Hadley Presents

Painting Blind

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, artist John Bramblitt joins us to share his story. Welcome to the show, John.

John Bramblitt: Thank you so much for having me, I've been looking forward to this.

Ricky Enger: Yes, me too, I've been really, really excited. It's so great to have you on the show and you have this incredible list of accomplishments. It's really impressive. You know, you've gotten Presidential Service Awards. You've written a book and all sorts of really really cool stuff. But you know, I always think it's more fascinating to rather than do this big introduction myself, just to see what people like to highlight about themselves when they introduce themselves. So why don't you just tell us a little bit about who you are.

John Bramblitt: I'm an artist and I'm a father and I'm a husband and I'm totally blown away about how life can go completely different than how you would ever plan. Oh my goodness. So, I lost my eyesight when I was in college and I was fortunate because I had done art all my life. I had drawn. I think I could draw before I could walk. And you know, in art was a way for me to deal with bad times and good times. And I was sick a lot as a child. So, art was just my way of dealing with that. And then whenever I lost my eyesight, I thought art was gone. You know, they'd left me forever, but life is so strange. It just, you know, it comes back and you just, you know it's hard to make long-term plans. Just never know what life's going to give you but it's better I think to stick it, to call some audibles and roll with it.

Ricky Enger: You got that right. So, you mentioned that you could draw before you could walk. That was like your thing is drawing. And then when you lost your vision you switched to painting. So, can you talk about like what made painting appeal to you more so than drawing after you lost your vision? Or what was the transition like?

John Bramblitt: Whenever I started this, it was in 2001 and there weren't really blind painters out there. So, first off, I thought I was out of my mind. I thought I had lost my mind. I, you know, because I was a blind person, I was learning how to use a cane. I was going to classes at school, but I would have to have someone guide me to the classes. And, you know, in the idea that, you know, there was, there were no books, there were no classes or anything on how to paint for a visually impaired person. And I didn't know any other blind painters. I was pretty sure that whenever I let people know that I was starting to paint that they would come after me with a butterfly net or something, you know, they thought, Oh, John's finally lost it now, but so I didn't really tell anybody it's my little secret. But the wonderful thing about paint though is that you can touch and feel it. And I'd always been such a visual person. You know, I can look at something and I could draw it either with paint though you can actually feel the lines of the paint and the old way that I used to draw with charcoal and pencils and pens and things that was wonderful, but you couldn't feel the lines anymore.

So, I started experimenting with paint, mixing different mediums in with the paint. So that I could draw lines that were actually raised up from the canvas so that I can touch and feel them. And you know, one of the things that you start, that starts happening whenever you lose your eyesight, is that you start learning how to use your other senses to replace the ones that your eyes used to do. And a big one for me, were my hands, you know and even like with a white cane or a guide dog like I have a guide dog named Eagle that's asleep right now down by my feet. But the way that you use, you know a guide dog, or a white cane is through your sense of touch and there's different ways to be able to use your touch to know where you are to orient yourself, you know to know like where the door is, where it couches, where the curve is, and be able to navigate a room, a city. But I started learning this and I thought, “Good grief, if I can use my sense of touch to be able to leave my apartment and find the campus, surely, I would be able to find my way across a canvas again.” And during this time, you know, I'd always use art to be able to deal with bad feelings. I, you know, growing up, I had kidney problems. I had to have a kidney removed by the time I was seven. I had a severe epilepsy that just got worse and some neurological problems and ended up getting Lyme disease.

And I was just in and out of hospitals all throughout my childhood, but I never felt, I don't know, I never felt disabled. I never felt different or anything. And a big part of that was my family. But the other part was art. ‘Cause, you know, if I had a bad day, art made that day better, that a good day art was a great way to celebrate that day. And that worked all the way up until college until I lost my eyesight. And I thought that I couldn't have art anymore. But then when I started learning how to use my sense of touch to replace what my eyes did. It was just, I don't, you know, I don't want to say that it was like a dramatic sort of thing, like aww, ‘cause it wasn't really that it sort of snuck in. It was really slow. It took a long time to learn how to draw.

But I started getting hope back in my life. I was so depressed, and I was incredibly angry. I didn't even realize how angry and depressed I was, but you know it was just what it was more than I'd ever been. I never experienced that much anger, depression. And on the surface, I don't think I really seem that angry. You know, my family, my friends everybody thought I was adjusting really well. You know, I was learning braille, I was learning screen readers, how to use computers. Sewing on buttons without sticking yourself with a needle too many times you know, how to eat food without getting it all over you and how to cook food. Oh my goodness. I loved to cook, but I had no idea as a sighted person, how many sharp, pointy hot things there were in a kitchen, you know. So, you're learning how to redo everything in your life. And also, I was an English major at school at the time and I was functionally illiterate then, you know because I couldn't see the paper and I couldn't see to write. So, I had to relearn how to do all that. And I was just angry, Oh my goodness.

Ricky Enger: I would imagine, I mean there's a lot going on there and for the main outlet that you usually had to take out or let out those feelings and express those feelings was initially you didn't have that anymore because it was such a visual thing, right? So, there was a lot for you to learn and to go through at the same time as you were learning just to live daily life. Were there things that you learned something kind of in a daily living sort of way and then that transmitted itself to a way that you handled getting art onto the canvas, or maybe, maybe vice versa, maybe you were, you had a canvas technique and you're like, “Oh, I could use that to identify other stuff in my house as well.”

John Bramblitt: You know, I did have an a-ha moment. It had been about a year since I lost the last bit of my vision and I was still a student at the university, but I’d finally learn how to use a white cane and travel independently. I could leave my apartment and I didn't need to have a sighted guide anymore. I could just do it by myself. And I wasn't that good at it. I was still kind of break out in a cold sweat every time I crossed the street because you're listening to engine sounds and trying to listen if the car is going left or right all this weird stuff that I wasn't used to then, but I was walking down the street and I was using my cane to feel the sidewalk. And with the cane, you can feel the smoothness and roughness of the concrete. You can feel the cracks in the concrete. You can feel the grass on the side or anything that's a little bit different. And then when you come across a fire hydrant or a tree then that's a big marker, you know, because there's only one place that particular tree is. Or when you come to a cross streets, there's only one place in the whole city that those streets cross. So, when you hit that, you know exactly where you are in the entire city and you're doing it through touch. Now you're holding onto the cane, but the cane is just like an extension of your fingers. So, you're just feeling around, and use these different techniques to do it. And I happened to think while I was walking one day, you know, I thought, well, this curve is just like a line running down through the city and it's just hitting another line that's crossing it, you know another curve. Now I thought, well, my goodness, if I can touch these curves and walk through this 3D sort of environment, you know where there's people, there's cars, there's motorcycles all this stuff going on, surely I could reproduce this on a canvas and a much simpler way where there's no people or cars or motorcycles whizzing by. And so that was sort of an a-ha moment for that. And then it's funny, like the more that I, because I use what are called orientation and mobility techniques and my painting, that's the techniques you use for with a white cane and with a guide dog. Since I use those with my painting, it means that whenever I'm walking around or whatever I'm eating or anything that I'm using, I'm needing to use my sense of touch to orient myself. It explodes, it's so much better. The more I paint, the easier it is for me to get around in the actual world. And the more that I get around in the actual world the more it helps my painting.

And this is something that we've started teaching children in schools for the blind all over the country, and actually the US is sending us outside of the country to go to other places. And it's incredible because these children will learn how to paint. You know, this first time in history you have non-visual, visual artists. You have children who are visually impaired actually learning how to paint and it's affecting their life. It's making it where they can get up from their chair. They can walk around the room, they can do whatever they want and they can do it independently. And it's all because of art. And I'm such a nerd. I'm such a fan of art that it just, every time I think about that, it just gives me a warm feeling.

Ricky Enger: It's such an amazing connection and one that doesn't immediately seem obvious but when you point it out, it certainly is that if you're orienting yourself in space within the world or if you're using those same kind of spatial techniques to orient yourself on the paper, now you're starting to think about things in relation to other things and this beautiful connection is born. That's really, really cool.

John Bramblitt: It does make sense when you say it like that. I wish I could say I was so smart that I knew that would happen, but I just thought I was crazy just doing some weird stuff you know, but life is kind of wonderful in a way because it gave me what I needed to be able to heal and feel better.

Ricky Enger: Can you talk about the techniques that you use cause you've kind of touched on this a little bit in that you are using your sense of touch to determine what you've painted. Can you talk a little about, I know that you mix colors in certain ways and you do a few other things just to enhance that tactile experience as you're painting? So how do you do that as a non-visual person? And one thing a lot of people say when they look at your paintings, oh, they're so vibrant and colorful. So just talk about how you do that.

John Bramblitt: And I'll preface this saying that, whenever you hear about how I do it a lot of times people think, oh that sounds like it's hard to do or it's difficult. But one of the things I do, I work with museums all over the country- work with the Metropolitan, Guggenheim, dozens and dozens of museums. And I do a workshop where I blindfold people. And I showed them how to paint the way that I paint. And I do it in about five minutes. And in about five to 10 minutes, everybody's painting. And we're doing like cartoon sort of characters.

But it's funny though, because at the beginning of it people were like, “Oh my goodness I don't think I can do that.” Then they get started in it and they go, “Oh!” and it in clicks. But the way that I paint though is by using my sense of touch to do the work that my eyes used to do. Whenever I draw, I always draw out my paintings first. And I just use paint that I can touch and feel. So, a lot of times I even draw on white paint on a white canvas. So, it's hard for people to see it but I can feel it so for me, it's perfect. It's not going interfere with the color later on.

But I just have to be able to feel it and when I first started, the lines had to be really, really thick and I could only draw very big things. So, I couldn't do a lot of detail. There was no blending of color. There was no shading, you know but this is almost like 21 years ago. So, this was very simplistic. If you were here with me in my studio right now, you would look around the studio and you would see paintings throughout the years. And they started out very simplistic with these giant raised lines. But over time, the lines gets smaller and smaller because it's just like anything the more you do it, the better you get at it. You know, I don't really need these giant thick lines anymore.

But color is the most fun now. And I thought it was going to be the hardest thing because how in the world do you pick colors and control colors and mix colors if you can't see them? I thought that just sounds crazy, but it's actually really, really easy and there's several ways to do it. But the most fun way is by changing the way the color feels. So, I'll take different mediums and mix it in with the paint. So, what a medium is, well, when you have paint like if you just, if you break paint down to the very basics, you have the color, and then you have the stuff that holds the color together which is like the medium, it's a sticky stuff. But you can actually change that sticky stuff. You can change the medium and you can make it looser. You can make it runny. You can make it feel like water or like satin. You can make it really thick where it's like putty or even so, so hard and thick that it's almost like stone. You've got a carving. So, you've got this wonderful range of different textures that you can use. So, I can mix a medium into my white to make it really thick and gummy where it feels almost like toothpaste. So yeah, I've got this very, very thick white, that I can mix a different medium and with my black and make it feel like oil. So, it's really runny and it's really oily feeling. And because I had these two colors on my palette that are so different. If I touch the thick paint, I know it's got to be white. There's no way it's black. You know so it makes it really easy to know which color is which.

But if I want to mix the colors, it also helps with that. Because if I want it gray halfway between the black and the white, I just mix for the texture, the feel of it, that's halfway between the way the white fields and the black fields. So, it's a little, you know, it's a little thick, it's a little runny, but it's right in the middle. And then the color is also in the middle. And then I can go from there. If I want to have lighter than that, then I just go you know, I mix it for the half lighter for the texture. So, and it actually gives you a really great way to be able to control the color in a very precise way.

Our hands are fantastic at being able to feel detail. We have over 200 touch receptors on the pad of each finger, and their whole job is just to feel the viscosity of things and how thick and how thin they are. And so, you know, and they're there so that, you know in life, we can touch things and move things around without having to look at them all the time. You know, if you think about it you actually use this a lot in your day-to-day life.

Like if you're driving a car, you're probably looking out the window. You know, you're not looking at your hands on the wheel. You're not, if you have a manual you're not necessarily looking down every time you shift it or if you want to turn your volume up or down, you don't necessarily look over to the volume. You can find it with your fingers, you can feel it. You can feel the buttons that you want to push. I have a 12-year-old son and he plays PlayStation, Xbox all that kind of fun stuff. And the controllers, oh my goodness. When I was a kid, you've got a controller that had like two buttons on it. And that was it.

Ricky Enger: Yes, and now you got the bumpers and triggers, right.

John Bramblitt: Covered in things. But he never looks at the controller. You know, he's off in his own little world, you know, doing things and you learn how to be able to do that. Or if you play guitar, you know, at first, you're looking at your fingers, making the chords, and then after a while, you're not even thinking about it. We do this all the time with our sense of touch. I didn't know, as a sighted person though, that you could use your sense of touch to replace your eyes and a lot of things. And that came as a big surprise to me.

The more that I do it, the better I get at it. It does for me now, what it did for me then, every brush stroke that I make. I'm not thinking about anything in the past. I'm not worried about anything that I lost. I'm not, I'm also not concerned about anything in the future. I'm not worried about, you know, I'm only thinking about the paint on the end of that brush. So, I'm living in the moment and it's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling, you know, and I paint eight to 14 hours, seven days a week. For me, it's my way of living. It's my way of saying, and it's my way of expressing myself. So, it's just, you know, it's just been a wonderful gift.

Ricky Enger: Now if I understand correctly when the paint dries, so once you've painted something and once its dries, you aren't still able to feel that level of detail that you have as you're actually creating the painting. Is that right?

John Bramblitt: That's true. Well, it depends on the painting, but most of the paintings that I do, one of the things that I wanted to make sure when I started painting was that I wanted my paintings to look like anybody could have done them, you know, so that a sighted person could have done the painting. So even though I'm mixing all these mediums in with them, I want it to look like a regular finished painting.

Part of the reason I started painting was to let people know I'm still in here. I can still do things. I'm, you know, I'm relevant. Whenever you lose your eyesight, sometimes you feel a little invisible. And so. I just wanted to let people know, “Hey, I'm here, I still understand things.” And it's funny because you know, when your eyesight's gone, people don't realize sometimes what you understand. But you know, it's funny, like if your aunt comes in the room and you've known her your entire life and you know, and you haven't been blind that long, but she comes in the room, you can hear talking to your cousins and the rest of your family. And then she comes, you know it comes over and says, “Hi, John, I'm your Aunt Donna.”

Ricky Enger: Right, as if you would suddenly forget somehow.

John Bramblitt: I lost my eyesight. I didn't get it in my head, Donna, but thanks so much. I'm going to give her a big hug. But then on the other hand, there might be a commercial on TV and there's like an explosions and people running. And you know, you ask, “What in the heck was that about?” So, you do miss things, but I wanted to let people know I was still me in there. So, whenever the paint does dry, it feels mostly like any painting that anybody could have done. It's when it's wet that it really kind of helps me. Although there are some paintings where I use a lot of texture in that remains, there's some paintings if I know the people with visual impairments are going to be seeing the painting, then I'll make sure to leave raised lines and I'll try to make it more textually interesting. And the new series that I'm working on right now is some of the most textured stuff I've ever done in my life.

Ricky Enger: So that brings up the question for me then if you're not intentionally adding a lot of texture to the finished product, and you don't feel the paint once it's dry, you know, when you're painting it's sort of this method of expressing yourself. And once that's done, has it served its purpose or are you able to enjoy your work once it's done? Like, do you talk with somebody else about, “Hey, describe this painting that I did three years ago. I want to kind of revisit what that was like.”

John Bramblitt: You know, what's funny, I'm kind of weird in that I remember my paintings really, really, really well. It is strange that I can't go back and feel parts of them sometime, but the little bits that I can feel it's enough to trigger it and remind me like, oh, this is this step. And that's that step. But whenever I do a painting, now I have to come up with different steps that I'm going to do it in because I have to be able to touch it, you know to know what I did and to make sure that I'm where I think I am.

So, at first it was sort of easy. I had very two dimensional, like very like one-layer paintings. So, I could do one drawing and that was good for the painting. But now though, I may do tons of drawings on a painting. So, I may do a drawing and then that actually gets covered up with paint. I may do a wash or a tint on it. And then, I'll do a different drawing that gives me new lines to feel for the next part of the painting, you know, and then that might get covered up. And then I'll do another drawing for the next part of the painting. And then, so that all gets covered up. But you know, for each stage though I can feel what I need to feel, and I've planned it out in my mind. I know, okay, I'm going to do a beach scene. I'm going to have a couple. And they're very much in love. And I'm going to base the colors off this music that these people love over here. And I have step one through 20 that I want to do to be able to do that.

Ricky Enger: Do you think that vision loss has impacted the subjects of your painting cause you do paint a pretty wide variety of things, but do you think that you would have been painting different things if you still had your vision?

John Bramblitt: I do, I do. And I think it actually helped my vision in a way. I know that my drawing changed after losing my eyesight when I was a sighted artist, I can do the blueprints for houses, I could do cartoons, I can do portraits of people. I love to draw. And you drew every day, you know I took every class I could on drawing. And if I did a portrait of a person and the portrait actually looked like the person like it was a really good likeness of the person that I was, that I would think, oh, that's a good drawing.

After losing my eyesight, I still wanted it to look like the person, at least with basic lines. I wanted somebody to be able to look at it and go, “Oh, that's Tony Hawk” or “Oh, that's my Aunt Sally.” Or, you know, or whoever it became more important that it felt like the person too though. I became so interested in perception. If we had a family member walk into the room right now. And if we were in a large group of people, everybody in that group would see that our family member walk in they would see what clothes they were wearing, what color their hair was. Well, you know, the hairdo they had on, how they carry themselves all of this, they would all get the same information.

And yet everybody would have a different idea about what that person might be like. One person might go like, “Oh I really like that person, that seems like somebody I'd want to go talk to you.” And somebody else might think, “Oh, that's it seems like a really angry person.” It's a perception that's so interesting to me because, you know we all get the same information yet. How we actually view it is different. And that's, you know, perception just takes place in the mind. And as I started to realize that more and more so in my paintings, I wanted to pick the way things look, but I also wanted to pick the way they feel or at least the way they make me feel. And I think one reason I paint everything is because painting is my way of seeing the world.

Which is where a lot of my friends ended up in my paintings because I'll feel their faces and I want to see what they look like. And so, it's a lot of times a friend of mine and we'll go walk through my house and then they'll suddenly they'll pause in the hall because maybe they're next to a rocket ship.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, they've seen their likeness somewhere oh.

John Bramblitt: And it's, but I love to try and envision different things. I love to travel, and I love to get my hands on as much as I can, and then try to put that into the artwork.

Ricky Enger: I think that's wonderful. And I think it shows just based on when people describe your art, they always describe it in terms of not only what it looks like but the feelings that it evokes. And I think that's really what art is all about.

John Bramblitt: Thank you for saying that by the way then that makes me feel good. All I wanted to do when I started painting was to connect with people and I can't tell you how much of a shock it is that I've actually connected with people. It's just a wonderful shock. It's just huge, I mean there's not a day that goes by that I don't walk into my studio and just say how what a lucky person I am. You know, and I started out with it with, as an epileptic and was blind and felt completely alone and isolated, to now where I'm an epileptic who's blind and I'm happier than I've ever been in my life.

Ricky Enger: That's incredible. I just have one last question for you. I have to say, I love the phrase, non-visual, visual artists. The thing about it is though when you hear visual art it kind of sounds like vision, sight is a prerequisite for doing it. And that's obviously not the case cause you've proven that. So, I know that there are people listening to this right now who, they have an artistic bent and maybe they're losing their vision or maybe they've always been blind, but they still want to express themselves in this inherently visual medium. And you've proven that, that can be done. What would you say to somebody they have this art, that's just waiting to come out through their fingertips, and they want to do it but they're a little bit afraid? What would you say to them?

John Bramblitt: You know, I would say the same thing. If you're a person who is blind, if you're visually impaired, or if you're not. Art comes from your mind, you know perception is actually takes place in your brain. It doesn't take place in your eyes. In the same struggles that you have as a non-visual artist are the same ones you have as a visual artists. You're trying to take your thoughts, your ideas, your emotions, you know from inside of you and put them outside so that other people can understand them as well. And it takes a lot of practice and it takes an intense amount of failure.

I think that's one of the most important things is that you need to be failing and you need to fail a lot, you know and then you need to be okay with it. And take those mistakes and just go with it. You know, and I've been able to talk to quite a few successful people in their careers. And whenever I get a chance to talk to someone that I admire, I always ask the same question. What did you do to get where you are like, you know is there a tip that you can give me? And the crazy thing is almost every time they tell me you need to fail.

You know, if you're not failing then you're probably not trying enough new things. And if you don't, so just fail, be okay with it. It's incredible how much your failure will push you forward. And the great thing about art is that people don't really see your failure. You just show them that the successes. You've got the 10 paintings hanging in the gallery. They're all nice. You don't see the hundred back in the studio-

Ricky Enger: That's it.

John Bramblitt: -that are crazy.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely, John, if people want to find out more about you, if they want to check out your paintings, where can they go to do that? My website is just my last name and it's bramblitt.com. And on Facebook, I'm Bramblitt, Instagram I’m Bramblitt. And we do a livestream about once a week, every 8:00 p.m. on Tuesdays Central Time, we do a livestream on Facebook where we just get on there and chat, and I talk about art stuff. And if people have questions, we'll do questions and other artists will get on there every once in a while. And it's a very laid-back time where we just hang out. But it's also a great time for people to come and get information, you know, if they want to, you know if they want to chat in real time

Ricky Enger: That sounds awesome. We'll have all of those links in our show notes for you to check out and certainly tune into Facebook. Sounds like a great place to be. John, thank you so, so much for joining us. I love your story. I love your passion. I really appreciate your sharing with us.

John Bramblitt: Ricky, thank you so much for having me. This has been so much fun.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's p-o-d-c-a-s-t@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.