Elizabeth Layton did not begin creating art until 1977 when she was sixty-eight years old. Then she began to pursue art making with a vengeance.

Born in Wellsville, Kansas, in 1909, she married young and had five children. She struggled in her marriage and finally in 1942 separated and later divorced her alcoholic husband. In the same year, her father, who had been the editor of the Wellsville Globe, died, and she took over the newspaper, which she ran until 1957. She was on her own, raising her children and holding down a demanding job. In 1957, she sold the paper and married her neighbor, Glen Layton, but her difficult life had taken a toll on her, and when, in 1977, she began to draw, she had been suffering with depression for at least thirty-five years. Despite trying every cure, including electroshock therapy, her depression only deepened in 1976, when one of her sons died from alcoholism.

Our society’s popular narrative of aging is one of inevitable and irreversible decline, loss and despair. Like most popular narratives, though, it is a one-dimensional story that captures only a piece of the truth. The works in this exhibit, in contrast, paint a much richer and nuanced picture of the experience of growing older. The exhibit helps us understand that old age, like other times of life, brings joy as well as sadness, gains in roles as well as losses and pleasure as well as pain. Indeed, as Elizabeth Layton seems to shout out with confidence while donning a tutu or luxuriating amid flowers with her husband, “How dare you presume I’d rather be young?”

In unflinchingly honest self-portraits that capture all the age spots, wrinkles, and sagging skin of advancing years, Layton juxtaposes the physical changes feared by society against the beauty of long-time companionship, the fun of marching to one’s own drummer and the time to explore nature’s splendor – or simply to relax on the front porch. From deeply personal to overtly political, Layton’s work ventures beyond celebrating aging in order to explore darker subjects – the ethics of life support, the misery of depression and societal prejudices about addiction.

Ed Navone, as well, tackles this darker side as he chronicles his father’s descent into dementia. While Alzheimer’s disease is just that – a disease – and not a normal or inevitable part of aging, it is, nevertheless, a harrowing ordeal that presents tremendous challenges. Navone captures these challenges with heartrending clarity as he shows his father change into a skeletal apparition in a hospital gown and slippers – withdrawn, depressed and vulnerable.

While Layton shows us the joys that can come with a long life, Navone’s work exposes one of our greatest fears of aging through the depiction of his father’s decline – sans memory, sans clothes, sans dignity. These different sides of aging may appear contradictory, but they simply represent the reality of a complex process – a process that this exhibit allows us to explore in thought-provoking ways.
On the brink of suicide, she desperately decided to take a drawing class at Ottawa University, as her sister, an amateur artist, had suggested. From her teacher, Pat Wright, she learned contour drawing, in which the artist looks at her subject and only occasionally at the paper on which she is drawing. Drawing unleashed something in her, and she sometimes drew, at least in the beginning, up to eighteen hours a day. Her depression slowly waned until one day she found herself cured of this debilitating illness.

A number of works in the exhibition refer to Layton's personal struggles. For example, Void, 1978, and Light, 1978, treat her struggle against depression and the people who helped her. Regarding Void, she wrote: “I had this feeling that I was out in the middle of nowhere… absolutely nothing… and it was such a lost feeling. I was lit up by a white light, but I didn’t light up the black.” About Light, she said:

> I keep changing my religion, constantly. I get a new one every day, a new idea. Here was [sic] all these people wanting to help her figure up out of that void. I think we need to keep an open mind. There’s this life, life is one thing, and the life that’s in you and the life that’s in me is all the same thing. And it’s going to go on and on. It is just this body that the life happens to be in, or whatever, a plant. It is part of one life. Who knows?

Thus, the many hands may symbolize not only people who wanted to help her, but also a kind of world soul, a union of all living beings.

Other personal images include Intensive Care Room, 1978, in which she depicted the room where her son, Riley, died. She could not bear to draw his face, so it is covered with a pillow; though he was an adult, she drew his body, or what is visible of it, as shrunken and gaunt. She sits in the room with him. On one of her fingers is a drop of blood, which refers to the blood Riley received, as well as the blood Layton had given to the Red Cross. Drawing unleashed something in her, and she sometimes drew, at least in the beginning, up to eighteen hours a day. Her depression slowly waned until one day she found herself cured of this debilitating illness.

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One of the most striking aspects of Layton's work is that she appears in almost every one of her drawings. In this work, she is the crack baby, thus demonstrating her extreme empathy for the suffering of others.

Not all of Layton's work is so heart-wrenching. Autumn Leaf shows her pinning a beautiful leaf to a curtain, as she remembered her mother doing when she was a child. In many images she portrayed herself and Glen among the flowers that she loved.

Although she gradually slowed the pace of her drawing, Layton continued to express her unique vision until she died from a stroke in 1993.

In 1980-1982 Edward Navone, then Professor of Art at Washburn University, created Julio Navone: The Final Days Portfolio. This suite of heart-wrenching drawings was created following Julio’s death from Alzheimer’s disease in 1980. Drawn entirely from memory, the suite is an emotional evocation of watching a loved one die.

Alzheimer’s left the elder Navone unable to engage in any kind of meaningful activity. He generally sat and dozed, stared into space or wandered around his home of many years. Without memory of even his family, he was, in his son’s words, “lost” in his own life. A number of drawings depict this painful reality. In one, Navone portrayed his father standing in front of the fireplace in the living room. The artist ironically contrasted the clock above his head in the shape of a shining sun to a man in the sunset of his life.

Some drawings depict the elder Navone in his underwear, thus stressing his dependency and vulnerability. In one pair of drawings, Julio sits dejectedly with his head in his large hand. A rectangular-shaped object rests on the arms of his chair alluding perhaps to a child’s highchair or a student’s desk. This implies the incapacity of Navone’s father, as well as his apparent return to a “second childhood.” The most poignant of the drawings shows Navone senior lying on a mattress, foreshadowing the laying out of his body after death.
When Julio could no longer be cared for at home, his family was forced to put him in a nursing home. One drawing in the suite shows Ed and his mother driving Julio to the home. The fearful and hopeless expression on the old man’s face is almost unbearable.

The pain Navone felt at losing his father to Alzheimer’s is embodied in a drawing of the elder Navone standing in front of a vintage propeller airplane. As a child, Navone was fascinated by airplanes and could draw from memory all the different airplanes that fought in World War II.

Because of his interest, his young father took him to an airport to see planes, a visit recorded in a photograph that Navone still owns. Thus, this drawing alludes to a cherished childhood memory, but, ironically, his father could no longer remember this early, shared experience.

Other works in this series come out of Navone’s extensive experience with nude life drawing, which he taught for over four decades at Washburn. Of Italian descent, Navone is a huge admirer of Renaissance art and of Michelangelo, in particular. The tradition of drawing the idealized male nude, of which Michelangelo was a premier practitioner, goes back to the ancient Greeks, who felt that the young, naked, male body was the epitome of beauty. Here, the artist turns that tradition on its head. Julio had been an autoworker, and the size of his body alludes to his former strength, but now he is old, flabby and weak in mind and spirit. Navone noted that in these nude drawings he portrayed his father as “emotionally naked, isolated and lonely” in his inability to remember his own past. Two of these nudes depict a seated figure with outstretched arms, alluding to Christ’s crucifixion and portraying Julio’s sacrifice to this horrifying disease.

Navone frequently worked in pairs in this series, depicting a figure in one pose in both black and white and in color. But even when the pose is the same, the facial expressions are often strikingly different. The works in colored pencil tend to have a hot, red tonality over all. Moreover, the color is frequently harsh and dissonant with the red and green complementary colors placed next to each other. This coloration reflects both the emotional turmoil of the father and of the son as they faced the father’s loss of identity.

Almost all Americans have or will have some contact with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Cathartically, artist Edward Navone has visualized that very human experience with great feeling and compassion.

Dr. Julie Myers, Curator
Mulvane Art Museum

Front image: Elizabeth Layton, Autumn Leaf

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