

# **A Biography of Pamela Elizabeth Witcher: A Deaf Artist**

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## **1. Introduction**

Throughout recorded history, art has been known as a means of expression. A way to send a message to anyone who looks at it, hears it, or watches it and tell a story. The artist's story. Stories come from experiences which are born out of happiness, strife, anger, and so on. It is a common idea that if an artist has not experienced any such barriers or elation, they will have nothing to say with their work. This idea is why some of the best pieces of art come from tumultuous periods of human history. For example, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, one of his most famous pieces, was born from the attack of German forces on the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

War is not the only type of experience which can cause artists to feel inspired, however. Oppression and marginalization have also caused great artists to come forward. One such group who has lived these experiences is the deaf population. For most of history, deaf people have been considered as a problem to solve. This was the case as far back as the Greeks and Romans, when deaf children were killed as infants due to being viewed as a burden to the state.<sup>2</sup> Starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of teachers for the deaf, there was a large focus on focus on teaching the deaf to speak as a means of making deaf people fit into society.<sup>3</sup> Even in modern times, the invention of the cochlear implant has created what some people consider to be a

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<sup>1</sup> (Corbin, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> (Ferrerri, 1906)

<sup>3</sup> (de Chaves & Soler, 1974)

solution to deafness. The lack of acceptance of deaf people into society throughout history is one of the things that caused deaf artists to start emerging in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

In modern times, deaf art of all forms such as film, music, and visual art are emerging in an academic field of their own. One such deaf artist who is a voice in this new world of art is Pamela Elizabeth Witcher. Pamela Witcher is a deaf artist who is known for her 2-dimensional art and signed music. While 2-dimensional art is something that has been a profession for deaf people for hundreds of years, signed music is a developing field where deaf people are composing and performing songs, making them entirely grown from deaf culture.

## **2. History of Deaf Art**

Quintus Pedius was the first deaf painter to be mentioned in recorded history. Living in Rome, Pedius was born into a powerful family, however, when he never spoke, he was taught to paint instead.<sup>5</sup> Hundreds of years later in Spain, Juan Fernandez de Navarette, otherwise known as El Mudo, was one of the first famous deaf artists. Living from 1526-1579, he became well-known after he was hired by King Phillip to complete a series of paintings in the Escorial.<sup>6</sup> El Mudo and the King were known to collaborate using signs and his success in the world of art as a deaf man caused the arts to become a popular profession for the deaf population. Not only did art give deaf people a place and a profession in society, but it allowed deaf people to express themselves in a way they couldn't by speaking. After El Mudo died, Lope de Vega said:

If heaven did not wish him to speak it was so that, according to my understanding, he should give more feeling to the subjects he painted. He gave

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<sup>4</sup> (Forbes-Robertson, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> (Laes, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> (Radic-Sestic et al., 2012)

them so much life with his unique brush that not being able to speak himself, he made them speak for him.<sup>7</sup>

As can be analyzed from Pedius' story, without a developed language that could be used to communicate with deaf people, there were not many opportunities for deaf people in a primarily hearing world. There was not sufficient education to aid in written communication and as a result the deaf population was forced onto the sidelines, finding any possible means to express themselves. Navarette led an era of deaf painters out of the shadows. The fact that painting did not require verbal or written communication made it an ideal profession for deaf people to hold.

While becoming an artist is by no means the only path for deaf people in modern times, it still has the power to cross language barriers and expose the hearing world to a glimpse of the oppression and marginalization that the deaf community has had to endure for thousands of years.

### **3. Witcher: Early Life**

Pamela Witcher was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She was born deaf and to a deaf family, surrounded by many types of signed language. Coming from Newfoundland, her parents grew up signing Maritime Sign Language (MSL).<sup>8</sup> MSL was created as a result of a phenomenon known as deaf community sign language. This type of language formation occurs when deaf people with various backgrounds are in the same location and several signed languages merge to create a new one. In the case of MSL, the roots can be found in the Weald community of England, meaning that the root of the language is British sign language (BSL). However, when

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<sup>7</sup> (Bender, 1970)

<sup>8</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

the language became more popular it was in eastern Canada.<sup>9</sup> After moving to Montreal, where Pamela and her brother grew up, Pamela's parents began learning Langue des signes Quebécoise (LSQ).<sup>10</sup> LSQ was a language formed out of American Sign Language (ASL) and French Sign Language (LSF). It was a language formed over time as the result of teachers in Canadian schools signing in one of the two languages. LSQ was officially termed in the 1980's.<sup>11</sup> As a child, Pamela grew up with MSL and ASL being signed in her home, while Pidgin Sign English (PSE) and Signing Exact English (SEE) were signed in school, and LSQ was used in her neighborhood and by her religion. Pamela and her family are Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>12</sup> PSE is a language which merges English and ASL by conveying signs using English grammar.<sup>13</sup> SEE was created in 1971, grown out of the dissatisfaction of academic achievement for deaf people, the studies being conducted on the importance of being exposed to a language early in life, and the ineffectiveness of only lipreading.<sup>14</sup>

Through elementary and middle school, Pamela attended the MacKay Centre School for the Deaf, in Montreal. Once she reached high school, however, she was mainstreamed.<sup>15</sup> Mainstreaming is a word which came to fame after the "Education for All Handicapped Children Act" was passed in 1975. The Act stated handicapped children should receive a proper education, and if possible, be surrounded by children who are not handicapped.<sup>16</sup> There is still much debate about the potential positive and negative side effects of mainstreaming on deaf children.

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<sup>9</sup> (Buchanan, 2021)

<sup>10</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

<sup>11</sup> (Miller, 2001)

<sup>12</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

<sup>13</sup> (Reilly & McIntire, 1980)

<sup>14</sup> (Bornstein, 1998)

<sup>15</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

<sup>16</sup> (Stone, 1994)

#### **4. Witcher: Career Accomplishments**

In 1998, Witcher graduated from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Upon graduating she received her bachelor's in social work and proceeded to use her education to help the deaf community, performing many jobs from translating to working with victims of domestic violence. A few of the areas Witcher worked in include psycholinguistics research, interpreting between ASL and LSQ, teaching ASL, and interpreting between written English and ASL. While social work did not end up being her lifelong passion, this time in her life remains an important part of her journey. After about 12 years working in different areas of the deaf community, Witcher returned to school to study museology techniques.

#### *2-D Art*

Growing up, Witcher was an artistic and creative child. While being an artist was not always an accepted part of her life, she always found free time to draw. When she first went to college, art was something she took many classes in and was able to pursue. However, over time due to many reasons including financing, Witcher lost touch with her creative side. Nearly a decade later there was an art workshop that many deaf people participated in and she joined. She describes this moment as helping her remember how much she loved art. She continued to attend more workshops, the only issue being that the teachers were all hearing. They did sign; however, they did not provide the same level of communication that a deaf teacher would. This problem inspired Witcher to become a teacher, setting up a gallery and workshop of her own. While Witcher did continue to teach for some time, in the end she decided that what truly gave her energy was being the artist, so she has continued to learn about art and grow her creative self.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

While Witcher has a large portfolio of 2-dimensional art, “Wombyn” is one piece that is both beautiful to look at and contains a powerful story. “Wombyn” is a 2-dimensional art piece, as seen in Figure 2. “Wombyn” was originally a poem written by Witcher, which was later performed with a hearing singer. An image from this performance can be found in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Image from Wombyn Performance<sup>18</sup>

The story behind performing this piece, as described by Witcher, is that the singer’s grandmother had been a teacher at the MacKay School, which Witcher attended. The singer asked to perform with Witcher who at the time had just written “Wombyn”. Witcher agreed and performed the poem in sign while the singer sang it. As Witcher describes it, this piece was the last one created before taking a year to become more invested in music and expression through that form.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> (Witcher, 2019)

<sup>19</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)



Figure 2: “Wombyn” by Pamela Witcher<sup>20</sup>

“Wombyn” is a transitional piece. It shows a time in Witcher’s life when she had this inspirational experience as a performer and is finding a way to reconcile two forms of art in her life. Witcher also describes this piece and the time off following it as a time when she realized a large portion of her identity in music.

As Witcher’s work progressed, the human form became more key to her artistry. She defines “Cycle of Life”, as shown in Figure 3, as a series which well encompasses this fact. Witcher states that the goal of this series was to include only people in whichever facial direction felt most natural. This is a community-based piece on how her life is rooted in community. As she describes it, being a Jehovah’s Witness is centered around community, her parents were very friendly, and she has always been involved with the deaf community. Knowing how much time she spent in social work and going to meetings and conferences around the country to help

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<sup>20</sup> (Pamela Witcher, n.d.)

access to languages, Witcher is someone who values human relationships, which is clearly represented in this piece.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2: "Circle of Life" by Pamela Witcher <sup>22</sup>

### *Signed Music*

There is no clear definition of signed music. The songs may be lyrical, relying on the linguistic properties of signed language, or be non-lyrical, using abstract gestures and movement to portray sound.<sup>23</sup> A common misconception is that music for deaf people includes someone translating hearing music to a signed language. However, the mistake with this understanding is that it does not account for the fact that hearing music is based on experiences in the hearing world. That is not the music of deaf people. Signed music allows for music to exist that is based on the deaf experience.<sup>24</sup>

Signed music is still a relatively new idea in the academic world and is struggling to receive the same credit as oral music. While being a new field is a part of this struggle, audism also plays a large role. The oppression of deaf and hard-of-hearing people is a daily occurrence

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<sup>21</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

<sup>22</sup> (Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, 2018)

<sup>23</sup> (Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017)

<sup>24</sup> (Cripps, Witcher, & Youssouf, 2021)

and is known as audism. The idea behind audism is that a hearing person is considered the standard and therefore, for a deaf or hard-of-hearing person to achieve success or happiness, they need to fit in with the hearing world. This is primarily accomplished by learning an oral language and speaking.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding audism, signed music directly contradicts the theory that it is based on. By embracing the linguistic properties of signed language and applying them to music theory, deaf artists are proving that they do not need to be oral to create, enjoy, and experience music. Unfortunately, audism is a common experience amongst all deaf people and Witcher's encounter with it was no less oppressive.

Before she started creating some versions of signed music while she was working with a tambour group. In this group she started messing around with signed songs containing an audible beat behind it. Unfortunately, audism still affected the group, and she was one of many deaf people who would be kicked out. As devastating an experience as this would have been, it allowed her to immerse herself in the idea of silent signed music.

Some of Witcher's original inspiration came from ASL poems that were popular in the 1990s. Some poets include Sam Supalla and Ben Bahan, with poems such as *Bird of a Different Feather*. These poems kickstarted Witcher's career in ASL storytelling and allowed her to make her first signed piece known as *Experimental Clip*.<sup>26</sup>

*Experimental Clip* is described as Witcher's first real foray into signed music. The video is silent and filled with visual sounds, portrayed with hand and body movements. Witcher uses

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<sup>25</sup> (Alahasawi, 2016)

<sup>26</sup> (Cripps, 2021)

both LSQ and ASL in the video, allowing her to mesh the languages and word meanings together. The video also uses various editing techniques, changing from color to black and white to provide more visual stimulation. An image from the film can be seen in Figure 3.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 3: Image from *Experimental Clip: Version One*<sup>28</sup>

Even having experienced immense disrespect, Witcher has still found ways to go back to her roots and remember to be kind. *I Honour You* is a relatively recent release by Witcher in 2020. Her idea for the song came from being at home during the COVID-19 quarantine. At this

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<sup>27</sup> (pamelawitcher, 2008)

<sup>28</sup> (pamelawitcher, 2008)

time, with many protests going on, Witcher saw it as a time to remember what her mother had taught her about respecting other people.<sup>29</sup> An image from the song can be found in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Image from the Song *I Honour You*<sup>30</sup>

Witcher's first collaborative piece with other musicians was while she was working on the Resonance project. Resonance was an idea lead by Ellen Waterman from Carleton University. The project had two phases. The first was to research and create pieces of art which are centered around collaboration and social impact. The second phase was to perform these pieces. Two sets of musicians were brought in to work on the project. The first was a group of LGBTQIA2S+ community members who created a music piece in response to artwork known as *The Baroness Elsa Project*. These members include Gabriel Dharmoo, Kathy Kennedy, Tone Cluster choir, and the Qu'ART queer arts collective. The second group of musicians were from the deaf community including Pamela Witcher, Jo-Anne Bryan, Alicia Mbesha and Theara Yim. These artists made a

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<sup>29</sup> (Witcher et al., 2021)

<sup>30</sup> (Cripps, 2022)

response piece to the artwork known as *Three Songs* by Laura Taler.<sup>31</sup> Figure 5 shows an image from the Resonance performance.



Figure 5: Image from “Resonance 2” Performance<sup>32</sup>

Witcher discusses how the process of creating the Resonance performance was deeply affected by the fact that she was working with people from different backgrounds, Jo-Anne being from Nigeria and Theara from Cambodia.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the project was not only collaborative but truly broke cultural barriers in the process of creating the music shows how far Witcher has come in her musical career. It shows how her musical style has developed from experimenting with lights and languages, to taking those techniques and approaching bigger topics found in other great pieces of artwork.

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<sup>31</sup> (*Resonance: Towards a Community-Engaged Model of Research Creation*)

<sup>32</sup> (CarletonUniversityArtGallery, 2023)

<sup>33</sup> (Neal, 2023)

The development of Witchers artistic eye can be further explored in her performance known as “Play it by Eye” in 2023. An image from the song can be found in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Image from “Play it by Eye” Performance<sup>34</sup>

While the name of the song could not be found, it showed themes of contrast and deep emotion. Earlier in her signed music career, Witcher was focused on visual stimulation, however, as she has focused on her skill as a signed music artist, the meaning behind her signs have become the main purpose of the piece. The songs are more structured, and story based, rather than expression through lights and merging languages.

Witcher discusses how as she creates music now, it is about healing herself and readdressing her identity. I think that while this may have played a role in her earlier music, it also shows her growth as a musician and how she has moved on from playful experimentation to deep reflective emotion.

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<sup>34</sup> (SignedMusic, 2023)

## 5. Impact on the Deaf Community

Pamela Witcher is currently a professor at the Deaf Arts Academy teaching a course on signed music. The Deaf Arts Academy provides professional arts training to deaf individuals in the fields of visual art, signed music, and theatre.<sup>35</sup> She has also been working on composing songs and distributing them to other deaf artists who might want to respond in another language or with another interpretation.<sup>36</sup>

Witcher has accomplished so many feats in the world of art since she decided to be an artist. She has not only created art for herself, but also has been featured in many festivals and films such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Quebec on the Move!, and À Bâbord and Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey.<sup>37</sup> The international impact Witcher has had on the art world shows how far deaf influence can travel. Art is able to break all language barriers and by using it Witcher has reached thousands of people and told her story.

The world of art is an ever-evolving field. There is no one correct way to become an artist or to act as an artist. Despite originally deciding to be a social worker, Pamela Witcher decided to become an artist. She had the opportunity to be an organizer, to be a teacher, but she recognized that more than anything she was the artist. Beyond that, she decided to be one of the few deaf people to break ground in the field of signed music. As Witcher describes it, signed music is not a new concept. Just like any art or song it has been around as long as people have been.

However, the novelty of this field comes in its recognition publicly by the art and academic worlds, as well as the creation of records that show this music as its own genre. She determined

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<sup>35</sup> (CCSD Deaf Arts, n.d.)

<sup>36</sup> (Cripps, 2022)

<sup>37</sup> (Pamela Witcher, n.d.)

that while she had a love for 2-dimensional art, performing and music was something she was in love with. By pursuing signed music Witcher was becoming an artist not only for herself but to open the world of deaf music up for so many people.

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