

Episode 3, The Future

Artists: Felicia Byron, Salima Punjani, Carlisle Robinson

Interviewer: Mary Anderson

Music: Eli Howey

MUSIC

[00:00:00] This episode imagines forward looking possibilities. What would an ideal creative space look and feel like? What systems, relationships, and designs could exist to support disabled artisans work more radically. We invited artists Felicia Byron, Salima Punjani, and Carlisle Robinson to share their futuristic ideas.

MUSIC

Felicia Byron

Mary Anderson

Hey, I'm Felicia Byron. Most people call me FēB3A RBG (Phoebe). Professionally, I'm the founder and creative director of Studio FēB3A RBG Productions that is a creative house focused on inclusive storytelling through photography, video, and [00:01:00] visual arts. I'm a multidisciplinary artist, educator, facilitator, Caribbean Canadian woman of color, and a lot of my work centers on Black disabled and diasporic narratives.

I am tuning in from Tkaronto, also known as Toronto. I'm on the traditional territories of Indigenous nations, and the city's been my creative home for about 15 years – no, no 20 years now.

[Why is it important to feel like you belong as an artist within a space?](#)

As an artist who is both physically disabled and neurodivergent, belonging means that I don't have to mask or kind of perform a level of [00:02:00] ability that – I don't even know know if that's the word I want to use but – yeah, a level of ability, especially when creating. You know, like I shoot on set, I shoot with heavy equipment, and I work in both commercial, as we all do, but I do a lot of things myself. I don't have a team, as yet, unless the budget allows, and so I work a lot in commercial spaces where even just advocating for my access needs would have the job passed on to somebody else, for example. In places where you feel like you belong or creating places where there's a sense of belonging, I don't need to prove my [00:03:00] capabilities or prove that, you know, regardless of my physical access needs, I am still very much capable of creating the same caliber of work and existing in the same environment.

Just, you know, I have adjustments that may need to be made. I don't need to prove why I deserve to be valued at the same level of those who, you know, don't face physical disability barriers, or you know, neurodivergent barriers, right? And so I feel like creating a place where

you belong, I can feel like my body and my experiences and my needs are not just taken into consideration, but they're also respected, [00:04:00] and the respect part is very important.

Honestly, I've been an artist my whole life, you know, ever since I could hold a pencil. But professionally, I have been full-time practicing since 2020. But in a more part-time capacity for 15 to 17 years. I've worked as a photographer, and still do, but now as a photo artist, multidisciplinary artist, and educator, this has been fairly recent for me, about five years or so.

My practice is rooted in visual storytelling. [00:05:00] I work across photography, film, collage, and community based workshops. A big part of what I do through Studio Phoebe is create work that centers joy, grief, resistance, intergenerational connection, and identity. I'm also really invested in building creative spaces where youth, especially those from marginalized communities, can feel safe enough to explore and express who they are.

You know, I want to be the mentor or be the mirror that I didn't really see when I was growing up. That's a big part of my ethos as an artist, is also paying it forward. In my ethos as [00:06:00] an artist, I aim to create that space of belonging for the people that I work with, the people that I work for, and in the projects that I take on, I aim to create that environment for everybody.

[How do you do that? Can you give some examples of things you try.](#)

Yes, there's two examples that I would like to share. One being the newest addition to my team, which is my rescue pup, Rahel. She is a Korean Jindo, two years old, and I am currently working on writing a grant to do a documentary in telling her story – our story, as I'll be training her as a service [00:07:00] animal and emotional support animal – for my own access needs, but also, and I don't wanna say more importantly, but more importantly, so that she can be a calming presence on set.

My practice then becomes more accessible, even the commercial or portrait photography side of things, because I want her to be able to provide calming presences for people that I work with, whether they have PTSD, or you know, sensory issues and are neurodivergent, children, families. I'm always thinking about how I can – I wanna say that my love language is like acts of service or acts of care, and I'm always thinking of how I can do that in my practice, as well.

And so although Rahel came into my life when [00:08:00] I really needed her after the passing of my cat, I'd had him for 15 years. He was my ride or die. I saw the gaps when I looked into emotional support animals after Link's passing. I saw the gaps in access, in terms of financial access, and also how important the connection between an animal and someone who needs an animal for service or emotional support is. It's not just a want, it's a need, you know. And so this project is something that I want to tell the story of – the support, [00:09:00] the work that people are doing in support animal training.

'Cause I will be working with an organization to train Rahel myself, and document the whole experience. But also, I want to offer a window into the experience of people who don't have

access to this access need, you know, don't have access to emotional support or service animals.

The work that I'm doing now, you know, has expanded beyond – it's still lens-based, but expanded beyond photography. I did my first, I dunno if I want to call it a documentary, but it is a 30 minute [00:10:00] interview-based accompaniment video to the project that I did last year that debuted at Tangled called Glinting and Gleaning, which started out as a BIPOC disabled artist portrait interview project.

So I interviewed 20 artists and there's a portrait for each artist that was created into a community quilt, using cyanotype process. So I created a big cyanotype quilt and invited some of the artists, well all of them, but some of the artists provided pieces for me to include, like squares to include in the quilt.

Especially that piece, I really wanted the sense of community to be [00:11:00] present in not just the subject matter, but also the way in which it was created. Quilts are, you know, by nature, very communal, but also the invitation to have the artist's work be a part of the quilt, not just the portraits.

In doing the interview component, I've been leaning towards doing more film based work, media arts work for quite some time. I had no idea how to do any of those things. I just said, yep, this is what I'm doing and I'm gonna figure it out. But it was important to me because, you know, I could take portraits and I could, you know, do a written interview.

But I feel like I wanted to share the stories of these artists. I wanted to be able to [00:12:00] facilitate the opportunity for, and it's not to say that I'm the only person doing that or anything, but like in this project specifically, it was important for me to tell the stories of the people that I'm photographing.

And in offering that opportunity for visibility, but also like having frank discussions over experience, in a very similar way actually to this interview. That's the way that I can do so in my practice. And I would like to do more of that. Filmmaking [00:13:00] is very new to me, but we spoke a little bit about, you know, my love with music videos and cinematography. Truly, I think the reason why I went into photography first and foremost is because I loved cinematography so much, but I felt that I had to take baby steps towards it, which is interesting to say, but in my mind, I felt like photography was like the baby step towards doing more audio visual work. And so last year I took that step, I dipped my toe in, and I'm really proud of the work that I did. And I would love to see it as an ongoing series. I want to do more quilts – you know, I started with the [00:14:00] BIPOC disabled artist experience.

As a Black woman growing up with cerebral palsy, I hadn't really seen, had experiences where I met people that had similar experiences to me. That is another form of isolation that I felt. I had procedures done when I was younger where I spent time at Sick Kids and spent time at, well formally Hugh McMillan, but now Holland Bloorview, and still felt very unseen. You know, I'm

around other disabled kids, but not around other Black disabled kids, you know? And so that project began out of my own sense of wanting to find community, [00:15:00] and I felt most proud in the fact that I had such great feedback from all the artists in that they felt heard and seen and felt.

I'm very new to even interviewing people as well, but they felt comfortable – those are the things that I worry the most about. You know with YouTube you see a lot of content that should feel authentic, but in ways it just feels like people are being propped up for views and that is never how I want my work to come across. [00:16:00] And so I think doing portrait series where I am inviting a kind of communal discussion through my work, I feel like that's another way in which I, in practice, try to provide a sense of belonging in my own practice, in my own work.

Well I was just gonna say, it's like you are creating a space for that, which is a really powerful thing. It's like you have to have relationships and a skillset to be able to produce that and to design that and to facilitate that. And so it's like you're essentially creating your own space for that. And that's a really incredible thing. That's been like the [00:17:00] coolest thing about this project – the idea of space has been very much not just a physical space, right? There's a lot of makers that just don't have access. Plain and simple. And in some cases, don't necessarily want it.

And so it's been interesting to hear from folks about the spaces that they essentially carve out and create for themselves. I guess that leads into this next question – if you can imagine future spaces, physical or not, what do you hope for, like what do you envision that would be helpful for disabled artists, for the disability arts community more broadly? Is it just an accessible physical space only? Is it this openness and generosity and connection that you're [00:18:00] making with other folks. It's probably a mix.

I was gonna just say that. Yeah, it's a little bit from column A, column B and C and D. I think all of those things need each other – it feels like a bit of a tapestry or a puzzle – elements that come together to make a better whole, a sum of their parts.

We've talked a bit about the isolation felt during quarantine, but there are things that came out of COVID-19 or 2020 that I don't know where it'd be without it, like Zoom, for example. [00:19:00] There are things that I said yes to and did that if I didn't have the opportunity to show up on a Zoom call for it, I wouldn't have done. Being on a board of directors, but being incredibly introverted, I would've never said yes to doing that outside of that environment.

But it allowed me, even if it took a few years to gain the confidence to be able to show up with that board in person and expand on doing that. So I think technology and platforms that allow people to show up wherever they are, however they are, is super important. I think that as [00:20:00] I see more and more organizations that are focusing on access and focusing on the arts and the combination, it is so important to lead with heart and not just like, tick off boxes, and really show up with compassion, not just with words, but with action, you know? And give options, you know?

Can you give some examples of options?

Well, I am currently teaching a workshop with Access Arts, through their Won Lee art hub pilot project. And their option, [00:21:00] people can show up in person and people can show up through Zoom. I'm kind of new to art education. It's only been the last couple of years of my practice. And I have learned a lot, in terms of what I am bringing forth as accessible as possible. So my first class was actually yesterday and it's a six week thing.

We're doing photo collage and cyanotype. It's thinking about printouts, having printout options that people can take, and clear instructions or creating spaces for rest and [00:22:00] decompression. Creating enough time for breaks, having time for check-ins, making sure that the space that I'm working out of is accessible. And Access Arts is amazing with making sure those items are there.

But even as I'm developing these workshops, I'm always thinking about, you know, is my slide deck – am I using cap letters and not thinking about access when it comes to graphic design. People that are visually impaired have a hard time reading things that are all in all caps. You know, these little things [00:23:00] that are not really thought about. And these are the kind of options that I think need to be more front of mind, not just in access spaces, but in all spaces.

I'm learning too, you know, and so it's also the willingness to want to understand what those needs and those options may be.

I love that, the willingness. Because I think that that's a really powerful word. For folks to actually sit back and to think, are you willing to learn about what is needed here? And listen and to be open and have uncomfortable conversations if you don't understand things so you can ask questions. Like it really does, I think, illustrate how leading with [00:24:00] your heart is, is like the first step in a lot of these situations, right?

We've been getting feedback from artists – if folks feel safe and welcomed, it's like it's a huge first step to be able to then develop their work and to feel like they can just be themselves as an artist. I really appreciate you explaining all of that because I think it really does come down to some of these basic ideas.

Yeah. Access needs to be baked into the DNA of a space. You know, it's not just patched on as an afterthought. People think of access, whether it's physical ramps, elevators, et cetera, but like flexible hours, rest areas I mentioned, you know, [00:25:00] masking, still having access to masks because, you know, COVID hasn't gone away.

It's empathy based and it's care based because then you're thinking about somebody else's experience, you know? Scent free policies – I do fundraiser portrait sessions to raise funds for training or health. And I offer sliding scale payment options. It's about a culture of understanding, for sure.

Are you optimistic about the future?

Yeah, I think so. [00:26:00] I mean, I'm optimistic about the future when I don't think about the things – I don't wanna get political or anything because there are things to be concerned about, of course.

But I think there's a lot to be excited for and there's a lot to be hopeful for. I've done some visiting artist stints at high schools and whenever I connect with youth, I feel super hopeful 'cause they're the future, they're the ones who will be the stewards of what we got going on here.

I am so impressed whenever I connect with youth because [00:27:00] they know what's going on. I think empathy is kind of embedded in youth culture now, you know, with these generations that I've been connecting with anyway. And that's exciting.

As we're talking about having access to creative space, I think it's so important to have a place where it doesn't need to be physical, but it is a space that is created for the openness to take risks. That space could also exist in the form of a grant that gives you the freedom to take those risks, to process. A lot of my work, a lot of the pieces that I've created in recent years have [00:28:00] come out of grief, so I think having that space to create, to process emotions, to feel, you know. As artists, feeling drives us.

I think emotions are a big part of how I make work, especially the hard ones. The ones that people like to – in the past wanted to kind of shove down. I found a sense of liberation in allowing those to take center stage through my work. Allowing some space for dealing with the messiness of life has made me a stronger artist.

For [00:29:00] artists that are especially disabled, racialized, queer, neurodivergent, having a space where you don't feel judged or tokenized, particularly, I think tokenized comes up a lot more than people talk about. It's absolutely essential to have spaces where that isn't the case. As a Black creator, I've existed in spaces where I was the only Black person on a board, only disabled person in an organization.

And that tokenization can be exhausting because then you feel like you are a representative of your – it's not to say that you aren't representing, but to feel as though – there's a lot of pressure in that environment [00:30:00] where you are only the only, you know. Yeah. And so I think creative spaces like Tangled are so important because it can feel like coming home in ways, you know. Again, it's about embedding access into the DNA of our society and not just as a bandaid.

MUSIC

Hi, my name is Salima Punjani. I am an artist based in Montreal. I work [00:31:00] primarily in disability arts, creating multisensory environments to invite connection and different entry points using multiple senses. Today I am joining you from Glasgow, Scotland, where I'm doing a residency with my friend Greer Pester.

The collaboration is called Sensory Glisk, and Glisk is a gallic word for a glimmer of light. And we're essentially exploring different ways that the arts and care work intersect. This is our third time working together and the first one was literally during isolation lockdown time of the pandemic, sending each other sensory care packages.

We would be like smelling essential oils and eating tea cakes from across the world together. And then we met in Montreal and worked on soft sculptures, in relation to softness [00:32:00] with body parts. And this time it's quite interesting 'cause we're joining at a time where both of us are quite exhausted.

Having worked in social practice art for, you know, many years now, and it's interesting joining in this time where we're just kind of burnt out. So, our two residencies, like the one in Montreal and this one, what's quite interesting is that we always start with like a week of rest. So when Greer came to Montreal, we went to a lake house and just had some absorption time, which is a rare luxury in our work.

And this time we went to the Scottish Highlands and stayed at a farmhouse for a week and it was a way to connect to each other and to ourselves and to absorb some of the learnings, and things that we've had since the last time we spent together. And we're just entering into more like the design [00:33:00] exploration process now.

[Sounds like the environment's playing a key role right now in facilitating some of that process, in terms of visiting these outside spaces or different spaces rather?](#)

I think it's interesting to just see what we're drawn to – the little glimmers of plants or moss or mushrooms or different things. I think we're both just kind of trying to create the environments to learn who we are again, alone and together, because for both of us I think it's been a pretty hustley time.

But it's funny 'cause I remember checking in with each other before [00:34:00] the residency, and I was like, we don't have to do anything. We can just be, and I was like, you know, like imagine a Google calendar with nothing in it. And I had a Google home on my table and it was like, I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying. I was just like, this is so perfect, this captures this so well. So I feel like that's been like the starting point for our work together – can we imagine a Google calendar with nothing in it?

[Sounds like a dream. How long have you been a practicing artist?](#)

I've been a practicing artist since 2010 or 2011 or so, but it's been quite diverse, in terms of what exactly that's meant and what exactly I've done [00:35:00] along the way. When I first started exhibiting my photos, it's when I had an international development internship in Ethiopia, and just kind of fell in with the group of artists and was invited to exhibit with them and stuff.

And then I did a journalism degree at Concordia in Montreal, and ended up being a reporter and made films and stuff, and doing participatory art projects along the way, as a way to kind of bring storytelling and gathering, and I guess create some nuance in polarized situations through storytelling.

And then I did a social work degree because I wanted to learn more about how to apply a trauma informed lens to the artwork that I was doing 'cause I felt like there's a pretty big gap in both [00:36:00] journalism and in art, in terms of actually knowing what care is and how complex it can be. And it's not just like a pretty word to stick on something.

There's a lot of accountability that comes with saying that you care. And I feel like that gets kinda lost in the process and there's rarely like this ethical obligation to care. So I really wanted to learn more about how to deepen my approach to structuring care and to creative projects.

[Do you have a space that you make in currently?](#)

Yeah. So I have a studio at The Long Haul in Montreal, which will not be my space for very long. We're getting evicted at the end of the year. Well in Glasgow we have a couple spaces, [00:37:00] one of which is this beautiful project, I think it's called Outer Spaces, if I'm not mistaken.

And so Greer has a big studio in this abandoned building and they just let artists use it until it's taken over by business interests. So I think it's like something that happens in quite a few cities where they let people have space until it transforms into the next capitalistic endeavor.

But it's really amazing for artists, I think, to have access to that kind of space. I also go to an amazing pottery studio in Montreal called Studio 3 Tables, which is actually a BIPOC only pottery studio. So it's quite a sanctuary to have.

[Sounds amazing. Just going back to \[00:38:00\] how you said it was important for artists to have space, access to space – can you maybe expand on that? Like why is creative space, outside of your domestic realm, important for makers? Just a side note – we've actually had a lot of older artists, and they're not even old by any means, that have been incredibly grateful for this, almost like a revisitation of access to space. They just felt tired of making in their own home and having either family around or roommates around, and to go back into spaces with folks from all backgrounds, various ages, how that has actually influenced their practice. If you could speak to how access in general is just an important thing for artists.](#)

So what I [00:39:00] think is interesting about that question is that it's hard for me to think about access to space away from access to accessible space. And so as a person living with illness, what I have found challenging is to find an accessible studio space. Like both my home and studio are incredibly inaccessible. So some days I'm just kind of stuck. And I think that there's kind of a gap there in creating space for disabled artists to have spaces to create that makes sense for them.

Whether it's immunosuppression and COVID safety or physical mobility barriers and things like that. I think that perhaps I'm not answering your question in a linear way, but I feel like it would be such a dream to have [00:40:00] accessible studio space. You know, in measuring how many spoons it takes to leave the house and then climb, you know, 30 stairs, and go down a big hallway to a studio, there has to be that decision of like, can I create today?

Can I get there? How can I get there? Who's gonna be there? Is it gonna be loud? What are the lights like? I think that it would just be amazing if some of these things could be considered. And thinking about space specifically with an accessibility lens 'cause I wonder what people could do if the conditions were there to be well and create.

[Do you recall the first space that you accessed where you felt a sense of belonging? Like you \[00:41:00\] felt like you could be yourself and make whatever you wished?](#)

Yeah, absolutely. The first place that I entered that I felt a sense of belonging was Tangled Arts, in 2018. I was really lucky to be part of a group of artists that were invited for the Flourishing series, which was to create work with the backbone of critiquing medical aid in dying in the way that it was being practiced.

And so we were invited to go to Nova Scotia to Catherine Frazee's home where she spoke about MAID – medical assistance in dying – and how often it can be used as a way to encourage people to die, instead of take care of them. And so along with a variety of different organizations, including [00:42:00] Tangled, they invited eight artists, if I'm not mistaken, to come together and to create work about what it's like to flourish.

And so through that, I learned about vibrotactile technology from David Bobier. We had really good support to experiment with new ways of working. I met Sean Lee for the first time, which was the start of a long mentorship and friendship. And Cyn, and all of the crew at Tangled at the time, as well as other Crip artists.

And that was my first time getting to hang out with Deaf folks and other MAD folks. And you know, like everyone just came and met each other where we were and it was really beautiful. And to just have that space to connect with each other – I didn't even know what access needs were at that point. Like I [00:43:00] was so new to this world and it was my first time ever being asked if I needed anything. And I remember at the time of the exhibition, I was starting my master's in social work, and an internship at the Museum of Fine Arts, as part of my social work degree, as well as flying to Toronto to install the exhibition for Flourishing.

And I was so tired. I was so tired. And I remember at some point, and like at this time I was transitioning from a career in journalism and freelancing where if you're invited somewhere, you work until you drop, you know, it's that kind of vibe. And Tangled was so gracious and took such good care of me.

And I remember one particular instance that I've shared probably multiple times at this point, [00:44:00] but I think it really captures that feeling of like belonging for me, which was when I was literally unable to keep my eyes open, I just like looked at Sean and I was like, do you mind if I take a nap? And he's like, well, what can I do to help you be more comfortable? Do you want a blanket? Do you want a pillow? Like what do you need to be comfortable?

And I almost started crying because it was the first time where it wasn't stigmatized to take care of yourself, of myself. It wasn't like a bad thing that I needed to rest. I felt like there was an understanding that if my best creative self is valued, that that kind of care is inherent in the process of wanting to bring that out from an organization, you know?

And I think that it was the first time I was really treated with [00:45:00] dignity, and that has completely transformed how I work, how I live, how I move in the world, because to feel that embodied experience of what it's like to be cared for in a professional space, made me not want to do anything else, and to resist deeply when I'm forced to like conform to undignified treatment.

But basically in 2023, I did a project called The Space In Between, and months before the project started, we had sent out an accessibility menu, which outlined what was possible and gave options of like, what do you like to sit on? What do you dream of playing with? What do you love to eat and drink? How do you like to gather?

And all of these different [00:46:00] questions and like things that you could ask for because I find that in developing spaces, it's nice to know who's coming and what they need to feel like they can be present. And so I actually designed the space based on the answers from the access menu, and held gatherings, and then a public exhibition at the end.

And what I really learned from that is that to create a space of belonging isn't about having a checklist of how to do it, but actually slowly listening to what people need. Because that can change, right? Like, I don't know, sometimes I'm gluten free and sometimes I'm not. I don't know, like bodies are changing, bodies are shifting, and I think it's important to carve out space to listen. [00:47:00]

There's obviously some things that I feel are nice to do just as protocol. Often, if I'm having like a public gathering and it's possible, I'll make COVID testing mandatory and masking mandatory, and have air purifiers in a space, as well as a big box of fidget toys, and different seating, and audio description and you know, like ASL/LSQ if I can, and interpretation and, you know, image description, alt text, like all of the kind of like protocol package.

Also sometimes people might not wanna sit on a hard chair or, I don't know, there's like some pretty cool abstract stuff that came out of it. Like we had visual cues of how people were feeling. Like there was fluffy orange bracelets if you're feeling hyper and excited to meet people.

And pink bracelets, if you're [00:48:00] kind of neutral, and blue ribbons that were still beautiful, but we're kind of a sign of like, I'm feeling a bit like not into socializing today, and little pieces of red fabric that were like, if you just wanna leave and not explain why, you can just go. Like just put the fabric on so no one bothers you. And little rainbow ribbons, if you needed extra distance, if you were being extra COVID safe.

There's like this element of play and joy and pleasure in asking, in receiving, in these opportunities of generosity and reciprocity, and learning together of what is possible that I think is particularly exciting for me, because if you're thinking about belonging and you're asking about belonging, it's not assuming anything, but rather like a co-created listening process of experimentation and play.

I'm so glad that you are using the word [00:49:00] listening 'cause I do feel like it's that intentional, like again, even care, and openness to have those conversations and to ask the questions to make people feel like they can feel comfortable in that space. And I think you're totally right with the checklist. I think that's why initially when this was proposed, it felt like that's what was kind of sought after, in terms of like, hey, what are the 20 top things that a space needs to make folks feel like they can access the space?

That's just simply not the case. Like you say, there's obviously a series of to-dos and musts in any space generally or ideally, right? But in terms of actually feeling like it can be – I think the word openness comes to mind for me. I'll give you an example. I went to [00:50:00] Edmonton for a theater festival one of our partners was hosting and they basically set up the space exactly how you described. So it's like you just walked in and it was already implemented in a way that was just like, wow, can you imagine if every space was set up like this?

And also it does take a level of planning too. Something I've been thinking about lately is how to invite people to interact when folks have been told don't touch the work for so long. It's like this pause that folks have to actually play. And I've been trying lots of different things. Like the show I curated at Tangled last year, there is always something better. We had touch notes because every artist was invited to create tactile elements of their work. And I noticed that people weren't touching things [00:51:00] unless they were invited by someone to do so.

So when I was there I'd be like, oh, did you know you can touch this screen and play where the projection is? Or like, oh, did you know you can lie on this daybed and actually feel all the different fabrics, or like, oh hey, there's some audio here that you can listen to while flipping through these books.

And in a lot of my shows too, I pretend that I'm not who I am, and I'll be like, oh, did you know you can open those bottles? Or like, hey, you can play hide and seek under the bed. It's kind of like you need someone there. And I even tried making a couple how-to videos that invited people to play and I think that's like maybe something I need to work on a bit more.

But it's just so ingrained in people to not touch and play. And I really do wonder how to create a more [00:52:00] inviting environment to challenge those traditional ways of artwork being in the world.

I think a theme too, to touch on that from some of the reflections, has been safety. Feeling like they're safe within a space to actually feel like they can be vulnerable within a space – to ask questions if they don't understand, to be able to, like you say, to touch things, to actually, you know, engage with the space in ways that they might not know that they can. I think in so many artistic spaces, there's obviously power dynamics, and a hierarchy, and barriers to access in general.

And I think some of these experiences can be very intimidating for folks. I think as you've been saying, [00:53:00] to really kind of reimagine how these spaces can make folks feel welcomed and participate in art making practices that's actually fun, like you say, and interactive. It just obviously creates such a different learning dynamic too, right? There's a different appreciation for the work and that would be really cool.

A part of my work too is actually creating and bringing work into spaces. So for instance, with this organization called 3e impérial, which is based in Granby, Quebec, I went directly into a local college, Cégep, which had a multi-sensory room and invited women that were newcomers to Quebec, and also international students that were doing their nursing equivalencies, to take part in collective rest [00:54:00] experiences. And there's something to be said to like actually coming completely out of an art space to be able to offer that where people are.

Because I think that there's also, you know, a certain degree of access to luxury and rest and creativity and imagination that might not be present or something that folks think about when you're struggling to exist, or to transition into a new place, or to meet your basic needs. But I think that there's a lot of value too in working outside of traditional art spaces, in order to actually bring these kind of experiences or these artistic gestures to people and not expect people to come to you, or to a space like that. Because I think galleries [00:55:00] and museums and stuff inherently, unless you already have that vocabulary, are quite intimidating.

I've always dreamt of having a space called The Living Room that people could just come in and adjust how they wanted to, with like a bucket of access funding that they could just create their own space. I think it's fun to create a container that people can just completely appropriate for themselves. I've always dreamt of a space like that – it's just a constantly evolving, changing space based on the people that are interacting with it, where there's no have-tos.

I think it's valuable to also consider making space for friction in creating spaces of belonging. I think that a lot of the time there's this complete aversion to the discomfort that can come up when you're bringing lots of different people [00:56:00] together. And something that I've been thinking about in the past little while has been how do we structure spaces for repair into the process of creating these connecting gatherings and spaces and stuff.

Because like things come up, friction comes up. I even remember when doing This Space in Between, you know, like it was a masked event, but for a lot of the Deaf folks, they're like, well, we can't read faces as well if people have masks on. And so how do you find that balance between people that are recovering from chemo or have autoimmune diseases and Deaf folks existing in the same place that maybe have different needs, and no one's angry at each other.

It's just an understanding of different needs, but also, inevitably there is friction that arises, [00:57:00] and I think that it would be a shame to not acknowledge and honor and create space for friction and repair in trying to create spaces of belonging. I don't have a magic formula or something, but I do think that's an interesting thing to think about.

Is it having mediators in the space? Is it having listeners that are culturally sensitive or community members? I remember going to Bug, which was a performance, I forgot the artist's name, at a theater in Toronto, and they had an elder there in case something came up, because there was some references to trauma.

That really inspired me because I was like, well, you're not just assuming that this experience will be okay for everyone. And even experiences that are planned to be sweet [00:58:00] and beautiful – I have a piece called The Cost of Entry Is a Heartbeat, which is like vibrations and bath sounds and a heartbeat.

And like people have had panic attacks. And so there's like a certain thing that I think is worth considering, which is that how do we actually structure space for things going wrong? And failure and friction and repair, and I think that not running away from discomfort is one of the most generous things we can do for each other.

[There's so much to talk about Salima.](#)

Yeah, I know, but I have to go learn about a long arm quilting machine.

[What?](#)

Yeah. I'll know more. Maybe if I see you in September I'll give you an update. [00:59:00]

[Yes. So lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for your time and sharing.](#)

Thank you. It was really a pleasure to meet you too.

MUSIC

Carlisle Robinson

Mary Anderson

I am Carlisle. This is my sign name. It's like the letter C. It's your index and your thumb finger. And it's because it's this movement here. It's because my glasses – they always slide down my nose, as well as I'm really interested in searching and researching things. If I have a question or I'm puzzled about something I have to know. So I'm always trying to figure that out. So that's why my sign [01:00:00] name is that.

But my full name is Carlisle Robinson. I use the pronouns they and them. So I am a white person with brown hair, quite long at the moment, with black glasses. And I have earrings in the hand shape of ILY, which means I love you.

They're made by Melissa Brunner, she's a Deaf artist as well. So I am an artist, mostly focused on comics, like comic drawings, as well as illustrations. Once in a while I dabble in painting, as well. I have a Master's of Fine Arts at the Center for Cartoon Studies, and right now I currently am working at the Canadian Culture Society of the Deaf – the acronym is CCSD, as the Deaf Arts Director.

[How many years have you been a practicing artist?](#)

I mean, it depends when you're counting from. I mean, if you're counting [01:01:00] from the first day that I've been practicing art, then it's been for over 30 years. The co-founder of CCSD, his name is Forrest C Nickerson, and he has a quote where he said that he wasn't born with a silver spoon, but he was born with a pencil.

And I very much agree with that statement. So that means that I've been practicing for a long time, but professionally, I've been a professional artist for more than 12 years now.

[I was looking at your website and realized that you do illustration, comics. If you could just expand on what your practice entails.](#)

So my focus is primarily on comics and illustrations, mostly using digital on my iPad. I use the app Procreate for a lot of my work, but now I've started to kind of change my practice and focus a little bit more on [01:02:00] drawing and painting because AI is really affecting the way that we work.

And it's been really challenging for the digital arts community. So I love shining like a spotlight on some of the hidden stories, such as the queer community or the Deaf community. Often we don't really see ourselves authentically represented in daily life – sometimes in creative stories, but, you know, we live daily lives, as well. So I try to highlight those kinds of stories.

My handle, my username is @carodoodles because I always start my practice with a doodle. It's really an important part of my creative process to really just freely doodle and then work on that to become some sort of final project. I have two recent works that I'm quite excited to share. Recently I released a short story.

It's part of a larger story of the Marvel super [01:03:00] stories, like superhero stories. I created a short comic strip about the character Hawkeye. This is his sign name. And I think I am the first Deaf comic creator to have worked on a comic about Hawkeye. I think a lot of people don't realize that the character is actually Deaf. So I was actually really quite excited to work on that project.

And the second project I've recently been working on is a new online game for Deaf folks. It's an installment of the Deaf verse. So it's a new online game, it's kind of like a journey, it's free to play. But it's aimed towards Deaf youths to empower them with future decisions. So when they go to high school or college or university or seeking a job, what kinds of decisions are they gonna be making in those spaces?

I'm gonna shift questions now to creative space more broadly. I was curious if you have [01:04:00] your own creative studio space that you make in?

I mean, in my room here, in this little corner of my room, that's where I typically do a lot of my illustrations. I have my iPad with me all the time, so I'm quite flexible with the kind of spaces that I use.

What's your opinion on the value of creative space? Would you be interested, for example, in a shared collaborative studio space?

Yes, definitely. I think it's really important for artists to be together. I know sometimes, you know, artists work in silos, and I'm often by myself, or sometimes it's online and those are also great spaces. But I feel like having some in-person spaces where we can be creative together and we can play around and bounce ideas off each other – I can see someone else's work and their process, they can see mine.

I think that's really important for sharing [01:05:00] ideas and we really build off of that. I think that if we're completely isolated, I feel like, you know, we're limited in that creativeness. I think accessibility and society have greatly differed since COVID, and I can see really a lack of creativity in certain spaces and we lose certain spaces because of that. And it's been actually quite unfortunate.

That's interesting you bring that up because that's been some of the feedback from participating artists that have been accessing these spaces is this longing to connect with other makers and to actually, you know, leave their domestic spaces and to go to a quote unquote creative space to make and how impactful it is.

Like you explained – being around other artists for feedback, idea sharing, resource sharing [01:06:00] – there's such value in having these creative spaces, collaboratively, I think specifically we have found. And that's been across artistic disciplines. And I think that's interesting to note – there tends to be this idea that certain artists want a certain environment to work in. And I think what's been cool about our Space Project is like actually artists from all

backgrounds across disciplines really just wanna hang out and make together. And it doesn't really matter what you do.

You don't have a space of your own per se, but was there a time or a space rather, where you felt like you were a part of a community, where you felt like you belonged?

Yes. Recently, Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf, where I work, we set up a Deaf culture creative retreat – it's a center in New Brunswick, the town is called Grande-Digue. [01:07:00] And so we've set up that kind of space for Deaf creatives, artists, academics to kind of gather – I mean, professional level practice. To come for theatre, for De'VIA art, and for different signed music. We've created this retreat center to have all those folks gather and share ideas, and oh my goodness, this space is beautiful.

It's in nature and we're looking for some more support for that. We wanna have more access and more accommodations for different Deaf folks to come and be able to exceed. But because I'm located in Toronto, obviously it's limited with how often I can be going there. I visited the space, [01:08:00] but I'm located quite far away. So it's often, you know, these kinds of spaces we find are either temporary and they're kind of pop-up spaces, but we are really proud to have that center there now.

Obviously, first of all, it is a space where we use sign language. We use American Sign Language and Langue des Signes Quebec – that's a Quebec Sign Language. Those are the two most primarily used sign languages in Canada. And just so you know, Canada does have a bunch of other sign languages, like MSL, which is Maritime Sign Language. There's a bunch of Indigenous sign language, there's Oneida Sign Language.

There's actually quite a few, but at this space here, we use sign languages and that's the point is that we have direct communication with each other. That is really the key to connection between the teachers and the students and everyone. And the feedback so far has been amazing. If we have an interpreter, it is great, but it's still through a different person, through a different party.

So everyone that does attend those [01:09:00] retreats or that center is able to sign. As well, the physical space – first of all, it has to be enough space that we can be signing and not feel like we're cramped, as well as the design specifically, we're sitting in a circle so that we can see each other.

Deaf space is actually a design principle and it is quite in depth of a concept. For example, we can have lots of spaces with windows, so we can sign through the windows and communicate with each other, instead of always having to be face-to-face. So that is a really beneficial design principle that we have installed there.

Unfortunately, some of those factors are costly, and we are trying to do our best with what we have. We have accommodations for Deaf folks, as well as deafblind, so appropriate lighting in that sense. There's so many things that I could really go on forever. [01:10:00]

So I guess thinking about futurism and future discourse on accessible creative spaces, what does it mean to belong in a space? Like how does that feel as an artist? If you can maybe expand on that.

I've been thinking about that question. I think really the key is to allow Deaf folks to lead and to tell others what they need. So it's important that we have the Deaf leadership and that we're making those decisions.

And if you are hosting an event or you are creating spaces, make sure that you do have a budget for accessibility. So if you're able to book interpreters, make sure that you have enough time in advance, like typically we book interpreters two weeks in advance and there's so much planning that is involved.

I mean accessible spaces, and to feel belonging for me, means that [01:11:00] it doesn't matter – morning, noon, or night – that we are invited to these spaces. Sometimes, you know, we don't have interpreters for the networking aspects, but those are so key in meeting folks and really getting our names out there. I think also to have a really thorough understanding of Deaf culture, Deaf history, Deaf art.

We have our own genre, it's called De'VIA, D-E-V-I-A, and the four elements of De'VIA are Deaf and deafblind expression of affirmation, resistance, and liberation. The V stands for view of how Deaf and deafblind people experience the world. I stands for images, motifs, and symbols of Deaf experience, and A stands for art, activism, and authentic expressions of the Deaf experience.

So a lot of [01:12:00] people are actually quite clueless that that exists and that we have such a rich culture and a rich history and language. And I mean, I'm not saying that everyone has to have a PhD in Deaf culture, but some of the little things would really go a really long way.

You know, if you can learn to sign some basics, hello, how are you? That really does make a Deaf person feel welcome and know that you are open-minded enough to really meet the artists where they're at. Not all art is beautiful. Some of it can be quite, I don't know, really based off some terrible experiences.

And sometimes, you know, hearing folks are actually really scared or afraid to interact with us. At the Canadian Cultural Society for the Deaf, I feel like, you know, when we have these kinds of experiences, it's like a metaphor of like a dam is being broken down and there's an outpouring of support.

So we think [01:13:00] that understanding is very important. And suppose, someone has a booth, maybe it's at a museum. I mean, you see a Deaf person, don't be afraid to talk to us, because I think oftentimes, there is an interpreter and then a hearing person thinks, oh, um, that's actually a little bit foreign and complicated, and they don't know what to do, so they just end up skipping it. They don't wanna be offensive and they don't know what to do. So they find instead, let me just move on. I encourage you, please come talk to us.

We're also trying to encourage Deaf artists, but also Deaf art workers 'cause a lot of these spaces don't have Deaf staff involved, if you're thinking about museums or different exhibitions. Before I moved to Toronto, I applied to over 40 different projects, 40 different applications I sent out. I have a Master in Fine Arts and some of the responses I got were [01:14:00] maybe you should remove Deaf from your title, remove Deaf from your portfolio. And I said, absolutely not. Being Deaf is a huge important part of who I am and my artistic process, and that is not something that I'm willing to hide or to eliminate.

So, I mean, we navigate these spaces much like that. I've seen some improvements so far absolutely as society, but there is still such a long way to go. But I do commend so many of the hearing organizations and galleries and museums and theaters for really having an open mind, but also an open heart for supporting us and also teaching – like laying the groundwork and teaching other hearing organizations as well, because it is quite taxing for the Deaf folks to always be doing that kind of education.

So I really appreciate that and it's quite beautiful. I look forward to seeing what the future holds.

I mean, I feel like you summarized [01:15:00] all of my questions so beautifully here. I guess, you know, if you think maybe in a local context here in the city, in Toronto, do you know of any spaces outside of Tangled that are actively engaging in these practices? Are you optimistic about the future of creative spaces being more accessible for Deaf artists?

I'm a glass full type of person because water is in air, everything is together, so I am very optimistic. That's the way that I see the world, not half full, half empty. There are certain folks that think, oh, everything's been the same forever. I haven't seen any change. I mean, you know, sometimes yes.

But I also do see a lot of people with really great intentions and really good [01:16:00] hearts, and perhaps they don't have a full understanding, but they're trying. And I think that's really the key. As well as social media, I think has really, you know, spread awareness and can create a lot of understanding. So people do have different options for accessibility.

I mean, accessibility doesn't look the same for everyone. There's so many different needs. So I think slowly the attitude of society is changing and that's something to be celebrated.

Absolutely. And I think, even going back to your practice, Carlisle, to look at the different mediums that you're exploring these ideas through, I think is so exciting, as well. Because you

start tying in the importance of space as you experience these art forms, is another really interesting idea to think about. I noticed on your website, like the video game, [01:17:00] I don't know, 20 years ago, wouldn't have happened. And so it's like the medium itself is really shaping new practices, I think. I think it's very cool.

Yes, definitely. It's really cool to see different kinds of art forms pop up as things change and evolve. For example, that game is the first online game by a Deaf team for Deaf folks. And I'm thinking, okay, we can do this as well with comics, with sign language, because I do the drawings as a person that's signing, what could that look like in a video game form? We're kind of stretching the boundaries here and now if we have technology involved with our different models, what are the possibilities?

I'm so [01:18:00] curious to see how these things pop up. And how we could, you know, comics are very much 2D, but how can we make this 3D on the page or on a painting? I think that would be a really cool concept to explore – so many possibilities.

And also as an analog photographer, it's exciting to think artists like yourselves are kind of rethinking not old mediums, but you know, analog mediums, in terms of you're writing again – like going back to that because of the AI stuff. And kind of seeing how your practice can evolve and that medium can evolve. I think that's exciting too.

Yeah, it really is. Definitely. I notice a lot more support from Deaf artists recently, and I see how their art is changing, as well. And [01:19:00] how they're integrating other things and how sometimes, you know, the audience experience is now changing, as well. Or how folks are using lights on a stage setting to create different moods and different feelings.

I mean, that's incredibly accessible for Deaf folks and hearing folks at the same time. So kind of exploring some of those intersections are really cool and truly there is some really creative storytelling using ASL and using the space that is just so fascinating. For example, some movies now include different technologies to show – maybe I sound a little bit crazy because ASL is so visual, so the description sounds so different. But if you think about The Matrix and the scene where he's dodging the [01:20:00] bullets and he's leaned back and he is missing the bullets. But if you can apply sign language to that, this is what it would look like in sign language, and then to move the space so that you're now looking at it from a different angle.

I feel like sometimes that is so creative and I think hearing people are starting to understand and starting to get it. That kind of storytelling is called visual vernacular, and it doesn't actually use sign language. It doesn't use certain signs. It's more so gestures and using the space around.

So the whole idea is that hearing folks, that perhaps if they don't know sign language, they could still understand some of the parts. So that's been more and more common. It is really changing how people receive information and that is so mind blowingly cool.

Well, it also highlights, again, the importance of space and gathering folks [01:21:00] within a space to experience that.

Yes, exactly. Absolutely. And hoping to, you know, connect with other folks that are not within the Deaf community. That's equally as important. Perhaps, you know, we have a conversation and I think, oh, I didn't even think about it from that perspective.

We're always learning from each other, and that's so nice to share. Like, how did you do that? What was your idea? How did you create that? I think that now social media, you can create videos of the process, but it's again, not the same as being in the same space as someone else 'cause now you're with each other, sharing that space. You can show each other physically how you came up with that or how you thought about that.

Accessibility doesn't only look like an interpreter. It can look like the space, the rent, transportation, budgets, like sustainability of some of these [01:22:00] things. To have a space set up and to have that space for folks to go and to talk and to, you know, work on their works. And I think that space is so important because a lot of these would be incredibly challenging online. So I think permanent spaces are beneficial for folks who live close to that space and live close to each other.

So if you think about Toronto, it would be great. But then if you also think about the cost – I think that's why a lot of folks have actually moved away and moved out of Toronto. So the ability to gather in the same space is actually quite challenging. It's really, we're stuck with who's here, right? We're left with who's still around.

Deaf people, in general – I mean, I think maybe 75% of Deaf folks either are unemployed, or they're underemployed. You know, that's our reality. If you think about budget and money – so a lot of Deaf folks are living in poverty [01:23:00] because there's a lack of work opportunities, there's a lack of financial support. So in general, Deaf folks, but as well Deaf artists, it applies to as well. So that's how things are [01:25:00] rolling.

MUSIC