The Later Works of William Utermohlen



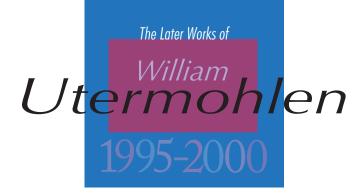
1967

1996



Exhibition: The New York Academy of Medicine Presidents Gallery 1216 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10029 October 22- October 27, 2006 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM

Hosted by the Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter, and supported by Myriad Pharmaceuticals, Inc.



This catalog was produced in conjunction with an exhibition entitled *The Later Works of William Utermohlen*, which was held at The New York Academy of Medicine, New York, New York, October 22 to 27, 2006. The exhibition was open free to the public.

There was also a corresponding lecture entitled *Portraits & Promises in Alzheimer's Disease* held on the evening of October 25, 2006, which brought together a panel of leading experts in Alzheimer's disease and art.

The exhibition and lecture were hosted by the Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter (www.alznyc.org), and supported by Myriad Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Salt Lake City, Utah (www.myriad.com).

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Art commentary adapted, with permission, from Patrice Polini, MD, William Utermohlen-The Late Pictures 1990-2000.

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Cover: Self-Portrait, 1967, and Self-Portrait (With Easel-Yellow and Green), 1996

This program is dedicated to William Utermohlen and his wife Pat along with all those living with Alzheimer's disease, their caregivers, families, and friends.

Forward

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first report of dementia by the German psychiatrist, Dr. Alois Alzheimer. I am using this milestone to reflect upon how far we have come over the last century, juxtaposed with how far we still need to go to bring this devastating disease to an end.

Alzheimer's disease affects millions of people in the United States and, to date, there is no cure. If there are no significant breakthroughs in the detection and management of this disease in the near future, the number of people living with Alzheimer's disease is expected to reach epidemic proportions. Alzheimer's disease will be the leading public health crisis of the 21st century. The emotional and financial toll Alzheimer's disease already takes on individuals with the disease, their families, and their caregivers is enormous, with the economic burden to society estimated at a staggering \$100 billion per year in the United States alone.

The Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter, serves over 200,000 people with Alzheimer's disease, as well as their families and caregivers, in every neighborhood throughout the five boroughs. Our mission is to create and promote comprehensive and humane care for persons with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders, and to provide support for their families and professional caregivers. The Chapter meets this mission in the community through increasing public awareness, providing education, creating and encouraging replication of model programs, collaborating with research centers, and undertaking advocacy.

One of our approaches to garnering greater public awareness of the disease is to utilize novel art and lecture programs designed to inspire, inform, and encourage people to take action. Our latest initiative is this extraordinary art exhibition— *The Later Works of William Utermohlen*—and its corresponding evening lecture event—*Portraits & Promises in Alzheimer's Disease.*

This exhibition showcases the self-portraits of the artist William Utermohlen, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1995. It is through his art that we can see his attempts to stay connected to the world around him while he loses the ability to communicate in other ways. His work remains a testimony to the creative and human spirit that resides in all people with dementia.

Lou-Ellen Barkan President & CEO Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter

Introduction

Artist's History. William (Bill) Utermohlen was born into a German immigrant family in South Philadelphia in 1933 and, after high school, trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from 1951 to 1957. In 1957, the artist went to Europe on the GI Bill and traveled extensively through France, Spain, and Italy. In the autumn of 1957, he enrolled at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England. He spent most of his life and artistic career in London where he lived with his wife Patricia (Pat), an art historian.

Bill's portraits, still lifes, and drawings throughout his career can be arranged into multiple thematic cycles, the last of which was a series known as the Conversation Pieces (1989-1991). This series depicted decorative interiors with people and places inspired by living in London. Each of the paintings are powerfully sensory with intense colors and engaging spatial arrangements that amplify the interactions of the people in the compositions.

One example of this earlier work is shown below in *Conversation 1990-1991*, which silently narrates a conversation between Bill's close friend James and Bill's wife Pat in the Utermohlens' London apartment. It is sharply rendered and speaks of a powerful emotional connection and intimacy.



Conversation 1990 -1991 Oil on canvas, 86 x 122 cm

Art and Life Altered by Alzheimer's Disease. In 1995, Bill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. After this, his style changed dramatically. Thicker brush strokes and more raw surfaces bring a more urgent and expressionistic feeling to his canvasses. Now, Bill concentrates on self-portraits in which a variety of states of mind—including sadness, anger, and resignation—are powerfully expressed. Though seemingly more spontaneous, these late works still reflect Bill's innate sense of drawing and structure that underpins his brushwork and gives the paintings their real power.

Bill's late oeuvre is particularly precious to medical authorities and to the public because it offers a unique visual narrative of a patient's subjective experience of dementia. The artist paints the gradual changes he sees in his world—changes he cannot communicate anymore in words—as he loses the power of speech and the ability for conversation. In the portraits, he tries to maintain his bearings and sense of identity while fighting off the cognitive and functional decline that is the hallmark of his disease. To the extreme limits of his ability, he attempts to preserve his world—to depict himself so as not to disappear.

Despite the great sadness these portraits evoke, they are surely among Bill's most compelling works. They visually communicate the emotional, perceptual, and psychological journey of a man living with Alzheimer's disease and offer us a unique opportunity to learn from his experiences.

Self-Portraits



1967 Self-Portrait Mixed media on paper, 26.5 x 20 cm

At the height of his creative powers, after having just finished his first great cycle of paintings depicting scenes from Dante's Inferno, the artist glares at the viewer with an expression of mixed pride and pain. The features and skull are powerfully drawn, revealing Bill's skills as a classic draftsman. The hunched shoulders, the receding hairline, and the delicate neck speak of premature aging and a sense of vulnerability. The three-quarter view of the head and the big, awkwardly projecting ear reappear in the compositions of his last self-portraits of 1996-1998. The penetrating gaze of the right eye retains its power but loses, in the last portraits, its assurance, which is replaced by anger or dread.

1995 Blue Skies Oil on canvas, 152 x 121 cm

In *Blue Skies* the artist bears witness to the announcement of his illness and his impending decline. The diagnosis of this psychic death, occurring before real death, produces a deep dread. The worst is confirmed, the end is now inexorable.

What is shown in *Blue Skies* is a key moment and a crossroads, beyond which the framework of the self dissolves. The will to live tips over and freezes like the studio skylight suspended above the artist in the picture. Time has stopped. Space is laid bare. Life opens to the steely blue emptiness of a dreadful future—an obliterating hole poised above ready to suck him in.

In order not to be engulfed by the darkness, he hangs onto the table like a shipwrecked man onto his raft, or like a painter holding onto his canvas. In order to survive, he must be able to capture this catastrophic moment; he must depict the unspeakable. Rarely has a painting spoken so clearly of the ending of psychic life and the desperate effort to continue to exist by continuing to depict the world.



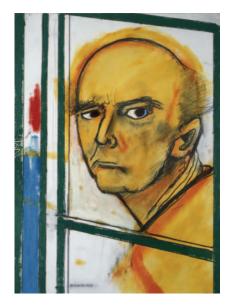
1996 Broken Figure

Mixed media on paper, 33.5 x 47 cm

The diagnosis is clear. The doctors are now testing Bill's memory. They've asked him if he still knows the day, the month, the year, and the place he is in. They want to know if he can still memorize a list of words, complete a simple subtraction, name ordinary objects, or copy simple geometric shapes. The humiliation of failing to answer these simple questions shatters his self-confidence. Soon, he feels he will be unable to answer any questions at all. All hope for a cure or even a stabilization of his condition is lost.

Confronted by his own decline, the fall in his self-esteem is dizzying. The self shown in this portrait is associated with a broken, dislocated, and fragmented body. The ghostly figure to the right is like the drawn contour of a fallen body. A part of his life has been destroyed.





1996 Self-Portrait (With Easel—Yellow and Green) Mixed media on paper, 46 x 35 cm

To paint oneself is a way of marking continuity and the passing of time. This self-portrait attempts to fix an image of the self, to regain his experience of being present, and to fill the everincreasing gap that now separates the artist from his old self and his environment.

Here, Bill bears witness to his experience of living with Alzheimer's disease and, through his work, we witness the poignant truth he shares with us—that the world has shrunk and he peers through it, as if trapped behind prison bars.



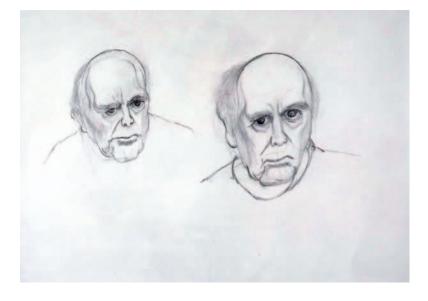
1996 Masque I Watercolor on paper, 21 x 25 cm

The eyes look upward toward a terrifying vision. Two white marks appear on the cheeks next to a red smear for the mouth. The effect is like the grotesque head of a crying clown. The head is surrounded by darkness. The upper part of the skull, where the brain is located, has been cut off. A pointed white shape slices the upper red part of the watercolor.

1996 Double Self-Portrait

Pencil on paper, 31.5 x 43 cm

Bill was asked by his doctors to record his feelings and thoughts through his drawings and paintings. Knowing now that the source of his illness is inside his head, he focuses on the contour of his skull which he delineates twice in the head on the left. His gaze here is heavy and resigned and the sagging cheeks are those of an old man. In the second head on the right, the black eyes glare out powerfully. Their expression is angry and bruised.





1996 Self-Portrait (Red) Mixed media on paper, 46.5 x 33 cm Collection C. Poilleux, Paris

It is with great anguish that Bill watches himself disappear, little by little every day. The artist mourns his lost self. His look is empty of all hope, the center of his pupil a blind spot. His reflection is coming apart and he can't put himself back together. The double in the mirror sends back a negative, a death-carrying image that he had hoped to escape. He has become a shadow of his old self and only the clothes floating on the ghostly body still show the bright colors of life.

1996 Mask Watercolor on paper, 28.5 x 21 cm

1996 Mask Watercolor on paper, 21.5 x 14 cm

These head studies suggest a series of masks—more colored traces than portraits. There is hardly anything left but painting the transition from being to non-being. Painting the instant in which the self turns away from itself, melts away, leaving only silence behind.





1997 Self-Portrait With Saw

Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 35.5 cm

In 1997, Bill learns that only at autopsy will his doctors be able to definitely diagnose his Alzheimer's disease. This notion haunts him and he speaks of it constantly to those close to him.

In this self-portrait, the vertical saw, like a guillotine blade, symbolizes the approach of a prefigured death. It also points to that other death—that of his psyche. The split between what he feels, what he would like to do or say, and that which he is actually capable of doing is greater each day. Unable to find himself within himself, he senses a stranger lurking at the heart of his being. It is an encounter with the unknown within. His possibilities of expression are no longer adequate to express the extreme nature of his experience.





1997 Pat (Artist's Wife) Oil on canvas, 35.3 x 35.6 cm

Bill must continue recognizing himself, yet he also must continue to recognize his wife Pat, who has been the focal point of his previous works. At this stage of his disease, he depends on her for all his daily needs.

This is the last portrait of her that Bill will paint. He gives her the blue eyes of lovers. Her lipstick smears as if he had just kissed her. How long will he still be able to tell her that he loves her?



1997 Self-Portrait (Yellow) Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 35.5 cm

1997 Self-Portrait (Green) Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 35.5 cm

Two years after his diagnosis, the self-portraits are now distinctly different. Forms are more blurred. Motivation, attention, memory, and visual recognition are now disorganized and render all tasks uncertain and awkward. The artist now paints as if groping.

In these portraits we gain insight into what the artist must now be thinking and feeling—sadness, anxiety, resignation, the feeling of feebleness. These emotions are depicted with a remarkable expressive precision despite the crusty paint surfaces and the uncertain drawing.

If his experience of time is now nothing but a disjointed sequence of superimposed moments, it is still possible to assign to every one of these a singular sensation. Through the portraits, the artist anchors his experience of the present to what is happening, to what he is doing, and to what he feels at the very moment of painting.

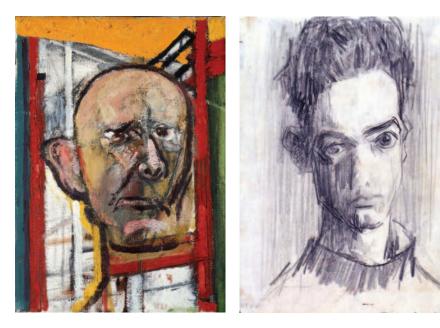


1998 Self-Portrait (With Easel) Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 25 cm

1955 Self-Portrait Pencil on paper, 28 x 21 cm

Alone in the studio, Bill wants to experience again the old motions of painting. For one more time, he wants to reconstruct a likeness he sees in his mirror. This time, he uses the pose of the oldest self-portrait he's kept since 1955 when he was 22 years old.

Back then, he already had that open gaze onto the world, that same perplexed, anxious, questioning note in facing himself and his future. In the 1998 self-portrait, the architecture of his psyche has changed. His head is tightly framed by the rectangle of his easel. The red and yellow lines narrow to constrict his head and serve to disconnect this last portrayal of self. It will soon become impossible for Bill to sign his name at the bottom of the canvas. Very soon he will stop recognizing his name altogether.





1999 Erased Self-Portrait Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 35.5 cm

2000 Head Pencil on paper, 36 x 31 cm

Five years after Bill's diagnosis, time has become no more than a sequence of instants. In these last portraits from 1999 and 2000, the head is drawn and erased at the same time dismantled as it is being structured. It is as if the artist has assimilated his drawings with his destiny—to subsist while disappearing.

The artist can still call forth a primal image, but what emerges is foreign and threatening to the artist's sense of self.

This program was hosted by the Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter, and supported by Myriad Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Salt Lake City, UT.

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New York City Chapter

For more information about Alzheimer's disease and the support programs available through the Alzheimer's Association, please contact us:

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