

MoMento

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Caring for the Dead :

A photographic essay on the funeral profession

Over the course of a year (2005/6) I worked closely with staff in a funeral home, as well as with the deceased and their families, to produce this series of photographs. The work focuses on the journey of the body from the time of death to that of burial or cremation. It's not a linear narrative in the traditional sense but rather it is made up of multiple narratives covering a range of cultural experiences. My aim is not to be sensational or gratuitous but to draw attention to what would normally remain hidden. The images in the exhibition document the daily rituals involved in caring for the dead as I experienced them.

Photography has played a central role in memorialising the dead since it's invention. I own a collection of 19th century glass plate negatives from an East London portrait studio and while cataloguing them I came across a lot of death portraits. These were local, ordinary people. They look as though they are asleep and I was struck by their simplicity, humanity and beauty. Death is a natural part of everyday life, yet ordinary, everyday death generally remains hidden from view.

I had a very personal motivation for wanting to go behind the scenes of a funeral home. I lost my mother at the age of seven. It was 1970. The adults took charge and we weren't included in the funeral. It's an experience I've carried with me into adulthood. I've always wanted to know what her journey would have been and to say goodbye myself.

Bridgit Anderson

List of works

(in order, front to back cover)

Grave
Prep Room 1
Mortuary 5
Mortuary 3
Body Preparation - mortuary 2
Dressing the Body I
Prep Room 2
Mortuary I
Body Preparation – mortuary I
Body Presentation – prep room
Dressing the Body 2
Indigent's Funeral – graveside
Graveside 3
Disinterment I
Disinterment 2
Chapel 2
Graveside I
Chapel I
Graveside 2
Cemetary
Waimiri Cemetary

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In the later half of the nineteenth century it was not unusual to find post mortem photographs of deceased family members lovingly displayed on the drawing room mantle of the family home. These images largely took the form of formalised portrait photographs in which individuals were pictured either lying in their caskets or stretched out on a bed as if caught in a deep sleep. Children too were often pictured cradled in their mothers arms or laid out in their crib. As with any portrait, the deceased sitter was dressed in their finest clothes and it became fashionable to adopt current artists trends in determining the style and composition of images. Such measures were of course important since these photographs were intended not only as personal memorial documents but also as objects for public display. If these images were somehow sought to mitigate the finality of death, they did so nonetheless by embracing its inevitability.

Death was a much more ordinary aspect of life during this period. Indeed perhaps the most troubling of deaths - that of the child - was a commonplace, if no less painful, occurrence. Faced with death in this way it is perhaps not surprising that funeral and mourning customs should become such an important aspect of nineteenth century culture. The post mortem photograph, then, must be understood as forming part of a wider set of elaborate rituals and practices that surrounded death and funerary activity at this time.

While the practice of taking and displaying post-mortem photographs has waned in recent times, these types of images do provide an interesting counterpoint to the photographs displayed in this exhibition. Indeed Anderson acknowledges her interest in nineteenth century post mortem photography as providing an important catalyst in developing her own documentary project. In the same way that we might learn much about the nineteenth century experience of death through looking at post-mortem photographs, the pictures on display here, as much as our individual responses to them, tell us a great deal about our own attitudes toward death and dying.

In contemporary Western society death has become something of a forbidden subject. We have developed a more palpable fear of our own mortality. The relentless barrage of media messages to which we are exposed constantly pushes us to look younger and live longer. The very idea of growing older is to be avoided in polite conversation. In a now famous essay written in 1955, *The Pornography of Death*, Geoffrey Gorer asserted that death had replaced sex as the great taboo of the twentieth century¹. It is clear too, that this attitude toward death has persisted into the twenty-first.

It is perhaps somewhat paradoxical then, that in a period when death is considered the unspeakable subject, images of death and violence should so voraciously occupy our movies, television and news media. In these realms, it would seem, we have developed an appetite for death. We are entertained by the sight of bloody, gruesome deaths in computer games or on the big screen. Television is populated by hospital, police and forensic dramas that trade on the spectacle of death while images of

murder and war, portraying scenes of death which are ostensibly more authentic, are accepted as news-worthy.

Why is it then that these kinds of pictures are so pervasive and yet our attitudes towards death - that is in terms of recognizing our own mortality - remain so strained? Perhaps one reason why we find this media-manufactured idea of death so much easier to face is the very fact that it *is* so sensational. The heightened sense of drama that is created by these forms seems so far removed from the reality of our own dying that it nullifies any personal resonance these deaths may have.

From this contemporary vantage point, the nineteenth century 'celebration of death' might seem a rather morose affair; the practice of post-mortem photography a perverse concern. Yet it is in this response that we might discover an important means of thinking through the photographs displayed in this exhibition. Early post mortem photography proves disquieting to us in its forthright acceptance of death, and in a similar way this is what is so confronting about Anderson's images. In her photographs death becomes *too* real. The discomfort we may feel in viewing her images betrays our reluctance as a culture to deal with death and dying as a universally real and inevitable outcome. Anderson's images do not illustrate shocking or gratuitous renditions of death but rather document it as an ordinary occurrence.

To talk about death in this way, as an ordinary occurrence, is in no way to be disrespectful. Here, Anderson has crafted a sensitively handled exhibition that reconciles the often extreme emotional distress of those whose loved ones have departed with the everyday routine of those whose job it is to care for the dead. We see images of mourning families by the graveside next to photographs of the body being prepared and the casket lined. Death is pictured as a site of sorrow but also as a site of work. Anderson takes us inside the personal and professional domains of the funeral revealing to us a world which is not often seen. While we might be familiar with the face of grief, we are less well versed in the technical operations that go on behind the scenes everyday within the funeral industry. And we are certainly less accustomed to the sight of the dead body so simply disclosed. As we follow the body through these photographs on its last journey, we gain a rare insight into the final rights of passage before being laid to rest. Anderson's thoughtful approach to these images well reflects the care and respect that is so obviously afforded the dead and the bereaved by those working within the funeral profession.

Caring for the Dead is a compelling series of photographs that dares to explore potentially difficult subject matter. These images are at once beautiful and challenging, harrowing and humorous, moving and mundane. As an audience we are richly rewarded for the experience of viewing them.

Barbara Garrie.

¹ Geoffrey Gorer, *The Pornography of Death*, Encounter, October 1955, pp. 49-52.

