

# Rainclamation: How installation art can reclaim space, transform collective suffering into poetic resistance, and bring aesthetics into utilitarian space.

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## Introduction

*Rainclamation* is

- An installation art piece
- Installed in Duke and Belk Dormitories
- Created by two student artists
- Focused on reclaiming the space around an elevator for disabled people

## Why *Rainclamation*?

The project arose from a conversation we had about our experience living in Belk our first year. We were living in a handicapped room because of Erin's disability, but our location on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor meant we had to take the stairs or the elevator. Sarah noticed Erin would usually take the stairs when entering the building at the same time as other residents, avoiding the stigma associated with elevator use, but causing her a lot of pain. Two years later, when discussing the Spike Grant opportunity Sarah thought back to our first-year and asked the pivotal question "could we make art for the elevators that would have helped you not feel like that?" and *Rainclamation* was born.

The name itself is a combination of the words "rain" and "reclamation". Reclamation operates on three levels within the project: in the location and positioning of the project, in the abstract painted design, and in the erasure poetry featured on the boards. The word "rain" specifically refers to the inspiration behind the painted wax designs.

## Location

The boards are next to elevators, and that location is central to the meaning of the work. Their installation literally occupies and reclaims space. The project brings aesthetics into an otherwise utilitarian space. The positioning of the boards at a lower height intentionally prioritizes the gaze of a wheelchair user.



## Painting

The aesthetic inspirations responded to the question of "what would rain look like running through color?". Since rain makes surfaces slippery, those who struggle already with walking and balancing then face an additional challenge. In *Rainclamation* the rain inspiration is reclaimed from something hurtful into the inspiration for something beautiful. The abstract wax paintings evoke a dripping aesthetic that plays on movement and gravity. The design on each board relates to the poetry also featured. The shapes of the boards respond to the environment in which they are placed (for example: the board "Some play creation" is curved to bend around a card reader in its 1<sup>st</sup> Duke location), and others are meant to mimic the shapes of water (the shape of "Taught that man could idle The Divine" resembles a puddle).

## Poetry

Painted on each panel is erasure poetry derived from physical education manuals from the 1950s at Davidson. The original manuals included letters emphasizing physical fitness as an essential attribute. The project takes those documents, the false universality of which erases disabled bodies (i.e. not everyone can participate in the quest for a perfect body) and erases them, resulting in poetry and a third level of reclamation. This work connects to queer theory, namely in how reclaiming the history of disabled people at Davidson is a means of claiming kinship with them. Disability's inheritability is dependent on the medical condition which falls under the label of disability, so this queer theory lens can be used in some cases to understand a past suffering which is not a part of someone's biological family's past.

## Theoretical Inspirations

We were inspired by Dr. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's scholarship. She is a feminist disability studies scholar from Emory University whose book *Staring: How We Look* brings an academic perspective to the phenomenon of being observed and judged that inspired this project.

## Acknowledgements

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The panels feature erasure poetry that is spray painted on top of wax painting. The boards are made of thin plywood.

