

## EXHIBITION

# Changing expressions

## Laura Spinney

From his early forties, the German artist Lovis Corinth developed a habit of painting a self-portrait every year, just before his birthday. In 1911, at the age of 52, he painted himself in classical style, as a knight in armour. A year later, he portrayed himself as Samson blinded, a picture of agony in chains and a loincloth. In between, the artist had suffered a stroke in the right hemisphere of his brain.

Corinth's style evolved so dramatically over his career, from naturalism to impressionism to expressionism, that he defies classification and is often considered an outsider. Art historians and neurologists debate whether the neurological damage he sustained drove him to be unconventional, or whether it was incidental to his artistic development.

Once the most fashionable portrait painter in Berlin, Corinth tired of the city after experiencing his stroke and turned to rural landscapes. Like the impressionists, he revisited the same spot — his beloved Walchensee in southern Germany — and painted it at different times of the day and year. In the last decade of his life, his preferred medium was drypoint,

a kind of printmaking, and his style became more sensitive and expressive.

One theme throughout his work is a fascination for flesh and the body. His interest in the visceral took him to places other painters feared to go, such as the slaughterhouse. But whereas his early paintings celebrated nudity in biblical scenes, his later ones dwelt on more morbid aspects, including the skeleton and death. The earlier works were subversive takes on the old masters, but still naturalistic; the later ones, with their violent brushstrokes and free use of primary colours, were much more expressive.

To resolve the issue of his evolving style, some scholars have turned to the unbroken record of the self-portraits. Corinth's stroke left him with the inability to process visuospatial information in the left side of his visual field, but how long this deficiency lasted is itself a matter of dispute. It is striking that in the earlier self-portraits he tends to be turned towards the left; in the later ones, towards the right. In an oil painting from 1925, he is also turned rightwards, but a mirror reflects his gaze back towards the left. Perhaps that was a final attempt at compensation — he didn't live to see his next birthday. ■



KUNSTHAUS, ZÜRICH

Lovis Corinth's *Last Self-portrait* may reflect stroke damage to his brain's right side.

Laura Spinney is a science writer based in London and Paris, and author of the novel *The Quick*.

**Lovis Corinth (1858–1925): *Between Impressionism and Expressionism* is at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, until 22 June.**

## EXHIBITION

# Etching the artist's mind

## Colin Martin

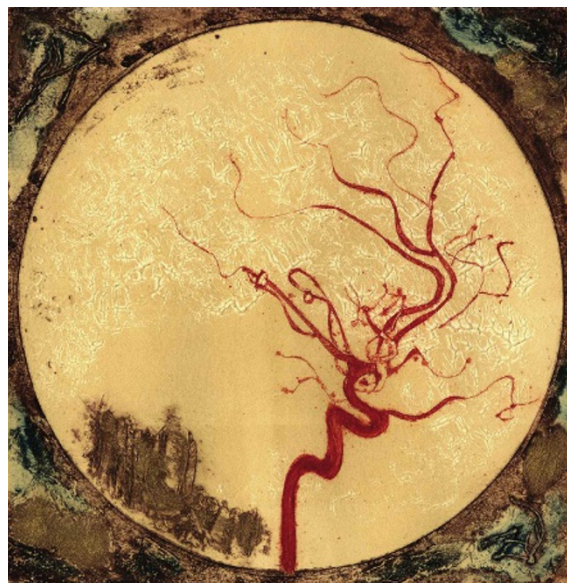
Artist Susan Aldworth's interest in neuroscience was triggered during an emergency cerebral angiogram in 1999, while observing her brain's structure on a monitor. "You are looking inside your head while thinking, seeing, feeling; your brain is working while you are looking inside it," she marvelled.

In 2005, as artist-in-residence at the Royal London Hospital, UK, Aldworth sketched works on location in hospital clinics and collaborated with consultant neuroradiologist Paul Butler and neuropsychologist Paul Broks.

*Scribing the Soul* is her personal exploration of how matter becomes mind. Now on display in Oxford, UK, the exhibition will move to galleries across the United Kingdom next month.

In a series of prints entitled *Brainscape*, Aldworth chose etching as a medium for exploring cognition because, like neurotransmission, it uses chemical reactions. Delicate surface effects were created by drawing on metal plates with marker pens and then dipping the plates quickly in acid. Ghostly lines flicker across the

surfaces of the etchings, printed from the blue-inked plates. Her fast etching process is a metaphor for rapidly firing cerebral neurons, and the resulting cognitive 'blueprints' capture the nanoseconds when "flesh thinks".



Cerebral art: Susan Aldworth's *Between a Thing and a Thought*.

The surfaces of 20 etched plates, displayed as a wall-mounted grid, simultaneously absorb and reflect light, alternately evoking dull and scintillating thoughts. In two kaleidoscopic films, images of Aldworth's brain obtained during a functional magnetic resonance imaging scan are incorporated as a sequence of rapidly changing frames.

Aldworth's latest series of etchings, *The Self is a Shadow Puppet*, dramatizes the convoluted topography of the brain, its neural network and blood vessels. In one, a pair of ghostly hands reaches out of the dark background towards a disembodied brain, straining to touch its intangible, mysterious consciousness.

In his introduction to the exhibition, Broks makes the argument that our understanding of consciousness benefits from artists and scientists looking at it collaboratively. "The self is a shadow puppet shaped by the firings of a hundred billion brain cells," he writes. "These are conceptual conundrums. Intractable to current science, they call for an artistic response." ■ Colin Martin is a writer based in London.

***Scribing the Soul* runs at Science Oxford, Oxford, UK, until 23 May; at Peninsula Arts in Plymouth, UK, from 7 June to 18 July; and at the Transition Gallery in London from 26 July to 17 August.**

S. ALDORTH