

## Migraine experiences as artistic inspiration in a contemporary artist

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'Did Picasso suffer from migraine?', asked the art historian Arthur O Eger<sup>1</sup>. He had been impressed by phenomenal similarities between migrainous visual hallucinations and the geometric forms of decorative ornaments, and between mosaic illusion and the visual features of Picasso's cubist style of painting. The question had to remain unanswered; however, Eger suggested that conditions such as migraine, epilepsy, diabetic hypoglycaemia or the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, which can all be associated with visual disturbances, could have acted as sources of artistic inspiration for various men and women in the history of art. Fuller and Gale<sup>2</sup> presented convincing evidence that Giorgio de Chirico, founder of the presurrealist style of 'metaphysical art', used his visual migraine auras as models for some of the more striking details of his drawings and paintings, and it can even be speculated whether visual illusions of metamorphopsia inspired his unique treatment of space and perspective. However, with the exception of a report by Atkinson and Appenzeller<sup>3</sup>, describing a female migraine patient who illustrated her complex visual hallucinations, there is a sad dearth of studies of other painters or sculptors for whom migraine could be discussed as a medical condition of relevance in the processes of artistic creativity. In this paper we present the work of a contemporary artist who acknowledges the importance of migraine experiences as a source of artistic inspiration.

J J Ignatius Brennan, an Irishman born in the UK in 1949, is an artist of international repute who is best known for his drawings and sculptures in the tradition of the surrealist movement. Brennan began his art education at Colchester School of Art, Essex, pursued it at Bristol Polytechnic and completed it at the Slade School, University College London. From 1973, Brennan worked as a lecturer, but he gave up teaching in 1990 to concentrate full-time on his own work. Since 1980 he has continuously exhibited both in the UK and abroad and his artworks can be found in collections in the UK, the USA, Hungary and Japan. Among other awards, he won the first prize in the 1987 fourth national Migraine Art

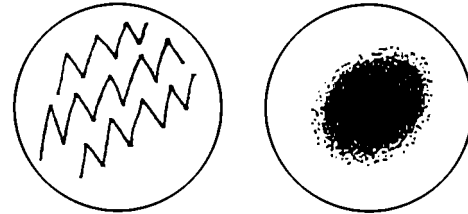


Figure 1 Brennan's recurrent visual migraine aura symptoms—vibrating zigzags and clouds

competition<sup>4</sup>, jointly sponsored by the Migraine Action Association (formerly the British Migraine Association) and Boehringer Ingelheim UK Limited, and the second prize in the 1992 Migraine Images competition<sup>5</sup>, organized by the Migraine Trust and Glaxo Pharmaceuticals.

Brennan was certainly qualified to participate in the two said competitions, having been a migraine sufferer, like his younger brother and sister, since the age of 11 when he first experienced episodes of visual loss, quite frightening at times, with zigzagged clouds obscuring part of the entire field of vision. These visual disturbances were frequently followed by nausea and bilateral numbness of the face or the limbs. It was not until the age of 18 that headache attacks severely hampered his ability to work. These acute headache attacks, with unilateral pain of pulsating quality, would then occur about once a week, last up to a day, and coincide with nausea and hypersensitivity to light and sound. Frequently, the migraine attacks were of basilar migraine type, the aura including dysarthria, ataxia, bilateral paraesthesias and numbness of the areas around the mouth and nose; all four limbs could be affected, the left hand and foot usually most strongly. Most common were bilateral visual auras with loss of vision in the temporal and nasal fields, bilateral central scotomas or concentrically contracted visual fields, the latter occurring with the most severe migraine attacks. During these visual auras, which lasted several minutes, hallucinations with cloudy shapes, zigzags, triangles and sometimes also round forms seemed to move across the fields of vision (Figure 1). Tunnel vision was often accompanied by mosaic illusion in the area of preserved vision, with a breaking up of perceived images into pieces. During episodes of metamorphopsia, objects or faces were often seen as deformed, asymmetrical, and with

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displacement of parts of the perceived images. For example, when viewing a face, the artist would sometimes get the visual impression that the eyes were tilted; one would go off and enlarge, the other would seemingly go away from the face instead of being in line. On some occasions the artist experienced macropsia, with objects seeming bigger and changing proportions relative to other things, and polyopsia, with multiple images in horizontal or oblique rows. Occasionally the artist experienced a loss of the three-dimensional aspect of vision, so that 'everything appeared flattened'. Body image disturbances experienced by the artist included episodes with macrosomatognosia of the face or the hands, delusional reduplication of the hands, and aschmatia of the upper and lower arms. It was not until the artist's late 30s that the frequency, though not the intensity and variability, of his migraine attacks began to decline; they now recur every 4–8 weeks.

The artist had already drawn a lot when he was a boy, and his decision to make a career as a professional artist was firmly established at age 18 when he began his formal art education:

'I started with pictures of my migraine experiences unconsciously rather than deliberately, when I was at art school. I used to do a lot of drawing of landscapes at that time and I often found I would be drawing clouds not just in the sky but everywhere, which was, I think, a reference to the voids experienced during visual loss. I also used serrated zigzag shapes in my drawings, symbolizing the experience of a whole being broken up, of not being able to put the pieces together, but I don't think that I was then aware of their origin in my visual migraine experiences. I didn't want to acknowledge this; I wouldn't have seen it as a legitimate means to do good art, but later I realized I was wrong. It's like a reference, like a support, which I'm privileged to have access to. Clouds, zigzags and other imagery are part of my own personal visual vocabulary, but which certainly has come out of migraine experiences. I'm absolutely sure. I don't tend to do that deliberately, but when it suits a particular subject, e.g. to represent a feeling or an emotion, I make use of some of these images in different ways, or in combination with others, depending on the subject.'

It was not until 1987, when he participated in the fourth national Migraine Art competition, that the artist realized that images suggested by migraine had subconsciously crept into many of his past pictures<sup>6</sup>. The use of migraine experiences as a source of artistic inspiration can be demonstrated in a large number of Brennan's artworks beyond his prize-winning Migraine Art pictures. A drawing and a sculpture produced by the artist in 1993 illustrate the point. According to the artist, Figure 2, entitled *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*,



Figure 2 J J Ignatius Brennan, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life: 1*, 1993, conte

'was done after a good friend had died. I've cited the Monty Python song as title, because my friend, who was, in fact, a part-time comedian, stipulated that it be sung at his funeral. I've used the black scotoma/zigzag image because it symbolizes something unknown and disturbing (to do with the loss of vision during migraine). I've pulled apart the darkness in the hope of finding something else!—and things emerge, with life.'

Figure 3, *The Sculpture You Want is Underneath*,

'is a more playful work. Again, I've used the black zigzag as a device to encourage viewers to imagine what might be there and how the shapes could combine. Overall, as regards my migraine attacks, I've tried to make a positive thing out of something essentially negative and annoying. This applies to all the works, both drawings and sculptures.'

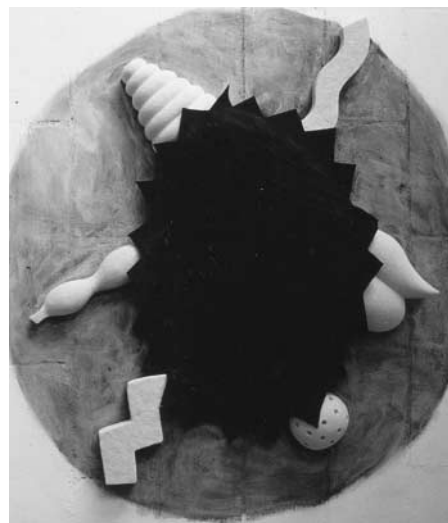


Figure 3 J J Ignatius Brennan, *The Sculpture You Want is Underneath*, 1993, stone, canvas, paint

The life and work of J J Ignatius Brennan clearly document the significance of migraine experiences as a factor of artistic creativity. This is in contrast to previous reports, where similar claims have been made for other artists only on the basis of interpretations and inferences. We do not suggest that all examples of the artist's work illustrate his migraine experiences, but his experiences of basilar migraine were undoubtedly one of the sources of his inspiration. Eger<sup>1</sup> suggested that visual migrainous hallucinations had provided artistic inspiration for man not only in modern times but also in ancient times. If so, the earliest examples might be the ornamental designs encountered in cave and rock drawings of the palaeolithic period of the Stone Age.

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