

PETER WIARDA

Synæsthesia: Visualizing Sound Through Photography

Synæsthesia is a neurological condition in which two or more of the senses are linked together, resulting in a combination of sensory or cognitive perceptions. I have a type of synæsthesia in which I am able to “see” sound. Every sound I hear has a corresponding visual element that appears in my field of vision, overlapping my entire visible world with colorful, undulating abstract forms that change as quickly as sound travels. I create abstract representations of my synæsthetic experiences of sound and music through photography.

Using long exposures to pan the camera across multicolored neon lights, I am able to replicate visual effects similar to my synæsthetic manifestations. I have developed a range of focus settings and camera motions to represent the different types of sonic expressions I see. It is a highly intuitive process that requires much trial and error to produce a satisfactory image. I primarily work in digital photography for this reason; the finished artwork may be my 10th, 20th, or 50th iteration.

Though I was born with synæsthesia, I didn’t realize it was unusual to see sound until 2014 when I heard about a person with a similar condition on an episode of Radiolab. I started this project as an attempt to show the world what only I can see. By visualizing synæsthesia through photography, I hope to inspire fellow synæsthetes to explore how their own unique perceptions can be utilized in art. In addition, I hope that my project can be used to bring awareness to the general public about this rare and little-understood brain condition.