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## Painter's Self-Portraits Reveal Devastation of Alzheimer's

*Special Exhibit of Works Opens Nov. 6*  
Oct. 23, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— For more than 12 years, portrait artist William Utermohlen's mind slowly unraveled after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He attempted to understand his changing experiences through the mechanism he knew best – by painting himself. The ensuing works offer a rare glimpse into the ravages of Alzheimer's on one's sense of self and one's relationships with others.

"Pursuing the Ephemeral, Painting the Enduring: Alzheimer's and the Artwork of William Utermohlen," an exhibit of 40 Utermohlen paintings, will open Nov. 6 at Illinois Wesleyan University's Wakeley Gallery in the **Ames School of Art**, 6 Ames Plaza West, Bloomington. The exhibit serves as the centerpiece of an interdisciplinary effort to better understand the devastation of Alzheimer's upon the individual and his or her loved ones. During the gallery opening reception, Illinois Wesleyan faculty in nursing, psychology, philosophy, art and poetry will present original works, interpretation and scholarship.



"W9," oil on canvas, 1990

The opening reception at 4 p.m. Nov. 6 will also feature remarks by Chris Boicos, the curator of Utermohlen's collection, and Carrie Otto, special events manager with the Alzheimer's Association Greater Illinois chapter.

Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Professor of **Nursing** Wendy Kooken first saw Utermohlen's work at an Institute for Healthcare Improvement conference in Paris. Kooken's research focuses on vigilance, or the way nurses, patients and families watch out for one another during hospitalization and maintain safety and quality of care.

"I was inspired by the many programs in France that use complementary treatments such as art, music and sensory rooms in working with Alzheimer's patients and their families," Kooken recalled. "Seeing Utermohlen's stunning series of paintings that so clearly demonstrate the progression of the disease gave me alternate ways of seeing the disease and its effects.

"I wanted to bring these works to Illinois Wesleyan because it struck me that a liberal arts university was the perfect platform to take a closer look at this interdisciplinary way of thinking," she added.

Through an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Speaker-and-Performer Series grant, the exhibit seeks to offer students, IWU faculty and staff, and the community an opportunity to gain understanding of the impact of the debilitating disease on the expression of one's self and on the psychological effects of the disease on family, friends and the community.



William Uttermohlen had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's the year before he produced this "Self Portrait (with easel, yellow and green)" in 1996.

Utermohlen was born in Philadelphia and studied at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, England. He lived in London for most of the rest of his life. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1995. At the urging of his nurse, Utermohlen continued to paint as the disease progressed.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2006, his wife Patricia Utermohlen, a professor of art history, said the interest in his paintings as a chronicle of illness is bittersweet because that interest had outstripped the recognition he received as an artist at the height of his career. William Utermohlen died in 2007.

The Nov. 6 opening reception will include offerings from Illinois Wesleyan faculty Wendy Kooker, Noël Kerr, Mignon Montpetit, Kevin Strandberg, Kent Cook, William Hudson and Mark Criley. These offerings will include piano compositions and interdisciplinary views of Alzheimer's disease.

Other exhibit events include a poetry analysis by poet and Associate Professor of English Joanne Diaz on Nov. 10 at 4 p.m., and an art walk and discussion led by successful aging specialist Assistant Professor of

Psychology Mignon Montpetit on Nov. 12 at 1 p.m.

More than five million Americans have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. With no known cure, it is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

"As a nurse and a family member of someone who died of Alzheimer's disease, I hope this exhibition opens eyes and minds, and brings new ways of helping combat this disease and to support families and people in the throes of it," said Kooker.

"Pursing the Ephemeral" will remain on exhibit at the Wakeley Gallery through Dec. 11 during regular gallery hours 12 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, Saturday and Sunday 1 to 4 p.m., and Tuesdays from 7 to 9 p.m. The museum will be closed Nov. 24-30 for Thanksgiving break and Dec. 1 for observation of a Day Without Art.