

NEWS

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

Julia Horton

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



Parkinson's drug brought a stroke of good fortune



His imaginative life seems to be getting more and more adventurous

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.

"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

McLean at work with brush and chisel, top; his work before Parkinson's struck, above left, and a recent painting, right

territory but it's also very rich. Some of his marks in the paint with the chisel are extraordinary."

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."

Brexit could affect supply of crucial drugs to Scotland

John Boothman

Fears have been raised that Brexit could severely disrupt the supply of drugs that are relied upon by thousands of people in Scotland with Parkinson's disease.

Annie Macleod, the new Scottish director of the charity Parkinson's UK, said she is "seriously concerned" that Britain's divorce from the EU will affect access to crucial medicines, forcing sufferers to switch to alternative brands. She warned that it could lead to "complications" – such as infections and falls – for many of those with the incurable condition.

"The medicines are currently manufactured in several EU countries and can have lengthy international supply chains. They can often be substituted, but for many people changes in supply of Parkinson's medication, or switching between branded drugs and generic versions, leads to sudden treatment failure with subsequent risk of serious complications."

The disease affects more than 12,000 people in Scotland, about one in 375 adults. Medication is the main treatment to control the symptoms of Parkinson's, which can include shaking and muscle stiffness.

Without it, people can be left unable to move, speak or swallow and can experience severe mental health symptoms. Sufferers need ongoing support from a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals and typically require more intensive social care as their condition progresses.

Michael Russell, minister for UK negotiations on Scotland's place in Europe, said concerns raised by the charity reflect similar worries expressed by pharmaceutical companies. "There is an increasing uncertainty regarding security of supply because of the continuing UK confusion about

adherence to vital EU medicines regulation."

Macleod also warned that a loss of research funding from the EU could have a "chilling" impact on efforts to find a cure for Parkinson's.

"If this funding is lost, it is not likely to be replaced by UK or Scottish government funding streams. It is imperative that researchers in Scotland and the rest of the UK are able to access EU funding programmes and collaborations."

Russell will brief the House of Lords tomorrow on the latest stage of opposition to the Brexit bill, specifically Clause 11, which would initially hand certain devolved powers back to Westminster.

Lord Steel of Aikwood, the former Liberal Democrat leader and founding presiding officer of the Scottish parliament, said: "Given that the SNP has no representatives in our legislative chamber, I have been in touch with Michael Russell to say that I shall put forward the complaint about the bill currently dragging EU powers back to Westminster rather than Edinburgh."

"That is the view not just of the SNP but of the Scottish parliament as a whole. We were promised amendments in the Commons, which did not materialise."



Macleod: 'serious concern'

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