



The feeling of colour

Kitchener artist
Meghan Sims makes
the most of her
unique vision

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
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Meghan Sims picks up a tube of paint and runs her thumb over an attached small piece of fabric tape on which she has painted the colour.

Sims, an artist with a remarkable feeling for colour though she is fully colour-blind, lines the tube up with others on a table in her new studio in the garage behind her house. The tubes are numbered: 1 is the darkest colour; 18 is the lightest.

"Don't tell me what the colour is," she says as a visitor studies one of the numbered tubes.

The tubes of paint are ordered as she perceives the colours, or as she better describes it, in a way that is "true to my eyes."

"I don't know what any of the colours are, really," she says. "I'm seeing a gradient of light when I look at the colour on the tube. I number them according to the amount of light I see."

Sims, 38, has a rare visual condition called achromatopsia that prevents her from seeing colours. She sees in shades of black and white only and at short range. Her eyes are extremely sensitive to light.

On this day, she wears prescription red-tinted glasses that help block the light.

Meghan Sims sketches under the watchful eye of a glass-blown fish, representative of another of her artistic passions.



A portrait Meghan Sims painted to honour Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip looks over her workspace, which includes the tubes of paint placed in order based on how she perceives the colours.

light with sporadic details that the brain has to put together,” Sims says.

Even the whitest tube of paint couldn't convey the actual brightness that she experienced on that spring day when she took the photograph that would help her paint the outdoor scene.

“This is not a great example of how bright it really is,” she says. “It's blinding, it hurts, it's disorienting. I suffered through this.”

Her newer, colour paintings are a sign that she has dropped what she calls a “rebellious streak” that saw her spurn the use of colour until about 2016.

“I didn't see colour so I didn't use it,” she says. “I had no interest.”

Before 2016, she used colour only as an Expressionist painter would – for emotional undertone, she says. “Colour meant to me an emotion I attached to it.”

Eventually, however, art school, her maturing as an artist and a lifelong fascination with light drew her toward experimenting with the tubes of acrylic and oil paints that she had turned her back on.

In 2016, Sims had a successful showing of her first colour paintings, a series called “Colour Blind Colour,” at the gallery at Kitchener Public Library's main branch.

Sims' investigation of colour has opened up opportunities to talk about her unique visual perception. She wants to help educate people about the differences in perception that exist in the world, and she wants to increase tolerance for those differences, particularly when they involve a disability.

In October, she hosted a CBC crew in her home working on a documentary about colour for “The Nature of Things.” She has also been featured in other documentaries, such as “Do You See What I See?” on BBC's Horizon, a science and philosophy program.



They highlight an expressive face with shoulder-length reddish-brown hair and an engaging smile.

Sims' experimentation with colour is a sea change from her earlier work when she painted in shades of black and white. Her “Urban Night Scapes” series features beautiful, sometimes haunting scenes with pinpoint or washes of light – a lamplit park pathway; silhouettes of pedestrians on a busy city sidewalk.

A painting called “Courtland at David” is an example of how she sees during the day; it's a mostly white street scene with ghostly cars and trees. “I would call it a wash of

In 2018, Sims was honoured to be chosen to design a fine silver coin and bronze medallion set for the Royal Canadian Mint that marks the 100th anniversary of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

A green iris of an eye, like a setting sun or rising moon, is at the coin's centre, representing the passage of time and “light and hope for the future,” Sims says. Green is her favourite colour in the way that it reflects light. If she were to describe green, “it would be calm and natural and the smell of fresh leaves and grass being cut.”

Seven Jack pines on the coin and medallion represent CNIB's seven founding members. Sims chose the iconic tree because it is a survivor, a tree that can flourish after a forest fire.

“I wanted the coin to represent the strength and resilience that people living with vision loss and blindness have.”

Both coins have the number 100 engraved on them in braille.

These days, Sims volunteers as an art teacher for CNIB clients.

She also led a colour workshop in Kitchener that introduced colour-sighted people to the notion of seeing in a different way. “My idea was to get the old 3-D movie glasses, with one red and one blue lens, to distort how they see,” she says.

She discovered that the experiment made some people uncomfortable. “I find that people don't like their vision distorted.”

For her, however, experimentation is a familiar state of being. “I think I'm always outside the comfort zone.”

In a lovely, century-old brick home in Kitchener with two resident cats, Felix and Oscar, paintings in black and white and misty grey share wall space with those with vivid colours and details.

A painting from the “Colour Blind Colour” series features a dark figure standing in front of a colourful graffiti-covered brick wall. Another shows a clerk grading apples in front of a downtown grocery store. The dark-haired woman is wearing blue; the apples in a brown

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bushel basket are red and yellow.

She may not see colour the way that others do, but it's everywhere in her home; in the yellow sunflowers in a blue vase on the kitchen counter; the red plaid shirt she's wearing; the display case with a mounted Blue Morpho butterfly; a fish that represents her own glass-blowing work.

The Blue Morpho butterfly, with its iridescent blue wings, speaks to her fascination with light when she was a teenager visiting the Cambridge Butterfly Conservatory.

"I was so struck by the electric vibrance of this," Sims says. "There is just something almost neon about it; that I think would be neon."

"To me, it's luminous. It's like a glow, a very cool glow. But doctors say there is no way I can possibly see that. I think it's the way the wavelength reflects back to my eye."

"I guess a butterfly's wings are prismatic," she says. "There's something about the way the light bounces off that particular genetic structure."

Inside her new studio – part of the garage transformed for her by a handy neighbour – there are colour-infused paintings on the walls and a striking black-and-white night scene of the moon casting long shadows through a forest of tall trees.

A tomato and eggplant sit on a table near a colour painting of the eggplant. "I chose 10 (tube) and black," she says, nodding at the eggplant. "I look at how the light hits it."

The studio is a cherished space, a bit like the moonlit forest where she loves to go. Here, she can work in low light. A string of twinkle lights hangs over a patterned grey-and-white patterned rug. The door's white paint has sparkles in it.

Similarly, the moonlit forest "is my place of comfort, my place of refuge. This is where I'm most at ease, at night because of low light and being around trees makes me happy."

"The moon is one thing I'll never get sick of looking at."

She listens to music while she paints. Her

favourite poet and singer is the late Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip. "He's got a way of describing his surroundings," she says. A large portrait that she painted to honour Downie looks down at her as she works.

"Music is sort of a driving force," Sims says. "It's my main inspiration besides the moon."

It took courage for Sims to begin experimenting with colour. Having grown up with what was generally regarded as a "disability," she was self-conscious at first about exploring the unknown.

"Anyone with a disability has been raised to see a disability and that they're 'less than' in some way and that does a number on you. Being afraid of colour was only natural. I was comparing myself to people who use colour."

"Once I got over that, it was really freeing."

Fine art photographer Patrick Wey, a

mentor when she was learning how to use photographs to help her see detail, encouraged her to be herself; to portray a reality that is different from everyone else's.

Use your unique vision, Wey urged her.

"I said, 'If you're painting, use whatever feels right,'" says Wey, an artist, entrepreneur and inventor who now lives on Vancouver Island. "A lot of artists are often trying to use unique colours in different areas that aren't normally used. Go wild with it. Something will come of it."

"I made her aware that what she has is a uniqueness rather than a disability," Wey says. "She's doing things other artists would really have to strive to do."

"She thinks out-of-the-box. I didn't have to teach her that. I'd say, 'Keep pushing and describe in your art what you see. It's not what other people see.'"

Sims was three years old when she was diagnosed with achromatopsia. When she received her first red-tinted glasses, she ran ahead of her father in the shop, not needing

to hold his hand for the first time.

But the red glasses and her unique vision resulted in daily bullying at school – until she got red contact lenses when she was in Grade 4.

That changed things. She was able to hide her differences. "My main aim in life was not to be picked on, to be popular. I gave up a lot of who I was to serve that."

"All of a sudden, I was part of the crowd that had bullied me."

She continued to try to fit in during high school. "I carried on, determined to be popular and not be outed for being different. It was a full-time job trying to hide and not getting what I needed at all" in terms of help with school work.

After high school, Sims worked as a personal trainer, well familiar with matters of kinesiology and exercise since her father, now a golf teaching professional, was a high school physical education teacher then.

She was painting for herself when a friend asked to exhibit one of her works at a show.

A gallery owner spotted Sims' black-and-white painting and encouraged Sims to exhibit more. People bought them.

It gave her focus. "All of a sudden, I had this reason to get up," Sims says. She quotes the lyrics of an Ani DiFranco song: "Art is the reason I get up in the morning, but my definition ends there. It doesn't seem fair that I'm living for something I can't even define."

At age 32, Sims entered Fleming College's fine arts program at the Haliburton School of Art and Design where she studied painting, drawing and glass-blowing.

"I'm very glad I did it, but it was tough," she says. With help from insightful instructors, artists Kim-Lee Kho and Kal Honey, she was able to forge ahead in the program where she discovered a passion for glass-blowing.

"Not everyone manages to push through the way she did. Not everyone challenges

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Paintings by Meghan Sims
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herself the way she did," Kho says.

Sims was a smart, self-possessed student who was skilful at interpreting what her eyes were seeing, Kho says. Eyes are information gatherers. Most of the perception of sight happens in the brain.

"She was the proof. It's only to a limited degree about the organs of sight. It's really what we do to it once it gets to our brain," Kho says.

The artists were not so surprised that

Sims, "an independent spirit," would show a preference for glass-blowing.

A bright glass-blowing furnace is only one of the challenges Sims faces.

"I'm a moth to the flame," Sims says with a smile. "I can't stay away from it. I need to do it. It's a light thing. Colour comes into it. The actual skill is very, very difficult and you have to have a lot of sight."

Artist John Kepkiewicz at his Thorn Glass Studio in Hawkesville has worked out an ingenious way to help Sims "see" the end of the long tube. It involves a mirror and reflected light.

Kepkiewicz, one of Canada's senior glass masters, has been teaching Sims the way of glass in the studio over the past five years.

"Glass is all hand-eye co-ordination," he says. "It's muscle memory. It's doing the same thing over and over. It's timing. Seconds can mean success or having it drop on the floor.

"One of Meghan's challenges is that she's light-sensitive. You've got a furnace you've got to look at. I can't imagine what she sees."

But Kepkiewicz says Sims has a knack for glass-blowing and he admires her creativity, determination and work ethic.

"I think she's an incredibly determined woman and very talented. She's very smart," he says. "Meghan likes a challenge and she doesn't like to give up.

"I think some people might think that it's totally impossible for her to do this. That's not going to stop her."

Sims will continue learning about glass with Kepkiewicz. "I hope my future is glass. I'm going to keep painting. This is my next frontier," she says.

"I'm going to take time now to look forward to just getting lost wherever the creativity takes me."

In 2017, her interest in trees took her to British Columbia so she could sit in its forests and take photographs. She soaked in the atmosphere from an old growth forest introduced to her by a friend who works

with Parks Canada.

"It was magic," she says. "If you went on a path, you could fall through three levels of moss."

Sims had never met anyone with achromatopsia until she was contacted by parents of a little boy who had the condition. She travelled to the Netherlands after finishing her degree and met the family, with whom she stays in touch.

One day, Sims would like to visit a tiny island six degrees north of the equator where colour-blindness in the population is the norm rather than the exception. Scientist Oliver Sacks wrote about the island in the book, "The Island of the Colorblind," which her scientist uncle had given to her parents. Sacks' videos also follow his journey to Pingelap where he describes, for example, how people fish when the sun goes down.

Sims is curious about what it would be like to "be the norm."

She has read about experimental gene therapy and seen videos featuring animals that received such therapy resulting in colour vision, and one about a donkey with achromatopsia that raced through a maze after the surgery.

She thinks about what it would be like to be able to see colour and definition as others do.

"Say it works; my whole world would totally change," she says. "Initially, it would be frightening. I've based my artistic career on perception and my perception."

She's open to asking questions about the research.

At the moment, however, she's spending more time helping others with visual challenges so they don't feel like hiding, as she once did, and she's exploring how she can communicate her unique vision.

"It's so hurtful not to be your authentic self," Sims says. ©

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