

Art

When an Artist Loses Sight in One Eye

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photo: Nannette Gonzales

Lisa Adams and her eclipse at CB1 Gallery

For three days last summer, as the August heat rose across Los Angeles, Lisa Adams saw nothing in her right eye but black. What she felt was pain: her swollen forehead, pressed down on the edge of the desk in front of her, her bones sore from the weight of her head — her neck and back muscles wrecked from the weird position.

But even as she grew more disoriented from sleep deprivation, she would not forget what her doctor had told her: “Keep your head down,” he had said, “parallel to the ground.” And so she’d do it, even as she’d trudge to the bathroom, wading through Vicodin.

Eating meant a plate was put on a box below her, at the height of her knees, and she would lower a fork to it, then bring it up, concentrating more on not moving her head than on the taste. The food was tangential — a way of keeping her eye alive.

It was her eyes that had always kept her alive. Lisa Adams is a painter.

The pain was at its worst in her right one. The one that had been cut open for surgery. The one in which a surgeon had reattached her retina. What had happened was this: It had torn in the months after a simple cataract surgery and detached from the base of her eye.

She had noticed a brown shade at the edge of her vision about 10 days before what should have been her final check-up on the cataract procedure, but there wasn’t any pain and she could see fine. She thought she was OK. She wasn’t even that concerned when two assistants entered the exam room moments after her doctor had peered into her pupil that day. The three began to talk in some kind of code, one assistant on the phone, one at the computer, the doctor at her side.

“Lisa,” he said in that calm-speak doctors use, “you have a torn and detached retina.” It was what he said next, about a specialist, that set off her first tinge of alarm: “You have to go right now,” he said.

“Right now,” the doctor had then repeated to artist Jayme Odgers, the friend who had driven her and with whom she shared a utilitarian live/work space on the city’s Eastside. It was divided in half with a makeshift, foamcore, three-quarter-height wall, giving each their own area even as they shared an improvised kitchen, and a bath that had nothing to do with any luxury but the luxury to work.

So Odgers drove her. On a Friday evening in August, while California surfers paddled out and Angelenos met friends at bars, Adams was prepped for surgery and her right eye was cut open. And as night edged into the next day and singles scattered home throughout the city, she sat in Odgers’ car, post-op, disoriented from the general anaesthetic, as they drove around town looking for a 24-hour pharmacy. Her chin pushed against her collarbone, her forehead down. The surgeon had reattached her retina to the back wall of her eye. A gas bubble he had inserted after he’d drained the eye’s natural gel would keep it pressed in place, slowly dissolving, until it healed.

“I’ve done my job,” the surgeon told her. “Now, you have to do yours.”

Her job was to make sure she healed.

He told her she had to keep her head down, so the gas would float up and hold the retina in position, for two weeks. Then they'd talk about what came next.

He said that it was normal to be blind for a while, and she trusted him, but still in her worst moments she would wonder.

“Even if I just have one eye, I'll be able to do some kind of work, right? They'll be small, but I'll be able to make some paintings. I could adjust,” she'd say to Odgers.

And he'd respond, “Of course you can, but you're not going to lose your eye.”

The first three days, she ate, dozed, stayed awake, all at her desk, shifting position only when she followed a prescribed regime of eye drops from the surgeon. She'd pry open her swollen eye and Odgers would release drops in it and not tell her what he saw: sutures with their ends clipped off coming out of her eyeball.

On the fourth day, a form devised for patients recovering from the surgery arrived. Basically, it was a massage table without legs. Odgers laid it flat on her bed and Adams placed her face in the headrest. She could sleep again at night, and she settled in for the recovery, shifting to the desk during the day.

She didn't want any visitors. She didn't want to hear the stories: “Oh, my aunt had that same thing and she recovered just FINE!” She couldn't handle that forced energy. She wanted to stay still. She understood meditation — empty mind. So she went there.

For more than two decades her paintings had explored single elements of nature. A bird, a tree maybe, cast against a seemingly disconnected environment — juxtaposed, they caused viewers to observe each more closely. Her research involved examining flora and fauna intimately, directly or on the Internet. Now she was living in semi-blindness, in the stripped-down realm of an ascetic. Her right eye saw black, her left a blurry gray of floor. There was Odgers moving around his side of the studio, but not much else.

It was a writer who brought the tactile back for her: David Foster Wallace, on audio books. She fell into the inflections of the actors' voices and the textures of Wallace's details. It was 14 days in. And she could look ahead for a couple of hours a day.

And then, slowly, it was 30 days in. And she was allowed to lie on her side for up to four hours at a time, to give her back some relief. And then it was 60. And the aggravating horizon line created by the gas bubble that turned her vision into that of a snorkeler — half perfectly clear, half blurry underwater — for the hours she was now allowed to look ahead had disappeared. And then it was 90.

As her sight returned, she made her way back the world, her iPad on a box below her. But she kept her studio deliberately empty.

Still, she had one constant visitor — an eclipse — whenever she was facedown. In that position, at first all her right eye saw was a black ball. Gradually it grew smaller, the band of light and color revealed around it growing. It was her friend, she told her eye surgeon; it let her know — she was getting better.

She was.

Near the end of November, she was painting again.

In April, the truck came. Sent by her gallery CB1 Gallery, it was there to pick up 16 pieces for her new show, which opened April 7. On one was a floating black ball, an eclipse hovering in the middle of the sky.

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