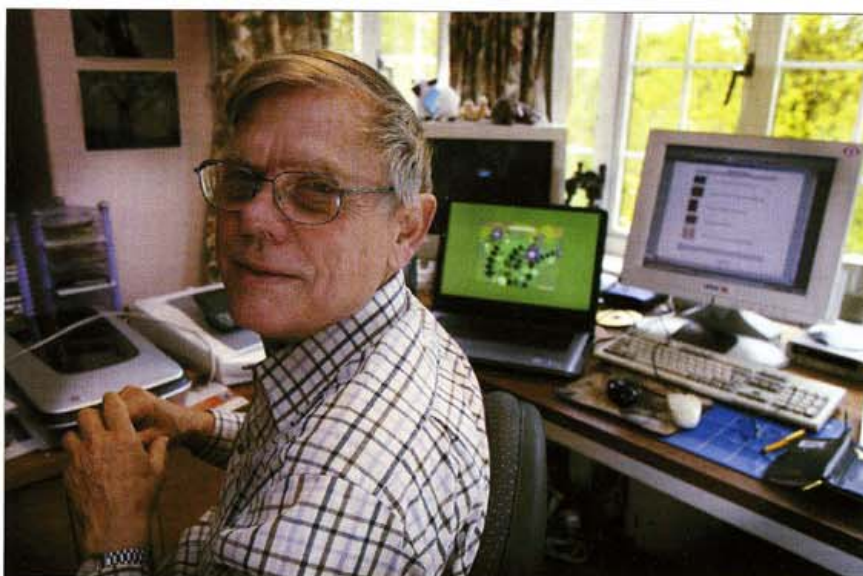




'I designed an optical illusion'

Last month I found myself on stage at the Van Wezel theatre of performing arts in Sarasota, Florida. As the lights dimmed and the applause started, I did rather wonder at how my so-called retirement had led to my competing in the finals of the international Illusion of the Year Contest, rather than simply sitting back and enjoying my bus pass.

I was one of 10 finalists in the competition organised by the Neural Correlate Society. It was held in conjunction with the American Vision Society's conference, so I was competing in front of ophthalmologists, visual scientists and neurologists. For the contest, I presented a visual illusion I had created called Steel Magnolias.

Some people might think I had rather a grand audience for what is simply a bit of fun. In fact, scientists are interested in optical illusions because they can help to explain how visual mechanisms work. As I looked out into the auditorium I felt a nervous twinge. I had created a terrific illusion but would the audience appreciate it?

Steel Magnolias is designed along the lines of an abstract picture, intended as a bridge between visual science and visual art. In it, the plant leaves and flowers appear to be waving gently as if in the breeze. However, everything in the image is rock steady. All the apparent motion is a figment of the viewer's visual system, induced by the careful manipulation of colour values. I'm really pleased with it, as the illusion not only

looks good but is underpinned by firm design and scientific understanding.

The path to my illusion was a long way from my old working life at a pharmaceuticals company. My working career had not been without its moments, but they were channelled within the culture of a corporation. Life in a large multinational is demanding – you have to give a lot and with a family to bring up and a mortgage to pay off my nose had been to the grindstone.

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The world is a wonderful place and we encounter many things we would have loved to have had a shot at, but so often we have to press on past those side roads. But sometimes it's possible to go back and explore some of those possibilities. I had no background knowledge, but as soon as I retired I knew I wanted to explore computer arts – and that meant going back to college. I got a place at Sunderland university and dug out an old pair of jeans. No more corporate speak for me!

My second coming as a student proved life-enhancing. I was welcomed by students and staff alike. Secretly though I had to work hard at shaking off the corporate dust of the past, loosening up and getting some kind of style going in the weird and wonderful world of art and design, but in the end it all came together. I caught up with my sharp and computer-literate new friends in computer-based design, multimedia and graphics and eventually came away with a first class degree, followed with a distinction in my MA.

The last step on the road of discovery was my decision to do a PhD. My research is about connecting knowledge of vision with art and design practice, and illusions are relevant as they provide an opportunity to combine science with art and design. So that's how I ended up on a stage in Florida, presenting my Steel Magnolias illusion.

When all 10 of us finalists had made our presentations we lined up on stage for the results. We'd all been asked to prepare a winner's speech – this is what it must feel like at the Oscars. As the results were announced to a fanfare of blaring music and confetti cannons going off, I held my breath... well, this time I didn't get the fairy tale ending, but I do know that my illusion was right up there. And I wouldn't have missed this chance for anything.

To see *Steel Magnolias* visit
www.mikepickard.net