



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;371:m4379<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4379>

Published: 14 December 2020

CHRISTMAS 2020: DR STRANGE

Why I . . . make art

Ophthalmologist Katherine McVeigh tells **Abi Rimmer** how she has incorporated her interest in the eye into mandala inspired art pieces

Abi Rimmer



| Mind by Katherine McVeigh

“Making art helps me to relax and manage the stress of the day, and allows me to create a space for exploration of ideas without rules or expectations,” says ophthalmologist Katherine McVeigh. “It’s something very different from the day job.”

McVeigh has enjoyed arts and crafts projects since childhood, but it was a career in medicine that she gravitated towards. “My parents are both doctors and, although I was always aware of how busy they were, I saw how rewarding they both found the profession,” she says.

While studying medicine at Newcastle University, McVeigh enjoyed the practical aspects of the training and found herself leaning towards a surgical specialty. “The intricate nature of eye surgery captured my interest and seeing generally high levels of satisfaction among both patients and doctors during a house officer job, I was encouraged towards the eye world,” she says.

“The continuing evolution of imaging techniques and devices keeps a dynamic pace of development within the specialty and makes things interesting. And, of course, the eyes are a beautiful aspect of the body.”

It's hard to complain about having to look at them every day."

McVeigh struggled to find time for art while at university, but her interest was sparked again when she moved to the Severn Deanery during her specialty training. "Living in Bristol—a city renowned for its artistic output—and finding myself inspired by my artistic partner, friends, and colleagues, I was encouraged to start creative projects again," she says.

After completing her training, she moved to Germany and, after learning the language, started work as an ophthalmologist in Berlin. In addition to her day job, she has explored a range of artistic media over the past few years, from drawing, painting, and photography to digital designs and animation production.

It was while travelling in Asia that she developed an appreciation for the mandala. "Not only are these geometrical configurations beautiful, but they also hold deeper symbolism of spirituality and connection," McVeigh says. To her, the design and construction displayed in mandalas resembled the eye, and she decided to try to combine these concepts.

"Having always enjoyed old medical art representing the eye, I sampled a range of anatomical and histological illustrations from archived ophthalmology images between 1850 and 1935," she explains. "These were collaged using image editing software and a drawing pad to create compositions mirroring the technical structure of the eye in an abstract style."

Her artwork entitled *Mind* (pictured) was inspired by the individuality and remarkability of the iris. To create it, images portraying the iris, ciliary body, and choroid were sampled and reconstructed in concentric rings to create a novel interpretation of the ocular uveal tract—the vascular middle layer of the eye.

While her normal audience are friends and family, McVeigh recently received an award for a photo showing an abstract representation of tunnel vision at the Royal College of Ophthalmology annual congress.

Rather than focusing on a specific goal, however, McVeigh enjoys the process. "I try not to put pressure on myself to produce a certain outcome, but more to learn and explore," she says. "Seeing development in these processes over time is rewarding and, every once in a while, making something that you want to give as a gift or hang on the wall is a satisfying feeling."

How to get into drawing

- Find something that motivates you
- Start with an idea but don't be defined by it
- Find inspiration in everyday life
- When making notes, make sketches
- Don't be too critical. Everything takes practice