DESIGN IN THE DARK

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I was 17 when I discovered that for most people “picture this” is more than just a figure of speech. Aphantasia is the inability to voluntarily create mental imagery. Only about an estimated 4% of the population experience this. I'm a part of that 4% and I'm a graphic designer. So what happens when a designer can’t use their mind’s eye? As more artists begin to speak openly about this neurological difference, that question becomes harder to ignore. What role does visualization really play in design? More personally: do I have a future in this field, or am I doomed to always be at a disadvantage?

To address this question, I first needed to explore where the idea of visualization originated and how it became so deeply embedded in design thinking. The concept itself can be traced back to early psychological studies of mental imagery, which established that people are capable of thinking in images as well as words. As these ideas gained traction, they were adopted by artists and designers and eventually absorbed into design education. Over time, visualization began to be treated as more than just a helpful tool, but as a necessity.

Many still reinforce the idea that visualization is a non-negotiable requirement for creativity. In an article published on *Medium,* titled *“The Importance of Using Visualization Tools in the Design Process,”* Anthony Nzouke argues that “visualization is important for the process of design,” allowing designers to think beyond language and access parts of the brain not typically used in verbal communication. He goes on to describe visualization as a “core component” of how we communicate, whether we are aware of it or not. This perspective is far from unique. For decades, design education has promoted the belief that to design effectively, one must first be able to visualize.

If this is the case, why are there so many artists who thrive despite missing this ability? For example, Glen Keane is an Oscar-winning animator who worked for Disney for over 35 years. His work includes Ariel from The Little Mermaid, The Beast from Beauty and the Beast, and so much more. Keane also has aphantasia. His process is described in his words as “an explosion of scribbles.” He then revises lines until they start to resemble the forms he wants.

Peta Tranquille, a multidisciplinary artist from Australia, talks about her process in an article published by the Aphantasia Network. When faced with the challenge of visualizing a dark cave, she leaned on her technical abilities such as drafting and sketching. Once she had her initial sketch, she revised it and looked to photographic references to create the final product. She says, “This project helped me realise I can use my ability to draw and analyse to dissect a narrative and create something that doesn’t exist while still reflecting my artistic ability. So, while I still have further exploration, I achieved something I had never done before as a visual artist with aphantasia; I drew something I couldn’t “see.” (Tranquille)

Studying other artists and their experiences led me to examine my own artistic process. I learned it is not far off from others who struggle with aphantasia. First, I have to start with a concept. Once that's

decided, I list out visual representations that could convey my desired meaning. Then the sketching begins. There is some imagery that I've learned to create through muscle memory. This includes the simple things I've been doodling since I was a kid. Trees, apples, animals, buildings, etc. The rest, I have to rely on photographic references. Once I know the elements that need to be in the design, I collage them together and add or simplify as the project demands.

Unfortunately, it's not always so simple. There are moments where I can't grasp onto a concept or where none of my visual representations seem sufficient. In moments like this, things tend to break into a visual cacophony of scribbles and words until something functional but abstract emerges. These moments, while frustrating, are not unproductive. They force me to engage more directly with the work in front of me rather than an idea in my head. Instead of executing a preconceived image, I respond to what is emerging on the page. The process becomes iterative rather than imaginative.

As I compared my process with those of other artists, I began to realize that what I initially viewed as a limitation was actually a different way of problem solving. Instead of relying on internal visualization, my work is built through gathering, arranging, and refining visual information in real time. The process becomes less about imagining a finished image and more about discovering one. So the question remains, am I always doomed to be at a disadvantage? Short answer: no. This study has taught me that visualization isn't the only tool to make a designer successful. I interviewed my fellow designers and was amazed at how differently we all see inside our minds. Some could see in 3D, even move objects around while performing other tasks. While others experienced their mental imagery in quick flashes, faded concepts, or stagnant imagery. There were even some who mentioned an emotional component that strengthened their mind's vividness depending on how deeply they felt about what they were imagining.

What became most apparent through these conversations was not just the range of visualization abilities, but how little those differences predicted the quality of the final work. Designers who described vivid, detailed mental imagery did not necessarily produce stronger outcomes than those whose mental experiences were more fuzzy or convoluted. In many cases, the process itself was way less important than the designer’s creative ideas and their final outputs. This further challenges the assumption that visualization is a prerequisite for effective design.

It is a fact that aphantasia exists on a spectrum but through my research I’ve come to understand that visualization itself is not a fixed ability. Instead it, too, exists on a spectrum. If every designer experiences mental imagery differently, then the expectation of visualization as a universal standard begins to fall apart. What is often treated as a fundamental is in reality, only one way of approaching creative development. If we continue to position visualization as essential, we unintentionally exclude those who think and create in other ways. In the end, good design is not defined by how clearly we imagine ideas, but how effectively we bring those ideas to life.