

***We who were not, ARE!***  
**NTID Triptych**  
**(2014-2019)**



This three panel mural, *We who were not, ARE!*, was created by many notable Deaf artists over the course of several years. The project began during the 2014 Viva De'VIA exhibit – a weekend celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Deaf View/Image Art (art about Deaf experiences) and the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Surdism (an international Deaf-themed art movement for social change).

Many motifs commonly found in the De'VIA genre appear in this work. The overall message relates to how Deaf identities are formed after finding a home at RIT/NTID. The work is read right to left. Each panel of the triptych is explained below.

The quote at bottom is from 1838. Claude Forestier, a Deaf French teacher and advocate, asserted: “today we are reunited. Today we have united our intellects, our efforts, our lights; today we constitute one BODY; all of us active and devoted members desire the well-being of that body; we who were not, ARE!”



The **first right panel** features a woman riding a Deaf spirit bird carrying Deaf signing babies. The woman in the flying dinghy is the Mother of Deaf Souls. She wears a dress of butterflies which represent freedom. She is signing “PAH!” which is an ASL exclamation meaning “at last.” She gathers up the babies and will bring them to NTID when they are older.

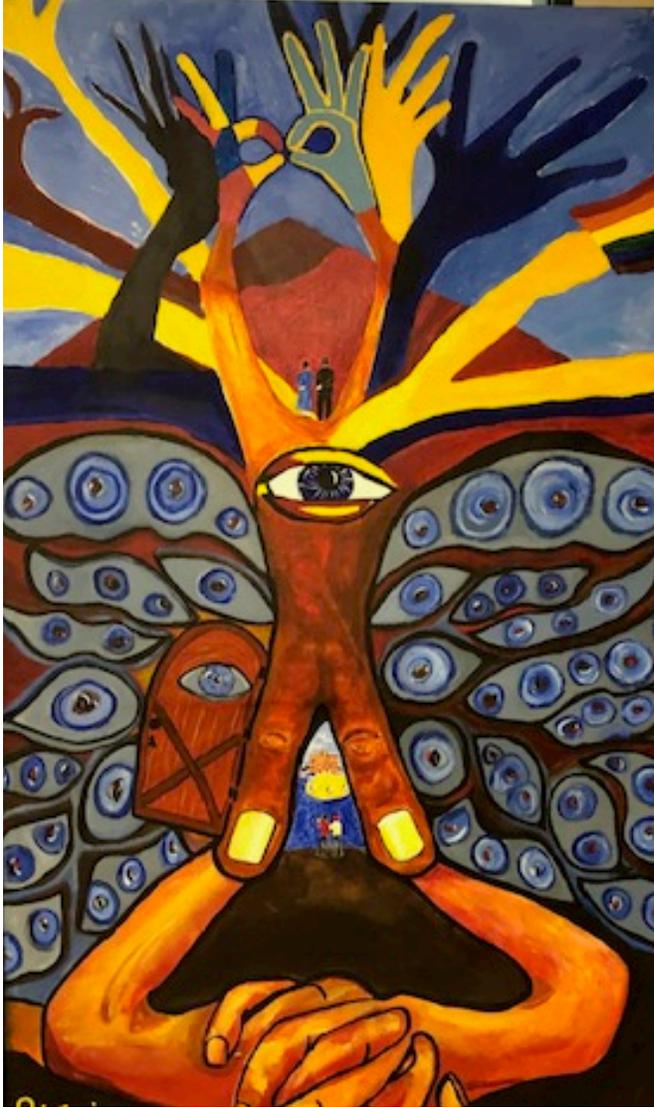
The nest with eggs symbolizes home and the large birdhouse signifies how NTID becomes a home of Deaf youth. Birds have long been used by Deaf artists as flight and flying are often equated with the right to use ASL and “freedom to be me.”

The waves below represent Oralism & Audism – many Deaf people are survivors of oral / aural only education and the systematic belief that its better to be Hearing than Deaf.

There are small hand prints and hand stencils on the red mountain in reference to how the first language on this Earth was signing and how we are connected to our ancestors. Hands are used in De’VIA often to represent signing people and the tactile nature of Deaf folks.

The large hands are signing “to take root / to be rooted” and signify how many, many Deaf students, faculty and staff find their roots and connections here at NTID. The blue outlined handroots reach outward expressing multitudes of people.





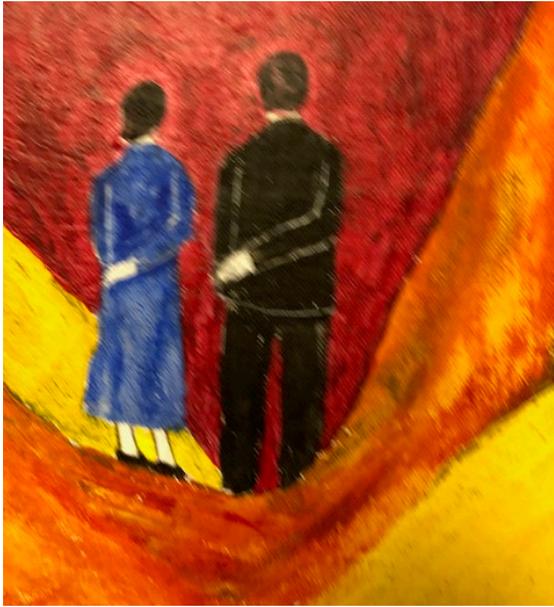
The **second panel** shows how we are all branches of the same tree. In the center stands the Eyes tree. Eyes are common motifs within De'VIA works emphasizing the visual nature of Deaf people. Eyes in the background communicate the idea of the world watching to see the success of the grand experiment that was NTID – a Deaf college coexisting within a Hearing college.

Two branches form the sign for infinity in LSF (French Sign Language) and turquoise, yellow and dark blue hand that echoes the colors of the Sign Union flag. The red, yellow and blue hand on the left echoes the primary colored hands from the original De'VIA mural in 1989.

The infinity hands to show that De'VIA and Surdism are interconnected forever.

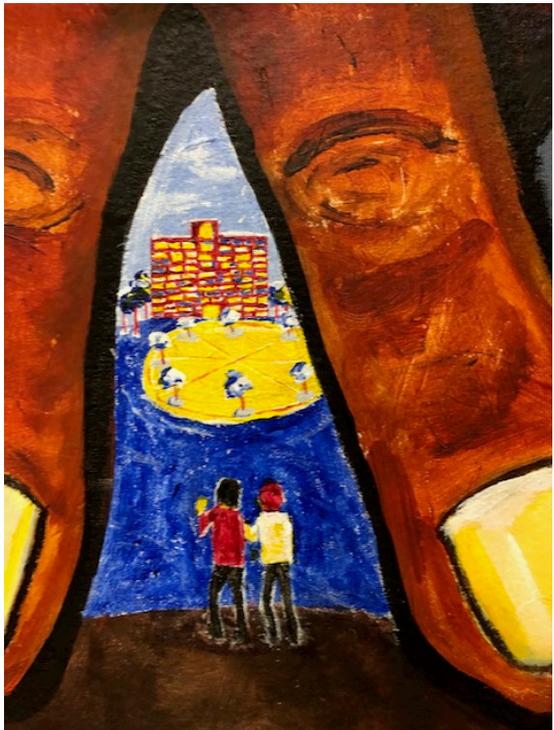
Below these hands is the red mountain top. The mountain references a quote by Deaf UK scholar, Dr. Paddy Ladd, who said we only have a few years to build the mountain before Oralism, cochlear implants, genetic engineering and such threaten to wash away natural sign languages and Deaf cultures. He noted the way to build the mountain was via artistic and creative expressions of Deaf experiences.

The large bottom intertwined handroots represent how interconnected Deaf students, faculty and staff are here at RIT/NTID and how this collective experience builds a strong foundation for the future.



Below the mountain top are two small figures each with one hand behind their backs – this couple represents George W. Veditz and his wife Bessie. Both worked at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind, where Bessie Veditz taught DeafBlind children for fifty years.

Veditz is a revered leader in of the Deaf community – he was a two-term president of the National Association of the Deaf. Veditz challenged AG Bell’s push for pure Oralism and the destruction of American Sign Language, and the opposition to a bilingual approach to Deaf education. He also called upon AG Bell to do for the eye what he had done for the ear and invent a television. He was the first known person to advocate for the use of film technology to preserve and disseminate ASL.



Through a hand-shaped opening in the Eye tree, two students can be seen walking towards the quad in front of RIT/NTID’s Tower A. This hallmark building which hosted the highest number of Deaf students on campus since NTID’s beginning.

The Eye Tree’s trunk forms the ASL sign for STAND. The sign is intended to represent how Deaf students discover their “voice” and agency as young adults at NTID. For many, NTID is a near utopia – a place where, at last, Deaf people, our natural sign languages and our cultures are accepted and cherished.

Because of this, many RIT/NTID alumnus have gone on to become important leaders and advocates for Deaf & language rights, as well as for diversity and inclusion.



The **third panel** portrays the experience of many RIT/NTID students who have been mainstreamed all their lives. These students arrive to NTID without any sense of Deaf identity. The ladder done in Rourkeism colors (red, yellow and blue) is a reference to NTID Alumni and ASL poet, Debbie Rennie's Black Hole: Color ASL work. The holes on the figure show missing language, information, culture and identity. The primary colored fingers again reference the poem – as the signing hands will now enable the person to take flight and not be consumed by the hole below. The figure waves a Sign Union flag, which is a banner under which signing people rally around the world and RIT has embraced.

NTID is considered "home" by so many students because it acts as an important part of their acculturation. When a significant majority of deaf children are raised today without access to Deaf peers or sign language, this is especially true. Reinforcing the theme of home are bees and a beehive in this panel. RIT/NTID has acted as a colony or hub of sorts – allowing for the creation of a Deaf space. Bees are Deaf and can find their way home to their hive unless nature is tampered with and they are put at risk.

The nearly-invisible children at the bottom are signing "hide and seek." This phrase suggests the unrealized yearning of many RIT/NTID students who were unaware of their own cultural and linguistic heritage before coming to college.

The large handroot at the bottom is open, holding many seeds. These seeds are new Deaf identities which will be planted and will bloom in the fertile soil that is RIT/NTID.

The Deaf artists who were involved in this project:

Brenda Boaz-Pond, Gino Caci, David Call, Karen Christie, Susan Dupor, Patti Durr, David Ennis, Randy Jackson, Ellen Mansfield, Sharon McKenney, Laurie Monahan, Nancy Rourke, Bonnie Sandy etc.