

Lifeworks

Losing your mind

Rose Adams: Mind Works
 Craig Gallery, Dartmouth, NS
 May 3–26, 2007

In *Mind Works*, Canadian artist Rose Adams provides a perspective on Alzheimer's disease and dementia that is often missing from reports and statistics. For example, the Canadian Study of Health and Aging, a population-based national cohort study of over 10 000 adults, estimated that 8% of all Canadians over the age of 65 years met the diagnostic criteria for dementia.¹ The study projected that by 2021, the number of Canadians with dementia will increase to 592 000 individuals, assuming that prevalence rates remained constant.¹ While statistics like these certainly convey the magnitude of this public health problem, they fail to impart as Adams does the ways memory dysfunction disrupts a patient's interactions with the world and his or her sense of identity.

Adams' reflections and interpretations of dementia are based on her experiences as the artist-in-residence at the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre Memory Disability Clinic in Halifax in 2004/05. The program allows artists to interact with patients, their caregivers and physicians, and to then reinterpret those experiences visually. Adams' resulting paintings and drawings were initially on display at the clinic in 2005, and she has since composed a number of additional works inspired by her experiences.

Most of the 19 works on display in *Mind Works* metaphorically depict dementia as entailing profound loss. In one untitled piece, dementia is portrayed as the gradual death of the mind. A progression of floral arrangements are portrayed: in the first, the flowers are vivacious and brightly and boldly coloured, the second is disrupted by a thick streak of grey, leaving the third vase full of only dried, brown and dead vegetation. Images of crows and ravens figure prominently in many of the other

works as symbols both of memory, due to their known ability to learn human language and count, and of death. In *Looted Memories*, the loss of memory is depicted as occurring in a harsh and violent manner. It features broken terra cotta-coloured relics of a Mesopotamian civilization — symbolic images of past knowledge — and a sagittal section through the head showing the brain and a raven.

In the largest work on display, *60 Day Free Trial*, the variety of ways in which memory loss affects activities of daily living is less symbolic and more obvious. Based on SymptomGuide™, an Internet-based resource that describes the symptoms of dementia, the piece features a series of 65 red wood-block reliefs of the surface of the brain that are superimposed with multimedia images depicting the realities of life that patients with dementia confront. For example, the reliefs feature a torn piece of someone's "to-do list," a note with "remind me" written in black, capitalized letters, a map that has been cut into pieces with the pieces pulled apart and rotated in different directions, and pictures of

clocks and watches. The last 3 prints in this work remind us of the inevitable end. In one, the relief of the brain is no longer red but grey and superimposed with the word "Death," and in another an image of a single rose lies on the brain as if at a burial. The last print, in which the relief is only seen as an impression on paper, includes a photograph of a post-mortem brain — the only way to confirm the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.

One of the themes that emerges from *Mind Works* is the necessity of living for the moment. As Adams recounts, one of the first patients that she met had difficulties with memory loss but her condition was nonprogressive. The patient felt that her experience caused her to live for the present moment and not to dwell in the past or try to plan for the future.² In works such as *Vanitas No. 2* (see below), *Lily and Crow*, and *Raven and chrysanthemum*, the juxtaposition of lush flowers with the birds suggests the need to appreciate the beauty that is here in the present and also to accept the inevitability of future losses of the mind and the body.



Vanitas No. 2 encourages viewers to savour the beauty of the present and our current abilities to understand the world, because future losses of memory may be inevitable.

Adams' works also explore how the brain functions, and she uses images of the brain "as a symbol for honouring our abilities to acknowledge a past, memorialize others, and plan for a future."³ In *Hard Wired?*, the brain is depicted as a complex but ordered circuit, with colourful wires systematically bridging individual gyri on a drawing of the surface anatomy of the brain as viewed from above. The complexity of the brain and its remarkable ability to generate memories is further captured by *As many brain cells as stars in the milky way*, in which a drawing of the undersurface of the brain is superimposed with celestial images.

The power of Adams work is its ability to make viewers consider the influence that memories have on concepts of self-identity. If we could no longer remember our past, how would we understand who we are and how would that affect our interactions with others? In making tangible the effects of memory loss on the daily lives of patients with dementia, *Mind Works* also provides a unique educational experience for health professionals to better understand how dementia is experienced by patients.

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REFERENCES

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2. McKinnon IJ. Memory and memorial: the art of witnessing. [Essay accompanying Rose Adams' *Memory and Memorial* exhibition.] Antigonish (NS): Saint Francis Xavier University Art Gallery; 2005.
3. Adams R. *Mind Works* artist's statement. Dartmouth (NS): Craig Gallery; 2007.



Rose Adams

In *The Miracle*, a complex pattern of lines, reminiscent of a histological section of the cortex, speaks to the remarkable ability of the brain to generate memories while an image of a crow portends the onset of dementia.