



Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Podcast Episode 49: Lindsey Holcomb

[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 installation artist and disability advocate Alexis Neumann. Alexis is a Pacific Northwest installation artist using light, biomedical imagery, copper, and iridescent, transparent, and reflective materials to draw attention to the complexities of the human experience while engaging disability studies, intersectionality, theology, and cultural studies. She lives with multiple invisible illnesses, including Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and mental illness, and is currently based in Portland, Oregon. Her work focuses on and celebrates interconnectedness, intricacy and balance within the body through her use of neural and biological systems and explores resiliency and the metaphysical through sound, light, vibration, and materials.

[Alexis Neumann] Hi! My name is Alexis Neumann, and I am a guest host of ABLE Voices. I am an artist, educator, and organizer here in Portland, Oregon. I have my Master's in Fine Arts and Visual Arts as well as a Master's in Critical Studies from the Pacific Northwest College of Art. Within my work, I focus on interconnectedness, resiliency and wholeness in relationship with disability, theology, and art. I am so excited to be here today with Lindsey. Lindsey Holcomb is a self-taught interdisciplinary artist, and she holds a BA from the University of Oregon in Japanese and Asian studies, as well as studied music. She's represented by the Portland Art Museum rental sales gallery and art-lifting, and I am so excited to be here talking to you today! Thank you, Lindsey.

[Lindsey Holcomb] Awesome! Hi, Alexis. I'm so happy to be here talking to you today. I grew up with a mother who was a teacher, and so I was lucky enough to have access to many different

kinds of art supplies and projects- we were always trying something at home. I have to say, I'm a twin, and my twin sister was a lot more of a- she really processed herself- her childhood through art, and I gravitated towards music. Art was always something that I enjoyed- viewing, going to see, celebrating, and my friends, my sister, and my mother- it was always something that I enjoyed doing, but it was never a focus of mine. I went to college for music, and as I entered the workforce in my late 20s, I found myself kind of coming back to clay, to painting- things like that- as a way to destress after work- you know- the 10:00 p.m. creativity sessions. I would have never ever said out loud that I'm an artist. I would have been embarrassed back then to show you anything that I was making because it was just for me, and it was just to play. I think it was almost like a- a response to adulthood where I was like, "Why do we stop playing? Why do we stop playing when we hit our 20s, and we have our careers, we've gotten through school?" I was always seeking that new crayon box smell- that shiver of new supply excitement that I remember so deeply as a kid- I think I started chasing that as an adult, which is very much the reason I started working in clay again because how fun is that? I don't know anyone that doesn't enjoy clay day at school.

[Alexis Neumann laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] And- it became something that I enjoyed doing in the evening, on the weekends, things like that, and that just magnified as I became a mother- almost- I'd say a decade later as I entered the workforce and it became a way to reconnect with myself, kind of find myself- I think in those early motherhood days where you feel like- I'll just speak for myself, but I know that I've shared this experience with many friends with young ones is that- I just felt like I was awake for three years and just serving these two little needy people and I suddenly- everything about me and that I enjoyed doing just kind of fell to the wayside. So, I really started focusing on painting again during that time period as an "I have to be able to produce something. I have to be able to do something." even though my studies focused on violin, it was maybe too disruptive to the environment, I couldn't be playing or practicing at 10:00 p.m. once the babies went down, but I could paint.

It kind of takes off from there, but that's the background. I am self-taught; I've just always loved it. I've never met a medium that I don't like.

[Lindsey Holcomb laughs]

[Alexis Neumann] That's incredible! Thank you for- Thanks for saying that! I'd like to- I would like you to tell us a little bit about your experience as a person with a disability and as an artist with a disability. Has your artistic identity been shaped by your experience with disability?

[Lindsey Holcomb] It really has! It was the defining- you know- the time of diagnosis was a defining moment for me as an artist and it very consciously affected how I practice and pursue art. My daughters were about three and four when I was- and I say finally diagnosed with MS because I am one of the many people who wait a very long time to chase down an answer. It's not the only thing I live with. I also have Ehler- Danlos and, epilepsy, and a Lyme diagnosis I've never done anything with-

[Alexis Neumann giggles]

[Lindsey Holcomb] That's for another day, time, place, and energy, but it was a diagnosis that I celebrated because I suddenly didn't feel crazy; I felt validated. However, that still comes with the tidal wave of emotions and feelings and fear over what that means because it wasn't learning- or rather- imagining what my life would be and how it would be affected living with Multiple Sclerosis is- anyone that's been through the diagnosis process knows it's just very overwhelming in the beginning and at many different points during your journey as a patient now.

When I was diagnosed, that is really the time I know that I put my foot in the sand and said, "I want to make. I want to use my limited energy on projects and pursuits that I'm really passionate about." I worked as an assistant for about 15 years, and it was a very draining role for somebody with energy deficits and things like that. I had always thought I'm almost like Batman, where you can bring me in for a project, and I will kill it, and then I will be dead for about two months.

[Lindsey Holcomb laughs]

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah!

[Lindsey Holcomb] I'm like- I have such a long recovery time, but I'm like, "Is there an industry that can celebrate or work with me on that?" Like, bring it in, I'll take care of it, but then I need to sleep.

[Lindsey Holcomb laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] For like a few weeks.

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah! I feel like that's an experience that a lot of people with disabilities and also, a lot of people just living in this really fast-paced world live with is that we expend so much energy, and then we have these really long periods of crashes.

[Lindsey Holcomb] Right! Right, and this is coming in an industry where the grind is really celebrated, and the employees that are most celebrated are the ones that are pushing themselves way over the edge every day, all day, all year, for years in a row without crash and it just was not tenable for me. How that relates to art is, it was- I did kind of self-volunteer to toss myself off the precipice and say- I was starting to reduce my hours, I was starting to really fight for a flexible schedule after a diagnosis because I just knew I couldn't hold up all the plates at once between mothering, maintaining a household, being a good partner- all the things- working and pursuing something that I wanted which was art.

At the start of 2019, I really said, "Okay, I'm an artist now. I'm going to figure this out and see what that looks like." It was terrifying, like I said, I don't have art school experience or anything like that, and so I went into it strong with my little music degree background and Asian Studies.

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] And- you know- what really launched things was what I still consider to be private- almost- like a journal entry in the studio, which is a day that I painted an impression of my own MRI that showed Multiple Sclerosis lesions. I am a highly squeamish person, which makes the whole medical journey that much more difficult for me- I have no interest in how and why what happening is inside our bodies-

[Alexis Neumann laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] No interest! It's amazing I get through dolling out Band-Aids as a mother because I'm delighted there are people that specialize in all of those things, but I'm like, "I don't want to see images of my brain." I found that terrifying. I found all of the diagnosis processes terrifying- spinal tap and things like that, and so this was a moment where I took this image, confronted it- in my way- painted it, and I felt quite a lot better afterward. It felt like, "Oh! These are my colors. It feels passionate; it also feels moody, but I can sit with this now." That was really the point- the same point that I was somewhat declaring myself as an artist, and I began doing this work rather organically with other people in the Multiple Sclerosis community to translate their MRI. This project kind of built and built speed rolling down the hill at the same time that I've been building myself as a professional artist, so it has been a really sharp learning curve for me over the years.

As I sit with you today, I've painted over 316 people's MRIs, some of which I've publicly shared through my project, "Colors of MS," and that was truly- like my entire focus in the beginning and so now, as I sit with you today I'm kind of finding my voice as an artist outside of that work as well, and so for me, that's what this year is all about- five years later.

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah! That is interesting- how you used that experience of this uncomfortable medical diagnosis and being combated with- you know- tests, and images, and conversations that maybe you weren't fully ready for- fully prepared for and how you used that as an artist- not only to connect with yourself and your own diagnosis, but also use that with other people who- I find that really interesting that you use MRIs- especially as somebody who is squeamish- was there this confronting of your identity and this new situation- how did that present itself in the work of "The Colors of MS"? Was it- I know that you were influenced by a lot of different things when you painted but-

[Lindsey Holcomb] Yeah! The way the artwork developed and how I've worked with people as a private commission- really- I again- I learned along the way. I just knew that I always wanted to replicate this very personal moment for the person that I'm painting for. I want it to feel like them; I want to know what their influences are that they enjoy, do they find peace in nature, do they find it through music, and certainly- I can weave that through with color theory and what certain colors mean to people and definitely want to know what colors to avoid at all costs and things like that. The technique has always been the same where it's- you know- it's very abstract, it's painted in a moment where I feel like I've cleared my mind and I've cleared my plate a little bit. I really want to hold space for them in the creating of the work. I will say- I use both alcohol ink and thread in the paintings of MRI, and how that started was an accident in ordering supplies.

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] I like to fully admit that to everyone. I thought I was ordering a different kind of ink when I was working on a Japanese technique at the time, and I thought I had found some colored Sumi ink, so charcoal ink-

[Alexis Neumann] Oh! Okay!

[Lindsey Holcomb] It was- and you know- it curdled when it hit the water, and I'm like, "What is this?!"

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] I started playing around with it and I was like, "Okay, I'm hooked!" It's unpredictable, and it's bold, it's a very fiddly medium but I kind of like working with that. It compliments my own neuro spiciness where I'm like- I really can't control the outcome- I can't.

I can put guard rails around it because I know the general shape and what we're going with, but it's going to be what it's going to be, and that's part of the process of making that I really enjoy.

[Alexis Neumann] That's- yeah- I feel like that parallels the disability experience so much also.

[Alexis Neumann laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] Having that back-and-forth conversations with people and, like I said- not everybody shares their story through my project, which is primarily hosted on Instagram- but if they do, they're sharing a little bit about themselves, a little bit about their diagnosis process and then their outlook for the future, what they would have liked to hear and you know- being five- almost six years into a diagnosis myself, I still consider myself new to understanding and reshaping my understandings of living with MS and what to expect truly- I think- especially when something is so important, and you know will be so impactful on your life, I really struggled with resources in the beginning of the diagnosis. It was just- it was too heavy. I had well-meaning relatives suddenly send me a million books and links and things. I could not bring myself to open these books, "Overhaul your diet overnight," these kinds of things.

But- talking with people about their personal experiences and then through art made it so much more digestible and accessible, and it was eye-opening for me and supportive to me as a patient in the beginning just to hear how differently everybody handles and approaches living with Multiple Sclerosis. That's my hope with people viewing or following the project- is that they can see like, "Okay, this is as individual as anything."

[Alexis Neumann] That's incredible that you were learning about your own diagnosis through all these conversations with others, and it's interesting that this kind of marked your early diagnosis period.

[Lindsey Holcomb] Yeah!

[Alexis Neumann] What are you focused on now in your art practice? I know that you have a show that you just opened and that you have some new bodies of work.

[Lindsey Holcomb] I do! It's- I'm feeling I'm at a really interesting point right now where really- these last five years- I mean- I credit my work the MRI for a lot of doors that have opened and opportunities that have opened to myself as an artist, but it's kind of like rolling backward and saying, "Okay, but what am I painting if I'm not focusing on MS?" Even though it's a project that I'm deeply grateful for, it does have some negative effects on me as an artist- somewhat in the sense that I feel like I'm being diagnosed over and over and over again.

[Alexis Neumann] Mhmm.

[Lindsey Holcomb] I can't deny that fact. I've slowed down my rate of commission over the last few years because I recognize the energetic impact of making those works, and I still do them but at a slower rate. I really began- I'd say last year- experimenting with- I mean- I don't want to say organically creating because everybody has their own way that they do it, but really just not beating myself up about the fact that I am not in the studio 9 to 5 every single day. That's just not how my brain works. Depends on busy seasons with children- I find that I'm okay with winter being a little bit more of a fallow period of just like- reflecting and thinking, but a lot of my work that I'm excited to take into this year- that started last year- was natural ink-making. It's been something I'm trying to study and practice for the last few years, and I feel at a really pivotal point with it. I feel like- you know- gathering ingredients from the environment or- which is blessedly rich here in the Pacific Northwest-

[Alexis Neumann] Sure!

[Lindsey Holcomb] Gives me- it lends a feeling of placemaking to what I create and is a way of- I just always think of Horton Hear's a Who with the little, "I am here! We are here! We are here!"

[Alexis Neumann and Lindsey Holcomb laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] You sometimes feel like that when- you know- I can't be present at fairs and markets, things like that- I'm not as what I say is active for my peers who are in art, we present a different way, and I think that working slowly is really the name of the game this year, and being and following what is curious and following what I think is- you know- I have some paintings that are inspired by Japanese myth which is my heritage and travels and things like that- that I really like to fixate on and explore and I'm just going to give myself permission to explore more of those topics this year.

[Alexis Neumann] That's great! Yeah! There's so much more to you as an artist and you as a person outside of a diagnosis, and it- I think sometimes as artists, especially as disabled artists- we get fixated on this one aspect of our identity, and we're like, "This is how we connect with other people," but the beauty of the lived experience is that disability is a part of the human experience. It is a part of every aspect of living, and there are so many other things that may- are still informed by our experience and be used as inspiration for-

[Lindsey Holcomb] Absolutely!

[Alexis Neumann] Different mediums.

[Lindsey Holcomb] Absolutely, and it's still something new. It feels very new to say out loud because, again- I'm just really, really thankful for where the project has taken me, and I'm really- it will always be incredibly important to me and- but I'm just really excited to kind of explore some themes and kind of get weird this year.

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah! I know you were talking about how you show up in spaces maybe a little bit differently than some of our other peers and how your acceptance and how you have come to work with that instead of fighting against that instinct to kind of show up all the time and be at all the fairs and exhibition openings, but it's true- working with your body instead of against your body is so important.

[Lindsey Holcomb] It's true, and being really honest with yourself about how- you know- how an event or a creative process is going to impact you. I say that as if I know what I'm talking about, but I'm pretty fresh into sticking to my guns about that, I'd say. I hate that phrase; I don't know why I said that but-

[Alexis Neumann and Lindsey Holcomb laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] But I think- again- since these last five years, I'll joke with my close friends that I feel like I'm cosplaying as an artist all the time. I'm just like, "Am I doing this right? Is this what I'm supposed to- I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing!"

[Alexis Neumann laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] And trying to kind of- I'll try something- I'll try entering a market, or I'll try to be available- for example- I was a part of a gallery that did a monthly first Tuesday event or needed work turned over more frequently as opposed to another gallery that I work with that may except work twice a year and certainly not more than like two to four pieces a year. I started to realize, I'm like, "I'd rather show up in my best way to the least- to the thing that least demands energy from me than try to be on a production wheel with seasonal products or offerings or being spread too thin, or- you know- their models and drive that I really admire." I really admire a lot of my artist friends that I have that- especially like the holiday season, where they're doing a Christmas market every single week of the month; I could simply could not do

that. I could not do that- I know how much energy it takes- it's- even just putting your work out there once, it requires a lot of energy, but just being okay with it and not beating myself up for deleting that email about an opportunity or-

[Lindsey Holcomb laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] Or I kind of might need a tattoo on my right hand that says, "Lindsey, do not apply to that thing-"

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] And Have faith that it'll still be okay, and I'll still be out there when I can be out there. That is hard. That is hard because the year's calendar moves fast and I think that's something a lot of artists, just in general- not only artists with disabilities struggle with.

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah! I feel like showing up in- it's a hard thing to figure out. Alright- when are you going to show up and like at your best, most energetic, and pick and choose the experiences and opportunities or balance that with opportunities coming in as well as seeing what everybody else is doing- it's a really challenging- balance, so I applaud you on your thought process on this.

[Lindsey Holcomb] Thank you.

[Alexis Neumann] I appreciate you sharing it.

[Lindsey Holcomb] This is a grounding talk for me because I know that even hopping onto social media later on, it affects a lot of us, and I like to remind all my friends I'm like, "Smoke and mirrors- smoke and mirrors- I am taking a nap every time I hit post, I promise you!"

[Lindsey Holcomb and Alexis Neumann laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] I am not as busy as I look!

[Lindsey Holcomb laughs]

[Lindsey Holcomb] But I'm thankful for where I can.

[Alexis Neumann] Yeah! Just to wrap up, I'm wondering what advice you would give to a young artist with a disability.

[Lindsey Holcomb] I just say, keep chasing that curiosity. I think it's like the art of remaining flexible with what you expect from yourself and your work and allowing space to be surprised. I think being- this is a large statement- I think being quote-unquote "successful in art" has to do with audacity and putting yourself out there, and I mean, your people literally put their heart on a wall or on a pedestal or however you're presenting art, but just like remaining open to looking at your practice and finding a way that can support the way you create. It's hard when we continually compare ourselves to others but just remain open to surprise and creative. I say that as a very neuro-spicy person that I'm- you know- I-

[Alexis Neumann and Lindsey Holcomb laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] I have- I beat myself up for a long time with like, "Okay, I need to stay in my own lane, I do alcohol ink. Like, no, no, who says that? Nobody says that! You can introduce yourself however you like." So, I say go by the weirdest thing at the art supply store and have fun playing with it and diffuse some of that stress that can come up with creating.

[Alexis Neumann] Wow! That's inspiring to me as well!

[Alexis Neumann and Lindsey Holcomb laugh]

[Lindsey Holcomb] Especially for people who are going through the art school experience, I don't have that experience. I'd say that going to school for violin performance, I can only imagine, is slightly similar where it's just- you know- the jurying and the constant feedback and all, but-

[Alexis Neumann] I love that!

[Lindsey Holcomb] Get that crayon box smell- that new crayon box smell. Remember why we do this.

[Alexis Neumann laughs]

[Alexis Neumann] That's so great! Thank you so much!

[Lindsey Holcomb] Absolutely!

[Alexis Neumann] I really appreciate the opportunity to have the space to talk with other artists living with disabilities. I think it is such an important conversation to have and is something that I will carry with me throughout my future as an artist and- but I think the lessons that I've learned from other artists with disabilities.

I'm thinking particularly like- allowing yourself to show up in the ways that you're able to and celebrating those ways that you can. Being open to being surprised, letting yourself live with complicated aspects of your identity, and using that within your art practice- these are all lessons that I don't know if I would have gotten or if I would have learned if I didn't get to have these conversations with other artists who live with disabilities.

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[Alexis Neumann] I really appreciate having the space and opportunity to work with ABLE Voices. Thank you so much!

[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 is produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo.

[Outro music ends]

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