

The New York Times

Artists Who Lose Their Vision, Then See Clearly

By Serena Solomon
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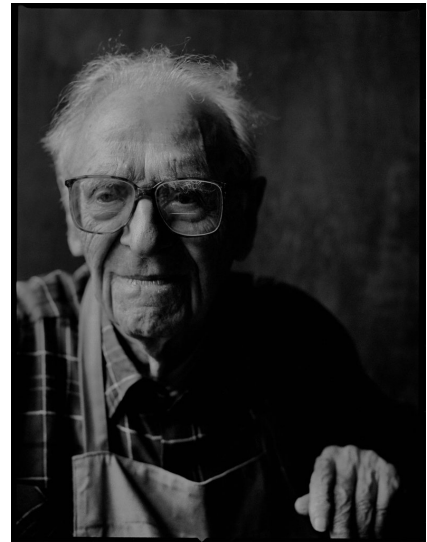
Pablo Picasso probably wasn't thinking about macular degeneration when he remarked: "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist as we grow up."

But the statement has more than a grain of truth in it for Serge Hollerbach, 94, a Russian-born artist in Manhattan. Mr. Hollerbach painted throughout every aspect of his vision loss caused by macular degeneration, a disease that affects 10 million Americans, often in their twilight years — typically depleting their central vision and leaving most legally blind, but with some remnant of sight.

Can they stay creative? As Mr. Hollerbach's vision began deteriorating in 1994, his work shifted from realism with a dose of expressionism to something more abstract. Defined shapes made way for something looser. Colors shifted gear from muted to bright. Mr. Hollerbach's rigid perfectionism also dropped off as his sight blurred, "like water in the eyes after taking a swim," he said.

"There is such a thing as a second childhood," Mr. Hollerbach added, explaining how his paintings changed. "To be playful, you have nothing to lose. Nothing to lose is a kind of new freedom."

The pre- and post-macular degeneration works of eight artists, including Mr. Hollerbach, Lennart Anderson and Hedda Sterne, are the focus of "The Persistence of Vision," a new exhibition at the University of Cincinnati. It explores the versatility of artists — shown in early and late works — as they adapted their styles to vision loss and, in cases like Mr. Hollerbach's, experienced a personal renaissance.



The artist Serge Hollerbach in his studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Cade Tompkins Projects

“The late works are gorgeous,” said Brian Schumacher, a curator of the show at the Philip M. Meyers Jr. Memorial Gallery within the university, where Mr. Schumacher is an assistant professor of design. “They stand on their own as viable and legitimate and beautiful works of visual art.”

Mr. Hollerbach’s response to his disease was a turn toward playfulness — perhaps a reflection of a relentless optimism that had helped him survive Nazi labor camps, where he was confined as a teenager during World War II. His work continues to reflect a bend toward social justice and his fascination with everyday life through crowded New York street scenes, including the city’s homeless.

On a Sunday afternoon in his studio, Mr. Hollerbach held a plastic cup up to within an inch of his face. “That’s blue isn’t it?” he asked himself. Yes it was, and he would go on to create water in a crowded beach scene. It was a back and forth process as he placed the canvas on a flat table to apply the acrylic paint so it wouldn’t run. “I can’t really see what I am doing,” he admitted, adding, “I will look at it later.” He placed the canvas back on the easel and took a long squint at it. Mr. Hollerbach didn’t seem overly impressed. “But that’s the freedom of it,” he said, as he continued painting.

Among the show’s other artists is David Levine, whose “The Last Battle” is an incomplete work that followed his vision loss. Instead of detailed faces like those in earlier depictions Coney Island beach scenes, he stuck to silhouettes and skipped the details on clothing. Charcoal lines were drawn and redrawn as the artist struggled with his new limitations, his son, Matthew, said. He watched the piece take shape around 2004 as his father’s vision retreated. “He became more and more obsessed with trying to draw those figures and less and less happy in his ability to use line.”

The exhibition is an extension of the larger Vision and Art Project, a research and curatorial project funded by the American Macular Degeneration Foundation. “It is good for other artists to know that there are these resources available so you don’t feel isolated,” said A’Dora Phillips, the director of the project and the show’s other curator.

Although the project celebrates the early and late works of artists, some painting through their macular degeneration diagnosis declined to be involved. Often those artists are fearful that publicly discussing their condition will negatively impact the value of their career and work, Ms. Phillips said.

But “The Persistence of Vision” stands as a material record that vision loss need not end an artist’s work, regardless of whether it is a profession or a hobby. Here are some selections from the exhibition.

Hedda Sterne



Hedda Sterne's "Untitled," graphite and oil pastel on paper. Credit 2018 The Hedda Sterne Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Collection of AMDF

Sterne, a prominent Abstract Expressionist who died in 2011, seemed to have a premonition of her late-in-life blindness. In the 1960s, she worked on a drawing series of lettuces. "She wanted to come from the perspective of a worm," said Lawrence Rinder, the director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, who knew Sterne in her last decade. "They are sensing a form around them, but they are not actually seeing it." (Most worms don't have eyes). In 1998, she gave up painting because of her vision loss, instead drawing on paper with graphite and pastel while using a powerful magnifying glass. "We only see a tiny fraction of what is before us," said Mr. Rinder. She was exploring the unseen world, he added, "and doing it really successfully."

Thomas Sgouros



Thomas Sgouros's "Remembered Landscape," 2007, oil on linen. Credit Estate of Thomas Sgouros/Cade Tompkins Projects

Sgouros's vision deteriorated quickly over six months in 1992, and at times he contemplated ending his life, according to the exhibition's catalog. Eventually, he adapted his painting process for the remaining 20 years of his life. To create the series "Remembered Landscapes," dreamy horizons with twilight colors, he felt his way around the canvas using masking tape and a T-square and found his colors by keeping them in the same formation on his palette.

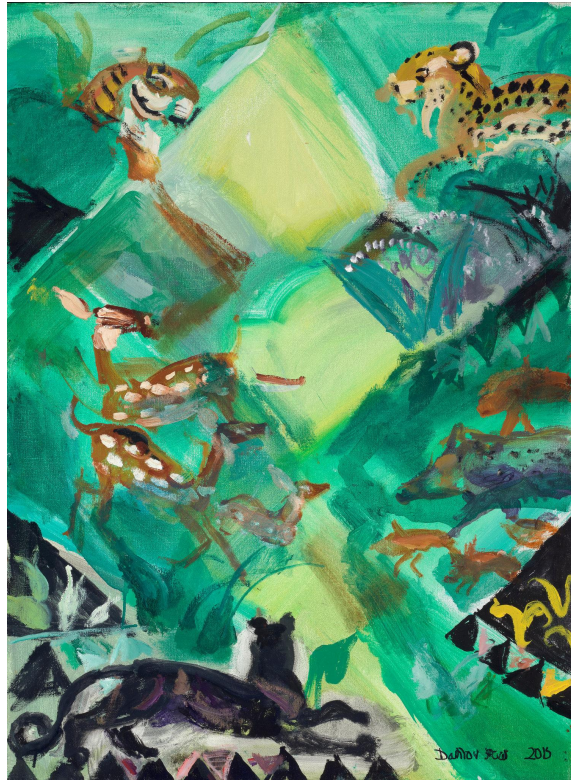
William Thon



William Thon's "The Birches" (Farnsworth Museum Insight Painting),
1996. Credit Collection of Nancy Warren

When Thon became legally blind in 1991, he had painted so many boats, birds and trees he could continue to do it all "by touch and by instinct," said Carl Little, an art critic and author who watched him paint in 1997. (During a failed treasure hunt on a 60-foot schooner in 1933, he returned with sketches that would inspire later work.) Instead of brushes, he used his fingers to feel as he created, and simplified his palette to black and white, creating remarkable gradations in gray. "It was like watching the creation of the world," Mr. Little said.

Dahlov Ipcar



Dahlov Ipcar's "Sunlight in Forest Glade," incomplete, 2015. Credit Collection of AMDF

When Ms. Phillips visited Ipcar, a beloved Maine painter, in 2015, the artist had only recently concluded that she could no longer paint because of her macular degeneration. Her colorful and whimsical work of exotic animals are set over shapes that have a kaleidoscopic feel. Ipcar eventually worked around her vision loss, focusing on similar themes with looser lines and broader brush strokes. On the day of her death in 2017, she spent the morning at her easel.

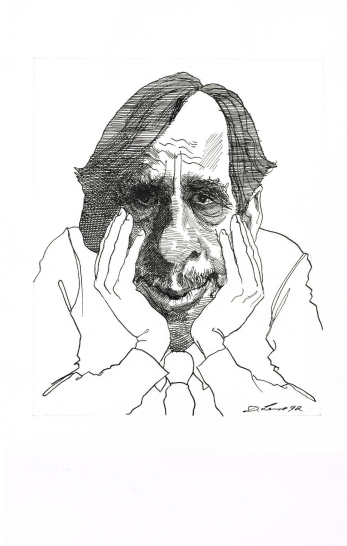
Lennart Anderson



Lennart Anderson's "Idyll 3," acrylic on linen, 1979-2011, created before and after his macular degeneration was diagnosed. Credit Estate of Lennart Anderson, Courtesy Leigh Morse Fine Arts

When macular degeneration struck Anderson in the early 2000s, the defined lines of his still lifes and streetscapes loosened up, and details were scaled back. Mr. Anderson's gradual adaptation to vision loss is seen across his large-scale acrylic painting "Idylls 3," which is in the exhibition. He started the piece in 1979 and finished it in 2011, long after the colors on his palette were no longer distinguishable to his faded eyesight. Reviewing the "Idylls" series, Hilton Kramer wrote in 2001, "In a saner art world than ours, museums would be vying for the honor of mounting a major retrospective of Mr. Anderson's work."

David Levine



David Levine's "Vaclav Havel," 1992, before losing his vision. Credit Collection of AMDF

Scroll through Levine's caricatures on the website of The New York Review of Books, and you will find a subtle history of his diminishing eyesight, according to his son, Matthew. In 2003, the details were reduced. By 2004, his line was less bold. By 2006, the year he stopped working with the publication, the line appears scratchy. In the privacy of David Levine's study in Brooklyn, a similar struggle occurred with his first love: painting. Even though the process became somewhat tortuous, "there is something about having to distill details that created an innate power," Matthew Levine said of his father's final works.

Robert Andrew Parker



Robert Andrew Parker's "Antonov," 2011, acrylic on board. Credit Collection of the Artist

Along with a career as a professional illustrator, Mr. Parker explored a variety of artistic mediums: etching, watercolor, sculpture, even children's books. With the onset of macular degeneration in 2000, he could no longer read. However, he still paints almost daily in his Connecticut studio, and the effects on his work — a less defined line or a foggy horizon — are only slightly visible. "Parker's loose, energetic approach achieves maximum effects with minimal amounts of detail," Michael Dooley, a contributing editor to Print Magazine, wrote about a retrospective of the artist's works in 2013. Even later in his career, with eyesight faded, the Mr. Parker could still "pack a visual wallop."

The Persistence of Vision

Through July 29 at the Philip M. Meyers Jr. Memorial Gallery, University of Cincinnati;
daap.uc.edu.

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