

TURN ON THE LIGHT

Stage 2 Visual Art

Body of Work

Word Count: 997

My work *Turn on the Light* is inspired by my late Grandfather’s battle with dementia, and the impact it had on his life, as well as the lives of my family members. By capturing my personal experience of his illness, I wanted to produce a body of work which encourages the viewer to reflect on what they know about dementia, and how dementia affects members of the wider community.

Recollecting my own memories of my Grandfather; before his illness, during the time he was affected, and also after he passed away was a focus for my work. I researched the signs and symptoms of dementia that he experienced, and identified various words that characterise the condition. *Confusion, repetition, and frustration*, are words that embody dementia, that I interpreted and portrayed within my piece.

The meticulous technique of etching allowed me to achieve a detailed result which could then be further manipulated. I discovered this time-consuming and repetitious technique was a metaphor for the repetitious behaviours that my Grandfather would often exhibit during the later stages of his illness. The imperfect nature and varied quality of the prints, although (at first) unplanned, highlighted the connections with my overall concept, showing the varied emotions, moods and behaviours exhibited by individuals living with dementia.

Mistakes, such as not drying the paper after soaking, created a blurred result, but actually highlighted how my Grandfather’s memories blurred together, and depicted his often confused state. The various faded prints, resulting from the lack of dampness and pliability of the paper, highlighted my Grandfather’s faded self and faded memories toward the end of his life. These (now deliberate) mistakes differentiated each print from the last and created a piece with variation and a number of focal points for the viewer.

As my prints accumulated, I reflected on the enormity of the illness with so many avenues to explore. My original plan for the display of my etchings was to order them in a progressive fashion, going from my Grandfather’s state when we first began to notice signs of dementia, to when his illness was at its worst. However, after reflecting on the work as a whole, I decided that it would be more visually appealing to the viewer if I ordered my prints randomly, representing the “good days and the bad days”.

I looked at how each symptom, word or phrase could be visually interpreted, through the exploration of various artists’ ideas and techniques. I researched works such as Tony Garifalakis’ *Mob Rule*, and artist Debbie Smyth’s use of thread to produce large-scale installations, and also various works from Despina Stokou, focusing on her use of text. The investigation of these artists’ varying styles, allowed me to manipulate each print individually that collectively create a thought-provoking piece.

While visiting the *Versus Rodin* exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, the large wall of etchings produced by Mike Parr offered me great inspiration as to how I could display my body of work. When viewing the artwork, it was evident that the large-scale presentation of the series could be translated to my own piece, creating a captivating and perhaps overwhelming body of work that demanded the viewers’ attention. The large-scale presentation of Mike Parr’s piece is an example of how scale creates impact. As dementia affects an increasing number of people and their families, I wanted the size of my piece to demonstrate how prevalent the disease is and the enormous impact it can have on individuals and families.

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From the time that my Grandfather displayed severe symptoms and signs of dementia, to the time he passed away, approximately 18 months passed. During this time, my Grandfather’s physical and mental condition declined, and a heartbreaking transformation of his character ensued. Each print signifies a month during this time, representing the various changes he went through because of his illness.

To add to my body of work, I expressed the rapid changes in mood through animation, using colour to portray different emotions. Inspired by Ben Quilty’s use of colour in his series of portraits, *After Afghanistan*, I used Procreate and iMovie to create a video. Quilty’s use of colour to express the emotions of PTSD sufferers after their involvement in Afghanistan inspired the colours used in my animation. The colours used in Quilty’s works are bright and bold, sometimes sickly, and often not coordinating. They are sometimes soft and gentle, sometimes realistic and other times surreal and confusing. I used various sized brushes, and a range of brush strokes to represent my Grandfather’s rapidly changing emotions. By also importing photographs of each of my prints, and having the symptom displayed in the video, I aimed to depict the varying mood swings and emotions that were changing spasmodically.

Working for so many months on a large-scale portrait of my Grandfather has been an exhausting process. I am proud to be able to create an art piece that draws attention to a devastating illness that affects so many people, and it has allowed me to reflect on the impact of dementia on a very personal level. The etching plate represents the surface that is barely scratched in terms of research and cure of this illness. I hope the beauty of Grandpa’s full life is reflected in the many lines that characterise his face and also within the piece as a whole.

The 18th print of my piece uses the original etching plate and a light source to project a shadow of my Grandfather’s face onto the etching paper behind. This illness left a shadow of the man my Grandfather truly was. The light creates the shadow, but when switched off, the paper is blank. This represents my Grandfather’s loss of both physical and mental control over his mind and body. The etching plate itself however, is a reminder that the memory of my Grandfather is still very much present, within my family’s memories. We just have to turn on the light to be reminded of his presence.