Dear Friends:

I am pleased to welcome you to Johns Hopkins University’s Evergreen Museum & Library and this unique partnership with the Maryland Institute College of Art and, specifically, MICA’s new MFA Curatorial Practice Program. This current endeavor is seen as a natural complement to the University Museums’ ongoing student-curated exhibitions program and our commitment to promoting the study and appreciation of art and history.

Perception & Ability explores society’s need for labeling ability levels, and how such labeling affects perceptions. MICA graduate student Gabrielle Buzgo has dedicated two years to the organization of this exhibition, which juxtaposes historical artifacts associated with Evergreen’s Ambassador John Work Garrett — someone who masked a life-altering tubercular hip — with works of four contemporary artists who face similar challenges in today’s more open and accepting environment. Evergreen is honored to have been able to offer not only a backdrop but a viable historical context for Ms. Buzgo’s curatorial vision of this most thoughtful—provoking topic that touches every person in some way or another.

On behalf of Evergreen, I wish to express appreciation to: Winston Tabb, Sheridan Dean of University Libraries and Museums; the Johns Hopkins University Libraries and Museums; the Maryland Institute College of Art and its MFA Curatorial Practice Program, spearheaded by George Ciscle; James Abbott, Maryland State Arts Council; and a group of private contributors.

I am pleased to welcome you to Johns Hopkins University’s Evergreen Museum & Library and this unique partnership with the Maryland Institute College of Art and JHU’s Evergreen Museum & Library — acknowledges the great wealth of talent and riches among Baltimore’s varying cultural institutions. Such partnerships allow participating institutions to see themselves in completely new ways, and to share their respective riches with new audiences.

This engaging collaboration is made possible through the support of: the Maryland Institute College of Art, and as co-sponsor by MICA’s new MFA Curatorial Practice Program; and Baltimore Lab School. Additionally, exhibition design, audience engagement, and writing would not have been possible without her Thesis Advisor Committee members, Marcus Civin, Dr. Mariale Hardiman, Ashley Hasler, Jeffrey Kent, and Dan Keplinger.

And of course, the beauty of Perception & Ability would not be such without the talents of Diane Cullinan, Breen Gilleran, Matthew Stainland, and Scott Sedar, as well as the contributions made by the Evergreen House Foundation.

Thank you to everyone who has made Perception & Ability possible!

James Archer Abbott
Director and Curator, Evergreen Museum & Library, The Johns Hopkins University

FORWARD

PERCEPTION & ABILITY AND ITS RELATED PROGRAMING WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY:

Evergreen Museum & Library
Maryland Institute College of Art
Maryland State Arts Council
Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council
Evergreen House Foundation
Evergreen Museum & Library Advisory Council
Private Contributions

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The curator would like to thank her Thesis Review Committee — James Abbott, George Ciscle, and Willettt Davudov — for their time, guidance, and support, as well as their related institutions, Evergreen Museum & Library, Maryland Institute College of Art Curatorial Practice Program, and Baltimore Lab School. Additionally, exhibition design, audience engagement, and writing would not have been possible without her Thesis Advisor Committee members, Jeremy Hoffman, Emily Blumenfeld, and John Lewis.

The programs of Perception & Ability owe their gratitude to the commitments and efforts by Marcus Civin, Dr. Mariale Hardiman, Ashley Hasler, Jeffrey Kent, and Dan Keplinger.

EXHIBITION EVENTS

Opening Reception: March 12, 6:00-8:00PM
Panel Discussion: April 4, 6:00-8:00PM

Doing It Differently, a panel discussion that features artist Dan Keplinger, Dr. Mariale Hardiman of the Johns Hopkins Neuro-Education Initiative, and Ashley Hasler, Education Coordinator at the Walters Art Museum, Doing It Differently is co-sponsored by the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council.

March 10 - May 26, 2013

PERCEPTION & ABILITY

March 10 - May 26, 2013

GUEST CURATOR

Gabrielle Buzgo
Curatorial Practice M.F.A. Candidate, MICA’13

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

Gabby Davis
Baltimore Lab School ’13

Housed in a former Gilded Age mansion surrounded by Italian-style gardens, Evergreen Museum & Library is at once an intimate collection of fine and decorative art, rare books, and manuscripts assembled by two generations of Baltimore’s philanthropic Garrett family, and an inviting, inspirational venue for contemporary art. As a teaching museum of the Johns Hopkins University, Evergreen contributes to the advancement of scholarship and museum practice by helping to train future art historians, historic preservationists, and museum professionals.

For information about tours, hours and special programs please visit museums.jhu.edu
INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, the inaugural class of the Curatorial Practice M.F.A Program from the Maryland Institute College of Art visited Johns Hopkins University’s Evergreen Museum & Library. The museum is associated with Baltimore’s philanthropic Garrett family — as a potential thesis exhibition site. Certain aspects of our tour, specifically design features, such as an elevator, struck me as unusual for a house of the 19th century. As our tour proceeded, the Garrett family history — and specifically a physical challenge faced by Evergreen’s one-time owner, Ambassador John Work Garrett (1872-1942) — resonated with something in my own family. Before long, I presented James Abbott, director of Evergreen, with a proposal for an exhibition that would address the way labels can define and, thus, possibly limit, one’s ability.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LABELING THEORY

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was a well respected American philosopher and psychologist who was a founder of social psychology. His work focused on mind, self, and society, and the relationships between the three. His writings were published posthumously, one of which was Mind, Self and Society, an essay, which promoted the study of social behaviorism — and which contributed to the formulation of social labeling theory. In his essay, Mead espoused that infant development relates to identity development; our own access to the family home. By perceiving himself as his family perceived him — or to have the potential to positively contribute or to have the potential to positively contribute to society. This last classification parallels another term — disabled, defined by Webster’s Dictionary as “physically or mentally impaired in a way that substantially limits one’s activity or his or her employment or education.” If a person is deemed to have limitations that cause them to differ from the accepted standards — or expectations — of society, then social labeling theory — and its constrictions — becomes the means of acknowledging and, thus, defining the individual.

JOHN WORK GARRETT AND SOCIAL LABELING

In the late 19th century, the future diplomat John Work Garrett was injured in a carriage accident that resulted in a tubercular hip. Today we know that tuberculosis of the hip occurs in three stages: the first involves inflammation and swelling, making the leg appear to lengthen. The second is when cartilage starts to break down, muscles begin to spasm, and the leg appears to shorten. The third stage results in destruction of all cartilage, making bone rub against bone, causing erosion and actual shortening of the leg.

As the eldest of three boys, and the namesake of a grandfather who was a successful banker, philanthropist, and president of the iconic B&O Railroad, John Work Garrett was expected to excel in academia, art connoisseurship, languages, and general social standing. While his previously noted childhood carriage accident left him with a limp and he would be dependent upon a cane, Garrett continued to fulfill his family’s expectations.

Garrett’s parents did not alter their perception of their son, though they did alter his immediate environment. After the accident, Garrett’s mother, Alice Whitridge Garrett (1851-1920), under the expectation of John Work inheriting Evergreen, added an elevator and moved her son’s bedroom from the third to the second floor. In 1896, she sealed the original main entrance to the house, creating a more easily accessible entry to the home. Though this was explained as an enhancement of Evergreen’s accessibility to women in inclement weather, the reality was that such modifications aided the son in his own access to the family home. By perceiving himself as his family perceived him — without limitations, Garrett graduated from Princeton University in 1895 and began a successful career in the diplomatic corps that culminated with his appointment as the United States Ambassador to Italy under President Herbert Hoover. John Work Garrett’s personal development served as a definitive model of George Herbert Mead’s belief.

However, following Tannebaum’s theory, if Garrett had been clearly labeled as disabled by his injuries, he would have very likely become a wealthy recluse who watched his two brothers successfully branch out into the world without him. Instead, Ambassador Garrett and his family went to great lengths not to allow his injury to become a limitation and they were successful in doing so through very creative means for the time. These included the addition of the previously noted elevator and new main entrance to the family’s residence. Later in life, Ambassador Garrett’s creativity brought about the use of specific, low-standing chairs that allowed him to conceal his shorter leg when entertaining guests by forcing others to perceive him the way in which he wanted to be perceived.

As Ambassador Garrett’s life illustrates, our abilities come from the perceptions of our identity. Ambassador Garrett did not perceive himself as disabled and did not want others to see him in such a way. He did not limit himself, though he did intentionally mask cues that society might have used to label him. It is this aspect of Ambassador Garrett’s life that inspired this exhibition, Perception & Ability.

Honoring the Garrett family’s patronage and passion for the arts, contemporary artists were invited to submit works that address how labels limit people’s perceptions of ability. There were no other guidelines for content other than being an artist, and there were no limitations for medium. The artists that were accepted show a range of style, personality, and experience with regard to the concept of disability. These works are juxtaposed with objects associated with the Garrett family, establishing a dialogue between eras and differing perceptions of social labeling. The following are statements from the artists about their projects that address disability, healing, and the possibility that imaging disabilities can become the agent of personal transformation.

My photographs and writings are selected from a body of work I created for the 100 Statements project, a photo and video project for women with breast cancer. My work candidly documents the struggles I experienced while in breast cancer treatment. I perceive myself as a breast cancer fighter who has overcome the physical changes left on my body by breast cancer. Cancer has stripped my breasts forever, which I am daily reminded of when I look in the mirror, but cancer no longer defines me since I had the ability to overcome it.

BREON GILLERAN “Hippocrates Promise” is an ongoing sculptural project that addresses disability, healing, and the possibility that imagination of the potential to change a catalyst, becomes the agent of personal transformation. The prosthetic limbs, cobbled together from disparate materials, forged steel, wood, cast iron and bronze and found objects, are the central focus of this work. These forms originate in my personal experience as a registered nurse caring for patients with injury, amputations, altered body image, and disease. The making of each piece is simultaneously a reassessment, a re-configuration and transforming of the damaged, in a symbolic gesture of the healing process. The white life tableau suggests a sterile, controlled but malleable space that is modular and transportable. Other components, and works in progress include well-mounted lightweight boxes depicting the anatomical body, its mystery and memory, sketchbooks and documents containing medical ephemera, small drawings and a series of relief prints.

My process is guided by the realization of unperceived usefulness, observing objects without regard to the limits of their purpose. Rather than employing traditional camera lenses, my photographs are achieved by modifying found objects and mounting them to the camera. The work assumes the homogeneity of the manufactured camera lens as suggestive of ordered thought operating within the confines of restrictive social constructs. The variable canality, transparency, and angles of reflection mimic the natural drive to maintain selfdom in a culture, which requires relative uniformity. As such the work seeks to bring attention to the predilection of the individual to coalesce within a rigid paradigm.

MATTHEW SANDON These images represent a challenge to how we perceive ability. Using lenses I constructed out of objects not designed for use in photography, I am exploring the perceived usefulness of these objects is altered. Just as individuals who are labeled as abled in a specific manner; these lenses with their apparent flaws typically disqualify them for use as camera elements in terms of traditional photography, I am asserting that they can successfully be employed in a manner that is impactful and relevant.

My photographs and writings are selected from a body of work I created for the 100 Statements project, a photo and video project for women with breast cancer. My work candidly documents the struggles I experienced while in breast cancer treatment. I perceive myself as a breast cancer fighter who has overcome the physical changes left on my body by breast cancer. Cancer has stripped my breasts forever, which I am daily reminded of when I look in the mirror, but cancer no longer defines me since I had the ability to overcome it.

DIANE CULIANI As a breast cancer fighter, I have come to realize that people often have misconceptions of my abilities or my appearance. I learned early in my life, and caused me to lose my hair during chemotherapy. Yet I perceive myself as a strong, beautiful woman who had the ability to fight breast cancer and who did not allow it to take my heart, soul, and life.

Scott Sedar As the 2011 Artist in Residence at Evergreen, I was invited to create a project that was much like my own, not readily apparent, more dismissed and hidden rather than celebrated.

Until now, these images have been for my own consumption, for the most part. I have only exhibited “Before” (Child and Drum). Each of these three images is an attempt to explore the non-verbal, emotional elements of my disability. I had polio at one year of age, before I could speak.