



BrainParade – Art and Science giving visibility to migraine

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Migraine is one of the most disabling neurological conditions worldwide, responsible for profound social, economic, and emotional impact. However, it remains invisible to much of society, often reduced to the mistaken idea of “just a simple headache.” This stigma reinforces the silence of millions of people, who refrain from seeking proper diagnosis and treatment. In Brazil, an estimated 33 million people live with migraine; globally, the number exceeds 1 billion (1,2). Still, recognition and empathy remain insufficient.

The BrainParade was guided by the principle of health education: translating complex neurological concepts into accessible messages (3,4). By combining science, art, and communication, the project aimed to dismantle stigma and to foster a deeper understanding of migraine as a legitimate neurological disease.

The Brazilian Association of Cluster Headache and Migraine (ABRACES) organized the BrainParade, an unprecedented artistic and educational initiative presented during the International Headache Congress (IHC 2025), held in São Paulo, Brazil, from September 10 to 13, 2025.

The BrainParade was conceived to transform an invisible disease into visible art, bringing together science, patients, artists, and society at large. The initiative aimed to promote public awareness of migraine, foster empathy and social engagement through artistic expression, and create a legacy of advocacy and education, reinforcing the dialogue between health, culture, and public space.

The exhibition featured 20 large-scale sculptures in the shape of the human brain (approximately 1.5 meters in height), personalized by invited Brazilian visual artists. Each artwork expressed, in unique ways, the lived experience of migraine, its symptoms, its stigma, its treatment and the resilience of those who live with the condition.

The sculptures were displayed in high-traffic areas of the WTC São Paulo Convention Center during IHC 2025, the International Headache Congress, where thousands of neurologists and health professionals from more than 60 countries were in attendance. IHC is the largest global event dedicated to headache science. By integrating art into the congress environment, the BrainParade invited both specialists and the general public to reflect on migraine as a real, invisible, and treatable neurological disease.

Artists received a blank sculpture for customization, and their creative process and final work were acknowledged in all communications, ensuring authorship and visibility.



Artists' Contributions to the BrainParade

Renowned and emerging artists—Adolfo Morandini, Mariane Morandini, Fefe Talavera, Erica Mizutani, Paulo Lionetti, Claudia Lente, Claudia Saller, Cuscua, Luciana Assumpção, Paola Lopes, Rukin, Aristides Jaguar, Gilberto Raimund, and Juliane P. Peres Mercante—contributed their expertise to translate complex and often ineffable experiences of migraine into a visual language. Through this process, art served as a mediating tool, bridging the gap between individual subjective suffering and broader social comprehension.

Each sculpture was uniquely transformed by the invited artists, using painting, collage, embedded objects, and diverse materials to create works that translated migraine into symbolic and aesthetic forms, offering distinct perspectives on pain, transformation, and relief.

Erica Mizutani's *Worms in the Head* (Figure 1) translates personal anxieties and memories into playful "Mizunhocas," forming an entangled brain structure. Even when addressing pain and illness, her work introduces humor and imagination as mediating elements, suggesting their role in coping and healing processes.



Figure 1. *Worms in the Head* (Erica Mizutani). Translates personal anxieties and childhood memories into playful "Mizunhocas," forming an entangled brain structure that evokes humor and imagination as coping elements.

Claudia Lente's *Metamorphosis of Pain* (Figure 2) depicts migraine as a journey in three stages: from visual aura to constriction and darkness, where nails embedded in the brain symbolize the sharp, invasive nature of pain, and finally to relief represented by arabesques and butterflies, an allegory of release and light.



Figure 2. *Metamorphosis of Pain* (Claudia Lente). Depicts migraine in three stages: from visual aura to constriction and darkness—where nails embedded in the brain symbolize invasive pain—and finally to relief represented by arabesques and butterflies, an allegory of release and light.

Cuscua's *Metamorphosis* (Figure 3) approaches the brain as a locus of profound transformations, highlighting water as both its essential biological substrate and a metaphor for depth, turbulence, and renewal. The work evokes the association between migraine, stress, and mental fog, while pointing to resilience through movement and fluidity.



Figure 3. *Metamorphosis* (Cuscuq). Approaches the brain as a site of profound transformation, using water as a metaphor for turbulence and renewal, evoking the links between migraine, stress, and resilience.



Figure 4. *Sensitivity* (Paola Lopes). Explores cerebral hyperexcitability through luminous, iridescent colors. Eyes painted on the base suggest vigilance, symbolizing sensitivity to light and sound.

Paola Lopes' *Sensitivity* (Figure 4) explores cerebral hyperexcitability through luminous and iridescent colors. Sensitivity to light and sound, often present during a migraine attack, is evoked by the chromatic intensity of the sculpture. The eyes painted on the base suggest constant vigilance, symbolizing how many individuals remain alert to migraine triggers. In this way, the work portrays migraine as an experience that goes far beyond pain, encompassing perception, alertness, and sensory vulnerability.

Aristides Jaguar's *How Much Relief?* (Figure 5) covers the brain with vials and pre-filled syringes, symbolizing the central role of pharmacological treatments, particularly monoclonal antibodies and injectables, in migraine care. The work reflects both the hope for effective relief and the dependence and challenges associated with ongoing therapy.



Figure 5. *How Much Relief?* (Aristides Jaguar). Covers the brain with vials and pre-filled syringes, symbolizing pharmacological treatments, particularly monoclonal antibodies and injectables, reflecting both hope and challenges.

Gilberto Raimund's *Light of Pain* (Figure 6) uses a reflective metallic surface to symbolize photophobia, one of the most disabling symptoms of migraine. The shining finish conveys light as unbearable.



Figure 6. *Light of Pain* (Gilberto Raimund). Uses a reflective metallic surface to symbolize photophobia, one of the most disabling symptoms of migraine. The shining finish conveys light as unbearable.

Claudia Saller's *Eclipse* (Figure 7) represents a deeply personal account of living with migraine, translated into a symbolic visual narrative. The artwork evokes the experience of days marked by relentless pain, insomnia, and an overwhelming sense of darkness that eclipses daily life. The sculpture conveys the pulsating and constricting sensations of migraine. The gradual shift toward lighter tones, along with the section adorned with flowers, suggests both optimism and the cyclical passage from crisis to relief. By combining visceral metaphors with layered symbolism, *Eclipse* illustrates migraine as an invisible yet consuming condition, one that encompasses pain, isolation, and resilience.



Figure 7. Eclipse (Claudia Saller). Evokes days of relentless pain, insomnia, and darkness that eclipses life. The shift toward lighter tones and floral details suggest optimism and the passage from migraine attack to relief.

Fefe Talavera's *Sky of Bones, Serpents in Trance* portrays a white brain as an altar where black serpents coil and whisper "ancient pains" and looping memories. By invoking symbols of ritual and trance, the artist frames migraine as an ancestral and cyclical force.

Paulo Lionetti's *Emotional Journey* was conceived as a collage-based reinterpretation inspired by Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. He depicted migraine as a suffocating pulsation where light wounds, sound weighs heavily, and the world narrows. On the opposite side, however, he represented relief—air becomes light again, forms open up, colors breathe, and thought regains clarity. Words of encouragement placed at the base of the sculpture underscore resilience and recovery.

Rukin's *After the Brain Storm* visualizes migraine through contrasting hemispheres: one side in pink spirals, lightning, and sharp forms symbolizing crisis; the other in turquoise tones, representing calm, healing, and the scars that remain as marks of resilience.

Luciana Assumpção's *Shoo Migraine!* portrays the struggle of recurrent pain through a colorful brain filled with expressive faces symbolizing

exhaustion, irritability, despair, and resistance. The base, decorated with pills and syringes, alludes to the reality of treatment.

Finally, Juliane P. Peres Mercante's *EMHA and International Advocates Working Together for Migraine* emphasized the collaborative and global dimension of advocacy, bridging patient voices, science, and public awareness.

Together, these testimonies and visual translations demonstrate how art can externalize pain, evoke empathy, and create a shared cultural understanding of migraine—transforming an often invisible disorder into a visible and socially resonant expression.

The BrainParade was more than an exhibition: it became a cultural-scientific movement that brought migraine out of invisibility and into public discourse. By uniting art and science, the initiative demonstrated that neurological diseases are not only matters of biology and medicine, but also of empathy, visibility, and social transformation.

Conclusion

More than an exhibition, the BrainParade is a cultural and scientific movement that invites society to reconsider its perspective on migraine. It is a call for empathy, accurate information, and collective engagement. By opening space for art at the largest international headache congress, we reaffirm that science and culture are not separate spheres, but complementary ones. Together, they have the power to transform the way the world perceives an invisible disease—and, in doing so, to improve lives.

References

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