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cultural geographies in practice

Between landscape and blindness: some paintings of an artist with macular degeneration

Hannah Macpherson

Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London

In the painting 'Morning sight' (Figure 1) Ann Roughton paints a garden landscape which includes the sight of her own macular degeneration. The affects of this degenerative sight condition are represented as a grey cloud area in the centre of the painting, while the rest of the garden is painted in an impressionistic style using flecks of coloured paint. The painting is one in a series which Ann produced over the course of a month in order to represent what she sees with age related macular degeneration (AMD).[1] The painting and her accompanying commentary are of interest because they render sight itself visible and help to draw our attention to the fact that sight cannot necessarily be assumed to be a constant or predictable source of information about the world. For example, there are around 155,000 on the register of partially sighted people and 157,000 on the register of blind people in England.[2] With age our colour values are also likely to change and we are increasingly likely to need spectacles.

In the United Kingdom AMD is the most common cause of visual impairment in people over 60. In AMD the cells of the macular area (see Figure 2) become damaged and stop working, central vision may become blurred or distorted and gradually a 'hole' in the central vision is likely to develop, while peripheral vision tends to be retained. Ann,[3] now aged 85, began to develop AMD ten years ago, first in her right eye and later in her left. In a comment on the painting on the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) website which promotes the work of visually impaired artists, Ann explains how she 'sees' and 'sees with' her 'macular cloud', how it affects her vision and how her vision changes during the day:

> My eye condition is age related macular degeneration and it affects me early in the morning because when I look up at the ceiling of the bedroom I get a black cloud with sort of frilly edges, sort of fringed and it looks rather like Australia in shape very often. And then as the day wears on my cloud, which obscures my central vision takes on the general tone of what I am looking at so I can always see round about the edges in full colour I am glad to say because I really am very colour conscious.[4]

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FIGURE 1 Morning sight, Ann Roughton. (Permission courtesy of the artist.)

I first came across Ann's work through the RNIB publication *Painting from a new perspective*.[5] This book was produced to demonstrate to people with visual impairments how they can still enjoy painting and produce work of merit. While there are a number of conventional landscape paintings in this book, as a geographer, interested in ideas of landscape and embodiment, I was particularly struck that Ann's painting was not simply trying to reproduce a conventional example of a particular artistic genre, but rather, it conveyed visually the particular nature of her vision and her impairment. In Ann's painting macular degeneration becomes a positive addition – it is treated as something to be represented as 'a cloud with frilly edges' not just a negative to be ignored or 'overcome'. Ann's paintings 'Morning sight' and 'Afternoon sight' (Figures 1 and 3) also lack a formal sense of perspective, instead remaining faithful to her 'lived perspective' which comes about through her remaining, hazy, peripheral vision. For Ann this was simply a way of painting with and representing her macular degeneration and the RNIB publication containing her painting was targeted at a limited readership of other artists and aspiring artists who had developed visual impairment or blindness. However, I think her work deserves wider discussion and recognition, for Ann's paintings not only have a pleasurable aesthetic value, or serve individual therapeutic purposes; rather her approach to painting contributes to a contemporary politics of disability arts that is concerned with valuing embodied diversity rather than simply proving equivalence.[6] Her work also ties into a set of debates within cultural geography concerning how we might go about representing embodied and socio-cultural diversity in our research accounts of landscape. Her approach to painting in the 'macular series' also shares interesting continuities with the work of the early impressionists, some of whom

experienced visual impairments themselves. I hope that by using Ann's paintings here the paintings will enter into visual histories and geographical imaginations of landscape in ways which perhaps verbal description of the paintings alone might fail to do.[7]

Research on landscape in cultural geography of the past three decades has shown how representations of landscape can work to produce powerful ideological affects, and how people's historical, gendered and ethnic positioning can structure how they see, experience and represent landscape.[8] However, disabled perspectives on landscape have been relatively overlooked. Recent research on landscape inspired by non-representational theory has also had a tendency to unwittingly perpetuate 'ablist' perspectives through a prioritization of the perspective of the fit and able body.[9] Therefore, by reproducing Ann's work in a journal of cultural geography I hope to begin to redress a relative neglect of disabled perspectives on landscape. This discussion of her paintings also builds on a tradition in geographical thought of looking at the work of landscape artists in order to improve our understanding of human-environment relationships.[10]

Ann trained as an artist at the West of England School in Bristol, she has painted for recreational purposes intermittently through her life and also taught painting professionally during her working life. Ten years ago she began to paint her progressive and increasingly visible macular degeneration at different times of day and in different settings in order to communicate to sighted audiences something of what it is like to experience the condition. She also wanted to reveal to other people suffering visual impairments that they can still produce paintings of merit.[11] After seeing Ann's painting 'Morning sight' in the RNIB book *Painting from a new perspective*, I phoned Ann and asked if I could visit her because I was interested in photographing some of her other paintings in the macular degeneration series and developing a better sense of her work. Ann's landscape paintings were initially of interest to me because they related to my doctoral research which explored the experiences of people with blindness and visual impairment who visit the countryside with sighted guides. In this research context her paintings helped to illustrate one part of a tension, that blind and visually impaired people seemed to have in their rural landscape encounters, between remaining faithful to their current lived perspective and wanting (or feeling obliged) to participate in collective, predominantly sighted, regimes of truth about what landscape is.[12]

When I visited Ann she explained to me how when she had full sight she favoured painting realistic portraits and still life with a formal sense of linear perspective. However, since developing macular degeneration she shifted her painting style and subjects and began to paint impressionistic landscapes and abstracts in order to accommodate her changing sight. Her approach to landscape painting (Figures 1 and 3) is interesting for it echoes the style of early impressionists, some of whom are thought to have deliberately employed their peripheral vision in order to get the blurred affects of mass, line and colour.[13] Ann's faithfulness to her lived perspective also shares continuities with Renoir and Cezanne who are among a number of myopic impressionists who capitalized on the blurred affect induced by their nearsightedness; interestingly Monet also developed cataracts and painted with this hazy vision in later life.[14] So while some painters would have attempted to overcome any such 'distortions' of vision and remain faithful to the principles of linear perspective established in the Italian Renaissance, Ann, like the early impressionists attempts to remain faithful to how she sees rather than how things are 'supposed' to look. This results in representations of landscape which render the process of seeing itself visible. There is an intertwining of sight and landscape.

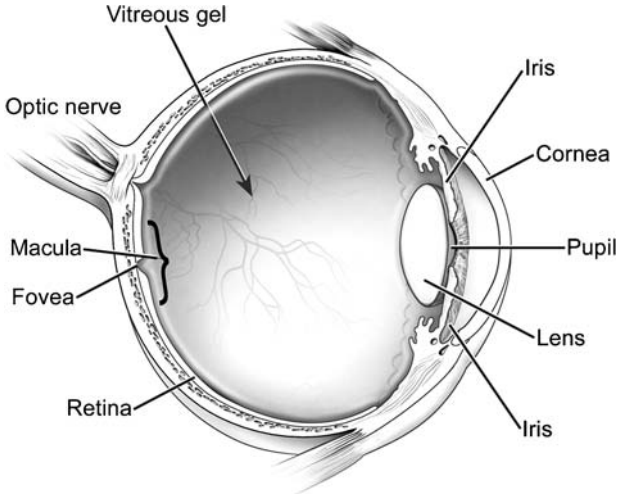

FIGURE 2 Eye diagram showing the macula. (Image courtesy of the national eye institute, United States national institute of health.)

FIGURE 3 'Afternoon sight', Ann Roughton. (Permission courtesy of the artist.)

For Ann her sight of landscape and the sight of her impairment vary depending on the time of day, weather and light conditions. Ann's experience of macular degeneration is thus bound up with conditions in the external world and as she puts it, her macular degeneration 'takes on the general tone of what I am looking at'. The titles of each of the paintings 'Morning sight'

and 'Afternoon sight' reflect this changing apprehension and have a double meaning, referring to both what Ann sees and the state of her vision at that time. While in the morning, her 'macular cloud' is dark and there is a sharp transition to colour outside of the grey area, as the day wears on the cloud becomes a lighter grey and her vision becomes steadily more blurred. This is illustrated in the painting above 'Afternoon sight' (Figure 3) which has a much lighter grey cloud to represent the affects of macular degeneration and is a lighter tone from the 'Morning sight' painting, with flecks of grey and light green representing the colour of the trees.

While all landscape paintings are dependent on the light conditions in the external world and are limited by the field of vision of the artist (there is a relative blindness in every painting) Ann's paintings render her sight and its specific limits clearly visible. In fact by painting her own macular degeneration, we might even say that her visual impairment becomes a landscape of sorts, for it becomes a phenomenon to be objectified and studied and which changes according to the light conditions, just like the external landscape in front of her. Thus Ann's paintings are doubled, for we see in them both the nature of her macular degeneration and her sight of the landscape beyond; two landscapes (macular cloud and garden) in one painting, each affecting how the other is seen. Therefore, the paintings contain body and landscape, and like the impressionists whose style she follows in the footsteps of, they blur boundaries between the visible and the invisible, external and internal, the body and the landscape; it is an optics of immersion. This blurring of boundaries and immersive sense of sight chimes with interpretations of vision found in Merleau-Ponty's writing on Cezanne and in his unfinished work 'The visible and the invisible'.[15] In his later work Merleau-Ponty develops a conception of vision as having touching immersive qualities; describing vision as a 'chiasm' or crossing-over between subjective and objective existence.[16] These paintings appear to illustrate this 'chiasm' or crossing over between body and landscape; the seer is caught up in the midst of the seen and the unseen.

So for Ann, like for all of us who see something, seeing is not limited to the physical organ of sight but is also dependent on light conditions in the external world. We never see alone, rather we see with the light and the landscape. This is a point which other geographers have made; for example, Cosgrove and Thornes, via the writing of Ruskin, discuss how the sky and clouds condition our landscape experience, while Yusoff has drawn attention to how the temporary snow blindness of Antarctic explorers forms part of their embodied landscape experience.[17] However, it is important that this intertwined nature of sight and landscape continues to be restated and illustrated because it has significant implications for how we understand the subject's embodied relationship with the landscape. For if sight and blindness is partly actualized and dependent on light and landscape this means that sight is not only possessed – 'our own' – but is also dependant upon and constituted by the surrounding environment. Rather than isolated, contained subjects staring out on an independent, external world, we are extensive and involved. We see in and with the landscape and are co-constituted by it. This is a point which has been explored in more depth by Wylie in his writing on landscape and the gaze;[18] however, the ethical implications of this understanding of landscape, sight and subjectivity, and the range of different gazes which people with partial sight bring into being in conjunction with the landscape and sighted others requires further exploration (a task beyond the remit of this short article).

At 85, Ann has lost almost all her sight. Three years ago she lost her husband Sam. The final painting below is her last attempt at painting. This abstract painting from her imagination

was motivated by her bereavement. The painting is in the form of an 'S' after her husbands name 'Sam'. The 'S' is painted in a blue swirl and Ann is represented by red dots in the centre of the painting. She explained to me she wanted to represent their own intertwining as they were a very close couple. In 'Sam' there is a change in style, reflecting Ann's almost complete absence of sight. In a conversation with Ann she told me that since developing macular degeneration her growing blindness had brought her 'a kind of peace as an artist' for she increasingly chose to paint abstracts 'freed of the need for realism which so many other artists are driven by'. So no longer able to adequately see around the edges of her macular cloud, Ann, with her failing sight painted abstracts instead, projecting an inner world outward for others to see.

Conclusions

The paintings and discussion of visually impaired artist Ann Roughton have three important implications for geographical scholarship which engages with issues of landscape, embodiment and disability. First, Ann's paintings add to an expanding literature in geography on ways of seeing and representing landscape. Previous research has shown how the visible landscape that we may register and reflect upon each day depends upon the coming together of our socio-historical and economic positioning; our practices and personal biographies. Ann's paintings add to this literature by showing how our individual physical faculty of sight may also directly affect what we see and represent as landscape. 'Perfect' 20/20 vision cannot be

FIGURE 4 'Sam', Ann Roughton. (Permission courtesy of the artist.)

taken for granted. As our sight changes over the life course from an infant unable to focus, to the potentially hazy vision of cataracts or other age related sight conditions, the ways in which we see in and with the landscape will also vary. Therefore any theorization of how 'we' see landscape must take into account these diverse ways in which individuals may see.

Second, recent writing in geography based on research with people who have visual impairment or blindness has tended to focus on tactile perception.[19] However, we must be wary of associating people with blindness and visual impairment solely with the sense of touch and proximal forms of knowledge. Even those registered blind often have some useful residual vision and some important features of sight itself can be revealed through reference to the 'visual' experiences of people with blindness.[20] Ann's paintings are important for they render sight itself visible and help to show how people with visual impairments may see and relate to sightedness, abstraction and other visual modes of representation. Third, Ann's paintings may be viewed as a contemporary example of a little acknowledged history of painters who have experienced forms of visual impairment and I hope that her paintings will help to give visual disability a positive and provocative place in geographical imaginaries. Ann's paintings challenge simplistic equations of sight and knowledge and reveal some of the complex and contingent qualities of vision. Specifically, the changing nature of Ann's 'macular cloud' helps to illustrate the important point that seeing resides neither entirely in the subjective observer at a particular point in time, nor in the external world; rather, there is an intertwining of sight and landscape. While her final painting 'Sam' shows that, when sight itself fails almost completely, we can continue to project an inner visual world outward for others to see.

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Biographical note

Hannah Macpherson is currently an ESRC post-doctoral fellow based in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway University of London. In 2007 she completed a PhD thesis entitled 'Landscapes of blindness and visual impairment: sight, touch and laughter in the English countryside' at the University of Newcastle-upon-tyne.. She can be contacted at: Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham TW20 0EX, UK; email: hannah.macpherson@rhul.ac.uk

Notes

1 Most of these paintings were donated by Ann to local eye hospitals in the South West of England and I have only been able to obtain good quality prints of the two macular paintings discussed here 'Morning sight' and 'Afternoon sight'.

2 Department of Health, *Registered blind and partially sighted people year ending 31st March 2003* (Department of Health Statistics Division, 2003).

[3] I have met Ann in person to discuss her paintings and take a photo of 'Afternoon sight' for this article; therefore, first name terms seem to convey best the relationship we forged during our afternoon together in June 2007. They are not meant to be a reflection of her status as an artist. She is also referred to in first name terms in the RNIB book 'Painting from a new perspective'.

[4] Quote taken from an Audio clip of Ann Roughton talking about the painting 'Morning sight' on the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) website, http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_paint_AudioARvision.hcsp. Accessed 10 June 2005.

[5] RNIB, *Painting from a new perspective: six artists and their experience of sight loss* (London, Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2001).

[6] P. Kuppers, *Disability and contemporary performance: bodies on edge* (London, Routledge, 2003).

[7] Compare D. Tolia-Kelly, 'Participatory art: capturing spatial vocabularies in a collaborative visual methodology with Melanie Carvalho and South Asian women in London, UK', in S. Kindon, R. Pain and M. Kesby, eds, *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place* (London, Routledge, 2007).

[8] D. Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (London, Croom Helm, 1984); D. Cosgrove, 'Prospect, perspective and the evolution of the landscape idea', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10 (1985), pp. 45–62; D. Cosgrove, *Palladian landscape* (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1993); D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*. (London, Reaktion, 1998); G. Rose, *Feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge*. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993); C. Nash, 'Reclaiming vision: looking at landscape and the body', *Gender, place and culture* 3 (1996), pp. 149–69; P. Kinsman, 'Landscape, race and national identity', *Area* 27 (1995), pp. 300–10; D. Tolia-Kelly, 'Mobility/stability: British Asian cultures of "landscape and Englishness"', *Environment and planning A* 38 (2006), pp. 341–58; D. Tolia-Kelly, 'Landscape, race and memory: biographical mapping of the routes of British Asian landscape values', *Landscape research* 29 (2004), pp. 277–92.

[9] See for example, H. Lorimer and K. Lund, 'Performing facts: finding a way over Scotland's mountains', in B.H. Szerszynski, W. Heim and C. Waterton, eds, *Nature performed: environment, culture and performance* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2003), pp. 130–45; J. Wylie, 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005), pp. 234–7; cf. N. Thrift, 'Non-representational theory', in R.J. Johnston *et al.*, eds, *The dictionary of human geography* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), p. 556; H. Parr and R. Butler, 'New geographies of illness, impairment and disability', in H. Parr and R. Butler, eds, *Mind and body spaces: geographies of illness, impairment and disability* (London, Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–25.

[10] S. Daniels and C. Watkins, *The picturesque landscape* (Nottingham/Hereford, University of Nottingham Art Gallery/Hereford City Art Gallery, 1994); W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and power* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[11] Conversation with Ann at her home, 23 June 2007.

[12] H. Macpherson, 'Landscapes of sight and blindness: vision, touch and laughter in the English Countryside', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2007.

[13] P. Trevor- Roper, *The world through blunted sight* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970).

[14] E. Coldham, V. Cooney, D. Kline and M. Slamanca, *Art vision and the disordered eye*, Vision and Aging Lab, University of Calgary 2002, http://www.Psych.ucalgary.ca/PACE/VA-Lab/AVDE-Website/ Accessed 8 January 2007.

[15] G.A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau Ponty aesthetics reader* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1993); M. Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1968).

[16] M. Merleau-Ponty, 'The intertwining – the chiasm', in T. Baldwin, ed., *Merleau-Ponty: basic writings* (London, Routledge, 2004).

[17] D. Cosgrove and J.E. Thornes, 'Of truth of clouds: John Ruskin and the moral order in landscape', in D. Pocock, ed., *Humanistic geography and literature* (London, Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 20–46;

K. Yusoff, 'Antarctic exposure: archives of the feeling body', *Cultural geographies* 14 (2007), pp. 211–33.

[18] J. Wylie, 'Depths and folds: on landscape and the gazing subject', *Environment and planning d: society and space* 24 (2006), pp. 519–35.

[19] K. Hetherington, 'The unsightly: touching the Parthenon frieze', *Theory, Culture & Society* 19(5/6) (2002), pp. 187–205; K. Hetherington, 'Spatial textures: place, touch and praesentia', *Environment and planning a* 35 (2003), pp. 1933–44; C. Allen, 'Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the body-in-space encounters of visually impaired children', *Environment and planning d: society and space* 22 (2004), pp. 719–35.

[20] M.A. Heller, 'Introduction', in M.A. Heller, ed., *Touch, representation and blindness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–26.