Interview with Aubrey Grison: Disability, Art, and the Self

Aubrey Grison

Wesley R. Bishop

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Part of *NMR*’s mission is to create a space where both academic and non-academic writers, activists, and artists can read, share, and engage one another’s work. The journal’s managing editor, Wesley R. Bishop, met with French artist and disability rights activist Aubrey Grison to discuss her work over the summer. The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.
Bishop: Can you please start by telling us a little bit about yourself? Give us your background information, the whole thing. Who are you?

Grison: Okay. Basically, I am 31. I am an artist. I’ve been studying for fine arts, art history, and I have a degree [in] graphic design. What can I say? I think I like to be a [inaudible 00:01:07], because this is how I express myself. But not only as painting or modeling or whatever, it just is something very important in the way that I tend to see people as colors and emotions. And when I was 20, I used to think I was not sensitive. Then I realized that I was, which was for me a big thing. It sounds kind of silly, but I am such a strong person, and I am a rebel. And I say what I think, I’m very honest. So, to actually dig into my feelings and to accept the fact that I was feeling things.

But at the same time, I was like, okay, it makes sense. It’s why I am creative. I am in a wheelchair. I was born with my disability. It’s still unknown to this day what it is exactly. My parents tried to find [a] different diagnosis, but each of them were wrong. And I never had [inaudible 00:02:22] me the fact that I want to know what I have, even as a kid. So, when they stopped digging, I was just very happy to not go to hospital and stuff like that anymore. And eventually, because my ears [are] quite fragile and stuff like that, I have to be careful. But I live my life, I would say, as anyone. Except for the fact that I am physically dependent. Yeah, I think it’s about who I am in the big picture.

Bishop: Can you tell us where you’re based out of?

Grison: I am in Toulouse, which is the southwest of France. It’s quite a big city. And I was born in Toulouse, and so I am still in Toulouse.

Bishop: You were speaking a little bit about disability and art, and how that related to your earlier life. Can you talk a little bit about how that transition from you being younger and not wanting to know anymore, and just wanting to get on with your life, how that impacted your art, particularly modeling and photography?

Grison: I would say that I am 30-something, and so I realize now because I don’t shy away from it, I’ve been doing therapy for two years. And so I just realized that what I was when I was six, I became the same in the way I [inaudible 00:04:18] over a book or over a TV show, or a movie. I don’t know. In the fact that I was very confident in what I was, who I am, and what I deserve. I’m pretty lucky to be in this way, and to still be like that. I think some way modeling was a new thing, a new step in seeing my body differently. Because even if I always been low-key sensitive and feminine, and I like to take [care] of myself. Still, to make [a] picture, and then you see yourself through the eyes a photographer, and you see the results. Well, it’s great. And then you say, “Oh, my God, it’s not that bad actually.”

And so, when you make a statement, you can make it with your own words, which I’ve been trying to do ever since I was a kid. But to realize that my body was that powerful in, oh, I can express my image. Oh, can I shape it, what I want to say and what is meaning of my [inaudible 00:05:39]? I was going to say beauty, but body. Yeah, it was very strong, very powerful. And I would say I’m even more confident in my ability to look good, but only for me. And at the same time I was like, when I’m making a painting for clients, then it’s all of me inside of it. But then my client buy[s]
it, and okay, that’s it. It is. When you look at a piece of art, it doesn’t belong to me anymore… But what is funny is that it’s my face on it. But when someone look[s] at the picture, he just thinks something of how I look or what I say and whatever. But what this person is thinking doesn’t belong to me anymore.

**Bishop:** What was the first photograph of you and your body that you saw that made you think that? That, wow, this is something that I could pursue, that I’m beautiful, that I can show my body in this way? When was this? What year specifically? Was there a photographer that you worked with or was it a selfie that you took?

**Grison:** I would say it’s in two times. Because in 2016 I went to Paris and there’s a group of photographers on Instagram… And they were doing a worldwide tour, and they were in Paris. I was like, “Greta, I want to do it.” And it was not so expensive, so I was like, I’ll try it. But it was my first time, and I was like, oh, my God, am I going to look ridiculous, or whatever? And I had the best time. It was just so much fun, so crazy. I had to change and to be in a tail in front of the Eiffel Tower. It was very insane. And, I don’t know, it was fun. But then I didn’t do much after that. And in 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, I had a lot of anxiety and I need to find something to do. Which was like, okay, I need to get out of my home. I need to have fun.

And so, I went and called a friend of a friend, she’s a Colombian… and she’s in Toulouse. And so, we went in the field, and we made the picture. And when I saw the result I like, oh my God, it’s great. And it was the first time I thought, okay, maybe I can make something out of it. Maybe, I don’t know. As I say, it’s pretty message or make money, or meet people. And each time I was doing a photo shoot, what I liked the most is a process of creativity right before the shooting. Which is like, okay, I have this idea, I want to do this. What do you think? Okay, make it. Just the communication, exchange.

Which is like, I just love to make something in my head to make it real. It just so exciting. And so all of this is quite selfish because what I think is that I did [it] for me, but at the same time it’s quite selfless because it just made an impact on [how] all people picture disability. I don’t know. When it gets extreme, it can be both. And something I made for fun just went bigger than what I had in my head. And then I’m like, okay, if I can make something so different, so strange for some, make it look good or look normal, or look creative and sexy, or whatever. Then I’m like, okay, I’ve done my job. But it wasn’t my first intent. My first thought was, I’m going to offend.

**Bishop:** You’re going to what?

**Grison:** I’m going to offend.

**Bishop:** You’re going to offend? … That’s interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that if you’re comfortable with that? Why that thought initially of worrying about offending or worrying about it not being received well?
**Grison:** I would say I wasn’t really worried about it, but it’s a fact that when you create something, people are going to like it or not. And the fact that I never fit into something. Maybe the first time was like maybe I’m going to get ridiculous. But because I am confident in who I am anyway, I go for it… But if I was truly worried about my image or what I was doing, I would say I wouldn’t have done it. But just fact is to be realistic, to know that some way you can have hate comments and very nasty messages, or whatever. It’s a fact. I’ve had some in the past, so I know it is. But I chose to never answer.

**Bishop:** Can you speak a little bit about that in terms of the comments? How would you break them down? Have they been supportive, negative? Have they been even/even? Did they start off as overly negative and then become positive over time? I guess, what is the history of the comments on the photographs and the modeling work that you’ve done?

**Grison:** Honestly, they’ve been mostly supportive. Then I can believe sometimes people can mock me, or whatever, but I don’t remember one bad comment concerning my modeling stuff. It’s been really great. But as I am in public, you never know what might happen. But it’s a choice. When you choose to, I would say that to expose yourself, I’m just being realistic. But I had issues in the past for a few stuff, but it wasn’t…the modeling. And I’m a bit tough, so I don’t take any shit. But I just probably in real life, when people speak that to me, I can be like... I don’t know. My favorite movie is *Scarface*, so don’t fuck with me. But again, I comment like that. I know it can happen, and I think the best thing is to not answer, because it’s not my energy.

**Bishop:** Would you say then that the comments online have been overwhelmingly positive? You said with a few negative, but mostly the negative comments you’ve been concerned about are actually as you’re doing the modeling. Not from online people, but people who are in the physical world with you.

**Grison:** Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes. God, what can I say? Wait, just because I need to translate into English. I just translating. I would say that I just sound like a diva, cold, or bossy or whatever. I’ve been told that a few times. But I know that people who say that to me are not confident in themselves. And I’m definitely not cold. You won’t meet anyone burning more than I am. I am a flame. But if you think that I just look, I don’t know, demanding or bossy, or whatever, it just means you have an issue with yourself. So, take a look in... I need to share that because once people speak back to me, like, don’t start, you’re going to die… I try to be wiser. I just try to shut it and to not say something always. But it can be like that. But if people are judg[mental], perhaps it’s not my issue. It’s your issue. I just want to focus into spreading positivity and optimism, and to show kids that they can do whatever they want, disability or not. I just want to focus and do that instead of focusing on bullshit. Then people will just want to be like, ‘I am so much better than you are.’ It just is fake. But I [am not] here to be the therapist.
Bishop: How would you say France is overall culturally in terms of disability rights and disability acceptance?

Grison: You picked the wrong French person. Honestly, I was with friends this week coming home from Stockholm. And all my friends are having very different background culture than I am, from [the] USA, Great Britain, Stockholm, place[s] like that. France, I would say… France… I think there is this word which is very trendy to speak about being “inclusive.” But in France, in my opinion, it is quite bullshit. Because I just want to sound like they [do]. For example, in Toulouse. Toulouse is very accessible in term of subways, bus, stuff like that. If you went to Paris and [had a] wheelchair, forget it… I know they make an effort. But in terms of shopping, going to, I don’t know, the bank, restaurant, theaters, anything. When you get out it’s very, very difficult. There are so many places I can only go in summer because [they have outside seating, other times]… I can’t enter because I don’t have a ramp. They don’t have accessible toilets. It’s like, facts. And to me it’s bullshit because most of them will be like, “Yeah, I forgot about the ramp, but I don’t have any clients in wheelchair.” You don’t have clients in wheelchair because you don’t have a ramp.

Bishop: Hmm mmm.

Grison: So… Don’t start [with the excuses]. Yeah. No, it’s not good. I think in terms to school as well… [out of] 2,000 kids in high school, I was the only one with a disability. Still to this day, it’s been more than a decade. Still to this day, when I’m going to party [at], I don’t know, clubs in Toulouse, or whatever, I still have people coming to me. “Oh, you were in that high school. I’ve seen you.” It’s crazy how lonely it was. But for me as feelings, I was okay. I was always the only one in high schools, in middle school, anything. I was the only one with disability.

In the early… [1990s] it was still very difficult to be inclusive in term[s] of normal school. Yeah, I would say it’s very, very late. I am much more comfortable in England. It’s much more like the way people are behaving. They try to find solutions. They’re not offended when you say the fact that it’s not accessible. I’m not going to apologize because I [cannot] enter. You have to think through it. No, to me it’s very bad, honestly. To me it’s bad because I’ve seen other stuff. I’ve been in other countries, and so I can compare. Even in Spain it’s easier.

Bishop: In Spain how is it?

Grison: Easier.

Bishop: Have you been to the [United] States before? How does it compare?

Grison: No, because taking a plane and maybe getting my chair broken, [gives] me too much anxiety. But I wish I could come, but so far it just is giving me too much anxiety.

Bishop: I understand that, that’s something that a lot of folks talk about in terms of the airlines. The airlines are not accessible by design, and for people who use wheelchairs. Like you said, wheelchairs can become damaged. You were saying that in France there’s obviously the inaccessibility of architecture with, excuse me, restrooms, seating, doors, entrances. And then you’re also saying that attitudes as well, where there’s this false inclusivity. But if you point out that things aren’t accessible, instead of them trying to fix it, they make excuses. Correct? Do you
think… that making these excuses comes from a place of discomfort? That they know that they should be doing better and that they’re not? Or what do you think?

**Grison:** I know it’s coming from ignorance. And ignorance is not always with some intent… it’s just being dumb. Honestly, we have a famous place in Toulouse, which is called the Capitole. And when I’m in the middle of the Capitole, I know that 80% of the people coming out from the subway never saw anyone [with a] disability. So, when they look at me, they’re like, though she’s smiling, is she looking pretty? I don’t know, does she look friendly? Does she smell nice? I don’t know. And we just look at myself. And from a judgment of what is to have disability. But the spectrum of disability is very large. So, because someone has disability and the same disability, it’s the same person. So, it’s bullshit again. But daily, I am obviously educating people at my expense, so have to do that to some extent. Because sometimes it just goes, sometimes it gets wild.

Like at a lunch last summer, it was one year ago, but still in my head. And so, we just chatting, friend to friend. And it was for work issues. And then he asked me, “Oh, did you ever have sex?” And I was like, “Sorry?” Just out of the blue. And so, people feel like they can ask this question, and it’s so rude. And so, okay, what do I do? Do I get offended? But at the same times I’m quite open at answering people[’s] daily stupid question because they don’t know. So where do I fit in that spectrum? And honestly, it’s very complicated. Because if I answer, it’s not good. And if I don’t answer, it’s not good either. So very often you can get stuck in that kind of dilemma.

**Bishop:** If you don’t mind me asking, how did you respond? Did you answer the question, or did you ignore it, or did you explain to them why it was inappropriate to ask?

**Grison:** After that lunch, four hours later or something, I was like, what the fuck, it happened. When it happened, I was a bit shocked, but then I quickly moved [on in] the conversation because I wanted to get to another subject. But then I realized, I was like, it’s not normal. And then I’m like, okay, now Audrey, you’re not a kid anymore. You’re still kind of are, but you have to be an adult. And if I was a woman without disability, maybe I would’ve just get offended and not answer. So, get entitled to answer. It’s super difficult to just know what’s right or wrong. And I know it wasn’t mean, but it was just, again, out of ignorance. And it’s very difficult to just know. And so, this is why one example that I think that France is very late in making [areas] accessible and changing minds. But at the same time, if they don’t meet anyone with disability in the classroom, in the office, in any place, how can we change the way they look at us?
Why should an artist reveal himself, and why does it matter to us?

WE are not things.
**Bishop:** Do you know of any other artists in France who are pushing the concepts of disability inclusion and disability rights?

**Grison:** On Twitter, I follow a few people. What I find complicated, and maybe because I’ve been saying this a lot, I don’t want to get involved in politics. Because I feel like nobody represents what I stand for. Even out of disability, I don’t relate… And so I tend to stand back from that kind of speech because I feel like, okay, they’re going to use me, they’re going to use my image, they’re going to use the way I behave. I don’t want to associate with political stuff. I don’t know, maybe I will evolve around that, but so far, I find it too tricky.

And I know that even… I don’t know. I was doing an exhibition in the gallery two years ago, and a few politicians came, and they all asked for a picture with me. And yeah, I know they use the fact that, oh, the young woman’s disability, she is making up a show in the gallery, blah, blah, blah. I know how it is, so I play the game. But if I have my say in that, I try to be very careful with that kind of stuff.

**Bishop:** Sure. Makes sense.

**Grison:** Yeah, there are a few people who are activists, but the way I do it in a very creative way is quite singular to what I love.

**Bishop:** So, you said you’re also a painter, correct?

**Grison:** Yeah.

**Bishop:** And was this an art exhibit that you were just mentioning, was that a painting exhibit?

**Grison:** Yeah.

**Bishop:** What do you paint with? Do you use oil, watercolors? And what subjects do you like to explore in your painting?

**Grison:** I make mostly portraits, and they’re faceless. And I use watercolors and pens, so I use pens to make the hair and the silhouettes. And then I paint with colors which are quite vivid, vibrant. I’ll say that I associate people with colors, such as a mood or who they are. I try to use the color to describe the people I’m seeing. Because again, they’re faceless. So, you don’t have the nose and lips, or whatever.
it's just 'till these tears have dried.
**Bishop:** Switching gears a bit, do you think that body positivity is linked to disability rights, or do you see them as very separate movements, in your opinion?

**Grison:** No, I think it links, definitely. But again, it depends on how you use it. How to say that? Okay. The first thing is visibility, the choice to expose yourself. Which I’m doing. For me, it’s quite obvious just by the fact that I am exposing myself, I am making a statement. And so, I try to say it’s normal and it’s okay to everybody, which is different. But again, I know my state of mind can be very driven, very strong. And that I [am] ahead of my years in the fact that I am kind of young, but I feel much more older in my head, because I just develop an attitude. Which was like, okay, I understood a lot of stuff. But don’t worry, I’m very naive and I still mess up hours like I did today. And I am still silly. But in term of emotional intelligence, I am very much like, it’s a lot for me to be around... You just have to make the choice to own yourself.

Because I say that I own my body, but I do not really own its image. And this is why making art is interesting. Because I can create something, then I give it to the viewer, and then people can interpret. But maybe I’d say that because, again, I see everything from a creative point of view, but it’s the way I develop each project. And I would speak about one more thing in turn of body positivity or stuff, to make tattoos.

**Bishop:** Tattoos?

**Grison:** Yeah, to add tattoos on my body. Eighteen or so was a big step into owning my body... I can choose to have pictures on my body. And driving statements, like words, sentences. It was quite important in terms of taking back the power.

**Bishop:** That makes sense. How were the reactions of your friends and family when you started doing modeling? Were they supportive? Were they critical? Did they have much to say?

**Grison:** Yeah, most of my friends, I think they were surprised. I’ve been known for being, as I say, feminine and stuff. But it was another step into... I don’t know, I just saw some of them thought I was brave for, again exposing myself. But because I’m okay with my body and its limitation but also its power. And it’s not totally complicated.

**Bishop:** This is something that has come up with a few of the people that I’ve interviewed [for fat liberation], that you’ll have feelings when people say, “Oh, you’re brave.” And they will push back on that about the idea of being brave. How do you feel about that when people say, “Oh, that’s so brave.”? Do you welcome that, do you reject that?

**Grison:** Honestly, again, it doesn’t belong to me. It’s a classic statement told to people with disability. It’s not only about the body, it’s about the fact that you go to school, or you do this or you do that just to be out. It’s so brave. It’s a typical stuff. And I don’t care, honestly. I’ve learned so much, some amazing things also, which were crazy and bad, so I don’t care. But I know that a lot of people struggle to get out of this bitch, but I don’t think we’re still there. I think it’s going to be here for [awhile], because people are not still ready to completely accept that we are human beings which sometimes struggle... I don’t try to fight it. I just like… *shrugs*... and we move on.
Bishop: For your art, what projects do you have coming up that you’re excited about? Are you going to be continuing with some of the same themes in your painting and modeling, or is there something new on the horizon that you want to do?

Grison: By the end of June, I’m doing a new photo shoot in the forest. It was my friend who’s a Colombian photographer. It’s the one I told you before. And so, it’s going to be very exciting. We have a lot of stuff. I would say that we really went deeply into the creative process, what I want to say and stuff like that. It’s going to be amazing; I think. I feel like it’s going to be Barbie meeting Twilight. I’m excited about it. Apart from that, I’ve done a photo shoot with one of my best friends, she’s a photographer as well. But it’s not a main job, so we’re going to publish very soon, the pictures. I’m going back to teaching in high school in September or October, so it’s nice as well. I only do that four months a year, so it’s very nice because I don’t get bored [with] it.

And yet I just love to speak with kids and to be like, even if I teach my arts, it just is a moment some way in the classroom where when I come to the table and see them, and one of them confident in myself. And I just listen and try to not say too much shit. And it’s when I feel very useful, because you see the results at the moment, and it’s nice to have kids. I remember what it was like to be 16, even if I was unhappy, but I remember the confusion. So, I just try. Here’s the thing, is that I tend to be very shiny. I am very solo, and I speak way too much. But at the same time, I’m very skilled at listening to people.

I understood recently that I was meant to listen to them and to really... Yeah, I think in my future it’s going to be very important. So far I don’t do that on the side. I’m like, maybe, I don’t know. I’m going to become some kind of astrologer or whatever. I don’t know. But I know there is something which makes people feel good, and there [are] enough bad things in the world. Why not help people, if I can do it?

Bishop: You were saying that you teach, you said you teach fine arts?


Bishop: Did you go to school anywhere for art? Did you study art at any of the university, or are you self-taught?

Grison: No, I was studying fine arts and then art history, and then I did a graduate design degree. But it had nothing to do with teaching. Teaching just happened, it wasn’t meant to be…. Someone I knew from another school, and they just liked my [work and profile] online, and said... I could educate teenagers about disability. Sometimes I speak from making small conferences, and so mostly I go to teach schools fine art.
Bishop: Would you like to close with any statement about disability, accessibility, and art?

Grison: I would say that if you don’t fight for yourself, who’s going to do it? It’s always go back to yourself. What may sound selfish is not at all if it’s done with great intentions. I just think that people should not give up on what’s right for them, and to go [have] fun, get out. I don’t know, just live your life. Don’t get stuck in, I don’t know, something depressive. I know that mental health is important, some people have issue with it. And it’s important to take care of yourself. But to go out and to sometimes get out of your comfort zone will make you meet people amazing. I would say that in my life, normal never happen. It’s always on the scale of what is extraordinary. When I was a kid, a little kid, when I was eight or something, I was a big fan of an artist in Spain.

He used to make his design on your school bags in band, and whatever. And each summer, because I go to Barcelona in summer, they always were taking all the pens and all the notebooks and stuff. And when I was seventeen, I could make a wish, like Make a Wish in America. But not wish as a charity. And so, I asked to meet him. And then we met and he’s like my soulmate. When you find someone and then you meet the person, and the actual human being is even greater, it’s kind of nuts. And it’s important to love and to try to make some greatness happen. But I know that I am very weird. I’m ambitious. And at the same time, as I say, I shy away from politics and stuff like that because I don’t want to belong to something that is not me. But at the same time, I struggle very hard to find people like me. So, it makes no sense. But I think just to be in love with life and to respect yourself is very important.

Bishop: Thank you so much for your time!

Grison: Thank you.