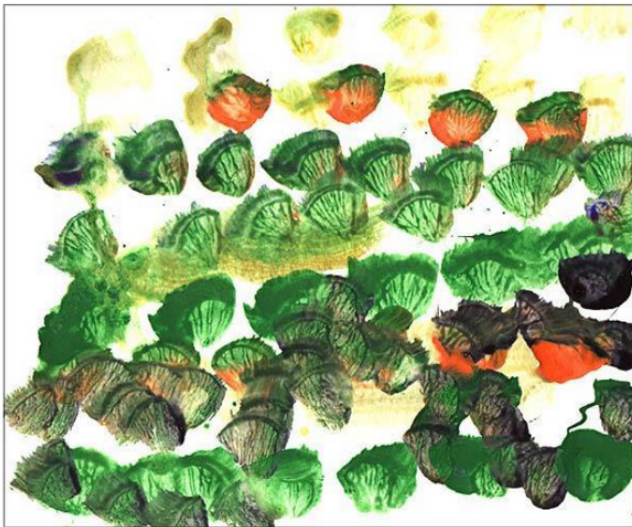




Orientation to MIM painting - Das Landrum, 2002 - "Sunrise"

I was known as "Das"
at the San Diego
Alzheimer Association's
Memories in the Making
program.

Memories in the Making -- Artists



Helen - 04/02/04 - "Green"

"They call this disease
The Long Goodbye."

Understanding Alzheimers is really bigger than me and my limited experience. In some ways I have a privileged, sheltered view. No one intimately close, such as a mother, father or wife has or is likely to have dementia. So in that sense I get to experience from an emotional detachment what the many families involved do not.

I can only surmise what excruciating horror it must be to see the very identity, that aspect that makes your most loved ones' individual personalities, slowly erode into a jumble of vacated ticks and voidness. That the good-bye is generally a 10-15 year affair speaks to it being long, but it doesn't really appear to be a good-bye as much as a constant getting reacquainted, a relentless discovery of serial loss. What new loss of function will become apparent today?

But through the Memories in the Making program, I have the good fortune to play with the spirits that still inhabit these courageous beings on the other side of that discovery.

There are special 'bumper-car' wheelchairs made out of plastic plumbing pipe that the residents can be strapped into and still walk or sit without falling over. Helen was in one of these bumper-car chairs during our

painting session last week. She was particularly antsy that day. Constantly had somewhere else she had to be. Every five minutes or so, she'd push the paints aside and start truckin' for the door. I'd see her movement in my peripheral vision, stop what I was doing and circle around the other way. I would greet Helen like a long lost friend who I hadn't seen in ages.

"Helen, Helen Bradbury is that you? How you doing, sweetheart?

" How'd you know my name?

"Oh, Helen, I come here every week to paint with you. You're a marvelous painter."

" I am?"

" Yes, you certainly are! Would you like to paint some right now?"

" Yah, sure, I guess. Got nothing better to do."

Then I'd take her hand and lead her back to the table she just left a few seconds ago.

"Look, Helen, here's a painting you did recently. It doesn't look quite finished, do you want to work on this one some more?"

" I did that?"

" Yes, you did."

" Well, my, that's pretty good."

Then she'd get engaged in the painting for another 5 minutes.

Then we'd re-enact the script pretty much verbatim once again.

So you can see, from my vantage point it's more of a perpetual "Hello!"



Melodious Action

I had the privilege of having an art session with JoAnn. It was an extraordinary session in several ways.

When JoAnn was wheeled into the dining room where we paint, she was already in the throws of a violent reaction to a medication she had just taken. JoAnn was increasingly gagging on an excessive amount of phlegm. Even amidst her extreme discomfort she began making the initial marks on her painting. Someone asked, "What are you going to make?"

She replied, "We won't know until it's finished."

After a few minutes it became apparent that JoAnn needed critical intervention and two of her caregivers took her to see a nurse. Some thirty minutes later she returned to finish her painting.

It's not uncommon for elders to have shaky hands, some shakier than others. I quite often try to encourage the artists I work with to allow the shakiness to become a part of their painting technique. Many resist the idea, and are discouraged that they cannot satisfactorily control the brush. JoAnn was a refreshing exception. She held her brush loosely and allowed it to dance across the page. Intent and present, she appeared to be more of a witness to the painting unfolding before her than its director.

When finished, I asked JoAnn to title the piece and to tell me what it was about. "Melodious Action", she stated without hesitation. "It's an exploration in color. I tried to keep the sparkle of the white paper behind the color."

I asked JoAnn if there was a story behind the painting. At first she said no, not really. I was surprised. I showed her the two little diptych paintings I had done in tandem across the table from her, which had started out in bright, Spring colors but had turned to black. I said, "I don't know about you, but what happened earlier really scared me."

"Yes, it was scary," she said. "As far as the story, just say this: Crisis situation in studio. Artist had taken a medicine that adversely affected her. She was glad to come back to finish. Painting made her feel better."

I told JoAnn how impressed I was by the fearless way she addressed her painting. "I marvel at your courage!" She smiled modestly, a true art hero.



Diana - 01/16/04

This is a variation on a conversation I had with Diana at the beginning of our art session for several weeks running.

Diana: I'm not ready to create.

Das: Why not?

Diana: Because I don't have any ideas!

Das: Why not?

Diana: Because I'm not creative.

Das: I have to disagree AND I have proof of some very delightful, creative paintings you painted.

Diana: I painted these?

Das: Yes, you did. So are you ready to paint? We know you can.

Diana: I'm not ready to create, because I can't think of anything to paint. I can hardly believe I created these.

Das: Well, that's just it. When you started these other paintings you didn't have any ideas either, but you did them.

Diana: And I don't have any ideas now.

Das: You don't need ideas, you just need to start.

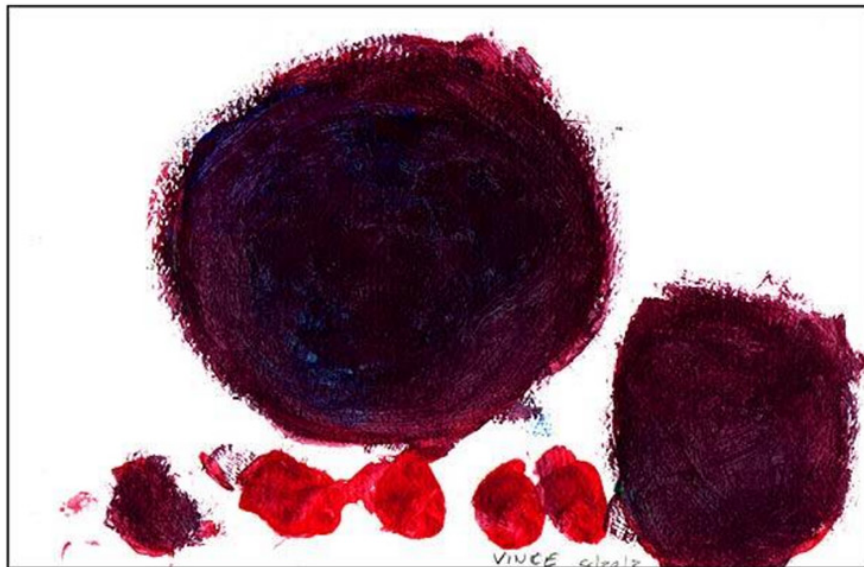
Diana: But how to start?

Das: I take a brush in hand, put it to the paper and begin ...

Diana: That's harder to do than to say ... I don't know how to do it.

Das: How do you learn how to do it if you don't do it?

Diana: Well, you have to do it!



Vince 03/08/03

Yes, this work tends most often to be non-objective. What is there to represent where they live? Even those who do have significant training in the technical skills of art making, and most don't, tend to delight more in the immediate gratification of playing with the inherent properties of water, color and movement itself.

The purest story of non-objective art resides in Vince. No longer bullied by the left brain hemisphere of logic and reason, he had for the most part lost the faculty of verbal language when I began painting with him. Vince appeared to still comprehend English, but when he went to express himself the words would elude him, then evaporate before he could get them out.

When Vince picked up a brush his focus was singular. In his first paintings he would go over and over the same organic shape, again and again making rich mixes of color, apparently fascinated by the subtle change in brushstroke texture. After a few sessions, when Vince picked up a brush, a sparkle of excitement was evident in his eyes. He was clearly happy to see me, to have this opportunity to paint. As he began to paint, it was apparent that there was something of a marriage taking place between the depth of his inner world and the small bit of outer world before him over which he had dominion.

These one hour art sessions may have been the only personal expression Vince would have to the outer world in the week. What aliveness was evident in that precious time! Though he may not have known which one green was, the serial artifacts are palpable evidence of the uninhibited spark of life glimmering through his profound, unique expression. Authentically profound in a way I have not seen in any other art.

After each session I would hold up the finished work for Vince to see. He would study it intently, at first with a quizzical look as if to say, "What's this?" Often he'd lean forward and begin to make a verbal comment, only to have the words disappear as he sat back shaking his head. He'd stare at the painting again and a soft smile of deep satisfaction would cross his face. Pleased, he'd look to me and the light in his eyes would sparkle.

Vince passed away in May of 2004.



Winnie 02/06/04

I once read that the problem with the New Age philosophy of illness was that it made a person feel responsible for the illness. And I agree.

Today, when I first entered the dining room where I paint with the Alzheimer Artists, it was pretty chaotic. They were behind schedule eating breakfast and somewhat out of the routine. I went to sit in an empty chair at

a table with Winnie and Elizabeth. Winnie had a horrific expression on her face. I don't always know if her facial expressions are a response to the present moment or not. This time it was.

Elizabeth was holding her hand like a vice grip. Winnie's gnarled knuckles were apparently in excruciating pain. As I pried open Elizabeth's mighty grip, I didn't sense it was malicious or even intended on Elizabeth's part, but rather she just wasn't cognizant of her own strength or how it was being applied in that moment.

Was Winnie being taught a lesson? I doubt it. I'd say what was going on was outside the pale of Freudian subconscious motives. I won't rest it at the doorstep of Winnie's Karma either. Some would call it 'ignorance', but that would assume some aspect was making a choice to ignore another. I don't see it as that either. The only word that seems to fit is suffering. Winnie was suffering. I happened along with the discernment to end this instance of suffering. I might not have, I might just as well have been distracted by any number of other things going on.

Some call it stressfulness, but suffering is how I translate the Pali word Dukkha. It is central to the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths, which basically states that life is suffering. We grow old, diseased and die. That's the way it is. If you want to make it a school and find a lesson in the suffering that's extra credit. The reality is what it is. The good news is there is a way out of the suffering. The way out is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Unfortunately, the Noble Eightfold Path isn't going to help Winnie. It's a practice that must be willingly, consciously undertaken from within one's own volition. I don't go to these Memories in the Making art sessions to help Winnie learn the way out of suffering. I go to have my heart broken wide open, to 'be with' the suffering', to practice compassion. Compassion being 'to feel with' another. I don't go to fix it, I go to be with it, feel it, breathe into it. For now, I can only hope that companionship brings ease and comfort.



Pearl 11/20/03

I was working with Pearl, among others. Pearl consistently is shrouded in a beatific light and a smiling countenance, but she quite actually doesn't remember what she's doing from one instance to the next ...

When I first started painting with Pearl, her mind was so far adrift that unless I was constantly prodding her, she would simply sit and smile and not move the brush across the paper at all. Slowly, I believe, from the weekly ritual and familiarity, Pearl's watercolors have evolved. It's evident in the artifact of her paintings. There is a clarifying articulation of the marks and cohesiveness to the composition. I wouldn't call it progress, as where would it be progressing to? But it does speak of a greater presence of mind and it does appear something remembers!

In this particular art session, Pearl was as animated as I've ever seen her. For the first time she picked up rhythm. For some weeks I'd been pairing swooshing sounds with the movement of the brushstrokes. Yesterday Pearl started mimicking the sounds and making the corresponding movement. I tried dat dat dat daaa, indicating a dotted pattern and she joyfully made her firsts dots, adding a new element to her repertoire.

Pearl stayed present throughout the session. By the end, she even helped clean-up. Another first. Not out of reward, but out of the sheer delight of seeing Pearl so full of life, I blurted out, "Pearl, you are marvelous. I love you! You are such a precious being!"

Pearl ardently replied, "Yes, I am!"
