Now You See It: Neuroscientists Reveal Magicians’ Secrets

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Wynne Parry | December 05, 2010 03:00am ET

Magicians create illusions by taking advantage of how we perceive stimuli and process information. For example, a dove fluttering from a hat can be used to draw an audience’s attention away from the actual trick.

Credit: Dreamstime.

NEW YORK — There is a place for magic in science. Five years ago, on a trip to Las Vegas, neuroscientists Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde realized that a partnership was in order with a profession that has an older and more intuitive understanding of how the human brain works. Magicians, it seems, have an advantage over neuroscientists.

“Scientists have only studied cognitive illusions for a few decades. Magicians have studied them for hundreds, if not thousands, of years,” Martinez-Conde told the audience during a recent presentation here at the New York Academy of Sciences. [Video: Your Brain on Magic]

She and Macknik, her husband, use illusions as a tool to study how the brain works. Illusions are revealing, because they separate perception from reality. Magicians take advantage of how our nervous systems — our eyes, sense of touch, minds and so on — are wired to create seemingly impossible illusions.

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