

Lifeworks

Tangles

As an introduction of my work relating to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, I recently exhibited a suite of six original copper-plate etchings at the Moose Jaw Art Museum. This first set of prints from this ongoing project specifically relates to my maternal grandmother's affliction with old-age dementia.

Each print is a culmination of disconnected images, which imply a fragmentation of thought but are also a construction of narrative. They may be a resurrection of my grandmother's memories, faded or romantically clear, but generally they make reference to various events in her past and present environments. *Big Ben* alludes to her homeland, England, which she often used to speak of. One of my grandmother's favourite foods is french fries. In the past her favourite was fish and chips, but now it's just the chips — perhaps only because of the ease with which she can eat them by herself without making a mess. Symbolically or physically, many layers of memory, whether hers or a family member's, are included in each image.

The orange rice paper behind the assembled images contains the same



Diane Lara, *Big Ben*, 2000. Etching with caned Arches paper, 57 cm × 100 cm

black markings in each piece. These markings were made by rubbing the metal plates the prints are made from against the bricks and concrete of the permanent-care home where my grandmother lives. This represents the environment she is now familiar with: it has firm boundaries and is small and contained, but safe and secure.

The actual caning (weaving) of the paper, which is consistent throughout my work, symbolizes an attempt at control. As I weave each strand of paper I think of how little or how much control relates to a specific image or thought. Perhaps there is very little control, which is often represented by a single, sometimes broken, strand. The actual physical weaving of the paper symbolizes a reorganization or “untangling” of the abnormal fibres in the cerebral nerve cells of dementia patients.

A horizontal band of weaving placed at the same point across each picture plane (and worked into, around and through each smaller image) represents the brain's neural pathways. The loose strands of paper at either side represent abnormal fibres, which create a disruption of communication; hence, the messages lose their way at the synapse (the physical space between each work mounted on the wall). The detail of *Empty Presence* shows the weaving process involved. A finely netted gold thread placed over the horizontal strip of caning represents that last, fragile hold on sanity.

While walking through the gallery contemplating each image, the viewer hears a voice in the background — a voice with a slight British accent, quietly speaking of nonsensical, unrelated things. It may be interrupted by sobbing, or possibly by intercom beeps reminiscent of hospital sounds. The voice comes from a video at one end of the room, while photos of the woman in the prints and of various family gatherings fade in and out across the TV screen. This is dementia.

Diane Lara
Moose Jaw, Sask.



Diane Lara, *Empty Presence*, 2000 (detail). Etching with caned Arches paper, 57 cm × 100 cm