcast.

Today's guest host is Anna Cowley Ford. Anna Cowley Ford is a post-disciplinary artist from rural West Texas. Using her experiences living with chronic health conditions as a touchstone, Ford explores the often bizarre world of living with chronic pain and disabilities. Along with manifesting sensory experiences, her art work conveys the social and domestic impacts of health conditions on a chronic scale and the patient's experience navigating the U.S. healthcare system. Ford's practice includes but is not limited to functional and sculptural ceramics, textiles, large-scale installations, video, and accumulated medical objects and documents. Artwork like self-portraits, ceramic busts, and fabric figures instigate conversations around the body, non-visible sensory experiences, and disability. After earning a BA in Art from Grinnell College in 2011, Anna Cowley Ford established a studio practice and has shown in jury and solo exhibitions nationally and internationally, including in Dallas, New Orleans, Des Moines, and Leeds, U.K. She will have completed a masters of Fine Art and Studio Art in May 2022 from Maine College of Art and Design. Afterward, she will continue her visual art studio practice. This includes making a range of work that could be exhibited in galleries and exhibitions and sold through her website and stores. When not in the studio or raising heck, Cowley Ford can be found in the garden.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Hi! Welcome to the ABLE Voices Podcast. My name is Anna Cowley Ford, and I will be the guest host of this episode. I am a visual artist from West Texas that visualizes the non-visible sensory experiences associated with chronic health conditions, the livelihood impacts of living with chronic illness, and navigating the healthcare industry.

Today, we are visiting with May Ling Kopecky. May Ling is an artist based in Plymouth, Minnesota. She specializes in highly detailed, hyperrealistic drawings, and paintings. May Ling received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota and a Master of Fine Arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Her work has been published in New American Paintings and has received multiple awards and exhibitions across the U.S. She was a grant recipient of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council's Next Step Fund in 2019 and was awarded the MCAD MFA's Trustees Scholarship. This past year, Kopecky was awarded second place for the Kennedy Center VSA Emerging Young Artist Competition in Washington, D.C., where she advocated for students with disabilities and accessibility in the arts. May Ling's work has also been featured in Momentum Magazine, Fox 9 News, and the Star Tribune. She has been an art instructor for both adults and children and is currently the Learning Center Coordinator in the Learning Center and Accessibility Services department at MCAD.

Welcome, May Ling!

[May Ling Kopecky] Thanks for having me!

[Anna Cowley Ford] I'd like to start off by asking you to tell us your story as an artist. How did you start, and how did you get to where you are today?

[May Ling Kopecky] I've been an artist since before I can remember. My parents still have drawings and paintings from when I was like one or two. At a young age, my passion for detail and realism was already clear. I often think back to this drawing I did of a bee when I was five. I had to make sure to draw the head, thorax, and the abdomen of the bee to make it more anatomically correct, and that trend of being super detail-oriented has continued to this day. Age five is also when I started to use acrylic paint, which is one of my favorite mediums to use. I learned how to use acrylics during an art class I took over the summer after kindergarten, and the instructor, Kris Holtmeyer, told my parents that I would grow up to be an artist. I've actually remained friends with Kris to this day, and now over 20 years later, she can kind of- look at my parents like, "I told you so," and yeah- She knew what she was talking about.

[May Ling Kopecky laughs]

[Anna Cowley Ford] That's awesome!

[May Ling Kopecky] Yeah, it is! It's been really great to keep in contact with her throughout the years and she's been like a mentor to me as well, though for a while it didn't seem like I was gonna go into the arts career-wise. My parents were super supportive anyway, sending my

younger sister and I to art and music classes and encouraging us to follow our passions. Also, both of my parents have their master's degrees in computer science, and I had originally planned on following in their footsteps. I really like programming, I really like math and science, and those subjects- so that's what I was planning to do, but after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis or MS when I was 15, I really had to rethink my trajectory, and throughout all of the changes and struggles that I went through after the diagnosis, I consistently turned to art as a way to cope.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah! That's really powerful and, same. It is the coping mechanism sometimes that can keep us going. I'd like you to tell us about your experiences as a person with a disability and an artist with a disability. You mentioned getting a diagnosis when you were 15, so I'd like to hear more about that.

[May Ling Kopecky] Yeah! First of all, I have just a bit of information about Multiple Sclerosis. MS is a chronic disease in which the immune system attacks the nerves in the central nervous system, which is the brain and spinal cord. The immune system damages the Myelin Sheath, which is the protective coating on nerves, and that affects the nerve's ability to transmit signals. This results in a really wide range of symptoms, but some common symptoms are fatigue, numbness, cognitive problems, vision problems, temperature sensitivity, and paralysis. There are many more, but these are also just symptoms that I have also experienced.

Since I was only 15 when I was diagnosed with MS, I often struggled talking about the disease. I was met with a lot of skepticism when asking for help. A lot of people would say things like, "But you look fine!" Or, "You're too young to be sick." According to the National MS Society, only 3-5% of MS patients experience disease onset before the age of 16, so it was a pretty alienating experience. I didn't know anybody else my age with MS, and I felt like my peers didn't really understand what I was going through. Sometimes I actually started to have Imposter Syndrome and question my own symptoms, wondering, "Oh, maybe this is in my head?"

So, my art now kind of acts as a response to the skepticism that I faced. It visualizes how I navigate the world with MS, exploring topics like my relationship with healthcare, the "proof" of my illness as evidence in my MRI scans, and how others perceive the world when struggling with MS symptoms. My art tends to be smaller in scale since that's more accessible for me and doesn't require as much physical effort. Fatigue is a super common symptom of MS, so working smaller is one of the ways that I've learned to conserve energy. As I've shared more and more of my art, I've met more other people who are my age with MS or were the same age when they were diagnosed, and it has been a super rewarding and validating experience.

I think that art acts as a visual language that can bring people together, and by sharing my story through my artwork, I hope to help spread awareness about how invisible disabilities can affect everyday life and also encourage others to share their stories and advocate for themselves.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Wow! Okay, so many things that I wrote down. I- I am really connecting a lot with what you're talking about. We have different conditions that we're living with, but the skepticism of, "You look fine!" "What's wrong?" You know, being able to tolerate it for a small amount of time, but then there being a point of, "Okay, now you're just being lazy!" Yeah, I also really turned to art as a way of trying to explain what was going on. For me- I was in college and so none of my friends were understanding or experienced anything similar, and so- Yeah! That was kind of the catalyst for me, too. How can I explain this to other people? How can I visualize this when- yeah, I do look fine, but I'm not.

[May Ling Kopecky] Exactly! And, there's just so much- kind of embarrassment sometimes too, when people are kind of questioning your symptoms and your experiences. I have a disabled parking permit that I have needed in the past, but- you know- when using it, I've gotten looks like "Well…You're walking, you're fine." I feel- I have felt many times even when I felt "Maybe I should use it today?" But then some voice in the back of my head is saying, "No, don't do that! You don't actually need it. People are going to give you weird looks," and it's just really uncomfortable.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah! I also really resonated when you were talking about proof of illness and that there needing to be some sort of medical tests that can be registered in order for it to be taken seriously. With chronic migraines, there are no tests, so- You know- Because of that, it's also one of the most under-researched conditions. Can you talk more about that proof of illness and what that- I mean because that's also making you go through the health care systems and get more expensive tests. I also think how having to have a proof of illness affects you and your wellbeing.

[May Ling Kopecky] So, the need to have proof of illness to show other people, "Hey, my symptoms are valid!" This is what inspired me to start painting my MRI scans. I requested all of my MRI scans to be sent to me because, one thing, as a patient, your scans are your property. You can have them. They were sent to me on a CD, and I just scoured through thousands of images to find certain scans that I wanted to paint. I would look at the scans on my computer and then paint them in gouache, watercolor, or acrylic. One of my favorite scan paintings that I did was back in 2020. It was inspired by the 10-year challenge that was on Instagram at the time, where people would take a photo of themselves from 10 years ago and then compare that to a current one to say, "Look at my glow-up!" Or, "Look at how I've changed!" I actually did that

with my MRI scans. I took scans from 2010 and 2020, and it was like, “Here’s the 10-year challenge! You can see that there are more areas of damage in the 2020 scans vs. the 2010 scans.” I just really wanted to share that with the world as kind of like- It’s a little snarky too- Like, “Hey. It is all in my head, quite literally. There’s damage there.”

Also, I wanted to paint the scans because I find painting to be a very intimate act, and through the process of really studying the scans in great detail as I was painting, in a way, I was also addressing my discomfort and imposter syndrome because I was looking clearly at the proof and that validated how I felt and the symptoms that I was going through.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah! Amazing! Amazing- Not like that you’re dealing with all of that, of course-

[May Ling Kopecky] Right.

[Anna Cowley Ford] But like- amazing of the 10-year challenge. It’s sassy, but it’s also a spin on this thing that a lot of people are doing and not thinking about, you know, how- what a 10-year challenge looks like for other people. It’s not always a glow-up.

I know that our listeners would like to hear about the arts education that you received. Can you talk about how you studied the arts and how you continue to learn today? And, I would also like to know about arts education outside of academia as well.

[May Ling Kopecky] Right. So, as I mentioned previously, my parents were super supportive, and they paid for me to go to art classes every summer. Also, I was pretty lucky to be in a school district where the arts were very valued. At school, I had art classes all throughout K-12, and that was just really great. As far as- You know- After K-12, I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota and my Master of Fine Arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design or MCAD. During undergrad- That was when I decided that I wanted to kind of stay in academia for my career. I had already kind of had experience with teaching kids and adults by helping Kris Holtmeyer, whom I mentioned earlier, whom I had stayed in contact with, and she reached out and asked, “Hey! Do you want to be a TA for some of these classes, or do you want to learn how to teach art?” That is when I decided that I was planning on teaching. My mom was a computer science professor, my grandfather was an english professor, and my great-grandfather was an art professor, so I feel like teaching kind of runs in my blood.

The goal was to get a BFA, then an MFA, and then teach in higher education. During my time in the BFA program, my work focused on my personal experiences that related to my bi-racial

identity, specifically being half-Chinese. It was at this point that I started to really think about how it affects how I view the world every day. What do I consider to be "typical," right? After earning my BFA in 2018, I remember at the time, I still wasn't talking about having MS because I was a little afraid of how it would be received. I took a short break from school to focus on creating art and this is when I started to think about creating artwork about MS. One of the professors I had had at the University of Minnesota for many classes- His name is Clarence Morgan, he's now retired; he had often asked me what I wanted to say through my work. He had often encouraged me to really be sharing stories and my experiences and messages through my work. I ended up reaching out to him after graduating like, "Hey, I have this idea. I want to start talking about MS," and he said, "Go for it! Do it!" So, I had that sort of support.

In 2019, that's when I received the Metropolitan Regional Art Council's Next Step Fund, and I ended up using that to create an accessible home studio space. Sometimes I can't leave the house, and I just didn't think that having a studio outside of the home was really sustainable. After that, I just kind of went crazy with the MS art. I painted a lot of indoor spaces from hospitals and doctor's offices to explore how those spaces that had once filled me up with anxiety had begun to feel familiar over time because- You know- As someone with a chronic illness, you're going to appointments on a fairly regular basis. I give the paintings titles like, "Welcome back!" Or "familiarity," and "comfort."

[Anna Cowley Ford laughs]

[Anna Cowley Ford] "Old friend"

[May Ling Kopecky] I know! At one point- One of my paintings is of a hospital scene at the Mayo Clinic, which is where I'm a patient, and I put- Instead of the number that's on the room that's on the outside, that sign, I put a "Welcome back" sign there because, it was one of those times where I had to get- I had active lesions in my brain and had to go there five days in a row to get infusions to help with the inflammation and I was just like, "Oh! Hi, everyone! I'm back!"

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah! It's like you're a celebrity, and this is like your personal green room.

[May Ling Kopecky] Every six months, I need to have blood work done at my local clinic. I go, and they're like, "Oh! Hi, May Ling! Have you been working on any art recently?"

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah!

[May Ling Kopecky] You know, it's like going into the coffee shop.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yeah!

[May Ling Kopecky] So, that was what I was making prior to the MFA program at MCAD. I started the MFA program in 2020, right during the midst of the pandemic, but this actually worked out quite well for me because online classes are way more accessible personally, and that was kind of a little happy accident, I would say. I graduated with my MFA in 2022, and shortly after that, I began working a full-time job in the Learning Center and Accessibility Services Department, which is awesome because MCAD is an art school. Every day I am surrounded by fellow artists and creatives, and I feel like I'm constantly learning just by being around them and talking to them. I'd also say one of the best ways to do art is by doing it. I do still try to carve out a little time each week to focus on my own practice.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Amazing! Yeah! It's so hard to- especially when dealing with fatigue- To have time outside of the job and the everyday commitments. Like- making work is the first thing that goes for me, which is wild because that's also the thing that keeps me alive and functioning.

[May Ling Kopecky] Yeah!

[Anna Cowley Ford] So it's a really interesting balance. That segues into- can you share your experiences navigating the art world and or academia as a person with a disability?

[May Ling Kopecky] I'm very passionate about this topic. My experiences as a student with a disability are why I ultimately decided to go into the field of disability services. I had a 504 plan in high school, and I also had disability accommodations all throughout undergrad and grad school. Also, you mentioned chronic migraines earlier; I also have chronic migraines. I've had them since I was at least six or seven, I think? I was pretty young, but I remember being in elementary school, just sitting in class with a lot of pain. I would often go to the nurse's office because they had some beds in there where it was dark and quiet, and I could lie down. After going on a fairly regular basis, one day, the nurse kind of looked at me with this kind of knowing look, and she asked me, "Are you sure you have a headache?" And- okay- If I'm anything, I am a rule follower. My goal was to always get 100% on all of my assignments and never do anything wrong, ever. After the nurse kind of implied that I was faking a headache, maybe- I don't know- So I could get out of class, I just felt like, "Oh, I can't go back here. I can't ask for help again." I was, too- just kind of discouraged by that. I also didn't know that I was having migraines at the time. I was just like, "Oh, everybody just wakes up in pain, right?" And I ended up getting a pretty high pain tolerance after that point. I thought other people were just better at handling lights, noises, smells, and whatnot.

So, that was the first time I felt like I couldn't ask for help if I had health problems at school. After being diagnosed with MS due to pretty debilitating fatigue and other MS symptoms, that's when I found that online classes were a lot easier for me. What I ended up doing was taking PSEO classes in high school, meaning I was able to take college classes that were offered online for both high school and college credit. However, once again, I found myself in situations where authority figures weren't believing what I was telling them. A specific example is, one of the instructors for a PSEO class that I took, seemed a little annoyed when I told him I wouldn't be able to finish my project on time due to a flare-up. he said something like, "You were fine last week. What's the problem?" So for a while, I just didn't want to ask for help or let teachers know what was going on, which was not helpful for me at all. However, I did end up getting better at talking to professors in undergrad with more practice and help from my parents encouraging me. By grad school, I had kind of mastered it. My entire thesis was about having MS anyway, but yeah, it was a lot of those moments where I thought, "I don't feel comfortable talking about having MS if I'm going to- If this is going to be the response."

During the MFA program at MCAD, that is when I was really talking about having MS. I was really open about it, and that's also when I started to consider working in the field of disability services in education. I was a graduate assistant in the Learning Center and Accessibility Services department at the time, and, like I mentioned, my whole thesis project was about the experience of being a student with an invisible disability. While I was originally planning on becoming a professor, that was when I kind of shifted what I wanted to do. I wanted to be able to work more one-on-one with students and also help them learn how to advocate for themselves by sharing my own experiences and teaching them the things that I had learned. I also wanted to be able to teach faculty members about accommodations and invisible illnesses so that, hopefully, the students would have an easier time talking to their faculty members and wouldn't have the same experiences I did. I should also mention that most of my teachers and professors that I had were great, but even having a few question my symptoms and experiences was pretty discouraging.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Yep! Same for me too. For the most part, the faculty were very understanding, but it only takes one-

[May Ling Kopecky] Yeah.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Not great experience to just have a huge impact on how you try navigating things then. That's really important because in academia but also all facets of our job economy- We just don't have enough support for people with disabilities, and so, we need more of-

[May Ling Kopecky] Yes!

[Anna Cowley Ford laughs]

[Anna Cowley Ford] Of you doing this work because it's so important to have that support. You're very active as an artist. Do you have any current work that you would like to share?

[May Ling Kopecky] Yeah! Currently, I'm continuing to share my experiences through my work and spread MS awareness. While I really would like to eventually continue my MRI paintings- I currently am focusing on visualizing MS symptoms. My thesis work is actually currently in an exhibition called "Chronicles of the Chronic," at the Rochester Art Center in Rochester, Minnesota, which was curated by fellow MCAD MFA Alumni, Zoe Cinel. My work is right by your work, Anna, which is super cool!

[Anna Cowley Ford laughs]

[May Ling Kopecky] It's- I had the opportunity to visit the gallery a couple of weekends ago, and I was like, "Oh! There it is!" So, while most of my MS symptom drawings are done from a point of view perspective, I'm also thinking about what others might see if they could see the invisible symptoms. That's what led to the life-size drawing titled, "Self-portrait: Multiple Sclerosis and My Body." I created an outline of my body and then I layered various drawings on top that show what those areas of my body might look like when I'm experiencing different symptoms. For example, I drew one side of my face as if it were made of stone to reflect a time from when I was suffering from partial facial paralysis.

Alongside that self-portrait, I also wanted to share the stories and experiences of other young people with MS. I interviewed a few college students with MS that I had met online, asking them to describe a time when MS symptoms interfered with their academic experience. I then created drawings to visualize those symptoms, and their stories are displayed on iPads below the drawings in both written and audio formats. In addition to my work in that exhibition, I've started to create more point-of-view paintings more recently- trying to get back into painting. This past summer, I focused on my experiences with specifically heat intolerance, which is another MS symptom that seems to be getting worse every year. I created a painting that shows my hand kind of fading away while I look at a group of daisies, and the image becomes doubled and blurry as you look further to the sides. This reflects how heat can distort my vision and also kind of make my hands feel weak.

I'm actually working on another heat intolerance painting right now, but now that the semester has started and I'm meeting with students all day, I'm not sure when I'll actually complete that one, but I'm chipping away at it and that's mainly what I've been working on recently.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Awesome! It's always good to have something in progress to keep working on. I- We have so much to talk about!

[Anna Cowley Ford laughs]

[Anna Cowley Ford] We have so much to talk about! I want to keep talking because there's a lot of overlap happening in our work about- you know- visualizing the sensory experiences, and I love that you are also incorporating other people's experiences into your work. That's been a hurdle for me with my own- I don't know- isolation, that it's hard for me to- I don't know- Schedule! Reach out, and make things happen with others.

Thank you so much for sharing about your work, your life, and your experiences. I'm really thankful that Zoe brought us together with that exhibition, and I would love to visit with you more! What advice would you give to a young artist with a disability?

[May Ling Kopecky] Do your best to keep making work and find community. There are many young artists with disabilities who post their work online, and it can be super inspiring to look at their art and also connect with them. One example of an opportunity to meet other young artists with disabilities that I recently had was in 2022 when I won second prize for the Kennedy Center's VSA Emerging Young Artists Program. This included a trip to Washington, D.C., and a chance to meet the other artists, and it was a super amazing experience to hear them share their stories, and how they've navigated their art world with their various disabilities. By the way, if you're between the ages of 16 and 25, you should definitely enter that competition next year. You can also view the catalogs from previous years online if you'd like to learn more information about the artists.

Another bit of advice, don't be discouraged if things don't go as planned. Being able to adapt can be more important than anything, and sometimes, you have to modify the way you do things to keep creating. For example, I love painting, but for a while during grad school, I found that painting just wasn't as sustainable for me, it just wasn't as accessible for me, so I switched to drawing. It's also important to be honest with yourself and know what your body needs. During undergrad I was often told by my classmates that, "You should try working larger!" But, I stood my ground and continued to work smaller because I acknowledged what was realistic for me at the time based on how my MS symptoms were treating me.

Speaking of symptoms, please keep in mind that even if you need to take a break, you're still an artist. You haven't failed just because you needed to stop creating for a while. You can't expect yourself to be at 100% all the time, and putting your health first is most important.

[Anna Cowley Ford] Wow! That is so beautifully said and kind of made my eyes water because those are all things I need to be hearing right now.

Thank you so much, May Ling. This has been really amazing to visit with you.

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[May Ling Kopecky] It's been my pleasure!

[Outro music continues]

[Dr. Bernard] ABLE Voices is a production of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, led by me, Dr. Rhoda Bernard, the founding managing director. It was produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo.

The introduction music is by Kai Levin, and our closing song is by Sebastian Batista. Kai and Sebastian are students in the arts education programs at the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education.

If you would like to learn more about our work, you can find us online at berkee.edu slash B-I-A-A-E or email us at B-I-A-A-E at Berklee, that's L-E-E.edu.