

## Self-Portraits Chronicle a Descent Into Alzheimer's

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When he learned in 1995 that he had Alzheimer's disease, William Utermohlen, an American artist in London, responded in characteristic fashion.



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A self-portrait of William Utermohlen in 1967, top, and 2000, above.  
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Collection of Abby O'Neil and Carroll Joynes  
'Mask,' a watercolor on paper from 1996. [More Photos >](#)



“From that moment on, he began to try to understand it by painting himself,” said his wife, Patricia Utermohlen, a professor of art history.

Mr. Utermohlen's self-portraits are being exhibited through Friday at the New York Academy of Medicine in Manhattan, by the Alzheimer's Association.

The paintings starkly reveal the artist's descent into dementia, as his world began to tilt, perspectives flattened and details melted away. His wife and his doctors said he seemed aware at times that technical flaws had crept into his work, but he could not figure out how to correct them.

"The spatial sense kept slipping, and I think he knew," Professor Utermohlen said. A psychoanalyst wrote that the paintings depicted sadness, anxiety, resignation and feelings of feebleness and shame.

Dr. Bruce Miller, a neurologist at the [University of California](#), San Francisco, who studies artistic creativity in people with brain diseases, said some patients could still produce powerful work.

"Alzheimer's affects the right parietal lobe in particular, which is important for visualizing something internally and then putting it onto a canvas," Dr. Miller said. "The art becomes more abstract, the images are blurrier and vague, more surrealistic. Sometimes there's use of beautiful, subtle color."

Mr. Utermohlen, 73, is now in a nursing home. He no longer paints.

His work has been exhibited in several cities, and more shows are planned. The interest in his paintings as a chronicle of illness is bittersweet, his wife said, because it has outstripped the recognition he received even at the height of his career.

"He's always been an outsider," she said. "He was never quite in the same time slot with what was going on. Everybody was doing Abstract Expressionist, and there he was, solemnly drawing the figure. It's so strange to be known for something you're doing when you're rather ill."

Dr. Miller, Professor Utermohlen and others will lecture about art and Alzheimer's on Wednesday at 6 p.m. at the New York Academy of Medicine. For more information: (212) 822-7272; [www.nyam.org/events](http://www.nyam.org/events).