

Art... and Alzheimer's

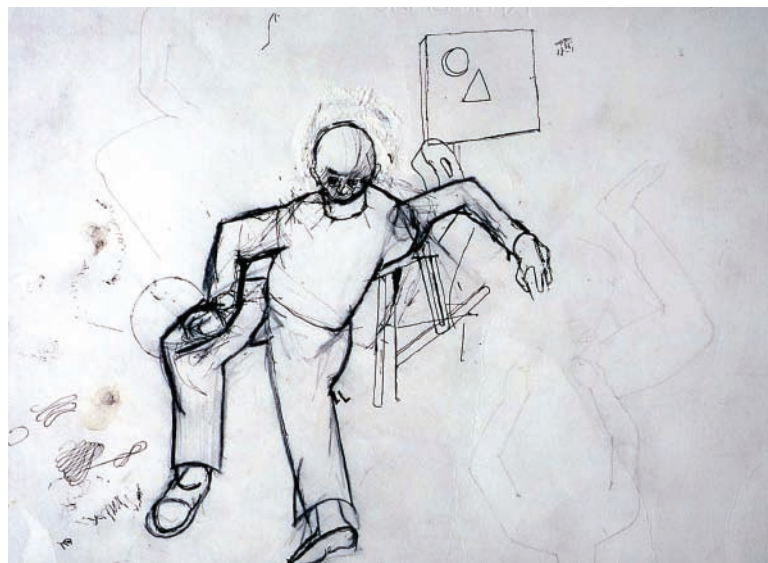
Over the course of his artistic career, William Utermohlen struggled with Alzheimer's disease, reflecting on his experiences in a lifelong series of canvases that bring the harrowing realities of his illness to the fore By Layla Revis

There is a famous quote that goes something like this: "A moment lasts all of a second, but a memory lives on forever."

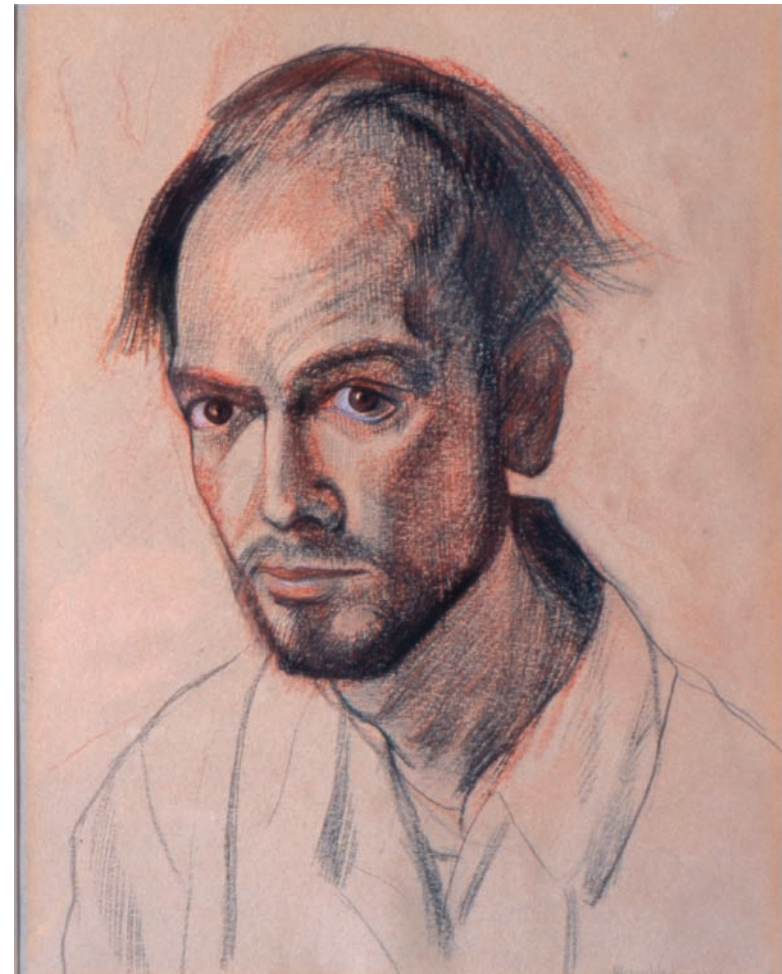
Though the sentiment is altogether poignant and inspirational, it also touches upon the notion of memory and value we place on our own lives—and our past—every day. For the artist and the everyman, this loss of past and the rich contextual experiences that make up our lives and our art can also mean a living death sentence; one that robs a person's life out from under them.

For the five million people living with Alzheimer's disease in the United States, this loss is now the seventh-leading cause of death in the country and the fifth-leading cause of death for those over age 65. With 78 million U.S. baby boomers beginning to turn 60 in 2006, estimates say that someone develops Alzheimer's every 72 seconds.

But for one notable artist this century, this stolen past has now been documented.



William Utermohlen, *Broken Figure*, 1996. Image courtesy Alzheimer's Association.



William Utermohlen, *Self Portrait*, 1967. Image courtesy Alzheimer's Association.

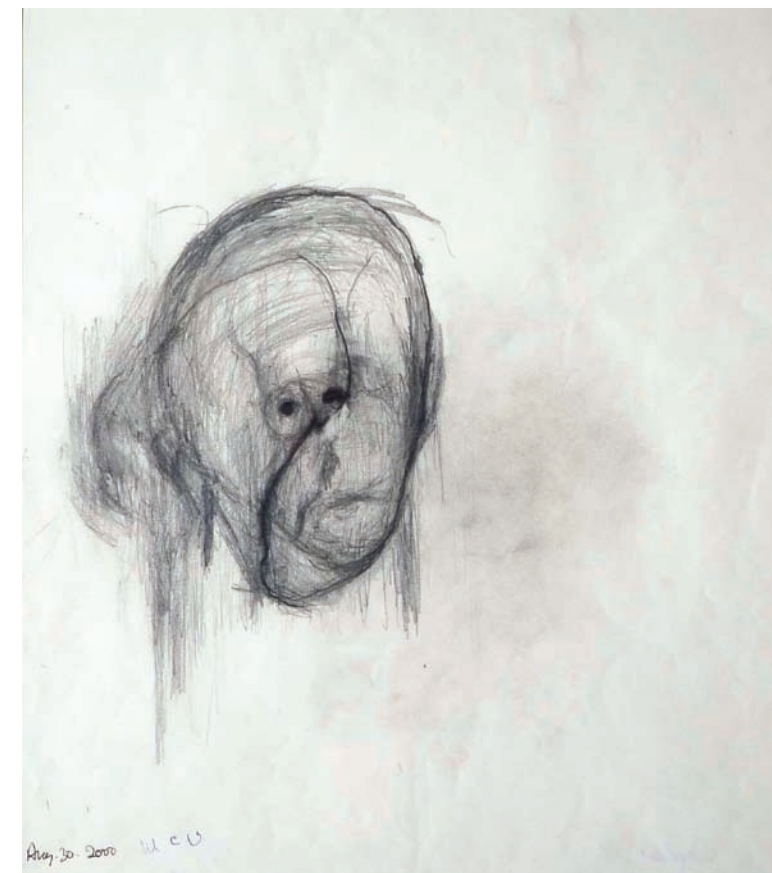
William Utermohlen, likely to be studied both in art schools and medical schools alike for years to come, was one of the first artists to record his own descent into Alzheimer's—from diagnosis to death. Born in 1933 to a German immigrant family in South Philadelphia, he would go on to attend Pennsylvania's Academy of Fine Arts before moving to London to continue his artistic studies and marry Patricia, an art historian. Paintings from his life in London before his diagnosis show a vibrant liveliness about them.

His early works, done mostly in a colorful, figurative pictorial style, eventually give way to an increasingly fragmented approach where space and time seem adrift. Never before has an artist captured the gradual descent into dementia so powerfully and painstakingly, providing a visual framework for the experience of cognitive illness.

In *Blue Skies* (1995), Utermohlen gives the viewer his interpretation of his illness and the dreaded isolation, sadness, and confusion that follows. In *Broken*



William Utermohlen, *Blue Skies*, 1995. Image courtesy Alzheimer's Association.



William Utermohlen, *Head* 2000. Image courtesy Alzheimer's Association.



William Utermohlen, *Self Portrait*, 1998. Image courtesy Alzheimer's Association.

Figure (1996), his frustration and confusion after failing a cognitive skills test—in which he was unable to remember simple shapes and objects—is depicted with harsh candor. As his mental capabilities diminish, we see self portraits that show a darkened head, a face of shadows, and a lost look in his gaze as he watches himself disappear before his own eyes.

In some cases, as in *Masque* (1996) and *Self-Portrait with Saw* (1997), the brain area is literally separated from the rest of the body or a division is suggested with an ominous saw. These images are particularly striking because they were created following the news that only after autopsy would doctors be able to definitively diagnosis the artist's illness. Utermohlen's internal divorce between mind and body, biological and cognitive, is laid bare.

From the vibrant color, light, and life of his earlier works to the stark barrenness, confusion, and personal sadness pervading his latter, Utermohlen's oeuvre not only documents a baffling disease but also gives it new light. Perhaps, somewhere within the puzzling loss of memory, may the artist and the everyman find beauty in solitude and a memory in a brushstroke. ■

For more information about Alzheimer's disease and the Alzheimer's Association, please visit www.alz.org or call 800.272.3900.