

Julia Horton Sunday Times 28 January 2018
Parkinson's drug brought a stroke of good fortune

Painter John McLean, 79, believes his treatment has been the catalyst for an unexpected new wave of creativity



McLean at work with brush and chisel

The drugs might work, according to a Scots artist who suspects his medication for Parkinson's disease is fuelling an unexpected creative flourish. John McLean, 79, a world-renowned abstract painter, feared his career was over five years ago when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, an incurable neurological condition. Symptoms include involuntary shaking, slow movement and stiff muscles. Instead, McLean appears to be in the grip of an artistic fever, the likes of which he has never experienced before.

His illness has forced him to abandon his trademark style of painting on huge canvases with a squeegee mop in favour of hand-held brushes and a chisel. Richard Morphet, a former curator at London's Tate Modern, said McLean is in "stark, new territory" yet producing some of his best work. The artist, who was born in Liverpool to Scottish parents, believes the main cause of his creative boost is the knowledge that he is running out of time as his condition gradually restricts his movement. But he also suspects that Levodopa, a drug given to Parkinson's sufferers to replace depleted dopamine, a chemical that plays a role in motor co-ordination, could also be fuelling his creativity. "I do as much painting now in two days as I did in a week when I could work full-time, which amazes me. I was very worried when I was first diagnosed that I wouldn't be able to paint, so this has taken me by surprise," said McLean.



His work before Parkinson's struck

“I think there’s an urgency to my work, driven by how much time I have left . . . but my medication might also be part of the cause of my latest burst of creativity. That would not surprise me. I suppose the more research the better, and I’d be willing to take part to find out more.”

Morphet, who was deputy keeper of the Tate’s modern collection until 1998, said that McLean’s work was growing “more interesting” following his diagnosis. “As his physical life has become more restricted his imaginative life seems to be getting more and more adventurous. He’s creating very interesting juxtapositions of form and new ideas. He’s in stark, new territory but it’s also very rich. Some of his marks in the paint with the chisel are extraordinary.”



A recent painting

McLean, who is the subject of a new film premiering in Scotland at the Glasgow Film Festival next month, has called for further research into why brain conditions appear to increase — rather than impair — creativity.

He was told he had a frozen shoulder in 2012 before doctors diagnosed Parkinson’s the following year. In 2015, specialists found he had multiple system atrophy (MSA), a rare condition similar to Parkinson’s. Both conditions are characterised by a lack of dopamine.

Michael Proudfoot, whose original aim with his film, entitled *Which Way Up*, was to document how a great living artist produces their work, also had a unique chance to record how McLean’s painting changed as his health deteriorated. Patricia Limousin, senior neurologist at University College London Hospitals who diagnosed McLean with MSA and appears in the film, said knowledge of one’s failing health could trigger a change in attitude that could explain a boost in creativity but that dopamine was more likely to be the key. “Studies have shown quite definite links between dopamine [replacement] treatment for these diseases and how creative people are,” she said. “If they were not creative they become creative, and people who were already artistic change their style.”