Exhibition

Black out to White out

"Art was never a consideration. I was merely having life changing surgery. I was completely detached from the reality of the situation, completely calm as I contemplated having holes drilled into my skull and wires inserted into my brain. So an artist wanted to watch my operation? Rather her than me." Ian Frizell's "unexpectedly cathartic" journey through deep brain stimulation (DBS) began with a "coldly clinical view" to the procedure, but through interpretation and representation by artist Martha Orbach, his viewpoint shifted. Now he finds himself emotionally responsive—"feeling a lump in my throat and tear in my eye"—to the "human experience", which is, or at least was, inaccessible to his conscious mind.

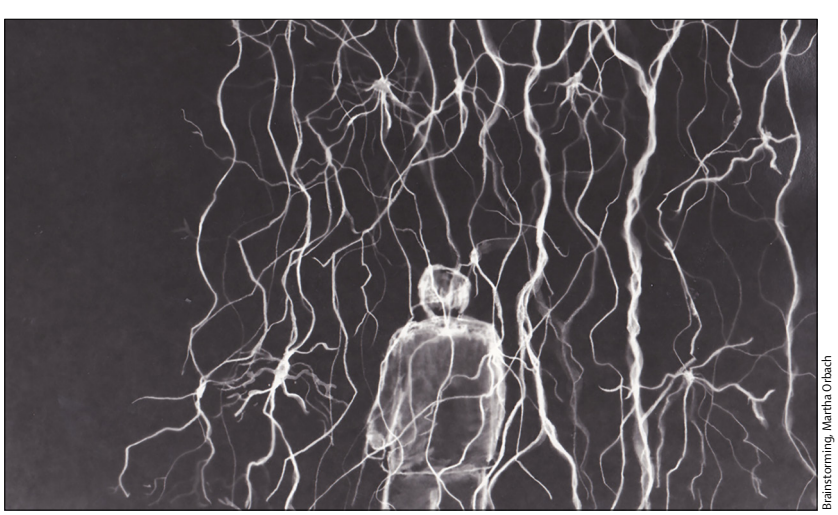
Orbach is Ian's observer and cofounder of *White Out*, a collaboration between artists, people with Parkinson's disease, and clinicians and researchers at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery (NHNN), London, UK. She tells *The Lancet Neurology* that the project was conceived during wide-ranging conversations with Simon Little, a clinician and researcher with a keen focus on DBS and Parkinson's disease: "we felt we'd found a story we wanted to tell that people had not heard", presented through a bifocal lens to capture Orbach's subjective emotional response and Little's clinical experience of this lesser-known therapeutic intervention for Parkinson's disease. *White Out*—the project title explained as overexposure, too many signals, and overload—involves contributions not only from patients at NHNN, but also from the wider population of people with Parkinson's disease who have submitted images, creative writing, or videos documenting their experience. Their submissions are passed to the clinicians for feedback before being shared with writer Joe Dunthorne and animators Dave Prosser and Rosie Holtom.

Art and science collaborations are integral to education, communication, and experience, transgressing barriers that unnecessarily polarise the two entities. In reality, art and science are extremely compatible for tapping into and exploring human experience to which Ian refers. "Art can cross borders and prompt new conversations between staff and patients, between clinicians and the general public, and....those living with illness and disability", Orbach says, "Clinical and personal perspectives can be so divergent within the one experience." Her exhibition *White Out* is testament to the way such an alliance can, as Little observes, "encourage us to take a different perspective, and to think very deeply about how abstract scientific ideas impact the lived experience of our patients".

The exhibition is in the Street Gallery, effectively a white-walled corridor in University College Hospital, adjacent to the road, so the story unfolds as the viewer moves from one photogram to the next, compelled to follow the sequence of curation. A few people are slouching on chairs, seeming quite rootless, possibly sheltering from a bitter wintery night. The space is quiet, for now, but everyday life in a hospital corridor is unlikely to stay quiet for long.

DBS, says Orbach, is where "high-tech medicine interfaces with human frailty". In her drawn and digital photograms she explores the architecture of the brain, the mechanisms of technology, and the complexity of neurological illness through the arresting beauty and phenomena existing in nature, and therefore visible to us. The result is a collection of images (like etchings on film) that capture the smallness of man in a large universe—the fear, the questioning, the frustration, and sadness—but also invoke a soulful, meditative searching for identity and purpose, which might resonate for us all. The science, or at least the feelings about the illness, becomes more tangible in artistic expressions.

So what about Orbach's creative process? "Some work and some don't and I often don't know which are which until I'm in the darkroom", she says. Discussions with Little "helped me find links between electricity, neurons, lightening, and the process of [how] photograms are made through a flash of light, exposure, [and] getting the correct amount of light and electricity through". Her fictional protagonist (a solitary figure who seems to drift from image to image looking from the outside in, and the inside out) emerged and evolved from everyone she met along the way: "[by] listening to patients and clinicians, hearing these areas of overlap between neurosurgery and fishing, waves, navigation, charting a course". For example, Orbach, after conversing with Jimmy "a fisherman from the west coast of Ireland, who worked in construction until the shakes got too bad to hold a hammer [and is] now drifting



Brainstorming, Martha Orbach

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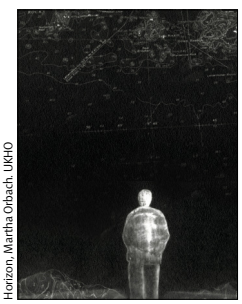
For more on **White Out** see http://www.marthaorbach.co.uk/whiteout/



Horizon, Martha Orbach, UKHO

back to sea", was inspired to create photograms with a nautical theme, such as *The Catch, Night Fishing,* and *Fish*.

Sometimes the solitary figure participates, other times he stands back, watching. Landscape and the brain become interchangeable, inside and out. *Brainstorming*—with the caption "What will I be like when I wake up?"—shows a frenzy of neuron pathways replicating a lightning storm. *Horizon* seems like an incredible representation of a faraway galaxy—almost a brain scan of the Milky Way—with a superimposed mapping of a shipping chart to create a sea–skyscape, where the two become one.

What completes the experience is that with every image there is a personal anecdote and a part of the clinical story seemingly unrelated, but always relevant. Accompanying *Night Fishing*: "DBS surgery involves implanting very fine wires, with electrodes at their tips, into the brain. These are connected to extensions that are tunnelled under the skin behind the ear and down the neck. They are connected to a pulse generator (a device like a pacemaker), which is placed under the skin around the chest or stomach area." Brain surgery is instinctively a frightening thought, and this exhibition confronts and breaks down some of the mysteriousness and inaccessibility surrounding clinical neuroscience.

Tom Foltynie, a movement disorders specialist at University College London (London, UK), emphasises how important communication is in healthcare and neuroscience, which can often be "dry, bland, or loaded with technical jargon", and how the "use of art and animation to describe a patient's journey through a life changing experience offers a brand new perspective". He has also been involved in the project, which he says has helped him "keep in touch with the impact that our powerful interventions have on human thoughts, fears, hopes, and expectations."

Orbach hopes that the project will continue (future exhibitions are already scheduled for the Summer), and the benefits speak for themselves. Tim Andrews had DBS surgery in 2014 and met Orbach 3 years later at NHNN. "Since being diagnosed with Parkinson's [disease] in 2005 I have had a surge of creativity", he says, so he and Orbach were a perfect match. Tim is an artist, writer, and filmmaker, and DBS stopped his tremor and his freezing, allowing him to be more actively creative. Being involved in *White Out* "helped me realise how much more there was to patient involvement in art, in connection with my treatment", he says. Tim is on point, because art is not only a therapeutic activity, it has taken on a new role in science and medicine, illness and recovery—as an inclusive, meaningful, and life-enhancing means of education and communication. Is there a silver-lining? Perhaps, in some ways there is. And look for a small sketch with the words: "there have been advantages to Parkinson's—I wouldn't have had so much time with the kids".

Jules Morgan

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