

Body of Work: Death

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Inspired by the diverse cultural approach to death from around the world, I created a body of work that challenges the preconceived attitudes of our current society towards the transient nature of life and the human fear of death. The portrayal of death is not unknown to the world of art, it's daunting presence is personified by Klimt and it's intricate decomposition cycle has inspired Jae Rhim Lee to design a new burial method - 'The Mushroom Burial Suit'. However, I chose to explore the positive relationship that can be fostered with death. My interest in the confronting rituals and traditions that celebrate the life of a loved one stems from my Mexican heritage and the experiences that I had as a child displaying 'ofrendas' on El Dia de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead). Death is an integral part of society, frequently embedded in religion, television, and pop culture, yet no matter how much curiosity it evokes from humanity, it is not a topic that we consciously individually contemplate. My final body of work interacts with the audience through symbolism and colour, to convey the harmony between life and death.

My mixed media painting, 'Death is Universal', juxtaposes the imagery of life and death; marigolds and luscious leaves are painted on canvas with acrylic paint and are reflected onto a rendered oil painting of a skull on mirror. As the audience positions themselves in front of the floral painting and gazes into the gold ornate mirror, their face is replaced by a monochrome skull that is juxtaposed by the vibrant botanic background. Inspired by the multi-layered oil paintings by Spirovski, the unique relationship between life and death is illustrated by the interaction between the two paintings as they are viewed by the audience. Similar to Frida Kahlo, symbolism is heavily utilised in 'Death is Universal' to convey the idea that death is natural and applies to everybody. The orange marigold flower that appears in the floral background is sacred to the Mexican tradition of El Dia de los Muertos as they are believed to guide the spirits of the dead to the altars set up by their family. The colours of white and green that appear in the small flowers and leaves represent the new life that arises from death. The branches that unite the composition are symbolic of the 'Tree of Life', frequently mentioned in Mexican folklore to represent the essential flow of energy in nature. Repetition of this natural imagery reinforces the concept that death is not only natural but is also associated with us all, it also symbolises the union of the living with the dead. The visual contrast between the light and dark tones of the skull enhance its three dimensional appearance. Following the natural contour of the skull, pockets of the mirror were left unpainted to seamlessly transition to the facial features of the audience. The intended purpose of 'Death is Universal' is to communicate that anyone can look into the artwork and become a portrait of life and death. The concept that nobody is exempt from death is projected in the painting to reconcile and confront our understanding of mortality.

My initial research into the many traditions that shape our global comprehension of death, deeply motivated me to use a mirror in my final artwork. I was challenged by the fact that death is not a topic that can be generalised, everybody confronts it differently and is uniquely impacted by death. Though the topic of death is very broad and can be endlessly interpreted, I aimed to create an artwork that could relate to every individual. For this reason, I chose to incorporate a mirror into my painting so that people of any age and cultural background could personally respond to 'Death is Universal'.

'Funeral Flowers' is a diptych composed of two black and white lino prints of funeral flowers with a watercolour focal point on animals with survival mechanisms. Influenced by the surrealist symbolism in Salvador Dali's artwork, 'Funeral Flowers' portrays humanity's innate desire to survive and escape death through the natural imagery of lilies, orchids, ladybugs and lizards. The diptych explores the

concept that although death evokes fear and despair from us as a society, as humans we can't help but be fascinated and curious about it's implications on our lives. As previously mentioned, death is a recurring topic of religion, television, and pop culture, however, our repeated exposure does not remove the primal fear with which death is associated. Lizards and ladybugs, among many animals, employ the passive defensive strategy of 'Thanatosis' in which pretend to be dead to ultimately flee from predators and escape death. Inspired by Margaret Preston's lino prints of native fauna, a thick black border encompasses the finished burnished prints to create a sense of depth. The lilies and orchids, on which the animals cling to, are commonly used in funerals and have been symbolically used to represent death. The balance between the positive and negative space further emphasises the harmony between death and life. A visual pathway guides the viewer's eye from the watercolour focal point on the animals and along the vertical stem of the flowers.

The storytelling nature of William Kentridge's short films inspired my decision to create a diptych for 'Funeral Flowers', to depict our modern society's desire to both escape and learn from death. However, instead of creating a motion animation using the symbolic flowers and animals, I chose to capture a moment in time through the textured prints.

While the topic of death is interpreted differently in cultures and traditions all across the world, my body of work highlights the fact that it a universal natural occurrence that impacts each and every one of us. Although 'Death is Universal' and 'Funeral Flowers' emphasise different aspects of death, they both challenge the viewer to reconsider their preconceived ideas of the transient nature of life and the human fear of death.

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