

I HATE THIS FUCKING APPLE: A VISUAL AND PERSONAL EXPLANATION OF APHANTASIA

My mind is empty.

I'm asked to picture an apple; to conjure it up in what's called 'my mind's eye' and describe what it looks like. What colour is it? What size, shape, and texture? Can I rotate it? Can I change the lighting? The setting? Can I put it further or bring it closer towards me?

This of course all sounds ridiculous to me, because there is no apple. Not really— to 'picture' something is a metaphor.

Only it isn't. In fact, for about 95% of people, 'picturing' the apple is doing exactly that: bringing up an image of it in their mind's eye and looking at it. For some it's so vivid it's as if the apple was sitting on a table in front of their open eyes, creating the impression that if they reached out with their hands, they'd be able to pick it up and take a bite. But, for me, to 'picture' the apple is to see nothing at all, only to recall facts about it that I've retained as non-visual memory.

This so-called 'lack of imagination' is named aphantasia, a phrase coined by Dr. Adam Zeman in 2015. 'Phantasia' comes from the word meaning appearance/image in ancient Greek, while the prefix 'a-' means 'without.' One to ten percent of the population are affected by aphantasia, and yet most go through their lives never even realising.

Learning that the majority of people's imaginations work so differently to yours always comes as a shock... you're left questioning how you've never realised before. Then, as you try and explain what happens in your mind, it can start to make sense. As Fox-Muraton writes: 'the person with aphantasia who attempts to describe his condition to others who do have capacity for mental imaging can only do so by taking up the language games of those with mental images—by making reference to concepts and expressions which he has no experience of, and thus perhaps to which he does not associate any specific meaning.' It's as if there's an immense gulf between me and other people, one which we are both throwing sticks into in the vain hope they'll somehow form a bridge.

Learning that other people had these bright, vivid imaginations seemed to spell doom for me. As an artist, I worried that my aphantasia would cause a lack of creativity, or worse, the inability for me to thrive in a creative field— and a lot of research on aphantasia seemed to only confirm my worries. Tamara Alireza addressed in her 2016 Ted Talk whether or not her aphantasia negatively affected her life by saying: 'Well, I can say that it does close certain doors. Being an architect is definitely out of the question for me.'

Alireza graduated with a double masters in neuroscience from University College London, and she seemed so sure about her aphantasia meaning she could never work in a field such as architecture. I worried that she was right, and that perhaps certain doors were just closed to me, too. That there was a ceiling to my artistic abilities, one I would never pass simply because of how my brain is wired. Despite my passion and love for art, was it impossible for me to be good enough to push myself over the threshold and into the industry?

Thankfully, I needed to look no further than Glen Keane to prove myself wrong; an Oscar-winning animator for Disney, who was once called 'one of the best animators in the history of hand-drawn animation' by former president of Pixar Ed Catmull. In 2007, he was honoured with the Winsor McCay award for lifetime contribution to the field of animation, and has created some of the most beloved animated characters in Disney's history.

He also has aphantasia.

In an effort to learn from him I looked deeper into his artistic process, wondering if there was anything special he did to combat this disadvantage we both share. It was fascinating, because for the first time I felt like I could truly understand the thought that went into the process of a drawing. For example, Keane starts his sketches with what he calls 'an explosion of scribbles', instead of immediately trying to define a shape or image, then 'highlights and subtracts lines until he finds the form he wants.' As though he is searching for the image in the sprawling confusion instead of pulling it out of his head, able to understand and visualise the poses or scene better with marks on the page to guide him.

I do something similar, especially when trying to sketch something with no reference at all. My initial lines tend to be messy, sometimes even one continuous line, barely hinting at the idea of what I'm trying to create. I then go over it multiple times, slowly carving out features and forms. I'd never seen anyone draw like that, like me, before.

For big, busier pieces, I build my own reference images, collaging badly cropped stock images and photos I take myself together to form a foundation of the illustration itself. A bit like an underpainting, it makes the blank canvas less daunting, and allows me an easier time of translating the idea in my head into artwork. Other artists build their mental visual banks, and pull from them when needed— I patchwork together a frame and use that as my starting block. I'm ashamed of it at times, impostor syndrome creeping in as I watch people easily produce similar or better artwork without having to 'cheat.'

In this way, aphantasia can feel like a shackle. I can stare at a blank page and curse my blind mind, entertaining what-if scenarios about where I could be in terms of skill in a life where I retained visual memories. In fact, the original concept of this very project was born of something akin to spite— I wanted to make a fully illustrated comic, juxtaposing aphantasia's very nature with something incredibly visually stimulating.

I wanted to use this to prove to you that I am an artist.

But the more I researched, the more artists work I found and the more first-hand accounts I read of people in fields like mine with aphantasia, my perspective began to shift. In 2019, the University of Glasgow hosted an exhibition titled 'Extreme Imagination: Inside the Mind's Eye', which featured 'art, design and writing by 22 people from around the world with aphantasia and hyperphantasia.' Michael Chance, whose piece 'Bacchus Walk' (2016) was featured in the exhibit, explained in an interview that 'the lack of ability to visualise images in my head is a great motivation; I must physically work on a drawing or painting in order for my imagination to become visually manifest.'

This sentiment really stuck with me, and I saw it echoed across other platforms and people. Dr. Adam Zeman, the man who named aphantasia, writes in a Psyche article that his colleague, a cultural historian named Matthew MacKisack pointed out 'if you're aphantasic, and you want to know what something looks like, one solution is to draw it.'

I took some time to consider why I connected so deeply to this perspective, reflecting on my favourite illustrations I've made in the past year. I realised that each and every one is a favourite not because it's technically or objectively better than any others, but because each is the realisation of a concept that I had in my head that I knew I wanted to see, and it was now an image on the page in front of me. And, since I was creating them for myself, I didn't care about proving my skill. I worked with the strategies and techniques I know work best for me, putting my all into the final product as opposed to the process itself. I wasn't trying to prove to anyone that I was an artist; the image spoke for itself regardless.

This realisation had me taking several steps back and thoroughly re-examining the way I've been approaching both my artwork and the topic of aphantasia itself. When I am trying to work against my own mind, I am putting myself at more of a disadvantage than aphantasia ever has. Everything— the process, the outcome— is all disappointing and less enjoyable, yet I do it so I can settle feelings of neediness and for how I create; because deep down I am creating to show off, to fit in, not for myself or for the love of the art. I found myself in a box of my own creation, wondering why I was ever in there to begin with.

My aphantasia, this thing I originally viewed as a hindrance and burden, is now actually a built-in motivator that pushes me to create my best work. Dr. Adam Zeman suggested that 'aphantasia might sometimes increase rather than reduce interest in the visual world', and I think that rings true for me. I'm comforted by the fact I will always have an engaged audience for my art— that audience being myself, and I think that no matter where I go in life, I will always be creating, if only to be able to see those things I imagine in my head in full, vivid detail.

If you are an artist like me with aphantasia, remember this: There is no sense in making things more difficult for yourself in the spirit of 'fairness'. Learn your processes and adapt to them. Everyone is shaped a little bit differently, and there is no sense in trying to cram yourself into a hole not carved out for you.

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If you can't find a space that's the perfect fit, then make one yourself.