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Migraine and Visual Arts

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## John Hudson

### Artist's website

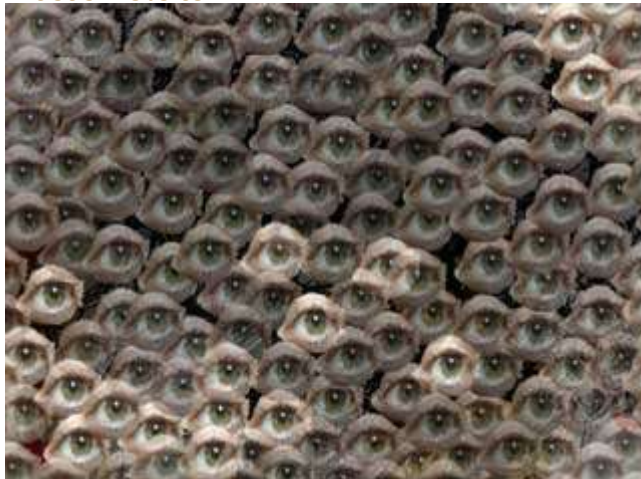


Figure 1. John Hudson, Migraine Eyes, 2003. "It's the sensation of a needle piercing my eye." © 2003 John Hudson (see [here](#))

### Of Art & Migraines

By John Hudson

Play the film produced for "BBC Humber – telling lives – your digital story" [[here](#)]

### Of Art and Migraines - Script

"Here is the script for my digital story:

I never know what the trigger is going to be. Cheese, chocolate or a glass of red wine. The odd thing is, it never happens if I drink a whole bottle.

Ouch!

My migraine begins.

It's the sensation of a needle piercing my eye. Sensitive to light I stumble into bed. Dark forms visit my world and I hope for sleep.

I close my eyes and I'm in a white room.

My usual hallucinations begin. I see circles, shapes and red roses pulsing with the pain. They fill my whole vision, populating the room. I close my eyes and they are still there. I drift in and out of sleep, but they follow me.

There is a point where my tormentors become playful and as the pain subsides I can move the patterns about to form strange compositions. The colours change too and I start to think about how I might put these images together.

Can they be fixed in paint? Or photographed?

Now I do not know whether I am asleep or awake. I think I'm entering the white room again.

Oh morning at last. Everything is calm. Even though I am awake, without pain, the images stay with me and become my work.

I am sorry about the delay I have been very busy."

(Email to Klaus Podoll, March 12, 2004)



Figure 2. John Hudson, Stills from the film *Of Art & Migraines*, 2003. © 2003 John Hudson ([see here](#))

"The above still is taken from the film *Of Art & Migraines*. The top image shows the eye motif which occurs in my work. The image acts as a surrogate for the migraine effect on the eyesight. It is also an attempt to illustrate a hallucination of eyes appearing in objects or surfaces like woodgrain during a headache. This is a rather problematic image because they have too much definition and as the central drawn image shows, they disappear into each other. The central image also acts as a surrogate in more active way. As well as being a rather raw image it was produced at speed and with such force it cut into the paper and eye motifs. As these eyes appeared, in the forefront of my mind were the eye slicing sequence from Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and the dream sequence from Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). The bottom image is one which represents what I see when I close my eyes when I have a migraine. It is always a bright white room. Again this image is not as accurate as I would like it. The image in my mind is more minimalistic. These are of course artistic problems which I aim to resolve."

(Email to Klaus Podoll, March 12, 2004)

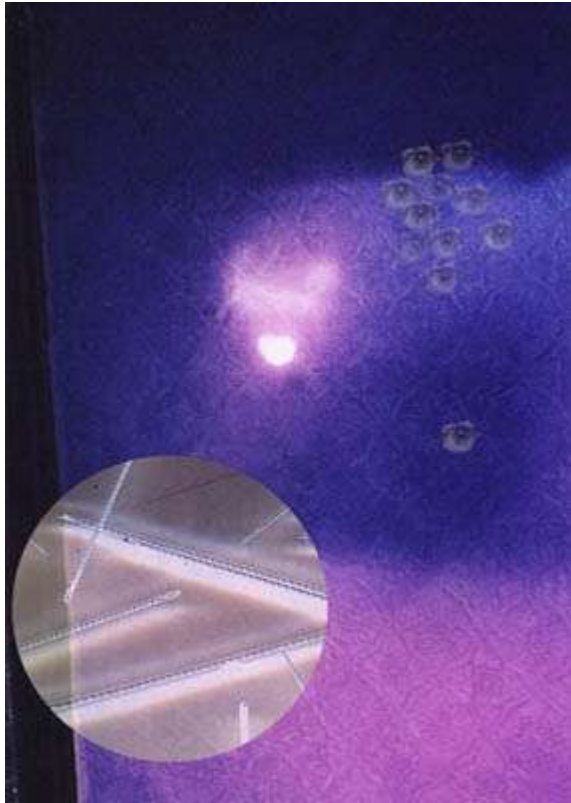


Figure 3. John Hudson, Untitled, 2003. © 2003 John Hudson

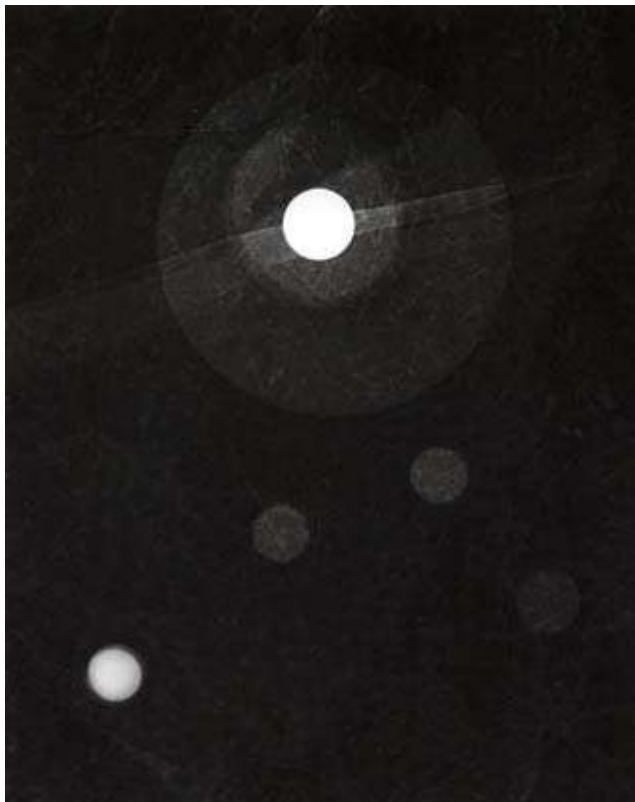


Figure 4. John Hudson, Untitled, 1995-2004. © 2004 John Hudson

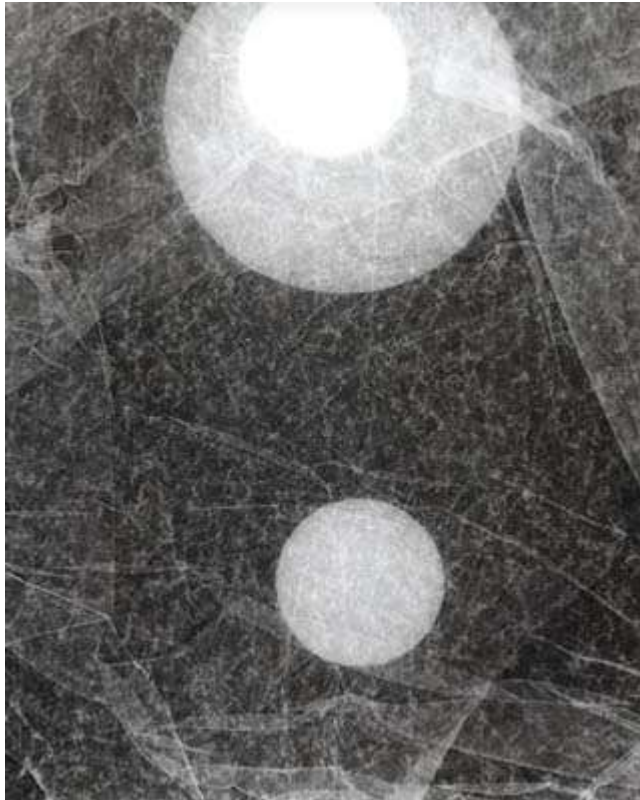


Figure 5. John Hudson, Untitled, 1995-2004. © 2004 John Hudson

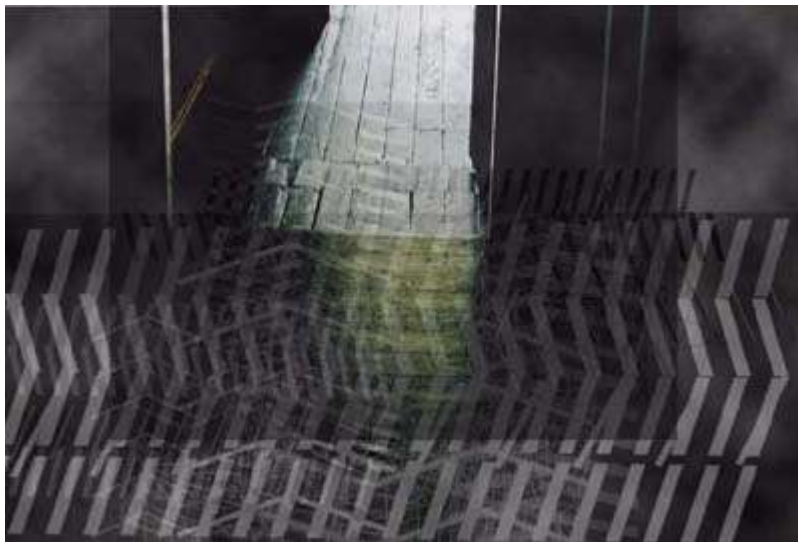


Figure 6. John Hudson, Zigzags, 2003. © 2003 John Hudson

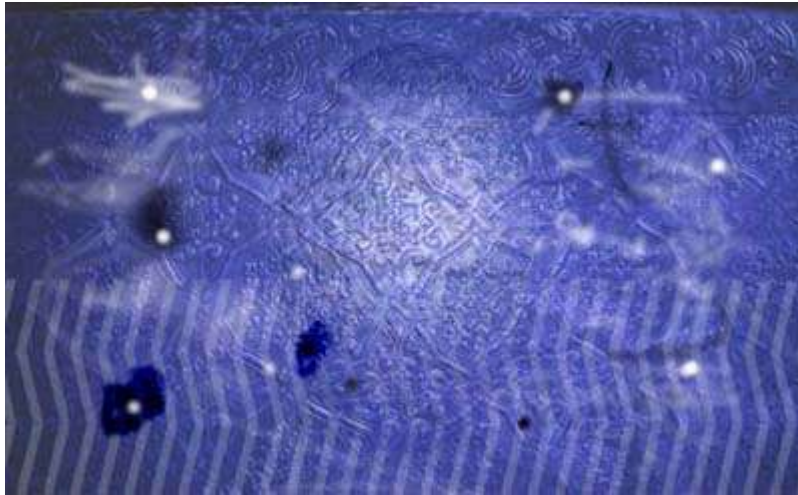


Figure 7. John Hudson, Wallpaper, 2003. © 2003 John Hudson



Figure 8. John Hudson, The Spectre of Love, 1997. "I see circles, shapes and red roses pulsing with the pain." © 1997 John Hudson



Figure 9. John Hudson, Ornithology, 1996. © 1996 John Hudson

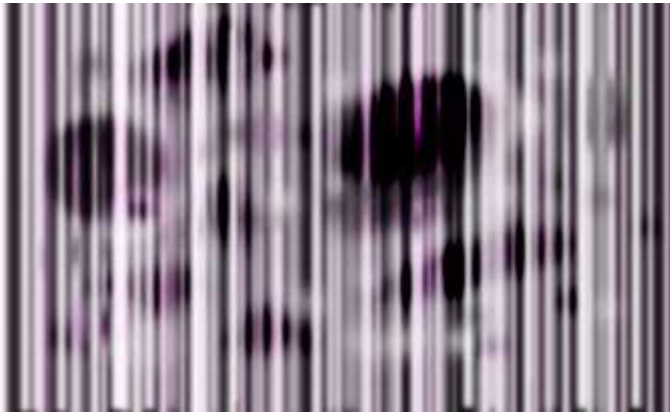


Figure 10. John Hudson, Dark Forms, 1996-2004. © 2004 John Hudson

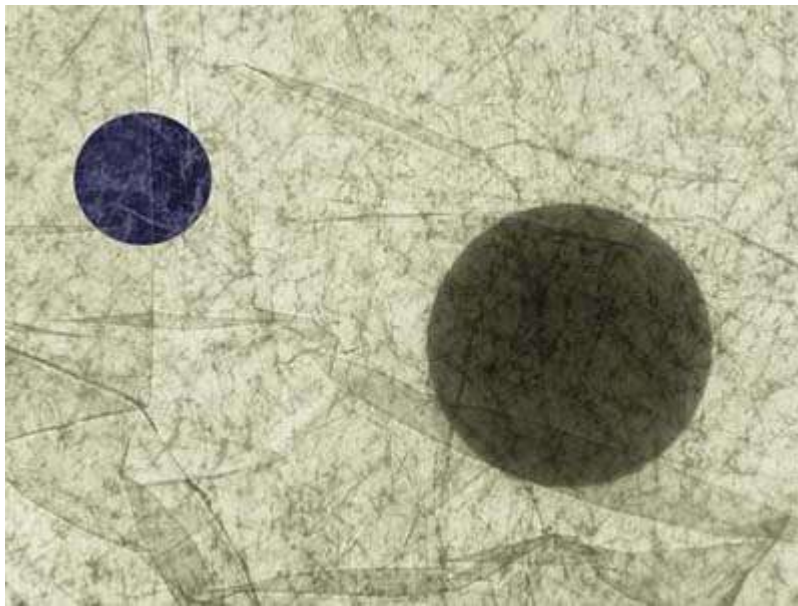


Figure 11. John Hudson, Dark Orbs, 1995-2004. © 2004 John Hudson

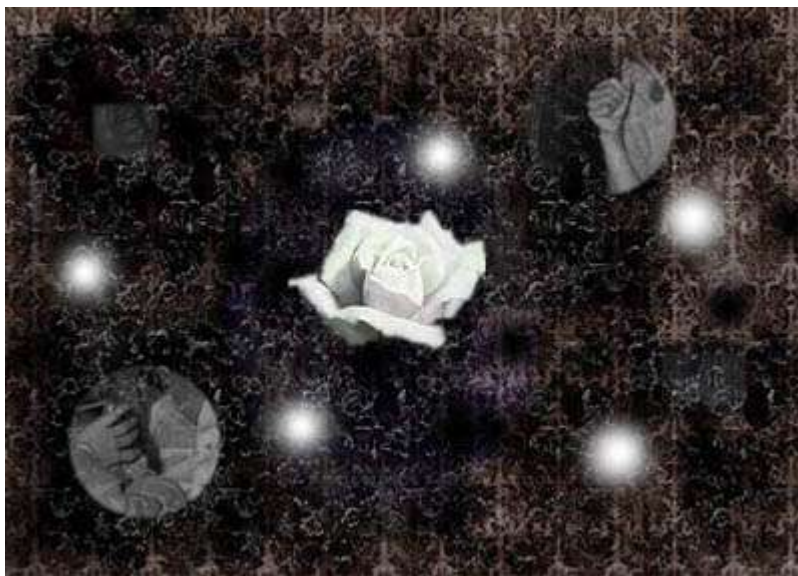


Figure 12. John Hudson, Desire and the Uncoordinated Soul, 1998. © 1998 John Hudson

"As well as being 'full-time' artist, I am a lecturer in design theory, art practice and history. Between 1995-97 I was diagnosed as being a migraine sufferer. Before that I often put the headache and nausea down to food poisoning (a joke is needed here about English food and school dinners, since it was at high school when I recall having these headaches, although I do not think that this was the when they began).

I see a direct relationship between my art making and migraines. What I find is that the migraine becomes a catalyst for my ideas and my visionary faculties are increased/spurred on by the visual distortions and hallucinations of my visual auras. For example, I use white lights or light objects appearing excessively bright in digital film and in print (Figs 3 and 4), dancing and moving cobwebs in digital film and in photograms (Fig. 5), zigzag streaks of light (Figs 6 and 7) or blind spots in digital print (as yet to appear in film, although sometimes suggested). These blind-spot effects are very similar to those represented in the photogram works (Figs 4 and 5). At present that is how I can 'capture them', but they do litter other images in less 'concrete' forms. Moreover, I paint or draw digitally stripes or 'zips' that respond to the hallucinatory effects/visual disturbances of a migraine (Figs 8-10). Dark orbs also populate my images as well as being a visual disturbance (Figs 10 and 11). They often appear as black cats out of the corner of my eye, which can confuse me as I have two black cats and find myself stroking thin air (it can make me nervous).

The influence of the migraine is not always direct or a particularly conscious one. With my photograms (started in 1995) the decision to use cobweb effects was a subconscious one and not one related to the headaches, but I find myself seeing it necessary to record these events. They are black and white photograms (e.g. Figs 4 and 5), produced by placing layers of cellophane on to photographic paper and circular objects; coins and plates. The paper is then exposed to light and objects are gradually removed to expose other areas creating a pattern. The effect created suggest suns, moons and planets. The cobweb effect (see Fig. 5) reminds of a hallucinatory scene in the film *Murder, My Sweet* from 1944, where the protagonist Marlowe, played by Dick Powell, was drugged by gangsters. The style is very surreal and dreamlike and involves some kind of veil like filter placed over a lens.

I was interested in the comments about de Chirico in the paper *Migraine experiences as artistic inspiration in a contemporary artist* (Podoll and Robinson, 2001). It struck me that the artist Max Ernst (an artist influenced by de Chirico) could have been someone who suffered from migraines. Although I see no written evidence, I started to see links with the visual disturbances mentioned in the questionnaire and the images recurring in Ernst's paintings (and with my own experiences). The herringbone pattern is one that occurs in a number of his works: *Fishbone Forest* 1927 and *Snow Flowers* 1929 are amongst many others. It again struck me that Ernst worked while having these headaches, certainly after reading his comments about the invention of frottage. This is recounted in many a text on surrealism and Ernst (see Gale, 1997). Ernst talks about putting Leonardo's teaching (from Leonardo's *Treatise on painting*) into action, whereby he stares at a fake mahogany panel or a floorboard, whereby creatures and other figures appear in a hallucinatory fashion. In order to encourage these figures to appear in his mind's eye he laid out a number of sheets of paper and using a black pencil began to take rubbings. The result was a series of works called *Histoire Naturelle* (1925). This can be seen in his use and development of techniques such as grattage and decalcomania.

I find myself drawn to Ernst's work, as I seem to be concerned with similar visionary effects. Similar themes occur in my work: an interest in wood grain and wallpaper as sources of visual inspiration, the appearance of birds (Fig. 9) and strange figures (Fig. 12) which I see in my hallucinations. The birds have been known to appear to me during my migraines in the auras. The strange figures are often more 'human' in shape or can be an 'animal' (catlike as I recall), and are yet to be used or represented satisfactorily in my work. There is an image I created in 1998 called *Desire and the Coordinated Soul* (Fig. 12), that includes those types of manifestations, all be it in a fragmentary way. I am currently collecting images of hands, torsos, eyes and mouths, to use in my artwork (e.g. Figs 1-3). I think that the human figures' are an irritation that first occurred to me in 1976. Whether this was a migraine (without the headache)



or a night terror I do not know. These figures appeared at the end of the bed, emerging from my fake mahogany bed board they seemed to move and change shape. As an art student it was to my amazement that I learnt of the similar experience that Max Ernst had as a child when suffering from measles. The works that were influenced by this trauma were his *Horde* series from the 20s (see [here](#)) and the other figure painting of that period after 1927 that used frottage and grattage."

(Email to Klaus Podoll, January 18, 2004)

[↑top](#)

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