

Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL by Patrick Graybill, Debbie Rennie and Clayton Valli

Video review by Chris Wixtrom © 1999

Are you familiar with American Sign Language? Then pay any price, go any distance, and climb any mountain to get your eyes on this artwork. Original ASL poetry created by three of America's most eloquent visual language artists will open your mind to new dimensions and may even touch your soul.

Patrick Graybill grew up with English and ASL around the dinner table, among hearing sisters, Deaf brothers and their articulate hearing parents. Graybill had ease and facility in both languages and made good use of these talents with ten years in the National Theatre of the Deaf. In 1984, while Graybill was a professor at National Technical Institute for the Deaf, he attended a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg. Asked to come up front and translate the phrase, "atomic jukebox," Graybill gave it his best ASL interpretation. An enthusiastic response from this great poet became a defining moment for Graybill, as he realized that a translator must abandon sign-for-word substitutions in favor of a leap toward meaning in a language of motion. Soon after, teaching a class called "Translation into Sign," he asked his students to compose in ASL and then translate their signed poems into English. Then he realized that he had not yet tried this discipline himself, having been in the habit of working from English to ASL. From this little seed, nurtured by his intense need to create and his thorough understanding of ASL linguistics, Graybill began to compose original, dynamic works in three dimensions. Now, we viewers reap the rich harvest.

"Black Hole: Color ASL" by **Debbie Rennie** is so beautiful it brings tears to grateful eyes. One of two deaf children in an otherwise "hearing" family, Rennie describes her early years as a time of frustration with the strong educational emphasis on speech, hearing aids and a search for "cures" for deafness. At age 13, an "oral education failure," she was transferred to a school for the deaf and fell in love with American Sign Language, immediately recognizing it as her natural language. She graduated from NTID as an art major in 1980 and worked for awhile with the National Theatre of the Deaf. Poetry became an expressive outlet as she recovered from a heartbreaking rejection by a hearing man who refused to accept her deafness. After seeing Patrick Graybill perform, Rennie came to understand the value of composing original ASL poetry.

Clayton Valli is well-recognized for his linguistic expertise with ASL. He shines here as a poet who inspires through snapshots of natural scenes and lingering impressions, re-birthed in moving images through ASL.