

A 'Mesmerizing' View of Blindness in Michael Nye Exhibition and Book



NICHOLAS FRANK | JANUARY 23, 2019



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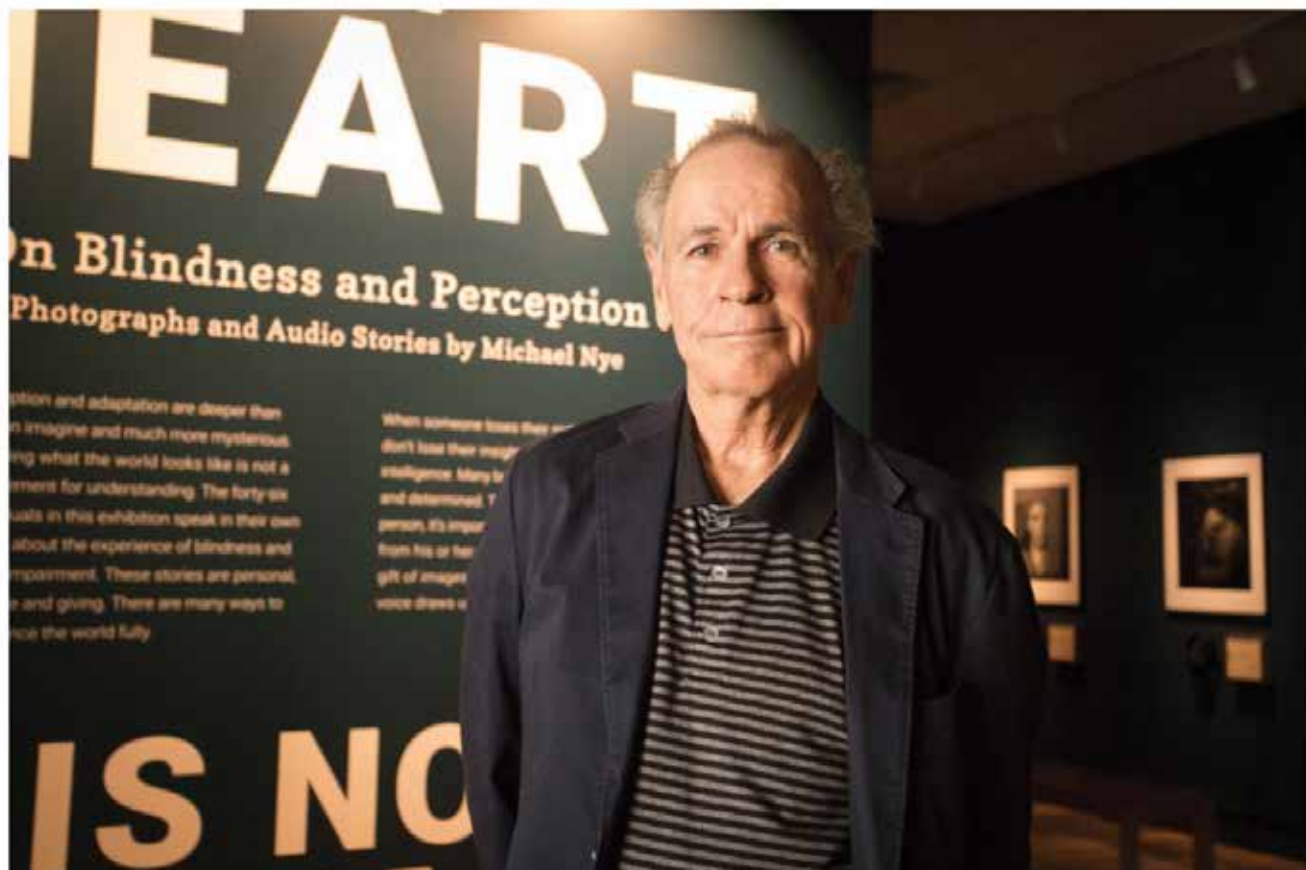
Two children view the exhibit *My Heart is Not Blind: On Blindness and Perception* by Michael Nye at the Witte Museum.

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On a recent day at the [Witte Museum](#), inside the exhibition space of *My Heart Is Not Blind: On Blindness and Perception*, a gallery technician accidentally turned off the lights. Viewers in the gallery paused and looked around to see what had gone wrong. In a moment, the lights were back on, the situation restored, all 46 black-and-white photographic portraits of blind people visible again.

Leaving the lights off might have been more instructive. The purpose of photographer Michael Nye's immersive exhibition is to see blindness not as a limitation, but as a triumph of human adaptation and even an expansion of awareness and ability.

"You lose your sight. You don't lose your insight," Nye said of blindness, explaining that "perception is not visual. Perception is all the things that we do to understand the world outside ourselves." Though Nye is not blind, his seven years of interviewing blind people for this project informs his knowledge, he said.



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Photographer Michael Nye.

The exhibition runs through March 31 at the Witte, and the companion book, published by [Trinity University Press](#), is now available. Nye will be on hand for a [gallery talk and book signing](#) at the Witte on Wednesday, Jan. 23, from 6-8:30 p.m.

Both the book and exhibition feature narratives of Nye's subjects accompanying their portraits, via text in the printed volume and through five-minute audio recordings of the subjects' own voices in the exhibition.

Newfound perspectives

Blind people use touch, hearing, sound, smell, memory, and intuition to heighten their awareness, Nye said, sometimes even surpassing the information that vision offers. "Eyes are greedy," he writes in his introduction to the 216-page book. Nye means that vision tends to skim surfaces, whereas the sound and touch that blind people use to relate to their world are "more intimate" senses.

Among the sighted community, visual impairment is often misunderstood, and people might fail to recognize the capabilities of blind people, he said. "Whenever I hear any sighted person speak of blindness, it is always about inabilities or limitations. The conversations are rarely about competency or newfound perspectives. When something is taken away, often something else takes its place," he said.

Neuroplasticity, Nye explained during a walk-through of the show, is the brain's rewiring of its former optical centers to develop new ways of thinking non-visually.

"Through my skin, I heard it," Katie Keim says in the five-minute audio narrative accompanying her portrait, of a large ponderosa tree she walked past during a forest hike. She lost her vision at age 36 due to diabetes. Before that, "I'd always thought I'd seen things," she says, but later realized "I could see without seeing."

Each person's narrative is as individual as its subject. Some are blind from birth, and for others the loss of sight came later in life. Each subject has found ways to cope and to accept the challenges their new lives of adaptation have brought.



COURTESY / MICHAEL NYE
Paloma by Micheal Nye.



COURTESY / MICHAEL NYE
Larry by Micheal Nye.



COURTESY / MICHAEL NYE
Frances by Micheal Nye.



COURTESY / MICHAEL NYE
Christina by Micheal Nye.

"How do you learn to live in the darkness?" asks Kay "Silk" Littlejohn, once president of the Arlington, Texas, branch of the NAACP. Her harrowing narrative of blindness caused by physical abuse ends with acceptance and important realizations. "With blindness, there's no boundaries," she says, describing her new sense of the world.

Frances Fuentes lost her sight in her 20s due to a rare genetic disorder, just 11 months after giving birth. "People wanted to take my child away," she says in her narrative, but instead she decided "I had to fight for him." The title of the show derives from her words, "My heart, it's not blind," which was her way of convincing people that she was capable of caring for her son.

"The biggest problem is not blindness, but rather, what sighted people think about blindness," says Michael Hingson, who, like several others among Nye's portraits, lost his sight to a condition that affects premature newborns who require an overdose of oxygen to survive.

As he relates in his narrative, Hingson's parents were told to put him in a home for the blind, "because no blind child could grow up to become a contributor to society." The young parents instead brought their child home and encouraged him to achieve his ambitions.

Hingson now holds a master's degree in physics, and once worked for Quantum Corporation, located on the 78th floor of the World Trade Center's Tower One. On 9/11, Hingson heard the muffled blast, and felt the drastic swaying of the building.

His guide dog, Roselle, had been asleep under his desk. Hingson kept her calm, leading her to the stairway and toward escape. Hingson helped others by keeping things lighthearted as co-workers negotiated the many flights down, and firefighters made their laborious way up. Once outside, Roselle helped Hingson and others run to safety, with Hingson even reassuring a woman whose eyes were clouded with dust that the guide dog would help them both.

Blind people are "as capable, as qualified to be human beings, on any level, as anybody else," he says. "Blindness is not the end of the world."

Hearing shadows

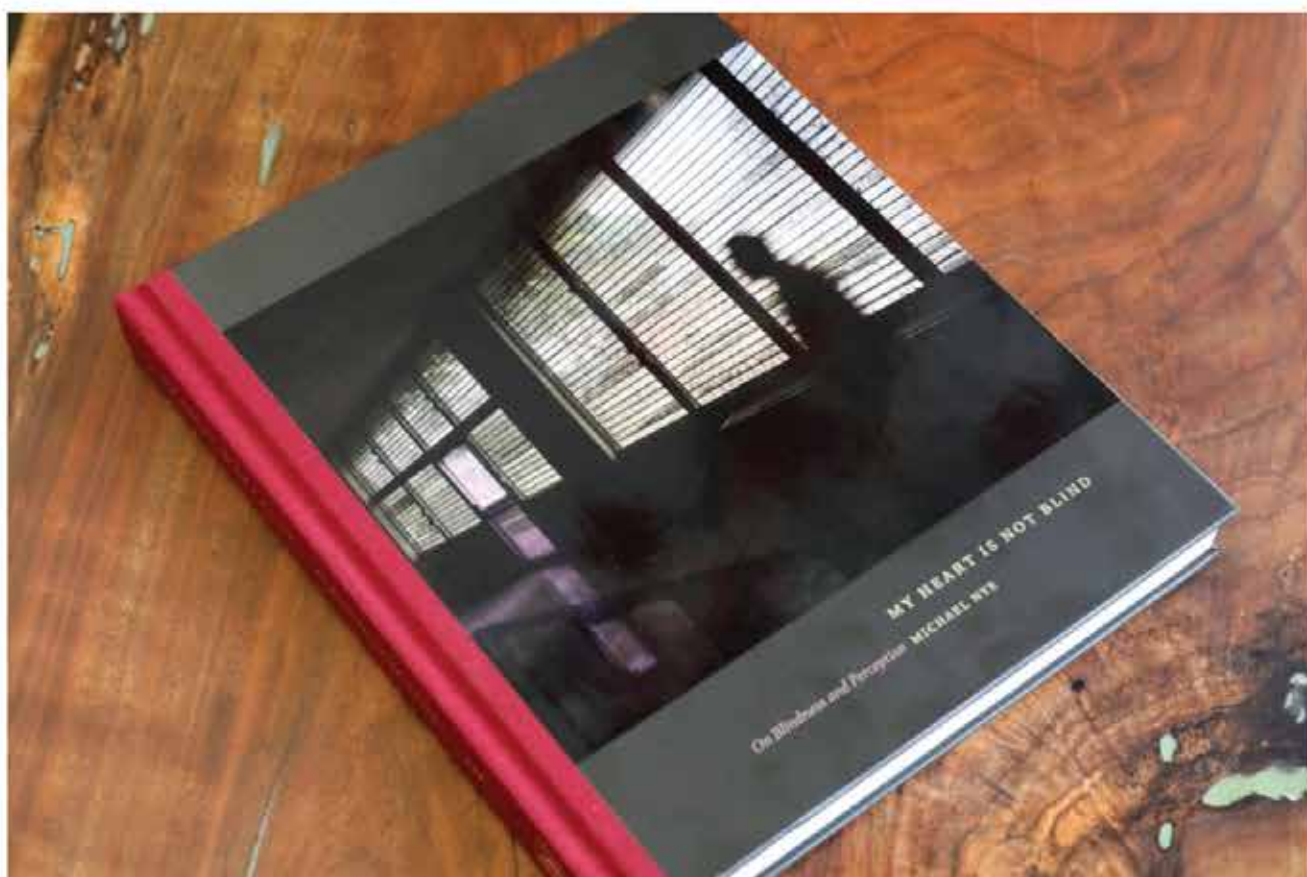
Noted local accordionist Juanito Castillo uses echolocation, "a blind person's sonar," to navigate through the world. On walks or even on his bike, Castillo issues vocal clicks and listens for their echoes to sound out objects and obstacles along his path. He described the sense as "not seeing a shadow, but hearing a shadow."

These heightened abilities are familiar to Mike Gillam, president and chief executive officer of the nonprofit Lighthouse for the Blind in San Antonio. Gillam worked with Nye to help realize the *My Heart Is Not Blind* exhibition for its Witte debut, and hopes to facilitate a much wider reach for it.

Through the Lighthouse, Gillam purchased 200 copies of Nye's book to send to CEOs at similar organizations throughout the country, because he believes Nye's project is an ideal vehicle to encourage awareness of issues affecting blind people.

"With this awareness comes not only opportunities to help more individuals, but also encourages volunteers to work through programs," and even help attract new board members to organizations helping the blind. "It's a win, win, win, win, every way around," Gillam said.

Related: [Working at SA Lighthouse for the Blind: 'I Never Thought I'd Be Able To Do Something Like This'](#)



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT
My Heart is Not Blind by Michael Nye.

He called Nye's exhibition "mesmerizing," and hopes that, like Nye's prior Witte exhibitions *Children of Children* and *Fine Line*, it will tour widely. "I want all the cities to be able to experience what San Antonio is experiencing, and the more the better," he said.

For more insight into the experience of blindness, the Witte offers *Blind Truth*, a program of conversations with blind people on March 6 from 6-8 p.m., and *Sonic Expressions at Twilight*, with music and poetry in response to the exhibition on March 21 from 6-8 p.m. Gillam also will be on hand for the Witte's [Super Saturday: Build It!](#) event from noon-4 p.m. on Feb. 9, featuring an opportunity to learn sewing with Lighthouse workers.

Perhaps most unexpected is that many of Nye's portrait subjects say if they were somehow offered their eyesight back, they wouldn't want it.

"If I could have my vision today, I would turn it down. I don't need it," says Robert Dittman in his narrative. He concludes by offering a vision available to all:

"The one thing that I really want people to understand is to step outside of your dependence on vision. Go sit in a dark room for an hour and open your ears and listen. Go touch something. ... it's at least a glimpse into our world, and it's not a terrible place. ... It is a beautiful world, and exciting and adventurous place. It's a vibrant world and just as relevant as the sighted world."

Disclosure: The Witte Museum is a *Rivard Report* business member. For a full list of supporters, click [here](#).