

# Drawing strength



## Newly diagnosed illustrator Megan Berkheiser won't let multiple sclerosis keep her from making art.

by Matt Alderton

### About the Artist



**Name:** Megan Berkheiser

**Hometown:** Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

**Location:** Savannah, Georgia

**Medium:** Illustration, photography

**Occupation:** Illustration professor at Savannah College of Art and Design

**Clients:** O, The Oprah Magazine, TIME, The Wall Street Journal, The Village Voice, Discover Magazine, HOW, Reader's Digest, Forbes and The New York Times

**Favorite artists:** Rachel Whiteread, Sandy Skoglund, Andy Goldsworthy

**Dream project:** To create a personal exhibition honoring strong female influences in her life

When she was invited to illustrate **Momentum**'s Spring 2015 cover story, "[Yes, you can regain bladder control](#)," Megan Berkheiser looked at the daunting mountain of projects already piled up before her. But this request was special, and saying no wasn't an option. The reason: She had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis last July.

"I said, 'It's about MS. I just have to do it,'" recalls Berkheiser, an illustration professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia.

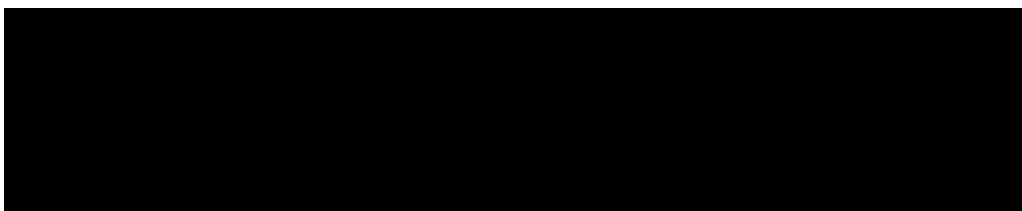
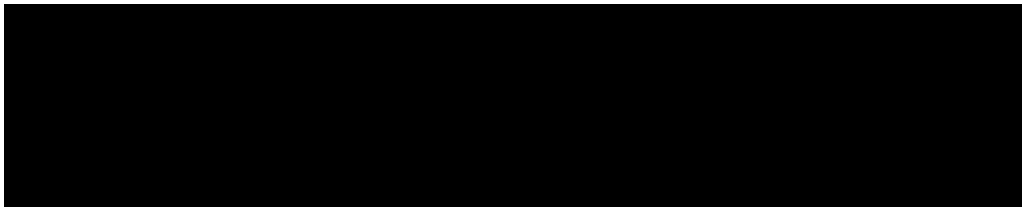
Tapping into equal parts creativity and catharsis, the resulting illustrations helped Berkheiser, 43, transform the initial despair she felt at her recent diagnosis into a source of inspiration. Here, Berkheiser tells **Momentum** the story of her work, her MS and the new marriage she's brokering between them.

**Momentum:** Your illustrations are extremely intricate and uniquely three-dimensional. What's your process?

**Berkheiser:** I usually start by doing a very quick, very loose drawing that I think will communicate the content of the story effectively. That black-and-white sketch, or "comp," is like a roadmap for me. Once the art director [who commissioned the illustration] approves this sketch, I blow it up to a larger size and start thinking about how to fabricate it. I employ watercolor, different types of digital imaging and photography—all kinds of things. Basically, though, I build a miniature set, which I then light and photograph.

**Momentum:** So, each piece of the illustration is a drawing, digital scan or photograph that you've manually cut out, mounted and assembled into a three-dimensional set. That's a lot of work. Why do you go to all that trouble?

**Berkheiser:** I think of each piece as a mini-installation, of sorts. I do it that way because I love building things, and I love the lighting of photography—the way the light goes over the form and creates shadows. It just adds so much depth and dimension.



**Momentum:** How did you discover you have MS?

**Berkheiser:** Last spring, I was on my way to class. I was stopped at a light and started out very slowly into the intersection. There was another car coming at a very high speed, running the red light. It hit and totaled my car. I had a broken neck, and during one of my subsequent checkups the doctors spotted some things they said could be MS. I went to the neurologist and they did an MRI, which confirmed it definitely was MS.

As I look back, I always had to go to the bathroom really quickly when I had to go, but I just thought that was from me waiting too long. Or I always felt really tired, but I just assumed that was because I was pulling all-nighters doing illustrations. There were lots of little, subtle signs, but I was so ignorant about MS that I never connected the dots.

**Momentum:** Has your diagnosis affected your work?

**Berkheiser:** The first thing my neurologist said to me was, "You need to sleep at least seven hours a night." I said, "That's impossible; I pull all-nighters all the time." That's my problem. I sit down to work in the mid-afternoon, and before I know it the birds are chirping and the neighbor's sprinklers are coming on. But I'm very aware now of trying to sleep more and trying to figure out how to make my schedule work. This is the first quarter that I'm back to teaching since the accident, and it's much trickier than I thought it would be. I'm absolutely exhausted.

**Momentum:** Have you found strategies that will help you maintain both your art and your health?

**Berkheiser:** I just made an announcement to my students and said, “This is a new season of life for me, and I would welcome any assistance. I pay \$10 an hour and pizza.” So I now have a fabulous assistant. And my husband, Mike, is really great about helping me out, too. In terms of the work itself, I’ve always been very old school about painting and drawing and photography, but now I’m looking for ways to get things done more quickly. I usually cut everything by hand, for example, but the school has a laser cutter that I’ve been trying to use more often. I don’t love the way it works, but using it is better than not doing anything at all. I have to still edit my life plan a bit. Maybe that means not teaching full time, or somehow picking and choosing what illustration projects I do. I have to figure out what the right balance is. I’m working on that.

## “Yes, you can regain bladder control”

Go back to the feature story about [treatment strategies available for bladder control](#).

**Momentum:** Your MS is affecting your work, but is your work also affecting your MS?

**Berkheiser:** Absolutely. It takes my mind off how I feel. How I decide I’m going to take on each day is almost like a light switch I can turn on or off. I can [focus on my symptoms] or I can say, “I’m so fortunate. I have more illustrations to do and at 2 o’clock I get to teach talented students; I can’t wait to see what they’re doing.” For me, it’s a no-brainer because it makes the time go quickly, and however I’m feeling gets put on the back burner and doesn’t seem quite so important or debilitating. Of course, you shouldn’t ignore how you feel—that’s not good—but it helps to have something that you really love to do.

**Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.**

See more of Megan Berkheiser’s work at [pushart.com](#).

Express yourself! Learn more about MS and art in “[The picture of health](#).”