

# More than meets THE EYE

For many, the trauma of losing an eye can be as overwhelming emotionally as it is physically. Enter Perth ocularists Paul and Jenny Geelen; they make artificial eyes with sublime skill, but this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to caring for their clients.

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DELICATE WORK: Paul and Jenny Geelen (opposite) blend a surgeon's touch with highly artistic skills to create artificial eyes virtually indistinguishable from real ones.



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**D**id you hear the one about the racehorse that needed an artificial eye? Paul and Jenny Geelen did – but the request, while unusual, was no joke to the Perth siblings whose skill at creating “false” eyes helps change the lives of around 150 Australians a year. As ocularists, the Perth pair blends creativity with superb hands-on skills to create bespoke artificial eyes to replace ones lost to cancer, blindness or accidents. Loss of an eye is much more than a physical trauma, and the Geelens often forge close bonds with their clients, helping them shake off the stigma of eye loss and adjust to life without 20/20 vision.

These artificial eyes are not the crude, joke shop glass eyes, beloved of schoolboy pranks, but hand-made, hand-painted and identically matched eyes, designed to be indistinguishable from the client's natural one. For one, they're made from a special acrylic plastic that can be shaved back to precisely match the curvature of the natural eye – apparently that's the trickiest part of the process and not, as you might think, matching the colour of the eye.

Then it's over to Paul and Jenny to use their own artistic skill – no Photoshop here – to get the eye colours right.

“You need a broad range of skills to be a successful ocularist,” says Jenny. “There's the mechanical side which you need to manufacture the eye from scratch, and then there's the artistic side, matching the colours of the eye exactly.”

“You have to be prepared to do a bit of everything,” adds Paul.

There are only 10 or so ocularists in Australia so the Geelens' services are very much in demand. “We see around two or three people a week on average, and have a good relationship with local eye specialists and surgeons,” says Paul.

The pair took over their mother's business after both working in the casino industry at Burswood. There's no sign of sibling rivalry between them, they finish off each other's sentences and move around their small Hay Street office in perfect harmony. “Jenny always checks my work before it's fitted,” says Paul. “It's a big part of what we do – one of us will talk to the client, while the other gets on with working on the eye.”

“We spend a lot of time together socially too,” adds Jenny, “and live down the road from each other.”

It's clear from the stories they tell, and the strong relationships they have built with clients, that Paul and Jenny's work has as much to do with offering support and advice to clients as making

artificial eyes. They have strong links to their clients, years after the eye has been made and fitted.

“We are more interested in building a support network, through our website and through social events we organise,” says Paul. “We get clients to write down their stories, a process which we find helps with coming to terms with their situation, and are able to give them lots of advice about how to adjust their lives once they have lost an eye.”

For instance, you lose 20, not 50 percent, of your vision after losing an eye. People will often get light shows “like fireworks” from the optic nerve still trying to send messages to the brain. People can be light-sensitive and suffer from glare but do not “see” it as with normal vision.

Nor do you need to take your eye out every night, and leave it in on the nightstand, like a pair of false teeth. And a prosthetic eye hardly ever pops out, if it's fitted properly. A brisk rub all over once a month is all it needs, although Paul says many clients don't even bother with that.

It's recommended you come back for a polish once a year but apart from that, having an artificial eye seems to be remarkably low maintenance, considering the huge impact it has on the client's self-esteem.

“When you lose an eye, people find it hard to

make eye contact with you, leading to a sort of social invisibility,” says Jenny. “Children in particular who lose an eye often find that adults will speak over them, rather than to them directly, which compounds a feeling of non-presence. With an artificial eye, it makes it easier for those around you to accept you as ‘normal’, and stop the loss of the eye being the most important thing about you.”

It takes one week to make an eye prosthesis, although it takes six weeks for the socket to heal before the Geelens start the procedure. The eye costs around \$1500. However, in special circumstances, Jenny and Paul have been known to work much more quickly – for nothing.

“I've just come back from two weeks in East Timor,” says Jenny, “and made five artificial eyes for locals there, all funded by the business. Paul went to Bali with the John Fawcett Foundation and trained two people to make eyes, and has also been to the Philippines on a similar mission.”

This charitable work is something Jenny in particular finds hugely rewarding, emotionally if not financially. “I just looked at the kids I had helped and knew it was worth the effort in quite challenging circumstances,” she says.

Paul sometimes helps clients with unusual requests. “One man asked for a smiley face eye which he wears all the time now – in fact he's known as ‘Smiley Face’ and if he wears a normal eye, people ask what's changed about him.”

And artificial eyes, it seems, are not just the preserve of humans.

“We got a call from somebody asking if we would make an artificial eye for his beloved race horse. He had found us on the Internet and didn't realise we were in Australia – he was based in the US, so we advised him to find a more local ocularist,” says Paul. Adds Jenny: “I offered to make an eye for an orang-utan at Perth Zoo... I'm still waiting to hear if they want to take me up on that one.”

For more information, check out the Geelens' website, [artificialeyes.net](http://artificialeyes.net).