

# A Master Copies The Eye

An artist's work helps in healing

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**E**leven-year-old Karim Nabih watches with spirited attention as Steve Young heats a tiny spatula over the flame of an alcohol lamp and begins sculpting in wax.

Young's hands move in minute strokes. He turns occasionally to concentrate on the boy's face. The work represents the culmination of Karim's 10,000-mile journey from Alexandria, Egypt, to Young's office in Oakland. The boy has traveled by himself and is staying with an aunt in Contra Costa County.

Karim's mission — to have an artificial eye made to replace his own — lost in a BB gun accident.

Steve Young, 35, is one of the world's best-known eye makers. More technically, he is an ocularist, a precision artist who recreates in artifice that mysterious miniature landscape — the human eye.

Karim's good eye is large and brown, flashing with curiosity and good humor.

## **Delicate Work**

Young works meticulously with fine sable brushes and specially ground pigments to transfer that jewel-like vitality to a lightweight plastic prosthesis — even recreating the minuscule blood vessels by attaching delicate red threads to the

"I basically think of myself as a copy artist, and a lucky one," explains this unassuming and jovial man who looks more like a hefty farmer than a professional miniaturist.

"Steve is simply the best," says Dr. James Langham, lecturer in reconstructive ocular-plastic surgery at the University of California Medical Center. "His work is a remarkable fusion of artistic and anatomical knowledge."

"I've watched him work since he started 12 years ago, and, as funny as it may sound, I don't think he was ever a beginner," Langham says. "His ability to paint realistically is stunning."

Langham is not alone in his opinion. Young's appointment book reads like a guest list for a mini-U.N. conference since people come from around the world to see him. Even film-maker George Lucas has sent artists from his production shop to have Young train them to mold eyes for some of the creatures in Lucas' movies.

## **Matching Many Traits**

"The loss of an eye is devastating," Young says. "The hope that surgery and prosthetic restoration offer are the heart of the healing process."

Young's dedication creates a special bond with his patients. He gets letters and phone calls from them long after his work is complete. On more than one occasion, he has been best man at the wedding of a former patient who attributed his good fortune in love to the contribution Young's artistry made to regaining his confidence.

The eyes cost \$800 to \$1,100, and making them is time-consuming. The patient must sit for three to six hours a day in sessions that can span 2½ to nine days. Where great damage has been done, the work can

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# Plastic That Shines With Life

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take longer, Young explains.

Young uses a two-part molding process. First, he makes an impression of the space left by the injured eye and works up the shape of the eye in wax to create the volume and contours of that eye.

"I match the gaze, prominence, symmetry, even the line of the eyelashes, and then take that shape and duplicate it in plastic," he says.

Because of the nature of plastic, it is possible to rebuild or change the mass of the eye and to repaint the iris or pupil as the patient grows older or as surgery heals and the surrounding tissues change.

If a client was born blind, Steve brings in the whole family, taking cues for eye color not only from the child's skin tones but from the eyes of the parents and siblings. "It's very satisfying to finish my job and hear a mother say of her son, 'he has my eyes.'"

Young began to paint in high school in Garner, Iowa, where he grew up. While at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, he continued to squeeze in art classes and turn out lavish canvasses while taking demanding pre-med classes.

"I was moving along, planning to become your standard doctor," he says with a broad grin. "I used to go over to the University of Iowa Medical Center to do special studies during my interim breaks." It was on such a break that Young found out about the medical center's program in ocular prosthetics.

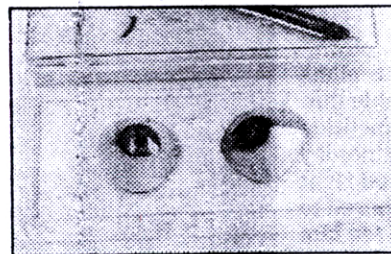
The program was pioneered in 1971 by Lee Allan, whose work set the standard for the development of ocular prosthetics both nationally and internationally.

"It was a dream come true —



PHOTOS BY JERRY TELFER/THE CHRONICLE

Steve Young's work has been called 'a remarkable fusion of artistic and anatomical knowledge.'



Steve Young spends many hours painting and shaping the lightweight plastic eyes.

the perfect blend of my hobby and my work," Young said.

The seven-days-a-week training, which lasted 2½ years without time off for summer or holidays, overlapped with his college work at Simpson. He received a B.S. in biology from Simpson in 1974, and then completed the special training about a year and half later.

After graduating, he came to

the Bay Area when he became staff member at Presbyterian Hospital in San Francisco.

After two weeks of various sittings, Karim is eager for the moment of his final fit. He tries to look serious but cannot repress his excitement. Young checks to see that he has faithfully rendered the rich browns of Karim's good eye; that the pupil is deep, the iris lively with flecks of red and yellow.

Karim has been very patient and Young has put in hours of concentrated effort. The teamwork has paid off. A look in the mirror brings a broad smile of approval that lights the boy's face.

The two confer on some final changes; then, with a few quick strokes of a marker pen, Young mischievously paints a mustache and goatee on the young boy's happy face.

Karim laughs.