



Memory and Mourning

SHARED CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

SEPTEMBER 21 - NOVEMBER 9

**CURATED BY
MARIJO DOUGHERTY**

**ESSAYS BY
CARLA SOFKA, PH.D. AND HAROLD LOHNER**

**UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY
ALBANY, NEW YORK
FALL 1997**





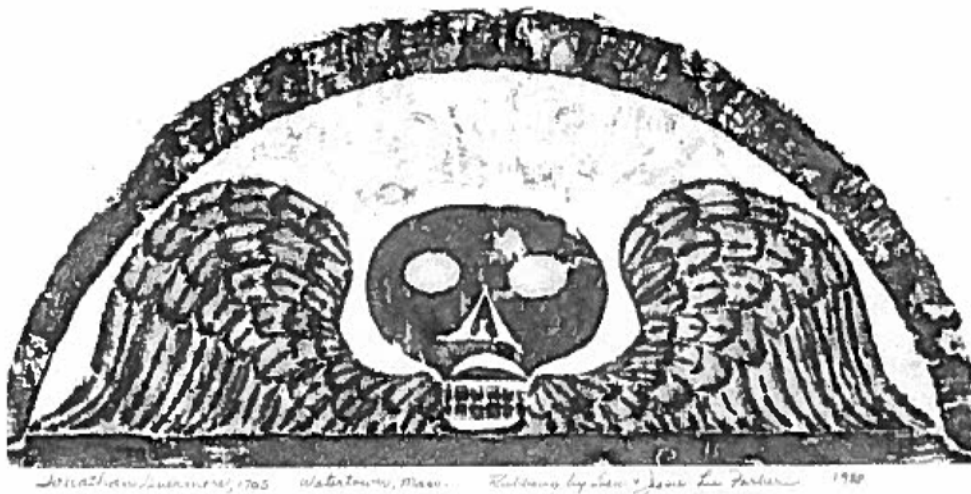


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Curator's Statement

Marijo Dougherty

7

Memory and Mourning: Shared Cultural Experience

Carla Sofka, Ph.D.

9

Art and Death

Harold Lohner

17

Exhibition Checklist

24

Project Acknowledgments

29

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

The exhibition, *Memory and Mourning: Shared Cultural Experience*, affords the viewer an opportunity to explore and perhaps seek comfort in the differing ways of processing the unavoidable facts of death and loss. It also allows the visitor to experience ways in which contemporary artists visually manifest their personal feelings of grief, loss and memory. The exhibition is curated and installed in several thematic sections: Repairing Memory; Tracing Loss; Haunted Allegories; Repeated Gestures and Containing Absence. I am extremely grateful to all the artists and lenders, cited early in the catalog, with whom the museum has worked to bring the exhibition to fruition.

The wonderful essays by Carla Sofka and Harold Lohner deserve several contemplative readings as they explore the societal meanings of rituals of death and the grief process as well as illuminate how artists process death and loss as they simultaneously celebrate life.

Carla, whom I've grown to know and respect during the many months organizing the exhibition, speaks from personal and scholarly experience as she draws us to an emotional level where many of us fear to travel. She gently does this by urging us to use the lenses of time, circumstance, culture and personal experience to facilitate and access our own processing.

Harold, a dear colleague whom I have known and respected for a number of years, as friend, artist, gallery director, teacher, curator, critic (our regional *l'uomo universal*) speaks for the contemporary artists in the exhibit and enlightens and informs the reader of the many differing messages and meanings contained in this extraordinary artistic production.

We are reminded once again of the power art has to reach all levels of the emotional mind.

Marijo Dougherty
Director



ELAINE EMMANUEL
Constant Companion, 1996
found objects/mixed media

MEMORY AND MOURNING: SHARED CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

 It is a rare day when one reads a newspaper devoid of vivid and often sensationalized stories of death. News broadcasts often highlight stories laced with tragedy and images of people experiencing grief. Objects and symbols associated with our society's "death system" and how we cope with loss are all around us; individual responses to them vary, provided they are even noticed. If the flow of traffic is not interrupted, do you see the hearse and funeral procession as they pass? What thoughts go through your mind when you see an inverted pink triangle on a bumper sticker or a red ribbon attached to someone's clothing? Do you seek out explanations for symbols that are publicly visible but foreign in meaning to you, such as a rock lovingly placed on top of a headstone in a Jewish cemetery or a small white cross decorated with flowers located near a curve on a rural roadside? When you see a picture of a young child in the obituary section of the paper, what physical and emotional reactions do you experience?

There are few experiences more universal to the lives of humans than the experience of loss. However, the ways in which humans grieve and mourn those losses can be as unique and diverse as the individuals themselves and the events to which they are reacting. Although loss cannot be avoided in our lives, most people in 20th century America are not very comfortable having conversations with people who are grieving or openly contemplating issues of mortality. Death and grief are two of life's greatest taboo topics.

During the past 25 years, the discipline of thanatology has quietly developed and grown along with the availability and acceptance of hospice care as an option at the end stages of life. Pioneers such as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross,¹ Jessica Mitford,² Derek Humphry,³ and Sherwin Nuland⁴ have written books designed to influence the way we think about living and dying. The beliefs and actions of Jack Kevorkian precipitated debates and discussions culminating in the Supreme Court decision of June 1997 that will place the issue of physician-assisted suicide in the hands of the people via the state legislative process.

Post mortem tintype in case
Collection of Carla Sofka



Currier & Ives mourning print
Collection of Carla Sofka



Uncomfortable or comfortable as it may be for each of us, there's never been a more appropriate or necessary time for these topics to be placed on the table.

This exhibit, *Memory and Mourning: Shared Cultural Experience*, explores the topics of grief and mourning on many levels. These subjects are multifaceted, making their study a complex task. Viewing grief and mourning through four lenses—time, circumstance, culture, and personal experience—will assist you as you learn.

First is the lens of time. Historically, the degree to which death is present in everyday life has varied. Consider changes in mortality rates, public health conditions, and the availability of medical care in western culture from colonial to modern times. Wandering through older sections of cemeteries offers a glimpse into the common heartbreak of many families from earlier times in our country's history. Some suffered multiple infant deaths commemorated by lambs or doves on the tiny headstones; others endured the untimely death of an adult cut down in the prime of life, symbolized by a broken column or a tree trunk. As evidenced by postmortem photographs from the late 1800s to early 1900s, many families held the wake of a loved one in the "parlor" of their homes which were draped in the black crepe of mourning. "Memento mori," such as Currier and Ives memorial prints or mourning jewelry, provided linking objects which were ways to keep a loved one close in the minds and hearts of the bereaved. In times of 3-day bereavement leaves (provided your loss or relationship with the deceased falls into a recognized category), quietly resurrecting and modernizing these customs may be one way to cope with the "get over it/snap out of it" mentality that is socially imposed. As modern hospice care practices for the terminally ill become more common and death becomes intertwined with daily life, perhaps these rituals and practices will hold significance and meaning once again.

Second is the lens of circumstance. Conditions surrounding a death have an impact on the grief experience of the bereaved as well as the way in which the deaths are commemorated. While it is ill-advised to make comparisons regarding which type of circumstance is "easier," potential differences between the experiences of sudden versus anticipated loss exist. Consider the missed opportunities, often described as "unfinished business," when a death is unexpected as opposed to dying of a chronic or terminal illness. The ability to resolve conflicts or simply say "I love you" or "good-bye" is also lost (illustrating the appropriateness of the word "bereft," which means "to rob away"). Unanticipated deaths may also be violent ones, contributing to reactions of disbelief and intense anger. Although expected deaths provide a chance to reach closure, watching a person change—slowly fading away during a lengthy illness



JOANNA OSBURN-
BIGFEATHER
detail of *The Education of*
"Our Indians"
a mixed media installation
Photograph of American
Indian children housed at the
government-run Carlisle
Boarding School, Carlisle,
Pennsylvania, ca. 1824

time. Consider the public vs. private nature of various “shrines” or monuments to the deceased that you have encountered in your own life and travels. How did you learn about rituals related to death in your family? To what degree does a culture leave records or documentation of their practices? Is it easy or difficult to find research materials? How comfortable is it to consider asking a member of the culture a question about their death or grief-related customs? Are they willing or even allowed to respond? While books and articles about diversity regarding death, dying, and bereavement have become more common within the last few years as cultural diversity has become an important topic, it is always wise to be cautious of stereotypes. The lenses of culture and personal perceptions and experiences are inseparable and intricately intertwined.

Regardless of how much factual knowledge an individual possesses about grief and loss viewed from historical and cultural perspectives, each person is an expert in their own personal experience with loss. No one can define or predict that experience, it simply evolves with the passage of time. Thoughts and memories long absent from consciousness or temporarily set aside for much needed relief from the exhaustion of grief may be triggered by a significant date on the calendar, an event during which the absence of a loved one is particularly painful, or exposure to unexpected stimuli. These reminders of important attachments and the emotions that result when those attachments change or are severed create filters through which you can compare and contrast the expressions of grief and rituals of mourning one encounters.

In the Chinese culture, the meaning of *crisis* is defined as danger and opportunity. Loss often takes away our sense of control and certainty, making each moment seem potentially unmanageable and difficult if not impossible to survive. At some point in the journey, even if only for a second, the potential for a challenge may



Gravestone facsimile
Captain Robert Mickler,
d. 1848, The Huguenot
Cemetery, St. Augustine,
Florida. Collection of
Carla Sofka

or disappearing rapidly due to a quickly progressing disease—creates a situation involving mini-losses that accumulate and must be grieved as the moment of death draws near.

Types of memorialization are also dependent upon circumstance. Socioeconomic status influences decisions that are made about final disposition - burial versus cremation - and how elaborate or simple the headstone or urn that is chosen will be. On April 21 of 1997, the first cremated remains, including those of Timothy Leary and Gene Roddenberry (of Star Trek fame), were launched into space by Celestis, Inc, providers of the Earthview Commemorative Spaceflight Service. Loss events such as wars or tragedies involving multiple deaths often merit the erection of special monuments to insure that the victims are not forgotten. A visit to the wall in Washington, D.C. leaves a lasting impression due to the mementos and sentimental gifts that are lovingly placed by family and friends near the names of Vietnam veterans who perished while serving their country. A cairn in memory of the victims of Pan Am Flight 103 was erected at Arlington National Cemetery “not only as a monument to the memory of our loved one, but also as a beacon to guide us and those who follow in our constant fight against terrorism, of any kind, anywhere in the world!”.⁵ Modern technology has also allowed for the creation of virtual cemeteries on the World Wide Web, a place in cyberspace to focus emotions and creative energy when a traditional burial did not occur or the cemetery is not accessible to those who wish to pay their respects.

Third is the lens of culture. Culture influences the degree and manner in which loss and death are publicly and privately acknowledged and commemorated. Culture also provides the context in which grief is expressed and dictates the manner in which members of a society should respond when loss occurs in their own lives or the lives of people with whom they interact. Corr, Nabe, & Corr⁶ note three areas that must be studied to understand cultural differences related to death: 1) the degree to which members of the culture encounter death; 2) the attitudes, including religious or spiritual beliefs, toward death; and 3) death-related practices which occur within the culture. Irish⁷ would add the following components of diversity to the list that must be considered: an experiential quality or “feel” for those participating within the dying, death, and bereavement features of the culture; related philosophical issues such as the meaning of life or the nature of the soul; consideration of how “death education” takes place—how members of the culture learn about death and dying, appropriate bereavement behavior, taboos, values, and attitudes; and how actions, rituals, and expressions are incorporated into life over



SARAH BATES
From Mother Ann to Amy
Reed, 1848, Spirit drawing,
watercolor on blue paper.
Collection of the Shaker
Museum and Library

REFERENCES:

- ¹ Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. NY: Macmillan.
- ² Mitford, J. (1963). *The American way of death*. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- ³ Humphry, D. (1991). *Final exit: The practicalities of self-deliverance and assisted suicide for the dying*. Eugene, OR: Hemlock Society.
- ⁴ Nuland, S.B. (1994). *How we die: Reflections on life's final chapter*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- ⁵ Found in the program from the November 3, 1995 dedication of the memorial cairn.
- ⁶ Corr, C.A., Nabe, C., & Corr, D. (1997). *Death and dying, life and living*. (2nd edition). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.
- ⁷ Irish, D.P. (1993). *Multiculturalism and the majority population*. In D.P. Irish, K.F. Lundquist, & V.J. Nelsen (Eds.), *Ethnic variations in dying, death, and grief: Diversity in universality*. (pp. 1-10). Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis.
- ⁸ Rosenblatt, P.C. (1983). Diary entry of Susan Mansfield Huntington, page 145. *Bitter, bitter tears: Nineteenth-century diarists and twentieth-century grief theories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

arise, which can be terrifying and exciting at the same time. A pathway to new growth may appear if one has the energy, willingness, and courage to recognize and seize the opportunity. The reflections of Susan Mansfield Huntington,⁸ a widow and bereaved mother, captured in her diary entry of December 4, 1822, illustrate this juxtapositioning of emotions that accompany life's journeys involving attachments and loss:

"To-morrow is the Annual Thanksgiving. These are sad days to me. They seem like landmarks of the soul, whose periodical recurrence, present at one glance, all the varieties of each ... stage of the way. I have been called to number one, & another, & another; since he who once traveled with me has been called home...Others have a parent, a brother, a sister, to mingle with them the aspirations of gratitude, or the tears of sympathy: but to me, there is not a dear relative who bears these endearing names, on whose bosom I can repose, & feel the sweet glow of confiding tenderness. No! these ties are all swept away. And I must feel it. A heart like mine could not have been called to surrender one after another of what it so dearly loved & not entertain at seasons like this some keen sense of its desolation. Yet hush every dissatisfied thought, oh my soul! Thy greatest mercies have been sweetly mingled with thy heaviest trials..."

Grief is a profound teacher in life whose lessons often come at a high price. Exposure to cultural differences and diverse expressions of grief can offer insight into strategies used by others to cope with loss. Borrowing rituals from days past can fill a void created by the absence of ways in modern society to acknowledge pain deeply felt and often unnoticed by those around you. Generating a symbol of hope from the depths of sorrow provides a tangible focus for emotions so intense but necessary to experience and express. As you contemplate two of life's greatest taboos for the next few minutes or during moments of quiet reflection or philosophical debate in the future, may this exhibit deepen your ability to be open to the lessons that loss can offer.

Carla Sofka, Ph.D.

*Carla Sofka is a member of the faculty of the School of Social Welfare,
University at Albany.*

ART AND DEATH

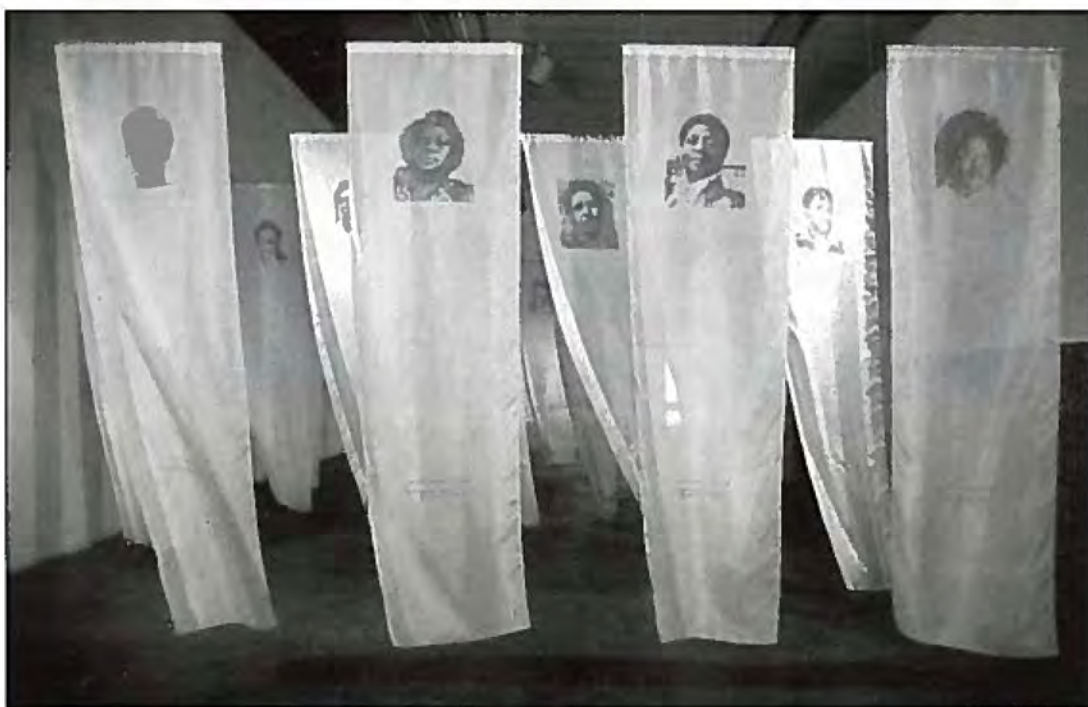


emory is the mother of the Muses, as exhibiting artist David Formanek reminds us in his statement. (He also reminds us that we had best assume an inclusive definition of *art* or we may find our own beloved painting and sculpture “excluded as craft.”) The work of art—language, image, form, space, sound, movement—that addresses death may forever evoke the unforgettable lost life and remind us of our own upcoming demise. We are able to metaphorically triumph over death in both the creation and appreciation of such works. The artist has looked death in the eye, bravely confronted the ghost, and survived with something to show for it. (At this writing, all the artists in this show are alive.)

And you, the reader of this, the audience member, you are always alive for it is precisely your attendance and consideration that keeps the art work alive by letting it speak again and again. Through the recollection of one’s image, words, actions, and creations, survivors are able to rekindle one’s spirit. It’s the reading and rereading that maintains the illusion of the timelessness of long-dead authors and characters; this is the reception of distant transmissions, even if the message varies from time to time, person to person. The resemblance to reality (to its truth, if not its outward appearance) is demanded of art; the experience of the death-related art work ought to stimulate (or simulate) some of the same emotions as the experience of death in one’s own life. But, no matter how moved you are by the movie, *you yourself won’t die!*

Jimmy Stewart died this summer. Think of that popular and acclaimed actor’s death-averted scenes in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Vertigo*. George Bailey is a failed suicide, whose grief at the consideration of his own non-existence makes him choose life. Scotty Ferguson watches Kim Novak’s character—wearing twice the makeup of a corpse—fall to her death over and over, yet seems himself impervious to death. The end of each film is the central character’s survival; George is joyous, tearful, triumphant, surrounded by loved ones, but Scotty is alone and numbed by confusing mixed emotions. George and Scotty live on in clean prints as vividly as ever. And we’re still here to watch them, to imagine what the characters did next, or see what Jimmy did next.

So art involves a *process*: the growing of the artwork—informed by history, colored by experience, ignited by creativity, carried over time, and delivered in labor. And a *product*: the finished art work may now assume “a life of its own,” pretty much independent of—and anticipated to outlive—its parent. A second process begins: how



BRADLEY MCCALLUM

*Shroud Mothers Voices: A Memorial for Victims of Gun
Violence in New Haven, Connecticut, March 1992*
silk with photo images, text, and video interviews

expressions of our understandable wish to hold on, while still finding a way to go on.

The death-related artwork, product as it is of the interrelationship of the artist and his or her society, circumstances, and purposes, can be seen as having therapeutic and diagnostic value, individual and collective weight. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross¹ identified denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as the stages of psychological adjustment to death. These—combined, encoded, expanded—are also some of what the artist has put into the art, or the viewer takes away from, the symbolic, metaphoric encounter with death. Whether commissioned or personal in origin, traditional or contemporary, the work of art may be evidence of something originating from within and outside of the artist, extending from far before the individual's life to long after. Thus the form of art can vary from idiosyncratic symbols and experience to widespread, cross-cultural iconography. (Subjectivity is necessarily a part of any such representation. Is white or black the better visualization of death?)

Representing or containing the body, the art work helps give tangible form to our emotions as well. A judge considers sentencing a remorseless murderer to life in a cell with his victim's photo. A crueler sentence might be to deprive the bereaved survivor of a fixed image of the dead one. Accurate likenesses have become commonplace; another sort of keepsake, a song, a place, a tree, a story might just as well conjure up the spirit of the individual as in pre-portrait times.

Thanks to the arts, we have experienced more gut-wrenching, spine-tingling, heartbreaking, even rib-tickling death than we will probably ever have to in our real lives. Watching heroes and villains and innocent victims die, are we better prepared to cope with our own death or that of others? We are misled by the dramatic, logical, plotted deaths of fictional characters, or of real individuals fictionalized by their elevation to mythic status. We use artifice to make ourselves live longer, to leave longer legacies, and create further distance from real death. But the imagery of death remains as intact as its inevitability.



MARINA GUTIERREZ,
Disillusionment Gown, 1997
from *Body Mask Series*,
aluminum, galvanized
screen, cast plaster, plastic
toys, mixed media

that product affects people. This process may never begin, or may outlive its civilization and the ability to decode it. In the appreciation of the work of art we may come to share the view of the individual or culture or time that produced it, or we may use it as a magnifying mirror of our own memory and experience. It is perhaps in the masterpiece that we can best experience a sense of the metaphoric immortality of the artist and of the eternal creation.



And death is understood as a process, an event, and the resulting state. Although we don't all age the same, reproduce, or even maintain a constant gender, we all face the biological certainty of death—of dying and of then being dead. We can say where babies come from, but where do we go? Science and religion have (as other aspects of culture and thus the arts in the broadest sense have) put a lot of effort into explaining death, but still not enough to convince the skeptic, and not too little for the faithful. The best that the church and the laboratory can offer are some solace, explanation, intervention, and hope. The objective measure of science says the Shroud is a fake, but it still remains a picture of Christ, a product of cultural processes rather than natural. Unable to go beyond life, science extends life longer and searches for it farther away.

If art is the product of a process, what is the product of the death process? The corpse, of course, but we have come to find this to be too scary, disgusting, and unhealthy to keep around, however effectively it might remind us of the dead and death.

The work of art supplies a safer substitute for the body; it is at this convenient distance from the unpleasant, but not unthinkable, biological reality of death that we enter into the expressive realm. The treatment, documentation, containment, and placement of the body, the ceremonies and rituals, the stories and prayers serve to facilitate the grim process of death, to contain emotion, to transport us beyond the specific moment, and then to serve as aids to memory. Pictures, shadows, tracings, and recordings *embody* the memory of appearance and emotion, and remain as

GAIL SKUDERA, *Mother Rose: Golden Slippers*, 1995
photo transfer and
watercolor on cloth, woven

