

ELLIE BROWN

HOLDING ON TO A DEAR LIFE

Alzheimer's. A word that conjures up images of fear, isolation, confusion, and loss. In the United States today, 5.7 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's. By 2050, this number is projected to rise to nearly 14 million.

Terminal illness is a painful topic – but this one strikes home for me. My father was recently, finally diagnosed with Alzheimer's, after years of ambiguous labels assigned to his memory loss and declining capacity to care for himself.

I sat down with photographer and mixed media artist Ellie Brown to talk about Alzheimer's, fathers and daughters, and art as a means of documenting, unpacking and transforming this disease. Brown's upcoming show "Sundown," at AS220 in Providence, encompasses all of these things.

Brown's own father, a tall, friendly and robust guy known for his love of music and acting, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's in 2015 after

years of ambiguous dementia. Then based in Philadelphia, she soon thereafter moved her life to Rhode Island in order to be closer to him and to make the most of the time they had left.

"When I found out my father had early onset Alzheimer's disease, it was my first instinct to photograph and document everything – as I do – partly to document the disease, but also to have my own personal record of my father," recounted Brown.

"It [soon] became clear to me that my father wasn't comfortable with having his straight photographic image on my website, and that other members of my family weren't comfortable [either]. So, I took a step back and stopped photographing him. I started making gel medium transfers with the images I had already taken. My instincts told me to start drawing into them. And what happened was, I was able to get at the nuances of the disease that I wasn't able to with straight photographs."

The transfer of an original photograph to another medium represents one layer of removal from reality. The degradation of the image that results is another layer of loss. The imagery reflects the hallucinations, metaphors, fears and emotions of Brown's father's Alzheimer's experience. The work is shadowy, small scale and largely monochromatic, although a few pops of color peek through here and there.

"This is something I've thought about a lot," admitted Brown. "My photographs are really colorful, [but] this is darker subject matter."

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

ELLIE BROWN: SUNDOWN

AS220 MAIN GALLERY
115 EMPIRE STREET
PROVIDENCE, RHODE
ISLAND

DECEMBER 1
THROUGH 29



Back Quad 1, 2018, mixed media on canvas, 20" x 16".

"The images reflect conversations we have when he tells me about his hallucinations, or I sit and observe him in the middle of one. He is always dizzy and so I've chosen this mixed media process to empathetically reflect the disorientation he's feeling," explained Brown.

The work feels intensely personal. Documentary of a family member, by nature, is intensely personal.

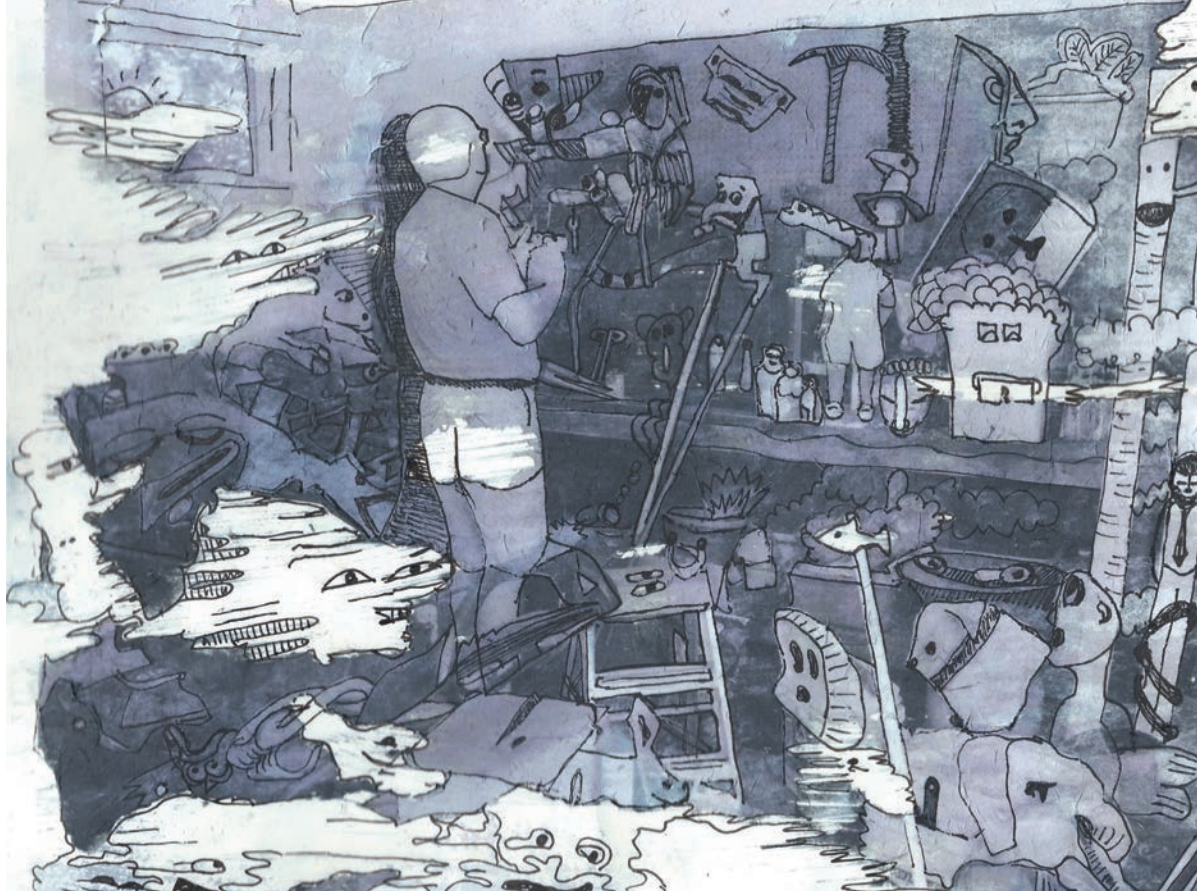
"I can tell you that some people are really put off by work that is this personal," said Brown. "I showed my work to someone recently, and he said it felt like he was looking at pages of my diary, which I thought was extraordinary."

Brown does not shy away from the diaristic point of view. In 2014, she wrote and produced a one-man play based on her 4th grade diary titled "Dear, Diary, Bye." Featuring tales of schoolyard scrapping, family trouble and sweet misunderstandings of adult concepts, the show ran in Philadelphia and Rhode Island and featured a young male actor as the protagonist.

It is clear that Brown utilizes her creative practice as a transformative tool – whether transforming the musings of a Gen-X 9-year-old girl through the voice and visage of a millennial male or transforming a photograph of her declining father into a new vision.

Brown said that the images she's creating of her father in this series provide her with "alternate scenarios and realities" that sometimes ease her aching heart or put her aching heart onto paper.

You can see this in "Garage," where the subject faces away from the viewer, staring at the wall. He could be searching for a mundane object in a typical, messy suburban garage, except this garage is not typical. Leering faces appear on indistinct objects. Creatures materialize in strange shapes and places. Through the small window, a smiling sun is shining, despite a scribbly fog moving in.



Slowly, then quickly, then slowly and inevitably, life gets shrunk down to a point for a person suffering from Alzheimer's. Busy, public places can be overwhelming for both patients and caregivers, making it hard for either to live what is generally considered a "full life."

"The physical radius of [my father's] world keeps shrinking and shrinking and shrinking and shrinking. And now it's the confines of the yard and the house and he doesn't go beyond that because it's scary for him," said Brown.

"Some of these drawings describe what I imagine his sundown hallucinations look or feel like; others describe mental states. His life is smaller and quieter, full of anxieties, confusion, missed words and gaps and I'm trying to capture all of it in honor of his struggles and my love for him.

"I don't want to talk about what we've lost. I can talk about who he is now, which is, happiest when he can dance and sing. And the rest of the time very fearful and confused. And very frustrated.

"But he's good natured and what's a source of pain and pride with him is that he's really aware of the Alzheimer's and

he talks about it and he's very accepting. He's not angry about it. He says, 'it is what it is.' It sucks, but he's not angry about it, which is kind of phenomenal."

Brown said that some of the relaxing times she now has with her dad are when they draw together. "I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to take artists like myself who are working with this topic and pair it with the artwork of the person that they are caring for – or – did care for if they are no longer living," she said.

That idea led to an eight-artist group show, "Care: Give and Take," that Brown curated at the Cranston Senior Center in early 2018. She'd like to see similar programs and exhibition take hold on a wider scale.

"I think a network of people who are doing this kind of work would be really interesting," Brown suggested. "Sporadically, someone puts on a show here and there, but as far as I know there is not a network and that would be an amazing thing to have, also for hospitals, universities or research centers who would want to show this kind of work."

Garage, 2016, mixed media on paper, 9" x 12".