

A Few Strokes of the Past in an Artist Who Lost Her Memory

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The New York Times:

“Can I draw something for you — what should I draw?” Lonni Sue Johnson asked, but she didn’t wait for an answer. She drew a squiggly line that became a curly halo of hair around the cheerful face of a seated man stretching one leg upward, balancing a large bird on his foot.

Within minutes, she had added a cat wearing a necklace, stars and a tiny, grinning airplane. “I like this part, because you want people to be happy,” she said, beaming. “Every sheet of paper is a treat.”

Ms. Johnson, 61, is an artist and illustrator whose playful, bright-hued and often complex work has appeared in a wide array of publications, from the cover of *The New Yorker* to children’s books to murder mysteries to *The New York Times* — even a physics textbook.

All that changed in December 2007, when she was stricken with viral encephalitis, a life-threatening disease that did severe damage to parts of her brain — including the hippocampus, where new memories are formed. She survived, but remembered little about her life before the illness.

Yet she is still able to make art, though it is simpler and more childlike than her professional work. Her case is rare, experts say, because few accomplished artists continue to create after sustaining severe brain damage.

Read the whole story: [The New York Times](#)