

LIFE ON THE SPECTRUM



was born in the village of Eynsford in Kent. I lived in the area for many years before moving away from the support offered by my family. The world is a complex and difficult place in general, but for me, it's doubly so. When I was 26 I was diagnosed with autism. It's a developmental disability that affects the brain, commonly characterised by poor social skills, and it still isn't fully understood by science. Over 700,000 people in the United Kingdom alone are on the autism spectrum.

It affects me daily: I don't understand social interaction, and that makes me shy away from people. Unfortunately for me, I happen to like being around people.

My condition is also responsible for sensory difficulties. I have a sensitivity to light, so I wear glasses with photochromic lenses that darken when I go out. I also have sensitivity to different pitches of sound.

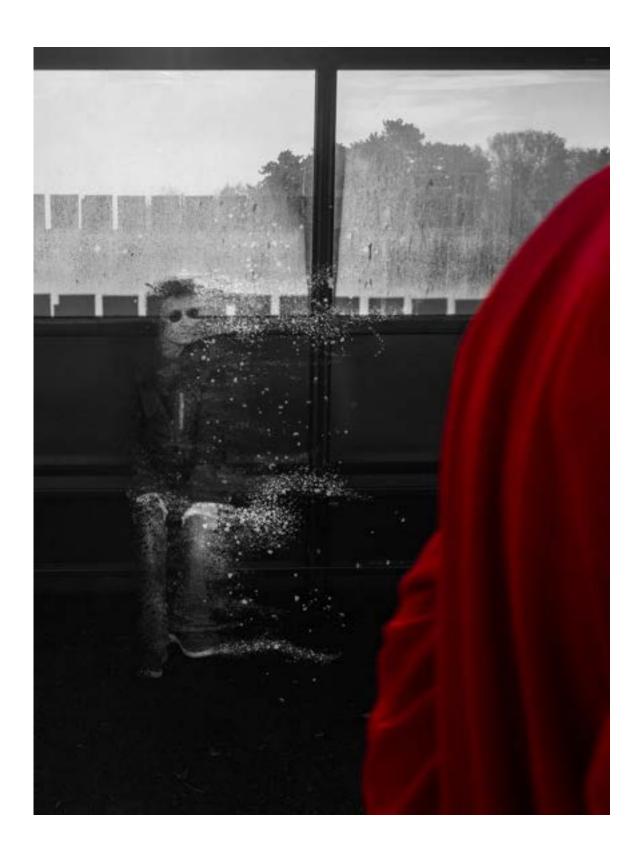
When I'm in a coffee shop, I get stressed and uptight after a short space of time. I find it difficult to cope with the combination of sensory information I find there. I often end up leaving early. If I could, I'd prefer to stay, finish my coffee, and interact with the interesting people having conversations around me. To cope with everyday life, I live it in bite-sized pieces. I limit myself, so I don't become overloaded. The form overload takes is difficult to describe. While overloaded, an autistic person needs to be given peace and quiet. By the time it's done, I've usually managed to alienate the people that were around at the time it happened.

When I try to communicate, I fumble and mangle my words. I have several qualifications in information technology and photography, but I have never had a full-time permanent job. I can never seem to pass a job interview. Fewer than 17% of all autistic people are employed. That is the largest unemployment figure for any disability in the UK today.

Through my art, I'm trying to effectively communicate what it is like for me to be autistic. I want to demonstrate what it is like. I want to be understood. Communication is key to forming meaningful relationships, and my lack of ability in that area shouldn't be mistaken for a lack of interest in making friends.

To understand people like me, the public needs to understand how autistic people see the world. So, I create images to help get to know me, and my autism, a little better.

Swept Away
Sensitivity: Light
Sensitivity: Sound
Sanctuary
Meltdown
Self-Portrait
Trapped
Look at me
My World (Outside)
My World (Inside)
Escape
Cabinet Card



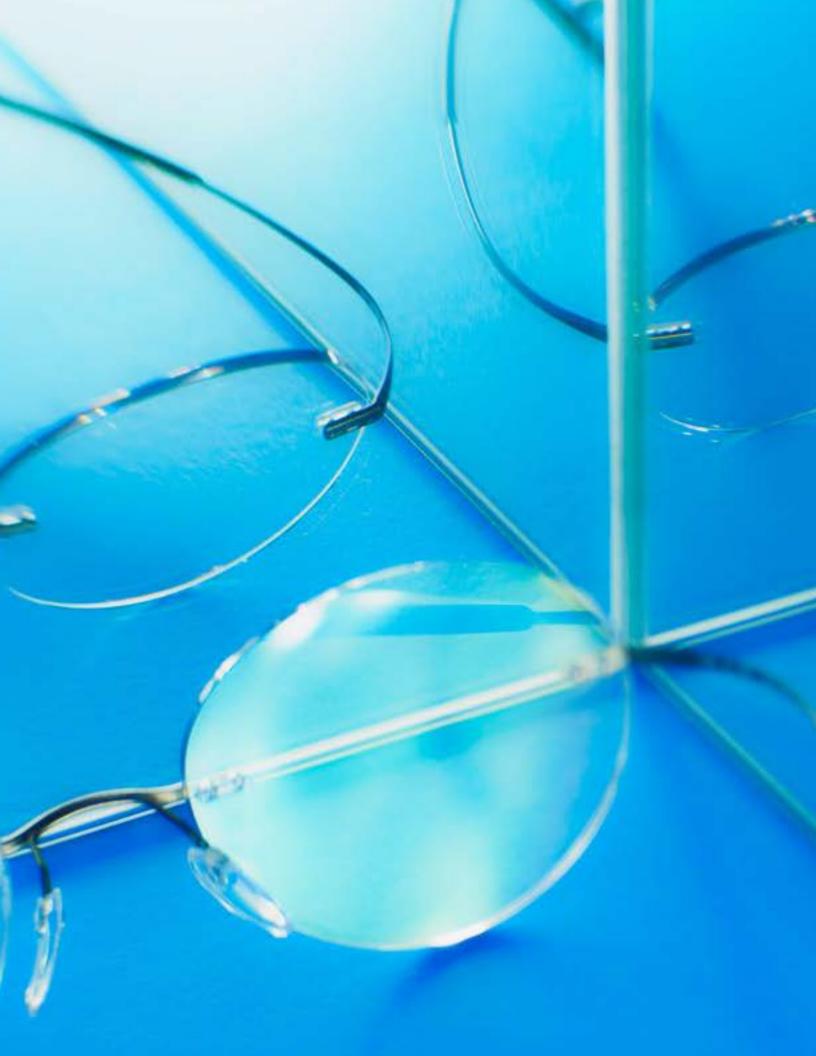
Swept Away, 2018

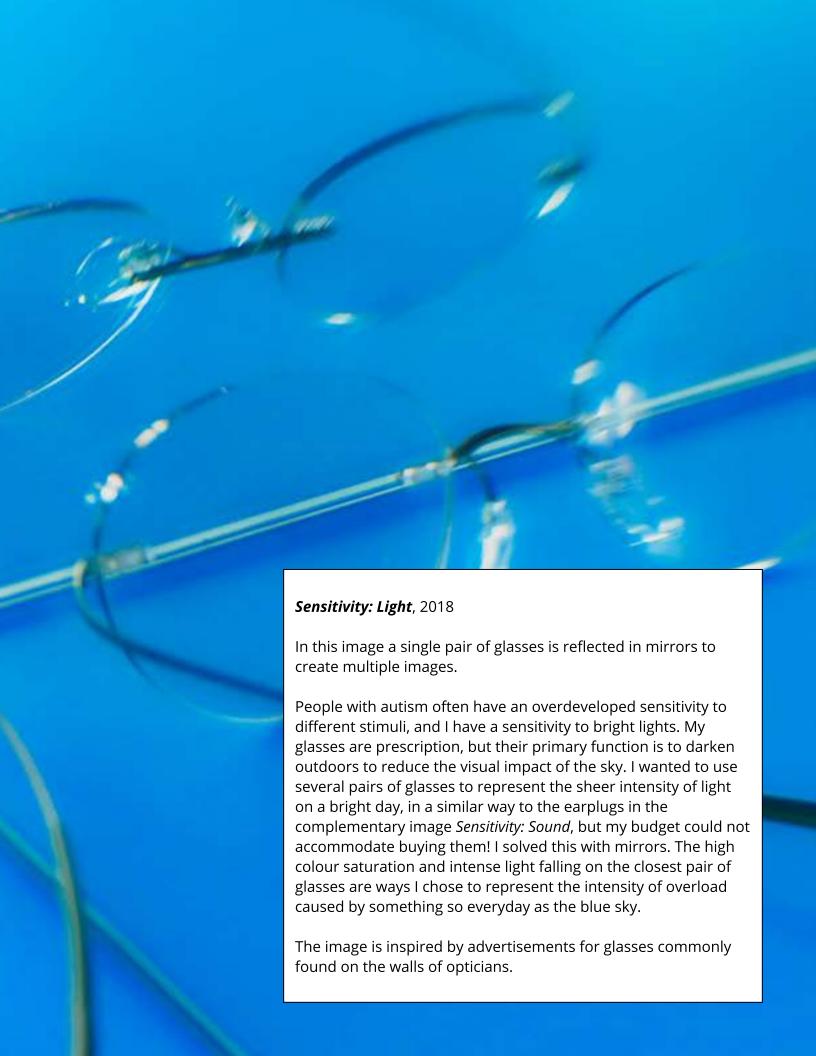
This image is about the sensory 'overload' that occurs in autistic people. It can happen in public spaces, making it difficult to cope and further isolating the autistic individual from the people around them because the resulting behaviour may be considered atypical by societal norms.

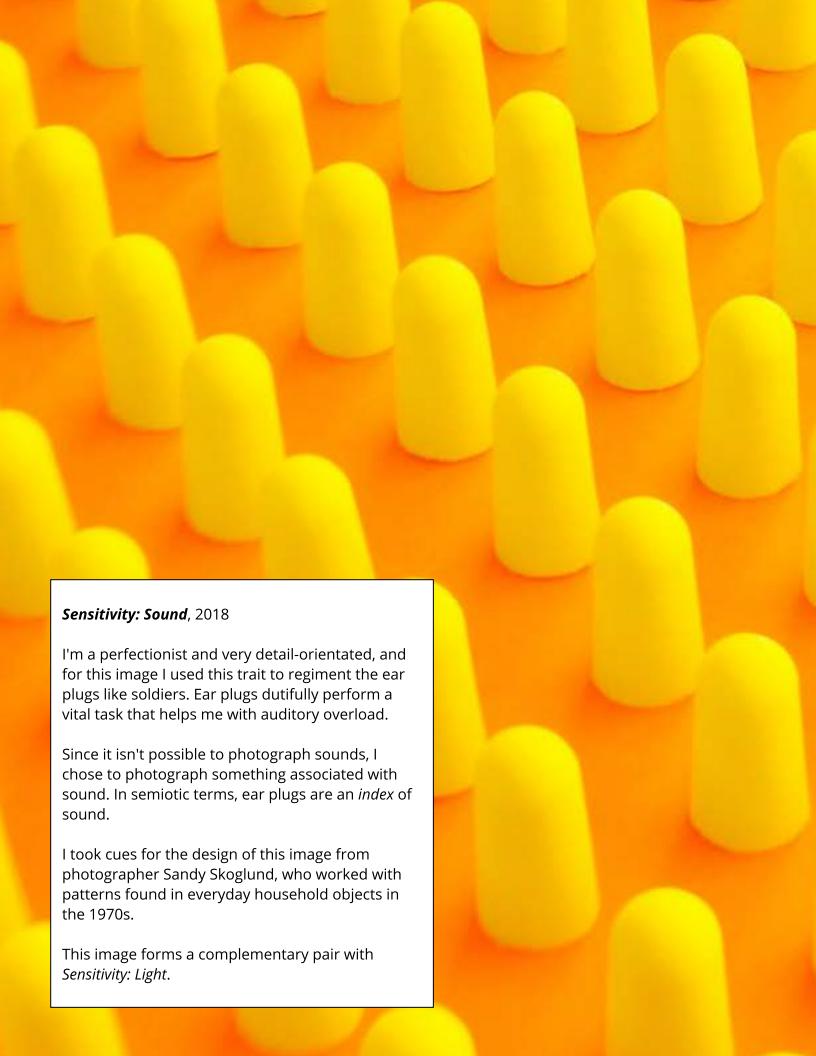
The image is also about the public being unaware of the possible extent of the effects of their actions on those around them, especially those on the autism spectrum. I find noisy environments particularly difficult, especially when people's behaviour is unpredictable.

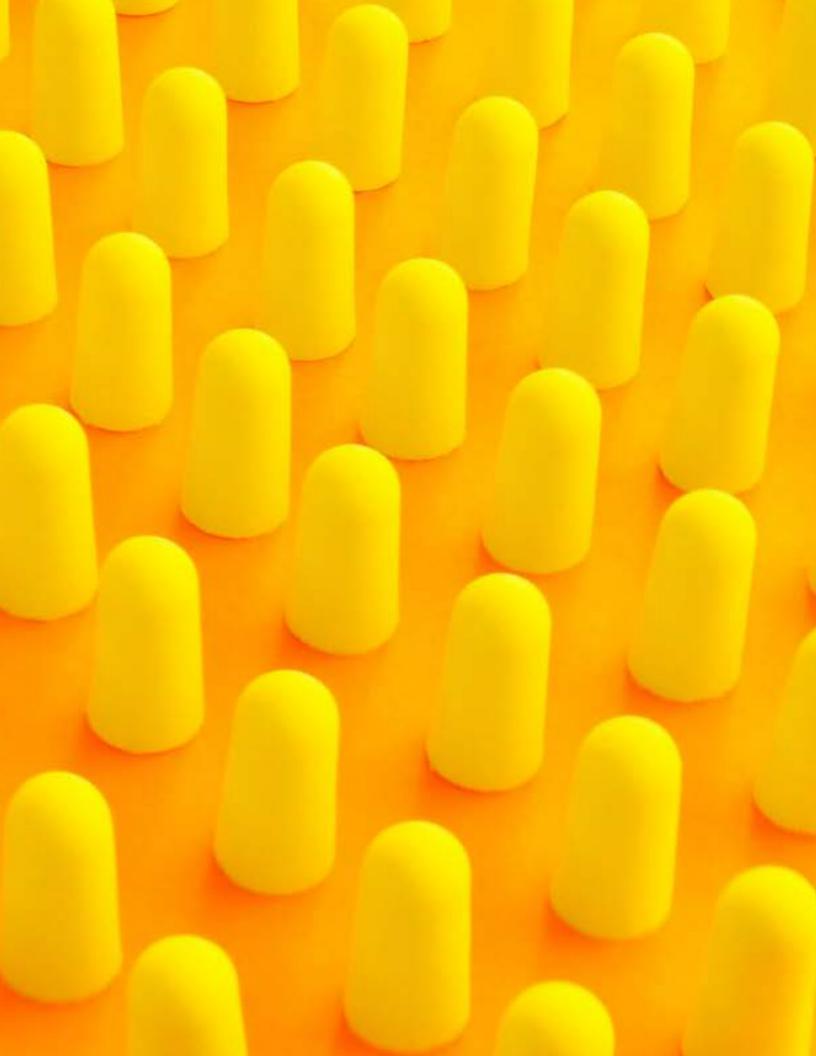
This was the first image I conceived in this set. The person in red walks past me sitting at a bus stop, and I appear to disintegrate in their wake. My original plan had been to create the photograph inside a coffee shop, but I believe this would have proved too difficult to realise because of all the extraneous objects. The simplicity of this bus stop enables the audience to better concentrate on what's happening.











Sanctuary, 2018

There might be a dark and depressive quality associated with hanging out in churchyards, but I have often visited them purely for their tranquillity. When I used to go out with my camera in busy places like London, if I began to feel anxious due to the extreme sensory input, I often sought the sanctuary of a quiet place. In the book *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the character Quasimodo was given sanctuary in the cathedral by the Archdeacon of Notre Dame. The hunchbacked character was shunned by the citizens of Paris for his appearance. He could be considered disabled by his appearance because society excluded him and he was confined within four walls for his own safety. Years of bell-ringing also left him partially sighted and part deaf. I can identify with this character because my disability has made it almost impossible to find a job, and during my attempts to secure employment I barely left the walls of my parents' home for several years.

In this image I am actually standing in the shadows of the ruins of Godstow Abbey in Oxfordshire, but the unique architecture of medieval buildings and their window designs suggests a church. The window is missing its glass and the walls are overgrown with weeds, which illustrates the remoteness and stillness of a ruin.





Meltdown, 2018

This was an experimental image created for an earlier assignment that then became part of this series. Having previously decided to create images of disability that avoided engaging any common stereotypes (the topic of my dissertation) I chose to do the opposite in this case. The melting hand represents the metaphorical autistic meltdown, and it is outstretched asking for help. The effect, created in Photoshop, is a somewhat unpleasant sight --- something often associated with disability. The social model of disability suggests that it is society that disables people by preventing inclusion through a lack of understanding and acceptance. This is the model that the World Health Organization uses today.

Below: The concept sketch I drew prior to making this photograph.



Self-Portrait, 2018

When I embarked on a photography degree, part of the purpose was to use photography to reach out to people; to help lift me out of the disability imposed upon me by society, with a view to getting a job. Unfortunately my anxiety often gets the better of me and I use the camera as a barrier; a way to disconnect me from the world rather than participate in it. I have invested a huge amount of myself in the degree, so it is fitting that a self-portrait be included, but I don't like having my picture taken and for this image I wanted my face to be difficult to see. An 'anti-selfie', in a sense, and lacking vanity. I was inspired by Lee Friedlander, who created several self-portraits described as 'anti-narcissistic' because he has cleverly hidden his face.





Trapped, 2018

There are times when I feel trapped by my autism because I find my difficulty holding conversations to be a barrier to progression within my life. I also feel that others sometimes use my autism to trap me, exclaiming "you don't understand because you're autistic!" I wanted to represent this in an image depicting being trapped in a more literal sense. Here I've done this using my shadow, which extends beyond a fence as though it is behind bars.

The shadow element was inspired by photographer Lee Friedlander's work projecting his shadow onto objects. I created it during one of my many walks to take photographs around Oxfordshire.

Look at me, 2018

This image is based on a scene in the computer game *Life is Strange* in which the protagonist, a photographer, has a wall of Polaroid photographs in her dormitory room. The similarity ends there, because the content of my images is quite different, inspired by the video short *Diverted* by the National Autistic Society about a woman having a meltdown on a cramped underground train. The thick surrounds of train doors reminded me of the wide borders on a typical instant print. I created a series of self-portraits trying to represent the anxiety I feel when forced to make eye contact. The title, *Look at Me*, is an intentional juxtaposition in that my face isn't shown in any of the instant prints, nor in the final image in which I'm putting them up on a wall. In fact, my face isn't fully visible in any of the images in this series.

Below: A concept image for a photograph that was never realised.







My World (Outside), 2018

This image came about through my desire to try a new technology: the spherical camera (prior to photography, my background was in computing, so I have an interest in technology). It takes two 180-degree views in opposite directions and combines them automatically using software. The result can be panned to create some interesting flattened views, like the one here which is zoomed out to create a sphere.

The image forms a pair with *My World (Inside)*. It's about what people might see when they look at me. I seldom travel by myself, and am often with Martin, whose arm on my shoulder represents his support for me. Here we are crossing the Old Gasworks Bridge over the River Thames near Grandpont in Oxford.

My World (Inside), 2018

This accompanies *My World (Outside)*. It depicts my current mental state as I near completion of my degree. My ambition has been to represent myself through art, to open doors and access the life I never had, with the normal things others enjoy. Whether this will happen is uncertain, of course, but working on the degree has given me a hope for the future that was absent before.

In the photograph I am drawing over my own shadow in an attempt to metaphorically define and reinvent myself. The image combines two exposures with me in different places to produce what would actually be an impossible shadow for the way I am facing, and a special effects lens creates a painterly effect.





Escape, 2018

The shed in this picture has two meanings. It was built in our garden to provide me with a refuge away from my home; a place to go to escape when daily life gets too much to bear. But it has also become the only place I completely control. To relax I often play computer games, like the space exploration game *No Man's Sky* from which this screenshot is taken. Extensive editing was required to combine the photograph and screenshot more seamlessly than a simple cut-and-paste. While not strictly a self-portrait as with the other photos, the spaceman is a representation of me and my love of exploration and science fiction.



Cabinet Card, 2018

I've presented this piece as a Victorian cabinet card. As with the other images, I'm hiding my face, although this time, it's underneath a price sticker. In the Victorian age, disabled people would often perform as spectacles for the masses in so-called "freak shows". It was one of the ways disabled people would generate income for themselves --- patrons of the shows could buy the cabinet cards as a curio or memento of the experience. By producing this series, I'm exposing a very personal part of myself in the hopes it will create a bridge of understanding between autistic and non-autistic people. However, I am aware that by considering selling prints I'm metaphorically putting a piece of myself up for sale. Performing for the amusement of others, and then selling the spectacle of disability to make money seems like a strange notion by the standards of today, but that is essentially what I am doing by producing this set of images for my final project.

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For further reading on disability portrayal and autism:

The National Autistic Society - www.autism.org.uk

The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome by Dr. Tony Attwood

The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery by David Hevey

Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen and Other Photographic Rhetoric by Robert Bogdan

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