

Her Guide Dog Inspired Her Art. Now the Lab Stars in a Museum Show.

After losing her sight in an accident, Emilie Gossiaux found meaning and art in a bond with her dog, London, celebrated at the Queens Museum.

Hilarie M. Sheets

December 5th, 2023

The New York Times

How does it feel to have your life change in an instant?

[Emilie Gossiaux](#) was an art student at the Cooper Union in 2010 when she was hit by an 18-wheel truck while on her bike in Brooklyn. Taken to Bellevue Hospital, she had suffered a [traumatic brain injury, a stroke and multiple fractures](#). While Gossiaux ultimately regained her life, she had lost her sense of sight. She struggled to decide if she could, or even wanted to, continue making art.

“I had to adjust that framework in my head of what it means to be an artist,” said Gossiaux, now 34, who had always viewed her ability to draw and paint as “my absolute superpower.”

From age 4, her favorite thing to do was copy cartoons on television. Growing up in New Orleans, she charged other children 25 cents a head for drawing lessons she would give in the playground at recess. At 5, she began to experience hearing loss, which only heightened her attention to images and facial expressions.

“I just became more hyper-aware of using my vision,” said Gossiaux, who now wears hearing aids. “That was my way of learning and understanding.” She went on to attend magnet high schools for art, where she envisioned a future life as an artist with big museum exhibitions. At the Cooper Union, in her delicate, stylized drawings and sculptures, she favored the figurative and the handmade, using tactile craft materials like plaster and hair.

But after the accident that blinded her, Gossiaux had to confront “some inner ableism” that told her she could never work at the same ambitious level or put in 15-hour days as before at the studio. She spent 11 months at a training center called [BLIND Incorporated](#) in Minneapolis, learning skills to navigate the world independently, including use of a white cane.

“Once I started to do that alone, I imagined myself in a video game,” she said, “playing to win.”

There, in woodworking shop, she also learned how to translate images in her mind using hand-to-hand, rather than eye-to-hand, coordination.

When sketching, she lays her paper on a rubber pad called a [Sensational Blackboard](#) that embosses the lines as she draws with one hand, following along with her other hand to feel the images.

“I’m using one hand to ‘see,’ the other hand to carve or draw or manipulate” the object, explained Gossiaux, who did return to Cooper Union, where she graduated in 2014.

And she learned to listen to her body and recognize the importance of rest, and of bed as a place to freely imagine her ideas. Only then did she feel she could really be an artist again.

“I allowed myself to sort of daydream about the work I wanted to make and not be so rigid,” said Gossiaux, petite and beatific, sitting in her studio at the [Queens Museum](#), where she has been in residence for the last year on a [Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists](#).

This week, Gossiaux’s youthful dream comes to fruition with the opening Wednesday of [“Other-Worlding,”](#) her first solo museum exhibition, which runs through April 7. It celebrates her 13-year-old guide dog, London, and their mutual dependency. “I protect her and she protects me,” Gossiaux said. On a more universal scale, her art seems to remove barriers between animals and the rest of the natural world.

The installation consists of three papier-mâché sculptures of hybridized dog-women — versions of London, scaled to Gossiaux’s height of five feet — dancing on their hind legs. They gambol around a maypole, which here is a monumentalized white cane. Fantastical and serene, the Londons hold colorful felt leashes that stream from the top of the 15-foot-tall cane, no longer constrained.

Brightly painted papier-mâché flowers are strewn across the wide circular platform. Trees crowned with a canopy of 600 individually made papier-mâché leaves wrap around the gallery walls like a 3-D collage.

Three whimsical pen and crayon studies hang on a wall, one with iterations of London floating blissfully. “The sheer joy that comes across in her work, it almost bounces off the page,” said Sarah Cho, an assistant curator at the Queens Museum and a member of the jury that selected Gossiaux for the residency from among some 380 applicants. “There’s this vibrational movement in the way that flowers are drawn, the petals just seem to flutter.”

Gossiaux has worked with London, an English Labrador retriever, for 10 years and describes her as both “mischievous and a little bossy.” Their

bond strengthened when the artist started graduate school at Yale in 2017, where she felt very alone for what she said was the first time. “London became my constant,” she said. “I was really craving intimacy and closeness.”

She explored their attachment in sculptures included in her [Open Call](#) exhibit at The Shed, [“True Love Will Find You in the End.”](#) and in the group show “Crip Time” at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, which acquired two dog-women.

Gossiaux said her ongoing body of work featuring London has been influenced by the writer [Donna Haraway](#), whose feminist theories look at cross-species relationships as a model for breaking down all kinds of hierarchies, whether patriarchal or economic.

“What if we didn’t center the perspective all around humans?” Cho said. “Emilie’s combination of animal and human bodies makes it almost feel like you’re there in this world with them.”

[Andrew Leland](#), whose memoir “The Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight” chronicles his experience with gradual visual loss, couldn’t stop thinking about a drawing that he encountered last year in Gossiaux’s exhibition [“Significant Otherness” at Mother Gallery](#) in TriBeCa. Leland acquired the piece, “London, Midsummer No. 1” — which the Queens Museum has brought to three-dimensional life — likening its “elegant rudimentariness” to the blithe figures in [Matisse’s “Dance.”](#)

“Emotionally, the cane, for me, is the most stigmatized aspect of this highly stigmatized disability — it marks you instantly,” he said. “Emilie really went into the experience of being a blind person in the world and found this image of freedom that is profoundly meaningful to me.”

Gossiaux's drawing became the springboard for a chapter in Leland's book about blind people's relationship with visual culture. "Having somebody like Emilie making work that's on the international art market pushes back against the image that so many people in 2023 still have of a blind person as fundamentally incompetent," he said. "Not only do blind people have an interest in visual culture, they're producing it and moving it forward."

The artist Finnegan Shannon, who experiences pain walking or standing, invited Gossiaux to contribute to a fantasy of disability access in Shannon's exhibition ["Don't Mind if I Do."](#) through Jan. 7 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. Gossiaux created 3-D printed ceramics of London's body parts, including her tongue and a paw, that circulate throughout the room on a conveyor belt with other artists' works, carried to viewers who can relax on plush seating.

"I really respond to the play in Emilie's work," Shannon said, adding that people in mainstream culture tend to talk about disability in somber terms, "always such a funny contrast to my experience as a disabled person where there's a lot of humor."

"I'm really excited about the way Emilie bridges these very specific experiences she has in her day-to-day life," Shannon said.

Gossiaux's process always starts with drawing. She pulls from her visual, muscle and tactile memory. "I know what London looks like because I've seen Labradors before, but I'm also getting the sense of her body from petting her and playing with her, feeling her face," said Gossiaux, who always completes a drawing in one burst of energy. "I also draw from my dreams because they are still very vivid."

When she translates drawings to sculpture, her life partner and studio assistant, Kirby Thomas Kersels, helps her measure and shape the pieces

in Styrofoam. Gossiaux layers on papier-mâché and then paints them, using her fingers rather than a paintbrush. “I’ve found ways to make it more of a tactile experience,” she said.

The artist will lead two “touch tours” of her installation at the museum for blind and low-vision visitors on Jan. 21 and April 7. “I think of touch as a love language; it’s very intimate,” said Gossiaux, who worked as an [educator at the Metropolitan Museum](#) giving tours to visually impaired audiences for five years before the pandemic.

Gossiaux’s ability to verbally describe works has helped Cho, the curator, write better audio descriptions herself. (Kersels, who lives with Gossiaux and London, said he was first smitten with the artist when he dropped in on a class at Yale and heard her present a student’s sculpture.)

Gossiaux’s day-to-day presence in Queens has helped move the needle on the museum’s efforts to increase accessibility. To facilitate Gossiaux’s freedom of movement, the staff installed raised tactile lines on the floors throughout the office and studio spaces, and Braille on kitchen surfaces. In the galleries, it is now offering audio descriptions for every artwork.

The artist and research professor [Liza Sylvestre](#), who is deaf and was also included in the Frankfurt exhibition “Crip Time,” said that the Queens Museum has likely learned much from Gossiaux’s residency. “A lot of focus at museums has been placed on accessibility programs and maybe less on support of artists *with* disabilities and their particular way of moving through the world,” Sylvestre said.

Gossiaux considers herself an activist for disability justice, pointing out that for the first time in her work she has included the white cane, a tool of her own independence. “Being out in the world with my white cane, or with London, that would get in people’s way and annoy people,” she said. “But I feel like they’re denying my right to be there or to even exist.

“I *want* the white cane to be in people’s way,” she added, with gentle forcefulness. “I *want* it to take over the space.”