AURA

Camille Laddawan

Aura deals with the unique phenomenon of migraine.

In medical terminology, "aura", derived from the Ancient Greek word for "breeze" or "soft wind", describes a subjective neurological disturbance – sometimes a sublime forewarning of impending pain.

Auras are often experienced as arcing, flashing or zigzagging lights, or as tingling or numbness that moves across parts of the body. Migraine can also involve heightened sensitivity to sound, inability to speak and strange sensations, like an awareness of one's teeth. Some historical accounts of spiritual and sublime revelation have since been interpreted as descriptions of migraine aura, evoking the slippery interactions between individual experience and the evolving medical canon.

The exhibition comprises beaded works embedded with coded descriptions of auras, drawn from over fifty submissions by people within Camille's community who experience migraine aura. The indescribable uniqueness of these experiences finds expression in Camille's visual code, which traces the words of experience whilst making them visually indecipherable to the viewer.

Taking the form of a home movie, *The Rest of the Afternoon* is shot through a series of lenses, created by slumping glass beads into glass sheets to produce visions reminiscent of auras. The intimacy of the subject matter is obscured by the lenses, akin to the experience of moving through a migraine.

Finally, Camille has cast an abalone shell in glass, its form visually reminiscent of ears. These represent Camille's auditory sensitivities, translating the shell's layered structure into the shatterable material of glass. The shells also nod to historical psychoanalytic theories that linked migraine to repressed emotions, invoking speaking and listening as imagined routes to relief.

Three essays follow by Bella Hone-Saunders, Lucien Alperstein and Stephanie Cobon.

Aura: A material dialect for the migraine state

By Bella Hone-Saunders

> *"A film is also always happening; its origins in time have been frozen through the process of recording."*
> **— Rachel Cusk, '*Life of M',* 2026, 4.**

Preamble.

I do not suffer from migraines and so, in writing this text for Camille, I have learned the following terminology: phosphenes, florid, scotomata, teichopsia, and aphasia. In spending time with the terms and considering Camille's practice, the aforelisted vocabulary has moved from clinical abstraction into an intimate vernacular. Much of last year I sat alongside Camille in her home studio while I worked on my own writing. Between the quiet click of sorting and threading glass beads onto the loom, I noticed the soft interruptions of Raphi wandering into the room, the doorbell ringing, and Roslyn parenting with devoted, diligent tenderness outside the back window. Migraines seem, to me, to be at once punishing and divine, hallucinatory even. I have looked to known writers, artists, poets and theorists to assist in my wayfinding of and consideration of Camille's current body of work…

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To write from the terrain of chronic neurological disruption is, as Hélène Cixous describes, "to write by shreds, by storm clouds, by visions, by violent chapters… in the true chaos of verbal tenses".[1] For Camille, this chaos is not an abstract aesthetic choice, but a biopolitical realignment. One suddenly forced upon the body. The onset of debilitating migraines arrived postpartum, a moment when the maternal body undergoes a radical, volatile endocrine shift. Here, health is not a static baseline. As Georges Canguilhem notes in *The Normal and the Pathological*, the pathological is not simply the absence of a biological norm, but "another norm… pushed aside by life".[2] In the postpartum period, this secondary norm took hold often and with an eclipsing authority. To miss approximately one-third of Camille's young daughter's first year on earth, one-third of Raphi's initial cycle through the seasons, is

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[1] Hélène Cixous, '*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*'. Translated by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 61.

[2] Georges Canguilhem, '*The Normal and the Pathological*'. Translated by Carolyn R. Fawcett. New York: Zone Books, 1991, 144.

a profound quantitative grief. It is a third of a year spent still, unable to participate fully in the unrelenting, shared reciprocity of early parenting.

This experience of somatic rupture finds an uncompromising echo in Audre Lorde's notable *The Cancer Journals*, where physical betrayal becomes an uninvited political curriculum. Lorde writes of the imperative to name the wound rather than paper over it, noting that silence grants no protection against bodily erosion.[3] When the nervous system mutinies, it demands a radical reckoning with what it means to inhabit a fragile vessel. We see this reckoning given physical form in a glass-cast abalone shell. Luminous and precarious, the ear-shaped casts are pierced and adorned, linking to Camille's aural sensitivity during migraine aura. Similarly to Lorde, in *The Shaking Woman*, Siri Hustvedt chronicles the terrifying split between the observing intellect and a convulsing, recalcitrant body. Hustvedt describes the migraine and neurological tremors as an alien invasion that shatters the illusion of bodily sovereignty, turning light into an intolerable physical assault.[4] For Camille, this bodily disruption reverberates through shared domestic space: the home (on any other day a sanctuary) becomes a site where light, sound, and presence must be constantly managed, forcing a temporary withdrawal into quiet suspension while family life continues in the adjacent rooms.

Joan Didion, writing on her own chronic migraines, famously observed that the illness demands a total surrender… "You let it happen. You put up no resistance. You lie down and let it happen."[5] Yet this forced withdrawal is not a simple void or passivity. In Gilles Deleuze's terms, the aura belongs to the domain of the virtual, which is "not opposed to the real, but to the actual".[6] The phosphenes, the florid zigzags, and the shimmering crescents that blossom across the visual field are completely real. They are light that is generated without an external input, produced internally by a hyper-reactive visual cortex. The aura is an unbidden halo, a herald marking the presence of something not yet fully manifest. When light itself changes state, warping into an active, tactile presence, the body is forced to retreat into sensory isolation, transforming the bedroom into a site of involuntary suspension.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed reminds us that perception is an act of orientation, shaped by what resides within reach and what remains turned away. Ahmed asks what happens when the body loses its line, becoming disoriented or turned askew from normative tables and familial lines.[7] For Camille, a lesbian mother in a family of

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[3] Audre Lorde, '*The Cancer Journals*'. Special ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2020, 18–23.

[4] Siri Hustvedt, '*The Shaking Woman', or A History of My Nerves*. New York: Picador, 2010, 13–15 & 38–40.

[5] Joan Didion, '*In Bed*'. In *The White Album*, 168–72. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, 171.

[6] Gilles Deleuze, '*Difference and Repetition*'. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 208.

[7] Sara Ahmed, '*Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*'. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 27–28 & 54–55.

two mums, orientation is already a conscious negotiation rather than an unthinking default. The migraine aura acts as an involuntary disorientation that breaks the visual plane, a mechanism mirrored in Camille's new work, where textured glass partially conceals and fractures the moving image, dismantling the seamless delivery of film. The unseen maintenance labour traditionally exacted from women and queer parents (holding the household together, anticipating human and non-human needs, sustaining invisible domestic rhythms) is suddenly confronted by a body that cannot maintain the straight line. As Eileen Myles writes, "I'm always living in a body that's trying to figure out where it is."[8]

This spatial reorientation directly shapes the rhythm of Camille's practice. Working out of a home studio rather than a detached workspace allows a permeable boundary between domestic life and artistic labour, a structure capable of bending around the sudden onset of an episode while embedded in the gentle rhythms of her family. Ahmed's concept of 'slanting' lines describes a physical refraction that demands a reorientation toward time, mothering, and domestic presence.[9] Here, maintenance labour gives way to an alternative rhythm built not on continuous visibility, but on endurance and reliance. Between the demands of parenting and the threat of an oncoming migraine, Camille steals brief, fragile windows (while Raphi sleeps, on a walk, or during quiet lulls) to engage in the painstaking process of loom-beading, turning fragmented time into a deliberate, tactile grounding.

Rather than treating the exhibition at CAVES as a collection of separate media, every element in this body of work functions as a variation of glass. The exhibition operates as a singular optical apparatus, a network of silica, refraction, and filtered light that destabilises the boundary between the perceiving subject and the perceived world. In *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, Etel Adnan writes of light not as a gentle medium, but as an active, physical force: "Light was so intense it had a weight... It was an encounter with something absolute."[10]

We tend to assume the human eye is a transparent, invisible window to our surroundings, but the migraine visual aura dismantles this illusion. In *Chroma*, written as his own sight was failing, Derek Jarman maps light not as a neutral medium, but as an active, physical threshold, a weight that presses directly against the eye. In Camille's work, we might consider that light carries this similar architectural weight. The scotomas, arcs, and shimmering honeycomb patterns announce that the eye itself is an imperfect organic lens—a surface that flares, warps, and generates its own blinding geometry.

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[8] Eileen Myles, '*Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*'. Minneapolis: Soft Skull Press, 2021, 163.

[9] Sara Ahmed, '*Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*'. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 160–162 & 165–167.

[10] Etel Adnan, '*Journey to Mount Tamalpais*'. Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2021, 21 & 28.

"The Distance / On the look of Death — / Can nobody teach it — Any — / 'Tis the Seal Despair — / An heavenly Hurt, it gives us — / We can find no scar."[11]

— Emily Dickinson on the searing spatial awareness of somatic pain.

The camera lens acts as the external analogue to this organic optic. In the exhibition's central moving-image work, an intimate home movie montage capturing quiet domestic moments with Raphi and Roslyn, the camera's glass lens remains subject to the same laws of exposure, refraction, and glare that trigger the neurological cascade. Here, ordinary family life is filtered through a rigid cylinder of optical silica, freezing moments of presence before they can be dissolved by pain. Unlike the solid materiality of the cast shells or beaded works, this video diary is projected directly onto a custom pane of glass, softened by the heat of the kiln to create a fluid smoothness and sandblasted on one side to catch the light, where the moving image refuses to sit on a flat or comforting substrate. Light passes through its translucent body while simultaneously bouncing off its frosted face. It mimics Cusk's observation that film is "frozen through the process of recording", holding time on a transparent surface while light bleeds into the space beyond.[12]

Translating this volatile static into a dense, physical grid, the loomed beadworks are composed of thousands of minute glass units. Beading requires a discipline of counting, measuring, and tension control, a somatic counter-anchor to the disorientation of an impending attack. Yet, because each glass bead possesses a curved, reflective surface, the woven grid remains optically alive. As the viewer moves past, light skips across the rounded glass, causing the static to vibrate into physical space.

When aura takes hold, it does not merely compromise sight; it attacks language and thought at their root. Words disintegrate, syntax stutters, and the subject enters a state of expressive aphasia, a transient threshold where one comprehends speech, yet propositional speech becomes impossible. As Anne Carson observes on the limits of language under physical strain, pain forces a sudden silence that unmoors us from ordinary syntax, leaving a stark gap between what is felt and what can be named.[13] This somatic threshold gives acute weight to researcher and artist Mariske Broeckmeyer's study 'unVOICING Migraine: A Study of the Failing Voice'. Broeckmeyer investigates this exact breakdown, describing the "failing voice in a failing body", noting how the migraine

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[11] Emily Dickinson, 'There's a certain Slant of light.' In *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Ralph W. Franklin. Reading ed. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, Stanzas 2 & 3.

[12] Rachel Cusk, '*Life of M*'. In *Coventry: Essays*, 111–24. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019, 114–115.

[13] Anne Carson, 'The Gender of Sound'. In *Glass, Irony and God*, 119–42. New York: New Directions, 1995, 119–121 and 128–130.

"occupies the body and leaves muscles, lungs, larynx, and tongue under its command", muting the subject and forcing a retreat into a blackened bedroom.[14]

This state of unvoicing is particularly fraught within the ecology of queer parenting. Infancy relies on vocal reassurance and constant affirmative responses. When expressive aphasia hits, this vocal reciprocity is severed. Yet, as Camille notes, during this state where propositional speech fails, laughter remains possible. Laughter precedes formal language; it belongs to an older, primal register of human expression. When expressive aphasia takes over, the aura suspends the ordinary utility of speech and structured time. Rather than treating this silence as a void, Camille treats it as a distinct perceptual grammar. Choosing to sit within the episode rather than instantly erasing it with pharmaceuticals becomes a quiet refusal, a commitment to listening to how the body reorganises itself when the visual field fractures, allowing the illness to generate its own dialect rather than forcing it back into normative productivity.

By gathering descriptions of migraine auras from a wider community and weaving them alongside her own experience, Camille does not offer a clinical survey. Instead, she creates a collective counter-archive against the medicalisation of sight, speaking a localised dialect shared across a community of sufferers. Where empirical science stripped the aura of its mystical imagination, reducing what has historically been interpreted as a divine touch to a mere neurological glitch, this exhibition reclaims its complex, feral subjectivity.

The glass lenses, film, and beads in CAVES hold the memory of those lost, unvoiced hours spent away from Raphi in quiet retreat. They do not seek to repair what was broken or recover the missing third of the year. Instead, through the meticulous assembly of silica and light, Camille constructs a new material dialect for the migraine state, one that acknowledges that even when vision unravels, language fails, and straight lines fracture, the body continues to weave its way back toward the light.

[14] Mariske Broeckmeyer, '*unVOICING Migraine: A Study of the Failing Voice*'. PhD diss., KU Leuven / LUCA School of Arts, 2021, 87–89.

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Aura as Wind

By Lucien Alperstein

I remember my first aura and the migraine that followed vividly. Me, a tween, arriving home teeth chattering after a couple of hours in a beautifully windy, violent blue-black ocean, calm after an anxious few days. A low-pressure system above Antarctica pulling a pelting southerly wind up the east coast, rain. Cold, satisfied. Cosy at last warming up in the bath on this stormy day while the water filled in around me, bottom of the calves, knees, waist, deeper. Surprised, mesmerised, to meet what I now know as my telltale aura. Trying to follow the zigzags as they emerged from a point, swelled, swirled around the room – the outline of them moving impossibly slowly, the in-fill lines of elongated static shimmering, flickering at warpspeed, the blind spot in the middle that erased whatever it fell over, words, textures, dissolving to white. It was only much later that I learnt an aura is not quite something you see – it appears as something visual but bypasses the eyes, still there with your eyes squeezed shut. Closing your eyes gets you closer. Over the next half an hour, and still today, predicting, following and particularly describing my aura feels like trying to describe a dream – knowing that there's almost no way to adequately describe it. Virginia Woolf wrote of it, "English has no words for the shiver and the headache". Since then, we've been given *scintillating scotoma*, pleasantly alliterative but something dead in the technicality of it. Sometimes it can feel richer to share a negative rather than describe what's actually there, so let's follow the curve around the blank space of an aura and maybe we'll be left with the outline, cut in sharp relief. The pressures and tensions of the aura (and in my case migraine) come like the changes in air pressure that sweep across the planet as wind.

The aura follows pressure. The same base circumstances have always precipitated my auras: prolonged stress, that feeling of pressure, mostly self-imposed, combined with a lack of sleep and tension in the neck, another pressure felt in the body. Wind itself is a function of air pressure, where first, heat from the sun creates areas of high pressure. The planet, forever thrown out of balance by the sun's heat but always chasing stasis, responds, sucking air from areas of high to low pressure. We experience this as wind, coming from one singular direction, a westerly, a nor-easter, but the regular rotation of the earth causes the wind to travel in long arcs around areas of low pressure. Cyclones, typhoons and hurricanes, all names for the same phenomenon taken to its extreme, are simply a rebalance of pressure. Wind, then, just as my auras, appears as high pressure returns in its long arc back to low. And just as the eye of a storm is calm, so too is the moment of an aura. A peacefulness, a stillness, a moment of clarity. A window where all you can do is prepare. Leave. Bunker down. Find a dark, quiet place, take drugs if they're at hand (sumatriptan, whatever strange magic it does to the brain, Maxolon to ease nausea, a strong coffee for vasoconstriction – another pressure squeezing tight the dilated blood vessels in the brain).

It's rare that the aura actually comes in the middle of a truly high-pressure period – it's usually a day after a good sleep and a body already returning to calm. Joan Didion wrote on her migraines, "It never comes when I am in real

trouble… And once it comes, now that I am wise in its ways, I no longer fight it... For when the pain recedes, ten or twelve hours later, everything goes with it… The migraine has acted as a circuit breaker, and the fuses have emerged intact".
The irony of the migraine as a circuit breaker, as pressure release, is that it comes too late, serving more as an I-told-you-so than an enforced slowdown. It's the fear of the next one, rather than the aura itself, that serves as a message to manage pressure, stress, to slow the next wind.

Historic descriptions of auras also follow this meteorological, barometric framing. Greek writer Hippocrates, writing in the fourth century BCE, describes the experience of someone named Phoenix, who "seemed to see flashes like lightning in his eye… when he had suffered that a short time a terrible pain developed towards his right temple". Somewhat contentiously, historian Charles Singer retrospectively diagnosed 12th-century abbess and Renaissance nun Hildegard von Bingen's visions, catalogued as both drawings and writings, as migraine with aura. von Bingen described her experience: "The words in this vision are… like a shimmering flame, or a cloud floating in a clear sky". Traditional Chinese Medicine, too, connects auras to weather, with migraine with aura thought to come from a Liver Wind stirring, typically treated with plants that can calm this too-strong wind.

Hubert Airy's more contemporary 1870 time-course drawing of aura is uncanny in how precisely it mirrors a storm front as it sweeps out around from a central low-pressure point. All these descriptions and understandings converge and are reinforced by more recent understandings of the chemical and electrical changes that take place during an aura. Studies in Western medicine mapping electrical signals in the brain have shown that auras are caused by a phenomenon called Cortical Spreading Depolarisation (CSD). During a CSD event, a short, intense burst of high-energy nerve activity is followed by a slow, self-propelled wave of reduced electrical activity (depolarisation) that travels across the grey matter of the brain. These electrical signals travel across at a pace of a few millimetres a minute, as if a storm front, moving from high to low pressure. Our minds construct the hallucinations we know as auras directly from changes in electrical pressure inside the brain, bypassing the eyes. The storm front holds a beautiful example of experiential, non-Western scientific knowledge embedded in story, description, ahead of and only reinforced by Western science.

To look directly at the aura misses what's most important about it. The not-knowing, the negative space around it, the low-pressure blind spot of its core and the piercing winds of a migraine that swirl around following it – these are what come into focus when we don't look the aura in the eye.

Aura

By Stephanie Cobon

> "Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural." – Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

"Blue gives other colours their vibration." – Paul Cézanne in correspondence to Émile Bernard, 1904

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It's summer and I'm floating on a blue lake, breathing dry heat and gazing into the infinity of sky. Not yet a teenager, this is the first time I experience an aura of cobalt speckled across my vision through streaks of white light. My voice is disintegrated, the subject deconstructed by the intrusion. A void opens, and it is blue.

Dusk is the hour of aura. Mercurial weather is risky. I ask my grandma, Nanette, what the colour of her migraine aura is, and she says pale yellow, like the lemons that bring them on. Citrus is a well-known trigger in our family, as is chocolate, caffeine (both overuse and sudden withdrawal), lack of sleep, blue cheese, red wine. Someone telling you about their aura is a major trigger. My sister adds cashews to the list, then retracts. "No, those might trigger cold sores".

My mum calls – she's recovering from an aura triggered by dried apricots. The next day, disseminating our shared phenomenology, I nervously decline an apricot pastry made by a friend.

Codified in memory, the list rolls through our lineage as lore.

Memory is often imagined as a fixed point in space (a camera lens). It strikes me that aura is often described as an overwhelmingly embodied phenomenon that appears in the eyes, crosses limbs, slouches to the tongue, decentralising perception throughout the body. The body becomes a total perceiving organ storing intimacy with aura shadows, recalling contours of pain, cataloguing the names of various nuisances to avoid. Aura memory binds our bodies in collective record keeping.

The colour of my aura is cobalt blue (cobalt, 16th-century German *kobold;* 'nuisance domestic goblin'; 'mountain-dwelling spirit'). Saxon miners hoping to extract silver from the earth instead commonly found a silver-mimicking ore which released arsenic and sulphur fumes during smelting. Local folklore of the time identified the *kobold,* a quotidian goblin of the earth, as responsible for harming and even killing miners.

Early in my first pregnancy, a late-night search soothes: 'migraines often subside during pregnancy'. Two weeks later I experience full aphasia for the first time. I open my mouth to speak and an utterance emerges: a completely incoherent approximation of the fluid thought in my mind. I try again, and again I produce an asemic translation as though my mouth is hallucinating semantic content. The early pregnancy attacks are every three days but are shorter than previous auras. Blue phosphenes leave a trace of bile in my mouth. A later google result: 'migraines can intensify during pregnancy'.

I am six weeks pregnant with my second child and am waiting for aphasia attacks to begin. I will it, desire it to come – a migraine accelerationist. Calling in the involuntary abnegation, initiating the cleansing process. Attacks roll on week after week and I reformulate the aphasic state as a sacred one.

Who am I without the ability to speak? What do I say to myself in the void of representation? I try to record my utterances but can only laugh as though performing laughter, or sob in overwhelm. I try to codify the sounds, to make incapacity legible. Speaking with the void, it occurs to me that this space is both emptiness and a portal.

I worry about how I'll care for my eldest child when a goblin gets to the mainframe. At her coffee table, Nanette tells me not to worry, that young children sense affliction as though they receive brainwaves as signals. They'll sleep when you can't stay awake; they'll wait. Nanette tells me of her home amongst the orchards at the edge of the Valley when her four children were still small; of the stray kids who walked miles to sit under the oak tree in the yard; of how money often didn't allow for doors or windows; and of how she never skipped lemon butter season even though it gave her aura for days.

I too would not dream of missing her lemon butter, side effects of migratory sanity considered. We sit mostly in silence, slow waves of electrical currents spreading depressions across our brains. Blue and yellow vibrating side by side.