



Elizabeth Jameson's Beautiful Brain

By Katina Leodas

Elizabeth Jameson is a 65-year old visual artist based in the San Francisco Bay Area who uses imaging of her own brain to create a new kind of self-portrait. Throughout the course of her disease, Elizabeth has spent countless hours in the cramped darkness of the scanning machine; her brain has been the subject of innumerable magnetic resonance imaging scans (MRIs). She identified MRIs as one of the major symbols of MS, and sought to incorporate the images into her art practice because she wanted to take unsettling and frightening images and transform them into something that would invite individuals to look directly at the imperfect brain with curiosity and fascination. As a printmaker, she produces large, vivid, and colorful etchings that at first glance appear abstract but in fact are literal representations of the inside of her brain. There is no shortage of imagery to work with.



Artist, Elizabeth Jameson

The artwork, which has been widely praised and displayed around the globe, is vibrant and moving in ways that challenge conventional expectations of the artist, who is constantly adjusting to her illness. She continues to create, despite the fact that she is now a quadriplegic, using a wheelchair to navigate her environment and collaborating with others to continue exploring new mediums.

Prior to her diagnosis with MS, making art was pretty far from Elizabeth's mind. Sure, she had doodled with pencils and drawn pictures with her kids. But as an adult, she had never picked up a paintbrush. For 15 years Elizabeth was a civil rights and healthcare lawyer who represented vulnerable populations (including incarcerated children) in their efforts to gain access to medically necessary healthcare. The work took her in and out of prisons and healthcare facilities, across the country. It eventually led her to be invited to consult with the White House on the healthcare reform efforts of the 1980's, and contributed to the creation of new law defining healthcare entitlements for juveniles. These important reforms are still advanced today through the Affordable Care Act. Her growing interest in the field led Elizabeth to complete a post doctorate fellowship in healthcare policy at the medical school of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).

Then one day in the late 1980's while playing with her two young sons on the playground, Elizabeth suddenly lost the ability to speak. After numerous MRI procedures that revealed the existence of a large lesion on her brain, she underwent brain surgery at UCSF. This was followed by a diagnosis of progressive MS and a full year of physical and speech therapy, during which she regained the ability to walk with a cane and to speak English, although with a distinctly (and uncontrollably) Swedish accent!

After her recovery from aphasia, Elizabeth was no longer comfortable practicing law in a courtroom. A friend recommended she consider visual art as an alternative means of communication and encouraged her to register for a class at a local community arts center. That first course led to others and eventually Elizabeth enrolled at California College of Art in Oakland, California. The program instilled confidence in her newfound artistic capabilities and instincts and exposed her to multiple disciplines and materials. She began by painting flowers and human portraits on silk, but soon migrated to printmaking and a kind of “portraiture” that is rooted in the experience of people with what Elizabeth calls “imperfect brains.”



“In 2008, when I began this work, people with MS weren’t routinely given the actual films of their MRIs,” says Elizabeth. “Instead you received a plastic hard copy of a scary image in black and white. I wanted to find a way to de-mystify MRIs, to make them accessible, less scary. I used a process called solarplating to transfer my MRI images from the transparent film onto copper aluminum plates (with chemicals activated by the heat of the sun), and then used the copper plates to print the images on paper. Afterwards, I added color with paints, colored pencils, and chalk pastels.”

Celebration, Solar Etching, 2010 (angiogram of Mark's brain)

The etchings, which reside in institutions, galleries and universities around the world, are far removed from black-and-white MRI scans, and capture in vivid colors the anatomical details of the brain—veins, folds, spinal column, even the lesions caused by MS. They have drawn the attention of neuroscientists at Harvard University, UC Berkeley, Yale University, and King’s College in London, among others.

In describing her purpose, Elizabeth has written, “My goal is to make it possible to stare at images of the brain and not be afraid, to find beauty in it without ignoring the complexity of the disease that is attacking it. Medical technology generates MRI images that bunch black and grey pixels into a prognosis collected in hollow, windowless rooms. In office visits, we tend to be defined by the technology. We talk to the image rather than talking about the disease. Yet the brain is the locus of personality, of identity, of self. I use art to expose the beauty and intrigue of parts of the brain in a way that people do not normally see in exam rooms or laboratories. I invite viewers to consider these images of the brain in a light that includes personality and uniqueness, one that bluntly denies the sense of being invaded by the medical technology that can make patients feel isolated and disconnected from their bodies, and their unique sense of self.”

This year, Elizabeth used a 7T MRI image—created using one of the most powerful MRI imaging techniques—to create an etching of a prominent neurologist’s brain. The image reveals some of the most detailed views of the architecture of the brain—amongst the most detailed views available yet in science. Elizabeth’s piece, which measures 16’x4’, is currently on display in the lobby of UC Berkeley’s Li Ka Shing Center for Biomedical and Health Services.

Elizabeth's artwork has captured the attention of people who live with brain illnesses. This has led to an increased interest in using art for social engagement with the MS community as well as the larger community of people living with disease and the health providers who care for them. She recently created a website, www.facingms.org, which contains photographic portraits and short bios as well as six individual narratives of participants' experiences living with MS.

Currently, she is collaborating with healthcare professionals on artwork that would build community among those who treat and suffer from illness. She is hoping to take the portraits and narratives of FacingMS to the healthcare settings where patients and visitors can add to the project by recording their own narratives in kiosks outfitted with the necessary equipment.



Valentine, Solar Etching, 2010 (coronal view of the brain stem, cerebellum, and lateral ventricles)

Elizabeth says, "As someone with a degenerative disease who has spent countless hours in waiting rooms, I am familiar with the feelings of loneliness and isolation, despite being surrounded by people. There is such untapped potential for building community within the healthcare setting. I want to connect people going through the very experiences that inspired my artwork and to create a reverent space for contemplating the beauty and architecture of the brain."

For much more information about Elizabeth Jameson and her artwork, please visit www.jamesonfineart.com.