

The Macular Disease Society

The Macular Disease Society is holding a 25th birthday exhibition "Peripheral Visions" at the Menier Gallery in London next year. The charity was established in 1987 to support people with visual impairment caused by all forms of macular disease, a condition which damages the central vision.

One form, age-related macular degeneration is the most common cause of sight loss in the UK. People with macular disease can find everyday tasks such as cooking, walking, reading, watching television and even recognising the faces of others very difficult.

The exhibition is open to artists with macular disease or to those whose work furthers understanding of central vision loss.

Peripheral vision is not affected by macular disease and so many artists continue to work even after developing the condition.

Cecil Riley, a professional artist who has had macular degeneration in both eyes for 10 years, said: "I've had to adapt my work a great deal. I became very interested in plants and also with painting imaginative narrative. I obviously can't do detail now due to the macular degeneration. My work has had to broaden in style and I focus on capturing the essence of things. I emphasise on composition, form and colour.

I must admit I hate labels as I think they put you in a box, but if I had to describe my work at the moment it would be closest to expressionism."

Portrait artist, Adam Hahn graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 2001. His grandmother was affected by age-related macular degeneration, prompting him to produce a haunting series of portraits of members of the Macular Disease Society as they see themselves; lacking colour, blurred and with parts of their faces missing.

He said: "My grandma had age-related macular degeneration in the last few years of her life. After she passed away I realised I didn't know what she saw. I wanted to get an idea of what her vision was like, so I spent a year researching the condition before painting these portraits.

I have painted how the sitter sees the world. I met the individuals and got as much information as possible about their vision before producing a portrait trying to show the effect macular disease had on their eyesight.

The reaction of the people I painted was fantastic. When they looked at the portraits using their remaining peripheral vision they said I had really captured what their eyesight was like.

The families have also been really positive, saying it was the only time they have had a physical representation of what their loved one saw.

It will be very interesting to discover the different approaches people have to their work when they have macular disease. Visitors to the exhibition will be able to see a visual depiction of someone's eyesight with the condition and then what they are able to produce."

Cecil Riley's pictures also shed light on a phenomenon connected to sight loss; visual hallucinations, known as Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Many people with macular disease experience vivid hallucinations which are often mistaken for mental illness but which are really just the brain's normal response to the loss of vision. Mr Riley has painted some of his hallucinations and the process of doing so seems to help prevent them.

Helen Jackman, Chief Executive of the Macular Disease Society, said: "We are incredibly excited about holding this exhibition to celebrate the artistic talent of people with macular disease and raise awareness of the condition."