



Arts and Sciences

Surgeon Eric Finzi is redefining the art of medicine.

| By Sarah Wildman | Photography by Benjamin Tankersley |

As any CNN-minded Washingtonian knows, physical image has become an important power tool, even in DC. Chevy Chase-based, board-certified dermatologic surgeon Dr. Eric Finzi believes there's something else aesthetics can do: change how you feel. Finzi has launched an ongoing study to learn whether Botox, that often-maligned wrinkle buster, may in fact be a weapon in the battle against depression. But the doctor, who's at the top of his field, is an artist of a different sort, as well.

Trained in fine art, including painting and sculpture, Finzi has held solo exhibitions internationally, but this month, he'll show for the first time at SCOPE Art Fair, during the country's preeminent art fair, Art Basel Miami Beach. No doubt, his dermatologic offices are his second home, but his first is his studio in Kensington. The scientist is an artist, the artist a scientist. Finzi says he couldn't be one without being the other.

A painter since his childhood — he studied painting at Pratt and The Art Students League of New York, as well as pottery in Greenwich Village—Finzi was equally enthralled with science. He enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania at 16 and studied fine arts, as well as biology and biochemistry. When he went on to an M.D./Ph.D. program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, he watched his classmates abandon other pursuits to focus solely on medicine. Finzi refused to give up the art, even taking off for a full year to live and paint in the South of France. Upon return, he studied sculpture on the weekends. "I got kicked out of the lab for not showing enough commitment to science," he says. "That influenced my life. When I went to Johns Hopkins for my residency, I committed to splitting time between being a physician and an artist. I would do both."

The connection between Botox and alleviating depression came, in part, from his art. Many of his paintings are inspired by photographs. A collection from the 19th century, taken in the French mental hospital Salpêtrière, moved him. "I was struck by the amazing expressions on these patients' faces," he

explains. "Many were depressed or hysterical." Finzi began to read works by Darwin. "It struck me how Darwin has a whole feedback theory of emotional expressions. The expression you make on your face influences what you feel inside, not just an outward expression."

Where inspiration for the study came from art, motivation came from his own mother's severe depression. "Towards the end of her life, her depression got worse and none of the treatments worked," he says. "I felt powerless and helpless."

In the early part of the last decade, Finzi began to consider Botox, which he'd worked with as a cosmetic tool, as a potential treatment for depression. "I published the initial study on the use of Botox to treat depression in 2006," he says. The report was a small, but influential set of findings showing that the inability to frown seemed to re-wire the way depression affects the human body. Injecting Botox into frown lines resulted in radically different images in the amygdala, the brain's fear center. Finzi has since pulled together a team, which includes psychiatrist Dr. Norman Rosenthal, who helped discover Seasonal Affective Disorder, and the Capitol Clinical Research Associates, to create a randomized, double-blind study that aims to determine what effect Botox has on depression.

Botox has influenced Finzi's art, too. He'll show pieces in Miami, made with epoxy resin, which is highly toxic in liquid form, viscous and difficult to control, much like the botulin found in the injectable he uses for his study. "Science satisfies one part of the brain, art satisfies the other," he says. "I never felt completely satisfied with doing only one." ■



NO PAIN, ALL GAIN
Clockwise from left: Leading dermatological surgeon Eric Finzi spent a year painting in the South of France. He returned to medicine with the decision to create both art and science. This month, his pieces "I'll Only Take Showers in the Daytime" and "Rain and Other Reasons" will show at the SCOPE art fair at Miami Basel.