

KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

Number 89
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EBBS AND FLOWS

"Portrait with a Seagull" by Natalie Haney Tilghman

"Neverlander" by Deb DeBates

"No One's Looking" by Karen McKenzie



Diana de Avila, *Tides of the Imagination*, 2023, digital art

RESILIENCE!

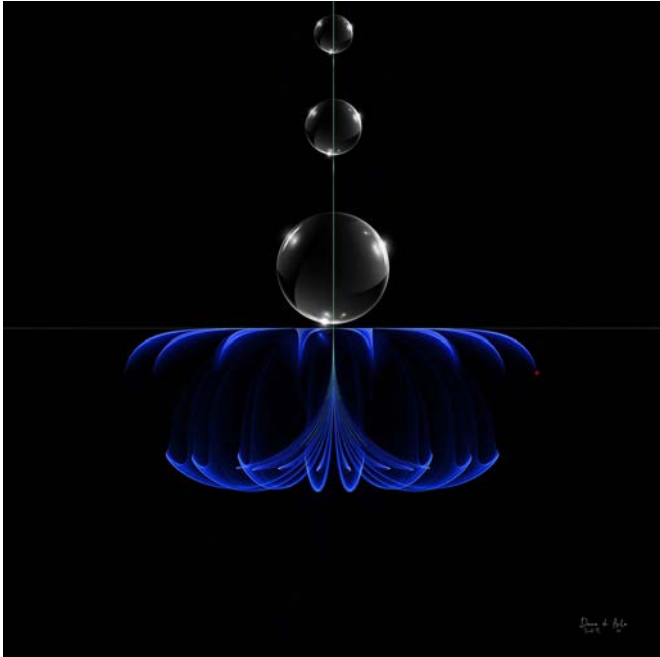
SANDY PALMER

“People tell me, without me revealing it, there’s a spiritual aspect they sense in my work.”
- Diana de Avila

Imagine suddenly seeing vivid colors and shapes floating in front of your face. Startled, you reach out to touch the swirling array, but your fingertips find nothing. You know the shapes aren’t really there, yet, they *are*. That’s exactly what happened to Diana de Avila several years ago. She was not an artist, but the moment those shapes and colors appeared in front of her, she was. The visual aura arrived in a split second. “I was hearing sounds, music, and seeing visions of colors and shapes. I also felt a compulsion to create. It happened in the blink of an eye—like lightning struck me—and it’s never stopped.” With a background in computer technology, writing code, and web applications, she picked up an iPad, and began to depict what she was experiencing. And so began a quest to harness what she was “seeing” and produce it.

De Avila grew up in Rockville, Maryland, one of six children, a twin. She entered the US Army after high school,

but her career as a military police officer ended abruptly when a motorcycle accident split her helmet in half and landed her in the hospital for nine months. With a traumatic brain injury, blood clots, and the threat of having her right leg amputated, she says, “I remember making a bargain with God, ‘If you let me keep my leg, I’ll find a way to serve you.’” That led to entering the convent three years later.” Joining the Daughters of St. Paul in Boston, she worked in the book bindery but after a few years, in 1990, experienced health issues and lost vision in her right eye—likely one of the first symptoms of multiple sclerosis, although she wasn’t diagnosed until 2001. She joined another order in 1993 and after serving for seven years as a nun, left the convent and earned a degree in sociology and a graduate degree in education. Working as a school psychologist for a short time, she became interested in computers and coding, which led to a career as a web architect for General Electric Global Research. While the vision in her right eye improved as the

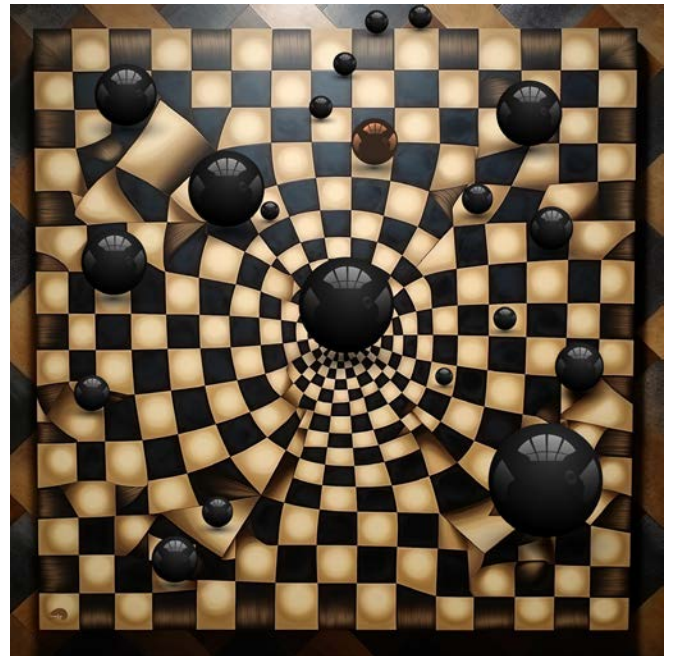


Diana de Avila, *Hanging by a Thread*, 2019, digital art

MS exacerbation abated, new symptoms, thyroid issues, and other chronic medical conditions made working difficult, leading to her retirement in 2005.

In 2017, she was experiencing a severe bout of vertigo and ended up in the ER. Doctors checked for a stroke, among other things, but determined it was an MS relapse and optic neuritis in her left eye. She received high dose steroids, which calmed the vertigo, but made her feel manic. Released from the hospital on a warm, sunny evening she decided a swim might help her relax. In the pool, she was suddenly overwhelmed with *synesthesia*. When one sense is activated, this neurological condition triggers the perception of another, unrelated sense—certain sounds might involuntarily create perceived colors, the sight of words or letters might evoke the sensation of taste. “It can be very anxiety-provoking, and in the beginning it was like, ‘What is happening to me?’ It felt like a constant intrusion—these floating pieces were about a foot away from my nose. It was craziness.”

What de Avila learned later was that she was experiencing a rare phenomenon known as *acquired savant syndrome*—the sudden emergence of an extraordinary skill, perhaps in art, music, or math, often the result of a traumatic brain injury or illness. Without any prior interest or formal training in art, she compulsively began to create artwork and intuitively knew color theory, balance, perspective, and so much more. “I never learned any of it. It’s just there. I worked with Jeremy Chapman who is part of the Treffert Center which works with savants, whether acquired or autistic, and it was Dr. Treffert who really gave me solace and told me, ‘You



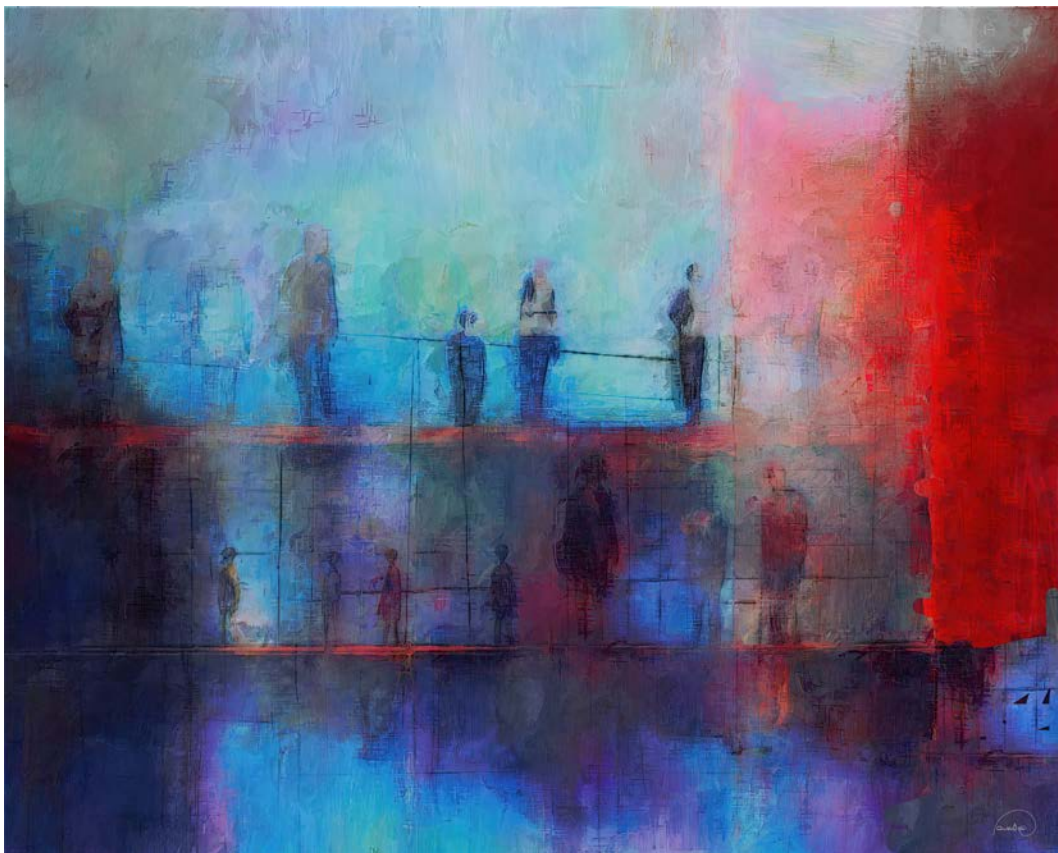
Diana de Avila, *Gambit Quest*, 2023, digital art



Diana de Avila, *Boomerangs and Blobs*, 2017, digital art

are not crazy. This is a gift.’ Jeremy would put a program in front of me and wanted to see what I’d do with it, and I just intuitively knew how to do things. I can’t explain it.” Through the Treffert Center she learned she is one of an elite group of people with the syndrome. The mystery of it and the way it has impacted de Avila are explored in *Psychology Today*, where she is one of three individuals whose unexpected mastery is revealed in the article, “The Mystery of Sudden Genius,” published in April of this year.

Once she completed the first drawing, *Blobs and Boomerangs*, on her iPad, she felt driven to create but thought she needed to do so in the traditional sense with paint and canvas so she loaded up on art supplies while simultaneously playing with vector images in Adobe Illustrator and other programs. She discovered within



Diana de Avila, *Orwellian Overture*, 2023, digital art

three weeks it was quicker to create images digitally due to a tremor that impeded her ability to control her hand movements. She abandoned traditional mediums and has created digitally ever since.

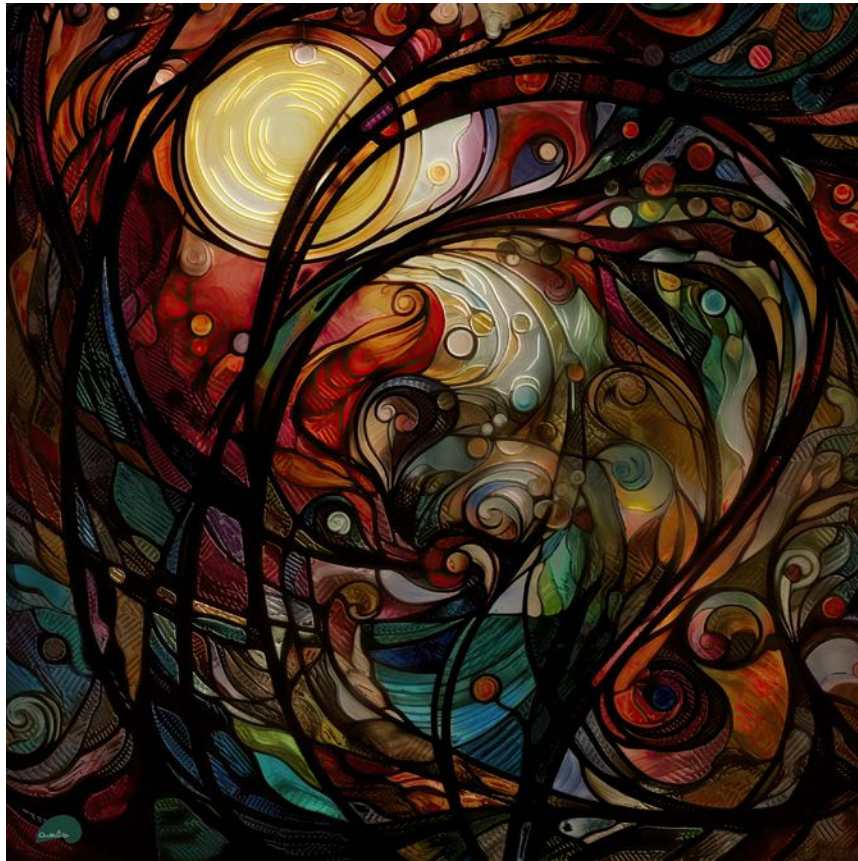
“My roots are in fractal geometry.” Fractals are the basic framework to most of the work she has created to date. Instead of paint, her art supplies are code and algorithms, inspired by quantum physics, chaos theory, and divine order, all of which produce fascinating images bursting with color, texture, depth, and movement. Coding is the process of entering information (alphabetic or numeric) that tells the computer what to do and how to do it. In her case, she begins by entering a fractal geometric algorithm which produces an image containing “self-similarity and infinitely repeating patterns.” A simple equation that repeats endlessly.

After the framework of an image is generated, she manipulates each one using a select combination from more than one hundred different software applications. Each one is akin to a spice one might use when cooking. “I use one spice for this and another for that. I’m just reaching in the cabinet knowing I’m working and using apps in ways I’m sure they weren’t totally meant to be used, but I love experimenting.” JWildfire is a fractal software app she uses often. She loves to bend the rules and use technology in novel ways. This led her to a group of artists who use technology in their work,

just as she does. They are members of the Techspressionism movement, a term coined by Colin Goldberg in 2011, where technology and self-expression merge.

In recent years she has incorporated augmented reality (AR), blending reality with technology. Expanded versions of her static, two-dimensional pieces can be viewed using a device, like a smart phone or tablet, with a special application loaded onto it. The viewer opens the app, points the device at the artwork and then the AR layer can be seen on the device. With AR she brings the image to life, incorporating movements like billowing smoke, flowing water, fluttering birds, or swirling colors. This augmented version is a piece of art in itself and some examples can be seen on her website.

Her work is largely driven by the compulsion to create coupled with the synesthesia she experiences. Over the years she has learned how to identify and turn the volume down on the sensations and compulsions so they aren’t as intrusive or overwhelming as they were in the beginning. One unusual form of synesthesia she experiences involves the sense of touch. If she looks at something with texture, whether it be gritty, grooved or fuzzy, she can feel the sensation on her fingertips without touching it. “If I have a lot of synesthetic noise, I have to sit down with one of the pieces I’m working on and get it out. That’s the therapeutic part of art. It impacts me personally.” Conversely, there are



Diana de Avila, *When the Forest Danced*, 2023, digital art

times when she experiences insomnia or migraines, and some pieces have been driven by those factors. *When the Forest Danced* was created during a bout of insomnia “but it was costly and I paid a personal price for that one with a big migraine that lasted for days.” In this alluring piece, a source of radiant light illuminates a dark yet whimsical landscape, beckoning it to come alive with graceful arcs and swirling motion—interconnected, yet flowing freely. A captivating performance.

De Avila is now represented by The McKernon Gallery in New York, where patrons can enjoy her printed originals and AR works within the gallery. Physically maintaining work in a brick and mortar location can be a challenge. MS flare ups, vertigo, migraines, nausea, multiple comorbidities, and recent issues related to toxic exposure while in the military have taken a toll, and she relies on a wheelchair when in public. “All of this has added to the burden of why being out in the world has become so difficult.” At home she uses a walker when needed. As a result, she was very excited when she was contacted about a new venture and national representation with ArtLifting, an online platform that promotes and sells the work of artists who have disabilities and other challenges. She looks forward to collaborating with them and the prospect of reaching a wider audience.

The partnership with ArtLifting prompted “a foray into a more minimalistic vector art series.” Having an interest in this style for a while, something recently clicked regarding vectorizing artwork. “With a new migraine medication, the creative channels expanded, and I’ve had the capacity to learn and assimilate just like I first did in 2017.” There are no fractals in these lighthearted works that includes beach scenes, sea animals, and sunsets. Mainly working in Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, she has been creating them at lightning speed, especially when insomnia and a multitude of bright, beautiful colors keep her awake and creating.

The artist’s work has been included in numerous juried exhibitions and won several awards. Her mysterious evolution as an artist has been detailed in the award-winning memoir/art book *Soldier, Sister, Savant*, and in a short documentary titled *The Color of Genius*. The book was written in collaboration with good friend and author, Wilma Davidson, who felt strongly de Avila’s story needed to be told. Subsequently, they worked on *Super Cat! Splat! Splat!* together, a children’s book drawn from the artist’s life. Toddlers are invited to share their thoughts as events unfold in the story conveying the importance of kindness, compassion, and acceptance. The duo has a second children’s book in the works.

Resilience best describes the message de Avila wants to communicate through her art. “Find your therapeutic outlet, whatever it is—cooking, art, music, whatever. Don’t focus on your past and don’t get too far ahead in the future. Enjoy the present. Make an impact. Don’t give up.”

Brilliant seems like a fitting descriptor for her work. There’s also something spiritual about the ability she has been blessed with and the mystery that surrounds the art she creates. A damaged frontal lobe and medical maladies suddenly collide and unleash astounding artistry and aptitude for aesthetics. There’s something supernatural about that. While no longer living in a convent, she continues to live a life of faith, prayer, and worship. “One Thing Remains,” is her fight song. Written by Brian Johnson, Jeremy Riddle and Christa Black Gifford, it is often played on repeat in her house in Florida. During her prayer time each morning, as she gets set for the day, she sings the lyrics:

Higher than the mountains that I face
Stronger than the power of the grave
Constant through the trial and the change
One thing remains, yes, one thing remains

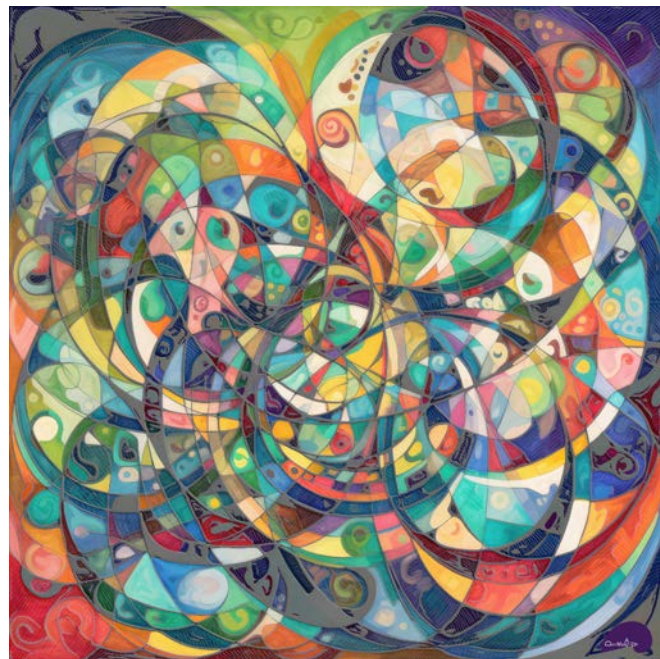
Your love never fails
it never gives up
it never runs out on me

The empowering words bolster her spirit.

You can see more of her work at dianadeavila.com where you can enter the Swirly Whirly Virtual Exhibit that allows you to move around within the virtual gallery space to see some of her artwork on display. Links to the books mentioned, as well as the documentary, can also be found by visiting her site. ♦



Artist Diana de Avila



Diana de Avila, *Joyful Chaos*, 2023, digital art



Diana de Avila, *Withered Whispers*, 2023, digital art



Diana de Avila, *A Symphony of Color*, 2023, digital art



Diana de Avila, *Psychedelic Rorschach*, 2024, digital art

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