

Who Am I?

As a guest exhibitor, I did not work directly with a scientist on the Art and Genetics project. This artwork was originally conceived as part of my third year Bachelor's degree exhibition.

In October 2011 while living in Christchurch, I had an early morning phone call from my father, who lived in Dunedin. He was extremely upset and crying, which was very unusual for him, talking about an incident that had happened the previous day when he had visited his doctor. This both surprised and alarmed me as he had spoken to me after the doctor's visit, saying the doctor said he was fit as a fiddle and I wouldn't be seeing my inheritance any time soon – an ongoing joke between the two of us. I immediately left for Dunedin, and arrived to find him still upset but really unable to give me any further details of what had taken place.

I contacted his doctor and asked to see her. At that appointment, I explained what had happened and asked her what she knew of the incident. To my absolute surprise she said the incident hadn't happened, and the doctor in question wasn't even in New Zealand. This was my welcome to the world of Alzheimer's disease.

After further specialist testing, a diagnosis was given of Alzheimer's disease and dementia with Lewy bodies as well as delusions. However, by the time his Alzheimer's was picked up he was beyond understanding, and refused to believe the diagnosis, leading to paranoia about all aspects of his life.

As a child in Invercargill my father had been IQ tested, with the result that he was in the genius category. After his death, while I was studying for my Bachelor of Visual Arts in textiles, which I focused on Alzheimer's disease, I read *Aging with Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us about Leading Longer, Healthier, and More Meaningful Lives* by David Snowdon. His research looked at the ability of subjects to use language descriptively at an early age and how badly Alzheimer's affected them later on. For example, two nuns of the same age and education and growing up in the same environment may show different signs of the disease – one with minor and the other with major symptoms. However, brain autopsy after death may show that both had the same amount of physical damage in the brain. The nun who was shown to have used language more descriptively early in life is believed to have greater reserves – a stronger brain that was more efficient and more flexible, and therefore able to make compensations as cells die.¹ For me, this explained how it had taken so long for anyone to realise that something was really wrong.



Figure 1. Megan Griffiths, *Who am I?* (2015), synthetic fabric, acrylic, 196cm x 60cm.

Translated into English – as Alzheimer's disease progresses, the brain shrinks, and tangles move through the brain, breaking off connections and killing cells. While there is no magic medication to either stop this or relink cells, some people seem to have more immunity than others as to how long it takes the disease to affect them.

In *Who am I?* I have used a jigsaw as an analogy for declining recognition and decreasing abilities, the actuality of physically being unable to put a jigsaw together as the disease progresses. The jigsaw idea was 'happenstance'. A friend showed me a quilt made up of fabric jigsaw pieces, and I suddenly saw how this could be used as a metaphor for Alzheimer's disease. While this project is personal for me, it reaches out to a wider audience, many of whom will know someone with one of these conditions.

This piece is made out of five identical but separate jigsaw puzzles, made from woven synthetic fabric, glued to acrylic and laser-cut into pieces. Each puzzle was assembled separately, and rearranged to get the progressive fragmentation, then joined together into one large puzzle. There are a total of 1235 separate puzzle pieces.

While early-onset Alzheimer's disease (familial Alzheimer's disease) is considered to be a genetic disorder, the cause of late-onset Alzheimer's disease is not yet well understood, as it is likely a combination of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors that affect a person's risk for developing the disease. Ongoing work at molecular level hopes to unravel the mechanisms of this disease.

In 2016, **Megan Griffiths** graduated from the Dunedin School of Art with an Honours degree in visual arts (textiles). This was the culmination of more than 30 years of working in textiles, starting with embroidery, then patchwork and moving into fibre art. Megan continues to work with these techniques and uses her art school knowledge to create unique pieces of fibre art.

1. David Snowdon, *Aging with Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us about Leading Longer, Healthier, and More Meaningful Lives* (New York: Bantam, 2001), 45.