

# *In Unplain Sight*

**Heather Heckel**

*Editor's note: This article by Heather Heckel reminded me of how personal the process of artmaking is. We see the world through eyes that no one else has, and we can be limited, or liberated, by those windows. Heather brings us the compelling story of her own artist's journey, as she deals with a physical challenge. It's an inspiring story of bravery, persistence, and adaptation.*

Through the eyes of an artist and educator, it is my job to inspire creativity in my students and teach them how to see and interpret the world around them. After teaching art for several years I decided to further my own education by pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Painting via elearning through the Savannah College of Art and Design. When determining the direction of my artwork, my professors showed me how to sift through and dismiss initial clichés and tropes to ultimately arrive at a viewpoint and statement that is unique to me. This process was more difficult than I anticipated because to get to an aspect of myself that was distinctly personal I had to acknowledge and explore a condition that I have spent my entire lifetime trying to hide.

I was bullied intensely throughout my childhood and into adulthood because of my eye condition. Being born more than three months premature, I developed a strabismus – a misalignment of the eyes, which led to amblyopia, as my brain used my dominant eye to see, while suppressing the other eye. This condition is commonly known as a “lazy eye”.

As I grew older, there were times where I wished I had a missing limb, a huge scar, or any disfigurement instead of my misaligned eyes. Unlike a deformity on a part of my body that can be hidden,

the amblyopia affects the very organs that are the windows to the soul and are responsible for first impressions and direct communication. As a child I learned quickly to look down and stay quiet so that people would not notice, so I would not make them uncomfortable. There was a conscious decision to not share anything about myself rather than possibly bringing attention to my wandering eye. I had low self-esteem and no confidence, and that impacted every aspect of my life – I spent all my mental energy thinking about it.

When I started my teaching career, I was very self-conscious of being an art teacher whose physical appearance was not normal. As a beginning teacher in a New York City public high school, I was terrified that one of my teenage students would notice my lazy eye and that I would lose credibility as a teacher of visual arts. Cosmetically I was able to pull my wandering eye in to align with my other eye, however it blurred my vision completely and it was flexing a delicate and weakened muscle which I could not hold for more than 15 seconds at a time – a conscious effort at correction that was not sustainable. Much of my brain capacity was spent worrying and envying other teachers who did not have to think about a physical issue and could instead focus purely on classroom management and lesson planning. I often wondered how I would plan and



*The rooster was an early work that I was trying to paint through mimicry using technical accuracy to overcompensate for my double vision. It was a way of ignoring my condition and trying to gain self worth through what I could produce -- something outside of myself that I could control. If I could paint something “perfect” then somehow, I would be less flawed because of my eye condition*



Jessica, Colored pencil and gold leaf on board, 9" x 12", 2017



Amanda, Colored pencil and gold leaf on board, 15" x 15", 2017



Emily, Colored pencil and gold leaf on board, 20" x 20", 2017

*My first investigation into sharing about my double vision was to create mirror image portraits. Instead of the imagery coming from within, reflections felt like a safe way to combine duality with technical accuracy. However, it was opening me up to the idea that I see the world differently, and using close friends as my subjects allowed me to share familiar sights reimagined in a new way.*

manage if I did not have the constant effort to hide and correct my "flaw". Would I be a better teacher?

Six years later, as I began a graduate program in painting – my first love as an artist – I began to evolve a different approach and attitude toward my unique way of seeing. I started to channel the

frustration of ostracism and abnormal vision inward, which actually enabled me to explore outward. I decided to try something new by letting go and revealing to everyone how I see. Thus, my thesis journey was developed: a series of paintings and drawings that was an investigation that involved a shift from being fearful of the world's perception of me, to confidently sharing and embracing how I look at the world.

As I researched this topic, I discovered some positive attributes of my lazy eye. I learned that there are several historical and contemporary artists who have the same eye condition that I do, and it made their work more successful. Since I have a weakened eye, my dominant eye has overcompensated, and several eye doctors have confirmed that I have a "super eye" which has better than 20/20 vision. Additionally, I see the world two-dimensionally – from an artistic perspective, I perceive everything as a drawing. This allows me to attain extreme accuracy and achieve a deeper understanding of visual cues that signify depth, such as a light and shadow, scale, and overlapping.

Eye doctors explained my difficulty with convergence: the ability of two eyes to focus together to create one image in the brain, an ability my eyesight does not have. I began to recognize a kinship with other artists who possessed the same visual condition: we possess many differences – time, place, gender, age, and style, but there are several similarities borne out of our shared visual circumstance. It is theorized that Pablo Picasso, Edgar Degas, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Leonardo da Vinci had strabismuses, and they were able to communicate the unique and personal character of what they saw, which formed and influenced their personal styles.

I have constant double vision; however, in order to make sense of my surroundings my brain suppresses one of the images so that I can function. This phenomenon can be interpreted in relation to physics: in layman's terms, the Pauli Exclusion Principle states that two identical objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Since I



Double Power Lines, 22"x30", Oil paint and oil pastel on paper, 2019



Double Rooftop, 22"x30", Oil paint and oil pastel on paper, 2019



Double Generator, 22"x30", Oil paint and oil pastel on paper, 2019

*I tried to more accurately portray my actual double vision. For this series I challenged myself to look up and notice structures that may be commonly overlooked. This echoed my own exploration of my eye condition because I was constantly wondering about our internal versus external lives. I wanted to give time and attention to scenes that may be forgotten or are not supposed to be seen, which included various rooftops with purely functional attributes such as power lines. However, these compositions ultimately became a study of line, shape and color as I perceived it.*

see two separate images simultaneously, it is also only possible for me to focus on part of one at a time. Therefore, in my thesis drawings and paintings there is the absence of the object where it overlaps itself, which leaves the shell of the edges. This void varies both vertically



*Duckling, Colored pencil on paper, 9" x 12", 2019*



*Walrus, Colored pencil on paper, 9" x 12", 2019*



*Samuel Whiskers, Colored pencil on paper, 9" x 12", 2019*

*I chose the small figurines because they are familial objects that I have spent many hours gazing at over many years. The five Beatrix Potter figurines (Peter Rabbit, Duchess, Mrs. Tittlemouse, Squirrel Nutkin and Samuel Whiskers) were my maternal grandmother's, and they echoed the books that my mother read to me numerous times as a child. The other figurines were my mother's. These porcelain objects remained constant and are precious and familiar despite my constantly shifting vision. They are fragile anchors in what can be an unsettling and irritating experience. Then, I painted an overlapping double image with one version of the object being sharp and one being blurred to more accurately communicate what I see (Figure 2). Finally, I illustrated the scientific Pauli Exclusion Principle by omitting the overlapping portion of the objects, which left just their edges remaining.*

*This final group of paintings represents how instead of simply drawing or painting something accurately, which any classically trained artist can do, I am finally including something about myself through the concept and the style of the finished pieces. This vision is unique to me, and I have arrived at an acceptance of myself through the progression of willingness to share with others instead of hiding, avoiding and pretending. I am no longer denying my eye condition, it has become my subject matter.*

and horizontally because my eyesight shifts on both axes – the vertical discrepancy depends on the angle of my viewpoint, and the horizontal discrepancy is dependent on how tired I am. The shallow background behind the subject still shows because the object has weight and depth, however ultimately it is an illusion of light and shadow on a two-dimensional plane.

The progression of my graduate artwork went slowly. At first I explored double vision through a mirror image (Figure 1). Then, I painted an overlapping double image with one version of the object being sharp and one being blurred to more accurately communicate what I see. Finally, I illustrated the



scientific Pauli Exclusion Principle. As a result of this thesis research and artwork I have transformed my perceived defect into an asset, a process that has social relevance today. My intent and body of work advocates for acceptance rather than exclusion of those perceived as "other". It also celebrates our differences, which is preferred to blindly focusing on how we are the same. It is important to remember that no one is alone; despite feeling like I am the only person on the planet with this condition,

The American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus states that, "approximately 4 percent of the U.S. population has crossed eyes or some other type of strabismus." My

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*She would love to hear about how her story relates to yours:  
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experience has caused me to deeply value kindness and understanding of others, and I hope that those who bullied and excluded me would have treated me better if they had been able to see from my viewpoint, which is now figuratively and literally available to all who choose to see it. This experience has allowed me to become more available to my students. If a student has been bullied, or is perceived as different in some way, I now have a renewed perspective about my own life that can be relatable to them.

I am the artist and person who I am today as a direct result of my lazy eye. My artistic success is echoed in the past, present, and future, and that is something that I am willing to embrace.