

THE DISAPPEARED

Brazilian artist José Rufino reimaged a painful history through art. Now, he sets his sights on another kind of sorrow—Alzheimer's.

BY REID R. FRAZIER



As part of his exhibition *Blots & Figments*, José Rufino evokes the presence and memory of Andy Warhol through the use of source images from Warhol's *Electric Chair* and *Skull* series as well as papers from Warhol's studio, The Factory.

PHOTOS: MARTHA RIAL

Lee Strawbridge stood before a large table, a paint-smeared smock covering his Pittsburgh Pirates windbreaker and the collared shirt he'd worn to church that morning. Before his mind started breaking down 10 years ago, he could have drawn the inside of a nuclear reactor on the back of a napkin. Today, he needed to be told how to paint.

"What do I do?" he asked José Rufino, a Brazilian artist who'd come to Pittsburgh to collaborate with Alzheimer's patients like Strawbridge. Rufino dabbed the tip of a brush into a dollop of acrylic paint he'd squeezed into a plastic cup. "This is dark red," he said, handing the brush to Strawbridge.

"Over here somewhere?" Strawbridge asked. Rufino pointed Strawbridge's brush toward a piece of yellowing paper, with a crease folded down the middle. Strawbridge leaned over and completed a careful, clean vertical line down the meridian of the sheet, then another along the horizontal axis: a cross.

Rufino folded the paper along the crease, ran a plastic roller over it, then opened it. "A bird," Rufino said, looking at the sheet. With Rufino's help, Strawbridge had just made his first Rorschach-style inkblot. (For decades, psychoanalysts have used the Rorschach test, a set of 10 inkblots developed in the 1920s by Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, to measure how a person thinks and perceives.)

The two partners in paint were brought together by a unique collaboration centered around Rufino's exhibition, *Blots & Figments*, a collection of work that explores the emotional and psychic terrain of memory, loss, and perception. More than a dozen of Rufino's works, on display through July 18 at The Andy Warhol Museum, combine the mediums of ink, paint, and historic documents.

Thanks to a unique collaboration with The Warhol and the University of Pittsburgh, Rufino, who has distinguished himself as an artist by exploring the subject of memory through art, is using his work to encounter and explore the lives of those affected by Alzheimer's disease. Included in the exhibition are works that Rufino created this past May with Alzheimer's patients like Strawbridge.

Rufino has devoted much of his artistic life to unearthing the lives of Brazilian dissidents who disappeared during the 1960s and '70s under the country's military dictatorship. Having used art to resuscitate the lives of those lost to his country's tumultuous past, Rufino would eventually journey to Pittsburgh to try to retrace the fading lives of people like Strawbridge—in danger of becoming lost to their own biology.

Resuscitating the past

Rufino grew up in João Pessoa, a city in Brazil's sugarcane-producing northeast. Though Rufino's family owned a large cane plantation, his father eschewed capitalism and became involved in the region's workers' movement.

In the 1960s, after a military coup d'état, Rufino's parents were arrested for their involvement in the Brazilian communist party. They were later released, but many of their dissident friends were imprisoned, disappeared, or killed by the military dictatorship, which ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. Rufino spent his childhood with friends of his parents hiding from the military inside his family home.

Although Rufino earned a doctorate in paleontology, specializing in invertebrates, he was drawn to the art world, embarking on a different kind of excavation. Beginning in the 1980s, he began collecting documents related to the disappearances of dissidents to use in his artwork.

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JENNIFER LINGLER, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INFORMATION
AT PITT'S ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE RESEARCH CENTER

Rufino and Lee Strawbridge create Rorschach-style inkblots applied to writings of fellow Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers.

When asking mothers for documents pertaining to their disappeared sons, some got angry, or wept. Others said, “Now, we can finally bury him,” Rufino recalls. He says he was drawn to the subject because of his personal and family history but also because of the collective grief those years have caused. “It’s not easy in Brazil,” he says. “Nobody talks about it.”

At the same time, he began experimenting with another vestige of his childhood. While in grade school, Rufino’s teachers gave him a Rorschach test. The amorphous, symmetrical shapes intrigued and fascinated Rufino, who began creating inkblots of his own.

Rufino’s work with families of the disappeared resulted in the large installation *Plasmatio*, first displayed in the São Paulo Biennial in 2000. It combines found furniture with inkblots printed on original documents from family members of missing Brazilian political activists.

Flipping Pop

Jessica Gogan, a former special projects curator and curator of education and interpretation at The Warhol, first saw Rufino’s work while in Brazil. She was immediately struck by the contrast between Rufino’s art and that of Andy Warhol, who created a Rorschach series of his own in 1984, which he made on large canvases with the help of assistants.

“When I first saw Rufino’s work, I was intrigued by his deep exploration and use of Rorschach, and the political and participatory aspect of it, in contrast with Warhol’s,” Gogan says. Warhol’s Rorschachs, she adds, “is all about surfaces.” Warhol frequently looked for abstract forms as subjects, particularly those with strong, ready-made connotations, like camouflage. While casting about for ideas, he once asked an assistant, “What can I paint that’s abstract but not really abstract?”

Like camouflage, inkblots provided Warhol with a subject that played off the viewer’s own desire to interpret, Gogan says.

Rufino used partial reproductions of Warhol’s inkblots printed onto old journals from Warhol’s alma mater, Schenley High School, overlaying them with his own inkblot style.

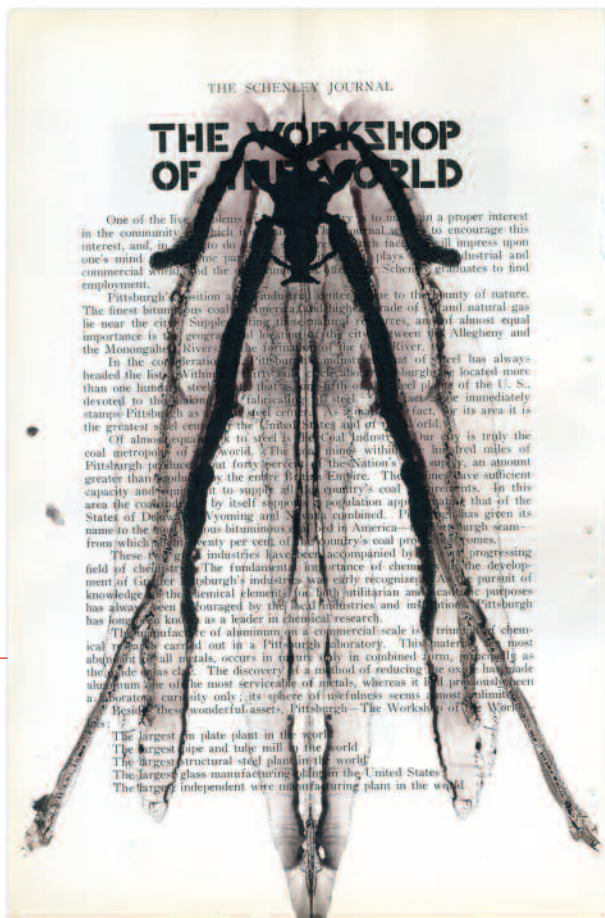
“One could read Warhol’s use of Rorschach as playing off that sense of surface, and our own pull of always trying to find meaning and depth beneath the surface.”

The inkblot’s abstract shape lends itself to interpretation, and thus is a powerful way to see how an individual’s mind works, explains Paul Gedo, a psychologist at George Washington University.

“To say it looks like anything, you have to do something in your head with the image. If you say it looks like a bat, or a butterfly, you’re filling something in, you’re editing,” Gedo says. “It really reflects what’s inside of you. It’s not in the blot, it’s in you.”

Rufino first came to Pittsburgh last summer for a residency at The Warhol and to participate in the conference *The Arts, Human Rights, and Human Development: 21st Century Intersections and Ramifications* in collaboration with The Warhol and Pitt’s Center for Latin American Studies and Center for Bioethics and Health Law. During the trip he began a portfolio of Rorschach images related to Warhol’s life and work. Gogan says that in this way Rufino is “flipping pop” or mining Warhol’s artistic practice and providing a nuanced and layered response to his Pop Art style. Literally and figuratively, you might say.

In *Blots & Fignents*, Rufino used partial reproductions of Warhol’s Rorschach inkblots



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- MAGGIE McDONALD, PITT’S ASSOCIATE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS IN HEALTH SCIENCES

and printed them onto old yearbooks from Warhol’s alma mater, Schenley High School, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* newspapers from the 1940s, overlaying them with his own inkblot style. He incorporated source images from Warhol’s *Electric Chair* and *Skull* series as well as colored paper remaining from Warhol’s studio, The Factory. He also filmed old photographs of Pittsburgh which he then mirrored in an inkblot style, creating an evocative memorial-type film of the city. (Warhol lived in Pittsburgh until 1949, when he left to become a commercial artist in New York City.)

Art and medicine intersect

Were it not for a unique partnership between Carnegie Museums and the University of Pittsburgh, Rufino’s stay in Pittsburgh might have ended there.

Over the past four years, the two institutions have developed a unique working relationship that brings the fields of art, natural history, and medicine together for a variety of educational programs and exhibitions. So Gogan approached Maggie McDonald, Pitt’s associate vice chancellor for academic affairs in health sciences, about bringing Rufino to the school for a kind of art-meets-science collaboration. McDonald said it was an easy decision to say yes.

“It didn’t take all that long to see that Alzheimer’s is another kind of disappearance,” says McDonald. “Perhaps it’s more insidious, because the body is still there, even though the essence of the person is not.”



Donna and Lee Strawbridge welcomed Rufino into their Penn Hills home to gather family memorabilia. Joining them was the couple's daughter, Lisa Costello (top right).

PHOTOS: MARTHA RIAL

Rufino presented his work to faculty and staff at Pitt's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC), one of the top centers of its kind in the country. The researchers were eager to work with him, says Jennifer Lingler, director of education and information at the center, and an assistant professor of nursing at Pitt.

"His work allows those who've been lost in one sort or another to be found again—that's where he had me," Lingler says.

Rufino kicked off the project by meeting with doctors, nurses, and social workers. Then he met with patients, their families, as well as researchers, to collect their original documents, and their reflections on the illness.

Richard Morycz, a social worker at UPMC Benedum Geriatric Center, wrote a list of things patients and families told him over the years. "I asked him, 'What's wrong?,'" read one of the quotes. "He said, 'Stone...my mind has turned to stone.'"

Every year, about 5 million Americans lose themselves through Alzheimer's, a progressive and fatal brain disease. In Alzheimer's, entanglements and plaques inside the brain gradually kill off brain cells, and the brain literally shrinks over time. Early on, patients have a hard time with problem-solving, following directions, and remembering things. As the disease progresses, they lose all ability to care for themselves and function in the world around them—an agonizing process for family members who, oftentimes, must also become full-time caregivers.

"It's like you're losing him gradually, and it's a long grieving process," says Donna Strawbridge, Lee Strawbridge's wife. Donna saw Lee first begin to deteriorate 10 years ago,

when he had a hard time concentrating on his work. Lee had been a nuclear engineer for decades with Westinghouse, until becoming a financial planner in his 50s. Over time, she began to assume many of the duties he performed to run the household. "I pay the bills now," she says. "All the things he used to do, I do."

Lee has participated in several studies at the ADRC, which focus on the causes, detection, and treatments of Alzheimer's. He participates with the hope that one day a cure might be found—not necessarily for him, but for his children, Donna says. "He was an engineer. He always had to understand why things were happening. He just believed in science," Donna says. When the opportunity arose to participate in Rufino's project, it seemed almost natural for the Strawbridges to join in.

This particular project marks the beginning of what's expected to be an ongoing collaboration between the ARDC and The Warhol. A new pilot program will soon bring Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers, like the Strawbridges, to the museum for studio visits as a type of creative expression intervention. (A program at Carnegie Museum of Art hosts Alzheimer's patients from an area residential facility for group tours led by specially-trained staff educators.)

Creating a new reality

Rufino insists on using original documents, no facsimiles. The originals are contaminated, he explains in his native Portuguese, with their own history, and thus imbued with meaning.

He sees in his artwork similarities to paleontology. "I see my process like the scientific method—it happens in steps, first the personal memories, then the collective or the institutional memories," Rufino says. "I never work in blank spaces. I need historical or emotional substrates."

When Rufino paid a visit to the Strawbridges at their home in Penn Hills, he looked through papers from Lee's job as a nuclear engineer with Westinghouse and old papers from Lee's family—ledgers, calendars, and school workbooks from the 1920s. He picked some of the yellowing papers to use for the Rorschachs.

Next, he invited the Strawbridges and other families to work with him at Artists Image Resource, a North Side printmaking studio where he produced most of the work for *Blots & Figments*.

After watching Donna create a handful of inkblots with Rufino, Lee donned a smock and followed Rufino's lead. He laid careful, deliberate brushstrokes on the paper. In between, Rufino added a touch of color or a line here or there.

After a few tries, Lee and Rufino had produced an image that looked something like a human skeleton, or perhaps some prehistoric flying creature. Lee registered surprise when the final creation was unfolded.

"Hmm ..." he said. "Looks like something. I don't know what, but it looks like something." ■