

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 25, 2006

What if Jim Dine had Alzheimer's?

Filed under: [artists](#), [career](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:57 pm

My pal [Karolina Karlic](#) sent me a link to a [fascinating article](#) in the New York Times. William Utermohlen painted self-portraits of his descent into Alzheimer's:



1967



1996



1997



1998



1999



2000

This is a truly remarkable group of images. But if you forget about the Alzheimer's, the work looks a lot like Jim Dine's self-portraits:



1979



1998



2002

Maybe it would help Dine's perception in the art world if he had Alzheimer's. Dine is reviled almost as much at [Botero](#). I'll never forget reading Richard Polsky's Artnet [column](#) recommending collectors sell Dine:

The truly great artists don't rest on their laurels. They take risks and continue to explore new possibilities. Imagine what would have happened if the great artist Philip Guston had played it safe by sticking with his Abstract Expressionist style. Instead, he chanced everything by painting his now-famous quirky representational subject matter.

For whatever reason, Dine has never felt compelled to endure the painful soul-searching that Guston must have faced. Almost 40 years after painting his first heart and robe, he continues to crank out variations of the same images. This is not to be confused with the example of Giorgio Morandi and his wonderful still lifes. In Morandi's case, his humble bottles and objects were painted over and over, with an ever greater sense of meaning and spirituality. Dine's paintings lack that sort of depth. They are what they are — attractive depictions of a limited personal vocabulary.

I don't know if it is fair to say he has played it safe. Certainly he has experimented. For example, Dine has spent a significant amount of energy producing photographs:



Singing Daily, 1998

But experimentation is not the same as struggle. The art world consensus is that Dine, like Botero, hasn't struggled enough. Assuming Dine doesn't acquire Alzheimer's or commit suicide, what should he do to do?

This is similar to the question raised in an earlier post about [William Wegman](#). Whether an artist is successful for dogs or bathrobes, how do you sustain a career? Another [recent post](#) discussed the work of Bas Jan Ader. Ader's entire oeuvre is about twelve minutes long. Much of the Ader legend is built on his disappearance while making *In search of the miraculous*. Might Wegman be just as highly regarded as Ader if one of the Weimaraners had snapped at his owner's jugular? In other words, can an artist sustain critical credibility over the long-haul without biographical myth-making?

5 Comments

1. I love reading your stuff. But sometimes you climb a ladder up into a trap door...I can't see it. When does myth-making not play a role?

Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — October 25, 2006 @ [11:38 pm](#)

2. got completely sucked into watching that tiny movie of Bas Jan Ader. Made me think alot about doing what I do and not worrying about what others make of it. I'm sick of Wegman's dogs and Dine's hearts but maybe thats cause our media machines and art institutes keep shoving it down our throats even though it's making everyone else nauseous too. Gravity is always there just like dogs and hearts but noone gave a rip about Ader unfortunately and now a few of us who happen to bump into his work in an obtuse way on the web can enjoy it's all to brief brevity.

Comment by [Eric Altenberg](#) — October 26, 2006 @ [12:57 am](#)

3. Talking about myth making, do you know Foncuberta, in particular these: <http://zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/fontcuberta2/index.html>

Comment by [Philip](#) — October 26, 2006 @ [1:58 am](#)

4. William Utermohlen's art is the results of a desperate act to contain the confusion and anxiety one journeys while slipping into oblivion due to Alzheimer's. Not my idea of progressive art making but instead a rare and painful disclosure of a mind in the process of disconnecting. I know all too well what one goes through living with Alzheimer's. My father has it, and I have been photographing him for over 12 years. He was also a professional artist and the simplest line drawings became a feat incomprehensible within the early to mid stages of this disease. It is true that on the surface Utermohlen's portraits reminds one of Dine, or for that matter Francis Bacon but his motive was not to find new ways to make art. Instead, it was his struggle to use art as a futile attempt to survive.

Comment by [Stephen DiRado](#) — October 26, 2006 @ [9:22 pm](#)

5. It's difficult to the point of impossibility to work through an analysis of strength and import in art in which William Wegman's given an equal amount of air time with Jim Dine.

Comment by [roy belmont](#) — October 27, 2006 @ [12:01 am](#)