

Eric Avery Print Life: Neurogenesis 2016

Thanks to medical imaging, we now know that trauma doesn't just make people feel bad, it changes the anatomy of the brain. We also know that neurogenesis—the development of new neurons—enables the brain to reorganize itself, to compensate for injury and disease, to respond to changes in its environment by forming new neural connections. It is only in the past 20 years or so, however, that scientists have come to recognize that such neuroplasticity is not simply the province of infancy¹ and that areas of the hippocampus related to memory and mood regulation retain the ability to generate neurons throughout life. If biology is still destiny in some sense, it is an adaptable destiny.

As a physician who has endured, he explains, his “share of childhood trauma and survived the dissociative reenactments that followed in adult life,” Eric Avery is conscious of these things as both objective facts and subjective experiences. As an artist, he has found the physical act of making prints to be of critical therapeutic importance:

Carving woodblocks, cutting up rags and beating them into paper pulp to be used in printing, squeezing printing templates through presses under high pressure, has served me as a way to process trauma and work it through my two brains—the one in my head and the one in my body. Since the body also keeps the score, art making can access parts of experience often dissociated from verbal memory. Metaphorically, the bad stuff can be transformed into art.²

This transformation is the subject of Avery's project for Art in Art in Print—it represents, in terms both physical and poetic—the burgeoning of the emotional brain. The language used to describe the brain's adaptive self-management is

curiously rich in gardening allegories: synaptic connections are “pruned” in childhood; new neurons are “seeded” in the dentate gyrus of the hippocampus and the subventricular zone. In *Print Life: Neurogenesis 2016*, Avery gives literal form to these metaphors.

The template for the project is a large, Mexican pine serving bowl, some two feet long and 18 inches wide, on the inside of which Avery carved a representation of the cerebral cortex. (Avery has been carving and printing hybrid image-objects from carved bowls since 1987.) The surface was inked and wheat berry seeds were placed in the incised areas. Finally, paper pulp was pressed into the bowl “like pie dough in a pie pan.” The resulting object is part sculpture, part print, part garden—a black-and-white brain embedded with seeds that, when watered, germinated and grew into lawn-like verdancy. But paper—even thick, handmade, pulpy paper—is not a life-sustaining ground for wheat. After reaching a height of about seven inches the blades of grass began to fall over and die. This too, was part of the plan.

More than 40 years ago, returning from Somalia, Avery had visited the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where he had seen, among the hosts of objects jumbled in glass cases, a woven mat with ancient wheat grass that had once sprouted from its surface, then fallen to the side and dried into eternity. “It must,” he observes, “have been taken into the tomb while still growing and been left to die.”

Working with photographer and artist Roger Haile in North Carolina, Avery documented the growth of his wheat-covered brain over the course of seven days with time-lapse photography, and then assembled the image into a video. The pulsar soundtrack suggests to the artists the “sounds made by neurons firing as we think and feel.” For the journal, video frames have been transformed into

a flipbook, sitting in the corner of the opposite page. The video can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/195833703>.

Avery's goal with *Print Life: Neurogenesis 2016* was “a print as close as possible to life itself,” using printmaking to evoke the brain's neuroplasticity—the way our physiology serves to heal our psyches—and to remember “an Egyptian tomb offering to outer and inner space.” ■

Susan Tallman is the Editor-in-Chief of Art in Print.

Notes

1. Fred H. Gage, et al., “Neurogenesis in the Adult Hippocampus,” *Nature Medicine* 4, 1313–1317 (1998).
2. All quotes from Eric Avery from his statement on *Print Life: Neurogenesis 2016*, email, 12 Nov 2016.

Photos: B/W image by Todd Mason; “growth” images by Roger Haile.



