PALINOPSIA: THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION IN TIME

Lesley Bragdon

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PALINOPSIA: THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION IN TIME

by

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Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Sculpture

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Abstract

Lesley Bragdon's art aims to capture and convey her unique perception of the world. She reproduces the distorted, out-of-focus, and shadowy aspects of everyday objects that she sees, highlighting that everyone can perceive objects differently. Bragdon's artistic process involves the hybridization of materials and the transformation of found objects into mixed-media sculptures and installations. She draws inspiration from contemporary artists like Lynda Benglis and Suzanne Jackson, exploring the boundaries between painting and sculpture. The use of shadows plays a significant role in her art, adding layers of abstraction and creating visually captivating experiences. Bragdon's art is influenced by her medical history, seeking to understand the relationship between perception and interpretation. Her solo exhibition showcased her diverse range of artwork, providing a holistic view of her artistic practice. Overall, Lesley Bragdon's abstract art explores the complexities of perception, materiality, and transformation, inviting viewers to discover their understanding of the world.
Introduction

Palinopsia is a medical term for visual disturbances that can produce positive afterimages even after removing the visual input. Perception is how we understand what our bodies sense, while creativity can influence our perception. I am interested in the mind-body connection and how perceptions are interpreted and experienced. To better understand my motivations, one must understand my medical history. Within this text, I will explain my seemingly disorganized approach to artmaking while interweaving my narrative with my study of contemporary art. Both Lynda Benglis and Suzanne Jackson challenged norms set in the art world. They developed a practice that emphasized the hybridization of painting and sculpture heavy with experimentation and material exploration.

Halfway through my MFA program, I hit my head on my car trunk and saw familiar-looking stars. After experiencing headaches and nausea, I went to a neurologist in 2021, who diagnosed me with a concussion. During this visit, I finally understood the cause of my visual disturbances, as I affectionately called them. I had them for a while – since my first concussion in California years earlier. The more unusual visions were hard to describe. I had mentioned them to doctors, but my concerns had been virtually dismissed. I was diagnosed with ADHD years ago, and the recent concussion had a significant impact on my ability to process information and maintain focus. I found it increasingly difficult to organize my thoughts and intentions. My brain and body began to compete for my attention. Interruptions from family, the recurring headaches, and the COVID lockdown were detrimental to the progression and flow of my art.
The effects of my most recent concussion allowed me to connect visual issues with my previous brain trauma. I began my investigation of perception to understand and describe the inconsistent visual effects that doctors often dismissed. I can experience extraordinary visual side effects that make identifying what I see problematic. It’s challenging to describe seemingly unrecognizable things. Even my depth perception can be affected, like wearing 3D glasses, but the vision in one eye is blurry, and the other is crystal clear.

I was curious about how the brain functions in people with neurodivergent thinking, I began by reading the books, “The Mind’s Eye”\(^1\) and “Hallucinations”\(^2\) by Dr. Oliver Sacks, where I delved into understanding perceptions and neurology. It was a relief to know that someone else experienced similar visual distortions as I did. These works describe the imagery I saw and explain how vision is perceived in the eyes and how the brain interprets the visual input. I found numerous similarities between my visual disturbances, his case studies, and his experiences. I realized my eyes were most likely misaligned because of the cataract surgery, causing frequent double vision. My mono-vision is unstable, and my brain has trouble combining the imagery from each eye into a single picture, and depth perception was impaired.

I grew increasingly anxious – trying to navigate life when suddenly nothing looked the same as it did before. How will this affect my art? How will this affect my life? I wanted to reproduce my vision to the viewer. I knew I had to examine my medical history to determine the direction I wanted my life and art career to take. I set a plan to create work that reproduced how I saw objects in everyday life. Distorted, out of focus, simultaneously shadowy and illuminated. I was suddenly compelled to show the world the things that I saw. I wanted them to understand

\[^1\] Sacks, *Mind’s Eye*.
\[^2\] Sacks, *Hallucinations*. 
what I was seeing and find some understanding of themselves and others. Objects do not look the same to everyone.

The Body

Body dysfunction and degeneration significantly influence my practice. My material choice can depend on my current state of mind and body as they influence my art-making capabilities for that moment. The repetitive nature of making art can frequently cause pain, and exposure to various substances can trigger allergies and skin irritations. Depending on any unexpected reactions and attention span, I bounce between several projects at once. I rotate modalities to avoid overexerting myself. These physical limitations often require me to adapt different techniques and explore new mediums.
In the Appendages sculpture, the pantyhose is filled with spray foam, simulating the appearance of legs with tumor-like growths extruding out of one end. The individual legs are enclosed in a steel band strap. A disembodied head, coated in wax and blood-red paint, is nestled into the center of the appendages. The repetition of legs, each with differences in shape and size, can be seen as a metaphor for body image. It disrupts the notions of form and invites viewers to explore complex themes related to identity and conformity. The differences in form and surface details allude to some of the side effects of past medications – bloating, swelling, rapid weight gain – that left deep purple stretch marks when my skin couldn’t keep up with the weight gain.
Lynda Benglis has dramatically influenced my understanding of the process and helped me develop my methodology – I overheard fellow undergrad students talk about the Crystal Bridges Distinguished Speaker Series, where she was scheduled to speak in November 2017. After researching her briefly, I decided to attend the event as it was a few hours' drive from Memphis. I purchased her book for the book signing after the program which secured me a brief in-person chat. I was intrigued by her use of materials, her art process, and her messy yet compelling pieces. Her work influenced my desire to use alternate materials such as polyurethane foam and resins. In her piece, Blatt\textsuperscript{1} (see Fig. 2) she pouredlatex mixed with Day-Glo paint directly on the floor to replicate the oil slick pattern reminiscent of her time kayaking in Louisiana.

In December 1969, Benglis began spilling vibrantly colored pigmented liquid latex onto

\textsuperscript{1}Blatt.
the floor of her loft, where she then let the material dry. Blatt and the related works, is part of her “poured” or “fallen” paintings. Where the rubbery puddles remain horizontal, displaying both painting and sculpture traits.”

In 2013, I was diagnosed with posterior subcapsular cataracts in both eyes – fast-growing, blocking the back layer of the lens, causing vision deterioration and extreme light sensitivity. I was advised to have different focal lengths in each eye, called mono-vision, to reduce the need for glasses. Unfortunately, the corrective lenses did not function as expected and caused double vision and debilitating headaches.

Using shadows as projected silhouettes on a screen creates a visually captivating and symbolically rich artistic experience in *Stacked Silos*. (Fig. 3 and 4) The colored images in the background represent visual disturbances such as double vision, palinopsia, and depth perception as a projection onto the wire structures, casting shadows onto the pictures on the wall and introducing an additional layer of abstraction. Suspended inside the frame is a female presenting torso made from foam and covered with pantyhose – it includes random materials like a slinky toy and safety pins. Other materials are attached along the sides to add more visual content to the cast shadows, creating an illusion like pareidolia, a standard optical phenomenon of finding the range of meaning in ordinary objects, such as the man in the moon. I used the weight of my body to bend the metal. Bolt cutters effectively shaped the metal but left my hands stiff and achy.

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1 Benglis, Lynda, “Blatt. 1969 | MoMA.”
2 “Monovision’s Role in Cataract Surgery.”
Figure 3, Bragdon, Lesley, *Stacked Silo’s* detail, 2021-2023
Figure 4, Bragdon, Lesley, Palinopsia Installation, 2023
In 2020, with the lockdown in full swing, I began researching my vision changes and other sensory issues like tinnitus and dizziness to find a better way to maintain focus. In retrospect, I had given up on photography due to my visual dysfunction. I realized the camera operated like eyes and could replicate some of my visual disturbances for others to experience. I attempted to integrate my research into my artwork by finding the correct terminology and medium for my art investigation.

It took me longer than usual to connect the similarities in my vision expressible through photography. I was so distracted by finding focus that I overlooked that the camera lens is comparable to the eye’s mechanics, the optical properties of my IOLs. I observed extraordinary visual side effects that made identifying what I was seeing difficult. It is challenging to explain unrecognizable things. My depth perception is affected; however, I don’t always notice right away, or sometimes at all. It is almost like wearing 3D glasses or double vision, but one eye is blurry, and the other is clear. Lack of depth perception affects daily activities such as walking into door handles, bumping into things, and having less confidence in judging the distance and speed of traffic. “Crossing streets, dealing with steps, just walking around – things that needed no conscious attention before – now require constant care and forethought.”¹

While driving on dark, rainy nights, I can see the illuminated water droplets shimmering in the halo of the brake and traffic lights as they wiggle and slide across the windshield. They move along with the car’s vibrations, creating a mesmerizing kaleidoscope effect. The glare from oncoming headlights and reflections from my side and rear mirrors cause dangerously distracting starbursts on my lens implants. (See Fig. 6)

¹ Sacks, Mind’s Eye.
The persistent and annoying floaters that inhabit my eye can be cloud-like and pass back and forth through my field of vision as squiggly cellular blobs and lines; some are like cobwebs, and I often see nonexistent smoke that can be alarming. I have swatted at an imaginary gnat, not realizing it was a tiny black floater moving around. Halos twinkled and rotated as my eyes moved. Entoptic phenomena are visual perceptions generated by the structures within the eye and, therefore, cannot be seen by others, making them seem like hallucinations. I see lingering afterimages, termed palinopsia, as the persistence of vision in time. It differs from the negative afterimages that appear after looking at a bright light. The positive afterimages, glares, and internal reflections are perceived when direct sunlight hits the glass on my implants. My eyes and how I see are recurring subjects centered in my life and art.
The interaction of light and darkness can carry symbolic significance, representing many things, duality, contrasts, or the interdependence of light and shadow in our lives. Shadows, by their very nature, are fleeting and transient. The fluidity of shadows brings an element of familiar uncertainty and transformation that evokes a sense of mystery, depth, and ambiguity, contributing to a thought-provoking exploration of perception and inner reflection.
The installation of _Indigo Dreams_, 2023 is made up of aluminum screens suspended on a wire, gently anchored, and reaching diagonally across two intersecting walls. A red light illuminates the rear wall from below, while a multicolored light adjacent to the piece automatically changes and reacts with the red. The shimmering from the screen resulting moiré is my interpretation of the visions I experienced in an MRI during my concussion examination. I remember a prominent wave of blue and purple in my mind’s eye that intensified as the machine moved toward my head. The official term is chromesthesia, a synesthesia triggered by sound and possibly from the machine's magnetic field. In "Hallucinations,"¹ Dr. Sacks described his fascination with indigo and its apparent obscurity.

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¹ Sacks, *Hallucinations.*
Process

Figure 7, Bragdon, Lesley, Basketcase, 2023
Wire can represent the most basic of shapes or design the line. As vision fades and shadows overtake your sight, lines blur. The shadows of the *Basketcase*, Fig. 7 stretch onto the wall behind it, elongating some lines and shortening others. The projected shadows emphasize the difference between the lighted sculpture and its cast shadow. Upon closer inspection, it is not as heavy or unbending as could be first assumed. Techniques used to create the form include crushing two industrial garden rings together to create an irregular basket form with woven wires and cords of varying thicknesses with plastic tape, shrink wrap, and spray paint.

I am attracted to holes, whether single, random, or sequenced. Netting, mesh, and hardware cloth holes are partially obscured with foam, paper pulp, plaster, or paint. Figure 8,
Test Grid, 2022, Fig. 8, exemplifies my experimentation with holes. Hardware cloth was dipped into paper pulp, partially covering the opening. The Blob is the longest work-in-progress. Beginning as a tomato cage, deformed and sturdy, slowly transforming as I layer the anthropomorphic blob in a holey painted formed skin, sinewy webs of foam stretched over large voids creating sinuses and into a mound of tufty yarn dipped in red paint, then stuffed into its belly.

Holes in objects can create visual distortion, causing depth or movement. They are achieved through perspective, negative space, or optical illusions. When an object with holes is viewed from a certain angle, the holes can appear to be receding into the distance, creating the illusion of depth. The use of contrasting colors or lighting intensifies this effect. Holes are the interruptions in form. Interruption is generally acceptable in moderation and was already a part of my life and work. A simple walk into another room has left me needing clarification as I repeat my goals, trying to hold onto the memory. Even so, I may begin doing something else, forgetting what I needed or was working on.
Figure 9. Bragdon, Lesley, *Palinopsia Installation - from the back*, 2023
Figure 10, Bragdon, Lesley, Blob and test wall installation, 2023
Figure 11, Jackson, Suzanne, *Crossing Ebenezer*, 2017

1 “Suzanne Jackson - Exhibitions - Ortuzar Projects.”
Recently, I stumbled upon Suzanne Jackson while researching alternative materials and process artists. I found drastic similarities in our processes and use of materials. Her inspiration primarily comes from nature, while mine is artificial, often found objects or commercially manufactured materials. Similarly, she began peeling paint off surfaces, saving paint scraps, and combining them with other materials layered on acrylic gel medium on a plastic sheet.

"... leftover deer netting from her garden, ballet netting from her costume designs, and produce bags and wood salvaged from renovating her house. Eventually, she figured out that she could put paint down directly onto a table covered in plastic, then peel it up and hang the drying film as her canvas, allowing her to paint acrylic straight onto acrylic."\(^1\)

_Crossing Ebenezer, 2017_ (Fig. 11) is a large, rectangular painting with patches of transparency and uneven edges. Orange and red produce bags are stretched and torn, then embedded in transparent gel medium spread onto plastic sheeting, later to be peeled off and suspended. This painting inspired the last piece I created for my exhibition, _Poetic Amalgamation_, Fig 12. As I had previously begun to use gel medium and paint scraps, I embedded mesh bags and bubble wrap peeled paint scraps, clips, and string with hardware cloth and resin for structure.

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\(^1\) Felsenthal, “An Artist Who Makes Paintings Without a Canvas.”
Figure 12, Bragdon, Lesley, *Poetic Amalgamation*, 2023
Distraction leads my process by embracing the interruptions as a time-out and utilizing them to make new connections and find different ways to interact with the materials. On top of unforeseen circumstances, curiosity motivates me to explore new ideas and experiment with other processes and materials. Materiality is a foundational aspect of my art, with the choice of materials and their physical qualities. The texture, color, weight, transparency, and durability of materials all contribute to the experiential and aesthetic qualities of the installation, adding depth and embodiment to chosen materials.

My life can be represented through various media—access to supplies, curiosity, and my tinkering spirit. I am a problem solver; I tear old things down to make them into new objects. I'm a bricoleur in that I make do with what I have. All the inventory and items have more significance than the face value of each item. Some are chosen for aesthetic appeal, and some are heirlooms or other family possessions. By keeping everything with little or no waste, money is saved. By repurposing and upcycling objects, I want to promote a sense of resourcefulness with the potential for beauty and creativity in everyday materials. Found items often carry their history and associations. They may have been discarded, abandoned, or forgotten, each holding stories and memories of their past use.

Transformation in art can take various forms by physically altering the appearance of the found item through cutting, assembling, painting, or reshaping, turning them into sculptures or installations. The hybridization of objects can create intriguing juxtapositions, to reveal unexpected relationships and narratives that push them beyond their conventional applications to create spontaneous forms or compositions.

Chemical transformations and properties create a dialogue between art and science. Prompts reflection on the relationship between the synthetic and the organic. I seek to challenge
the boundaries between these categories and reveal the complex intersections between art, science, and the environment. The material becomes a catalyst for reinterpretation, encouraging viewers to uncover new layers of meaning.
For the *Fence Figure*, I swirled a section of metal fencing into an inverted funnel-like form and placed it in the center of red, blue, and silver foam and paint skins. An aluminum wheelchair handrail and red wool yarn wrapped around the fence, leaving a mass of yarn in the
center as a heart. A silver task lamp with a multicolored lightbulb at the top gave the piece its shadowy spill.

![Image of a sculpture on a rolling cart with various materials and paint.] 

*Figure 14, Bragdon, Lesley, *Airhead*, 2020*

The *Airhead* piece is an abstracted bust with the top half of the head sliced off. Inside the head are segmented structures that hold epoxy resin, which allowed viewers to peek inside. It is placed upon a vintage rolling cart with several test skins of latex paint and a new work in process with paint embedded with other scraps onto a fiberglass screen for added strength.
Conclusion

Installation in the gallery setting allowed me to view all my art pieces in one open space. I could visualize the connection to my research, which increased my confidence as I puttered around the gallery. Working until the last minute allowed me to find the right fit spontaneously, even if it meant dismantling one piece to make another.

The exhibition opening went well, and I could engage in stimulating conversations with students. As I walked around answering questions and explaining the concepts behind my show, I quickly realized that I needed visual mnemonic cues to discuss each piece. Often, I lose track when speaking continuously as I get distracted by the sound of my voice or when I need to consult my notes. Initially, I thought it was a kind of anxiety, but now I understand that my working memory and executive functioning skills are still operating at a lowered capacity. I wondered how people would interpret the installation without art titles and written statements. Although I have been in several group exhibitions, having a solo show was an enlightening experience and gave me insight into future planning.

Throughout graduate school, I have investigated perception-related ideas within my artistic practice to learn more about the relationship between various ways of perceiving and interpreting the surrounding world. I have probed into perspectives, depth, and the relationship between the viewer and the artwork as ways to communicate. I pushed my understanding of the relative boundaries of perception and imagination to let ambiguity and intuition allow others more freedom to interpret my work.
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