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Ephemeral Art: Telling Stories to the Dead

Mary O'Neill

Abstract: The endurance of the form of storytelling and the compulsion to tell them suggests that telling stories is not merely an entertainment, an optional extra which we can chose to engage with or not, but a fundamental aspect of being. We tell stories to construct and maintain our world. When our sense of reality is damaged through traumatic experiences we attempt to repair our relationship with the world through the repeated telling of our stories. These stories are not just a means of telling but also an attempt to understand. Stories are performed and performative; they do not leave us unchanged but can in fact motivate us to act. They are not merely about things that have happened, but are about significant events that change us. Through our stories we demonstrate that we have not only had experiences but that those experiences have become part of one's knowledge.

In this essay O' Neill will explore the potential of objects to tell a story, the object that is both the subject of the story and the form of telling. Two ephemeral art works will be considered: *Domain of Formlessness* (2006) by British artist Alec Shepley and *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1977) by Canadian artist Liz Magor. Both works embody the process of decay and tell a story of existence overshadowed by the knowledge of certain death and the telling of the story as a means of confronting that knowledge. The ephemeral art object tells a story in circumstances when there are no words, when we have nothing left to say.

Résumé: La persistance de la forme narrative, mais aussi notre compulsion narrative, nous signalent que raconter une histoire n'est pas un simple divertissement, un supplément plus ou moins superflu qu'on pourrait laisser de côté si on le voulait, mais un aspect fondamental de notre vie. Nous racontons des histoires pour construire et sauvegarder notre univers. Lorsque des expériences traumatisantes ont entamé notre sens du réel, nous essayons de rétablir notre contact avec le monde en multipliant les récits. Le but de ces récits n'est pas seulement de raconter, mais aussi de comprendre. Un récit est donc un acte, il nous change et il peut nous pousser à l'action. Un récit ne parle pas uniquement de ce qui s'est passé, il parle des choses importantes qui ont eu lieu et qui nous ont transformés. Par le biais de nos récits, nous montrons que nous avons fait davantage qu'accumuler des expériences et que celles-ci se sont intégrées à ce que nous avons appris et à ce que nous savons.

Le présent article explore le potentiel narratif des objets. L'objet y apparaît à la fois comme ce dont il est question dans le récit et ce qui structure la narration, comme on le voit dans les deux œuvres d'art éphémères qu'analyse l'auteur: *Domain of Formlessness* (2006) de l'artiste britannique Alec Shepley et *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1977) de l'artiste canadienne Liz Magor. Ces deux œuvres mettent en forme un processus de déchéance et racontent l'histoire d'une vie placée sous le signe de la conscience d'une mort certaine, mais aussi de la narration comme une manière de faire face à cette conscience. L'objet d'art éphémère raconte une historie dans des circonstances privées de mots, où nous n'avons plus rien à dire.

Key words: ephemeral art, (Liz) Magor, (Alex) Shapley, storytelling, trauma

> [The story] . . . achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin 89)

In this essay I explore the stories told by two ephemeral art works, *Time and Mrs Tiber* (1977) by Canadian artist Liz Magor, and *Domain of Formlessness* (2006) by British artist Alec Shepley. These works tell a story of existence overshadowed by the knowledge of certain death. Through their emphemerality they embody both the process of decay and disappearance; the telling of the story is used as a means of confronting this knowledge. The ephemeral art object can tell a story in circumstances where the traditional myth of art, as something that endures into an indefinite future and opens a doorway to immortality, will no longer serve. Western art has traditionally been concerned with power and authority, of the church, state or wealth. It has been conceived of as permanent and monumental, concerned with what is to come, a form of propaganda that will survive us and represents us to future generations, and ensure our immortality through the survival of our reputations and the great achievements of our culture (O'Neill 89). The works of Magor and Shepley are ephemeral in the sense that they are not only transient, but contain within them the seeds of their own demise. They have broken with tradition and are concerned with the past and how that past is experienced in the present, at the moment of looking. They are flawed works that allude to mourning and offer the possibility of an alternative to the Freudian triumvirate of remembering, repeating and working-through (Freud 147-156). In these works, remembering and repeating is evident – the original loss is repeated, which on the face of it could suggest that they are trapped in the repeating stage. However, rather than the closure that working-through promises, these works suggest an alternative – they form an accommodation with

their trauma, and offer a new aesthetic, a new story, in which the fleeting, the discarded and the transitory acquires a significance which Western traditions of art denies.

Some of our stories, those that deal with traumatic experience, are an attempt to communicate, but they may also be an attempt to understand. Experiences that are difficult to comprehend need to be remembered and the means of this remembering may be the story of what happened, which we tell again and again in slightly different versions. The association between storytelling and the management of traumatic experience is well known and is indeed the basis of forms of therapy. For example, psychoanalysis involves freeing ourselves from the unconscious stories which we are compelled to relive by telling them over and over again to an attentive listener who reflects back what we are really saying. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) facilitates the altering of our stories that have become unhelpful or debilitating by working directly with the conscious voices in our heads to change their story.

The definition of trauma has taken on a political and legal dimension in recent years particularly in relation to the recognition of, and status given to, sufferers of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) amongst military veterans. PTSD was first officially recognised in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSMIII) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1987, where it is defined as the result of an event "outside the normal range of human experience" (236). PTSD often leads, in the words of Cathy Caruth a leading scholar of trauma, to a reaction that involves "the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind." (Caruth 2).

Domain of Formlessness

The bleak existentialism of Ernest Becker, as outlined in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, identifies the making and collecting of art as one of the means through which we create illusions of immortality as a defence against the knowledge of death that would annihilate us (171 - 174). In his discussion of the challenge facing the artist Becker states "there is something in his life experience that makes him take on the world as a problem: as a result he has to make personal sense out of it." (171) The production of an artwork is described by Becker as "the artist's attempt to justify his heroism objectively, in the concrete creation" (172). However the ephemeral work of art rejects both the possibility of the heroic artist and the "concrete creation" (172). It affords an encounter with the demise of the myth of the consolation of art, as well as the vicarious immortality it offers, and suggests a possibility beyond the psychic devastation described by Becker. Here a new narrative, a new form of meaning, whereby the ephemeral is seen as valuable and more precious precisely because it is fleeting, replaces the narrative of immortality.

Domain of Formlessness is a series of short films, each a single scene no more than 2 minutes long that play in a loop. The scenes take place in what looks like a cardboard box turned on its side (fig. 1). It begins with a single object, carefully placed in the box, followed by various other objects that are added at an increasing speed and with an increased suggestion of carelessness until the curtain falls, or in some cases fails to fall and has to be nudged closed with a stick (fig. 5).

The objects refer to art history and other works by Shepley – bits of drawings, maquettes for sculptures, a traditional artist's palette complete with blobs of paint, the odds and ends that one would find around an artist's studio. There are also more domestic objects, a small doll's house, a bird box, a model boat and a shoe. The differing scales of the objects means that they bear little relation to each other – a frigate leans against a table on which a house has been pushed aside to accommodate a bird box, the entrance of which is piled high with armchairs.

In the box Shepley creates a miniature world, a theatre/doll's house in which order is created and destroyed in endless succession. It is the world of dreams and stories in which scale is a matter of experience and importance rather than a physical characteristic. The films are manipulated by the addition of scratches and dust and have the amateurish quality of home

Fig. 1: still from *Domain of Formlessness* (2006), Alec Shepley

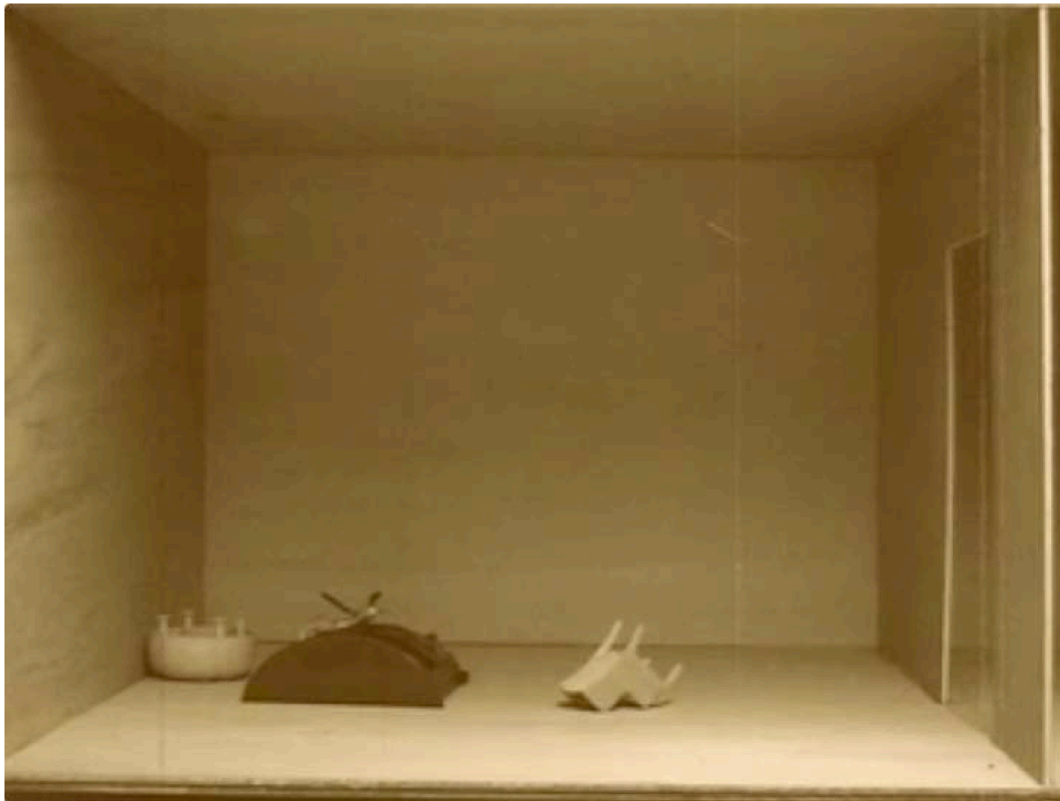

Fig. 2: still from *Domain of Formlessness* (2006), Alec Shepley

movies before the advent of digital technology. The pathos is accentuated by the sound track, a piece by jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, which reinforces the connection with a more innocent viewing experience of the past.

In my interview with Shepley he described the work as an acceptance of the ultimate failure of an artwork and, to an extent, a celebration of life's minor triumphs because these "are all there is". The demise of the work becomes the goal and, in letting go of the ego and notions of success, the damaged goods and the discarded become valuable. Shepley uses the word "avalanche" to describe what takes place within each vignette. The characteristics of avalanches are that they are sudden and overwhelming but not unexpected. These metaphorical avalanches happen again and again, but despite this the artist continues to construct scenes with the potential to escape the fate of the previous episodes. He describes how the film will play and play until the CD or the computer gives up and then it is over, not finished, just over. In the cinematic story form that this work utilises, as in other forms of storytelling, there is a physical rhythm. The listener settles into the story, can be lulled by the rhythm of telling, a heartbeat can quicken at a climactic moment and relax with the relief of the resolution, the 'happy ever after' followed by the closing of the book, or 'The End' screen of a film. The looping of Shepley's film suggests a lack of resolution in the telling of the story

and we are deprived of the sense of completeness that the traditional form of story offers.

Domain of Formlessness has qualities of a pastiche, a folly echoing the style of remembered Saturday afternoon films where fallible characters such as Abbott and Costello, Buster Keaton or Jacques Tati amused us by exaggerating our incompetence, our failures. The scenes provide a contained miniature world where an initial short-lived sense of order quickly descends into chaos and each scenario ends not because something has been achieved but because the curtain closes and it is over. But rather than being a folly which attempts to create a fake work it is a ruin in which we see the vestige of what once was, or, more importantly,

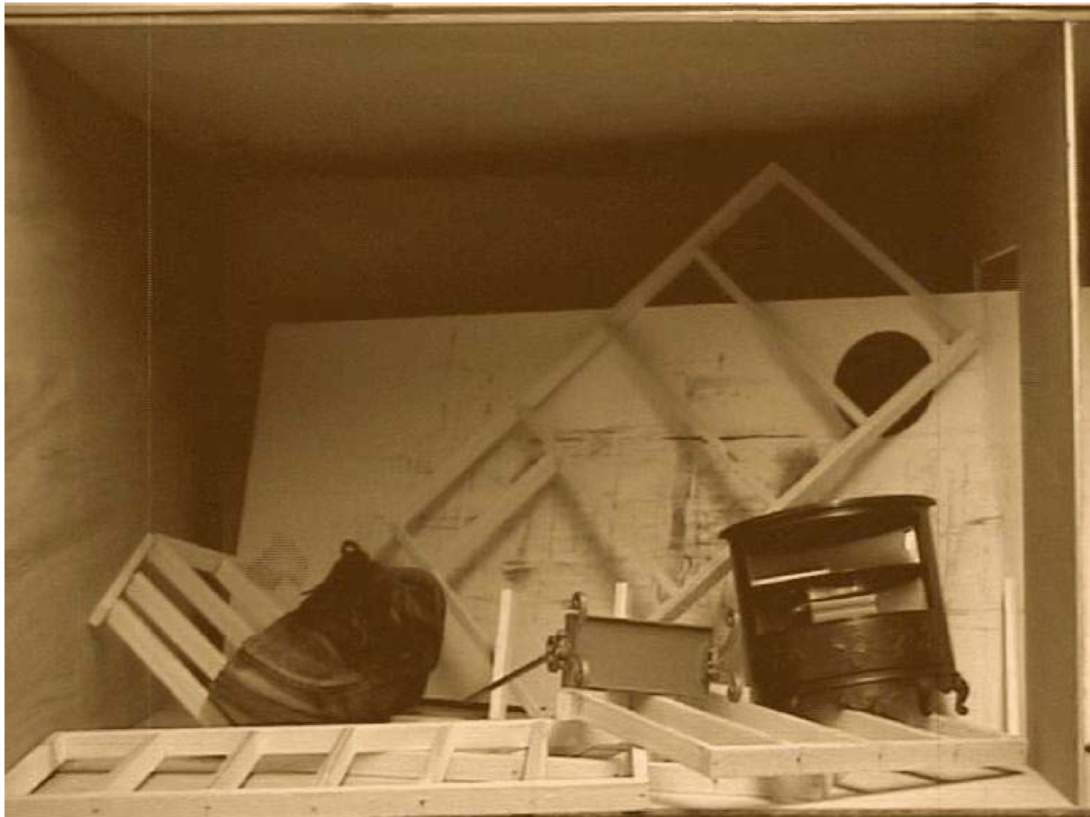

Fig. 3: still from *Domain of Formlessness* (2006), Alec Shepley

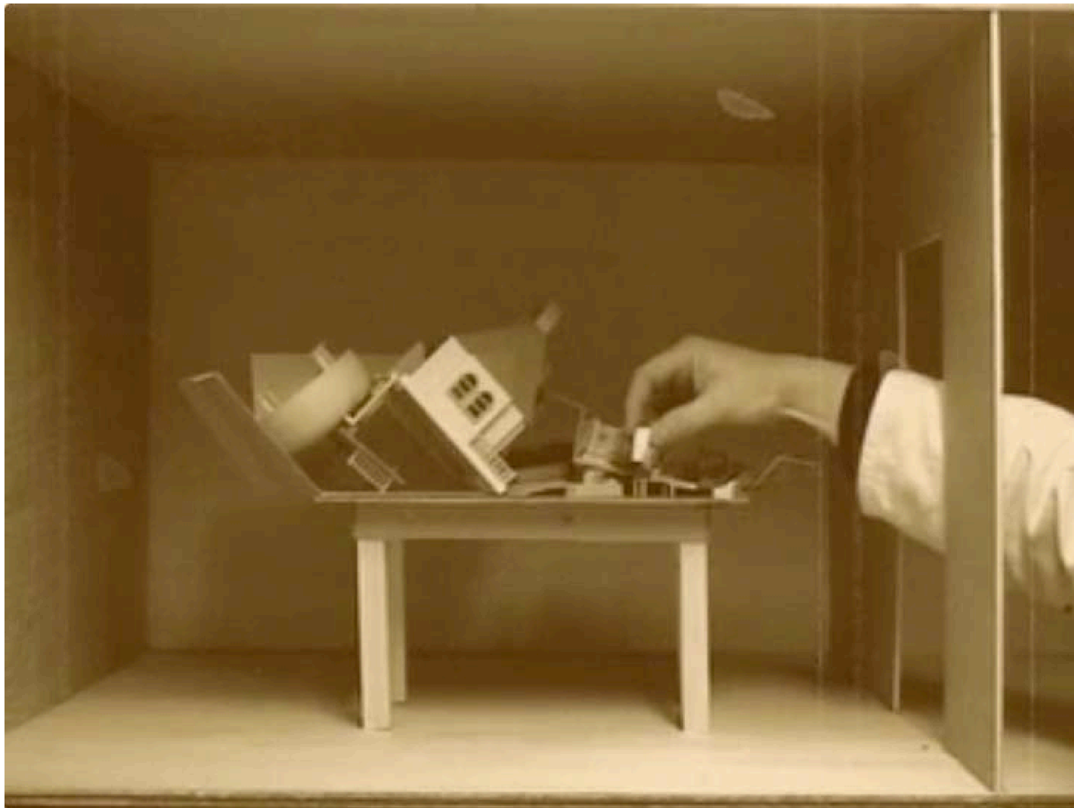

Fig. 4: still from *Domain of Formlessness* (2006), Alec Shepley

might have been but was not good enough.

Like these short films by Shepley the phrase ‘telling stories’ is deceptively simple; it conjures up thoughts of childhood tales of fabulous beasts, magical lands and dream-like existences. It is associated with ‘in the beginning’ and ‘happily ever after’. We are familiar with the structure, the beginning, middle and end, in which we experience a temporal unfolding. While this unfolding happens in one direction in time for the listener it happens backwards in time for the teller (Ricoeur 42-43). Stories are inextricably linked to memory, not only the privileged view of the teller who knows the outcome, but also the listener's experience of previous stories. The listener’s trust in the telling of a story is that there will be a *dénouement,* where motivations will be made clear and secrets revealed. However the great power of stories, the endurance of the form and the compulsion to tell them suggests that telling stories is not merely an entertainment, an optional extra which we can choose to

Fig. 5: still from *Domain of Formlessness* (2006), Alec Shepley

engage with or not, but a fundamental aspect of being. We tell stories to construct, maintain and repair our reality. When we were conceived, when the sperm met the egg, we were not there, but there is a second self-conception, which is our own. We conceive ourselves in our minds and then, through the speech act of our stories, we are born. The telling of stories is more than an individual process; through our stories we form relationships, our family stories bind us to those with whom we have shared experiences and our collective stories become our tribal, regional or national identity. These stories are performed and performative; they do not leave us unchanged but can in fact motivate us to act, to fight and be willing to die for an ideal or a belief.

The stories we tell are not merely about things that have happened, but are about significant events that have changed us. They are not general but specific; what happened and to whom. Through our stories we demonstrate that we not only have had experiences but that those experiences have become part of our knowledge. The etymology of the term experience suggests that it is a form of authority based on trial, experiment and observation, which is opposed to theory (Jay 10). In telling stories then it is possible that we combine experience and observation and move beyond theory to achieve a new form of authority. Stories are a contract and their existence requires another, a listener, to complete the event that is telling,

even if that listener is oneself or an imagined other.

In the face of some life experience or societal changes our traditional stories may prove inadequate and we must construct and tell ourselves new stories. These stories can represent a rupture with the safety of the past when we were sure ‘everything would turn out alright’. One such life event is the experience of bereavement unconsoled by religious belief. When we can no longer rely on traditional religious rites to offer comfort through the promise of another life beyond this, new stories are required to perform the act of memorialisation. This can vary from the inclusion of songs in a funeral service which represent the fullness of the life lived to the creation of an entire ritual process which can act as a surrogate life to fill the time that one would have devoted to the deceased – for example, creating and maintaining a roadside memorial.

Time and Mrs. Tiber

Time and Mrs. Tiber is an early work by Liz Magor consisting of 53 jars of preserves, some of which were found on the abandoned farm of homesteaders Mr and Mrs Tiber on Cortes Island; a remote and inaccessible spot in British Columbia, 80 miles or four days by sailboat, northwest of Vancouver. The artist prepared 27 jars in 1977, which she added to the original preserves found on Cortes Island, dating from the 1950s. The jars along with the others made by Magor were displayed on open wooden shelves with other kitchen items, recipe cards and utensils. Magor, speaking of the work in an unpublished interview in 1976, states:

> They were self-sufficient, and now they are dead. In her house I found a shelf full of preserves that Mrs Tiber had put up. She was working against time. She was trying to keep the fruit preserved for next year. The preserved fruit remains, but she and her husband are dead.

The piece also included excerpts from *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann which refer to mortality and the passage of time[1]. Considered Mann’s most overtly philosophical work, *The Magic Mountain* is set in a sanatorium where a young man, Hans Castrop, has gone to recuperate. Initially intending to spend only a short time, he eventually remains for seven years. The following excerpt from the book appears on a recipe card with the heading “DATE BREAD” which Magor features in *Time and Mrs Tiber*:

[1] The artist does not provide reference information for these quotes. This is usual in a work of art as they do not follow academic conventions. The references I have provided are not from the same edition used by the artist and therefore there are variations in the translation.

> "Dissolution, putrefaction," said Hans Castrop. "They are the same thing as combustion: combination with oxygen – am I right?"
> "To a T. Oxidisation."
> "And life?"
> "Oxidisation too. The same. Yes young man, life too is principally oxidisation of the cellular albumen, which gives us that beautiful animal warmth, of which we sometimes have more than we need. Tut, living consists in dying, no use mincing the matter – *une destruction organique*, as some Frenchman with his native levity has called it. It smells like that, too. If we don't think so our judgment is corrupted." (Mann 266)

Time and Mrs Tiber is no longer exhibitable and now sits dismantled in the stores of the National Gallery of Canada. Magor's work was the subject of a protracted correspondence between the artist, the gallery conservators and various experts called upon to discuss the state of a work that was deteriorating. The blackened jars of fruit are stored in a metal cabinet and they no longer have the qualities that the jars of fruit had when Magor first came upon them on the remote Cortes Island. My interest in this piece is not confined to the work itself as it was first shown but in the entirety of the piece as it has become, which includes the correspondence and the relationships between the work and the various people who have become responsible for it over time. The story told by the original work has become more complicated than the artist originally intended and is infinitely more complicated than Mrs Tiber could have foreseen when she first put the jars into storage.

In this work we are presented by two sets of direct intent. Mrs Tiber clearly communicates her wish that the fruits of summer should survive to be eaten in the dark cold days of winter, when luscious golden fruits could be the difference between life and death. This act, as Magor identified in a 1977 interview (unpublished), is a desire to defy time. It is also an act of hopefulness and promise, that one will survive another year. The jars as they are at present contain sinister black liquid and greenish lumps and are more reminiscent of something from the dark depths than anything that ripened in the summer sun and they no longer offer the possibility of nourishment. This does not mean that Mrs Tiber has failed but shows what Magor describes (in the same interview) as our helplessness in the face of the destruction of time. Magor, by removing the jars from Cortes Island, created a monument to the industry of Mrs Tiber and her skill, which has proved one of the ephemeral aspects of this work. Mrs Tiber's preserved fruits survived more successfully than any made by Magor or the

conservators who attempted to replicate the process.

Magor also refers to the quietness of the jars, which had survived by not drawing attention to themselves. In the ruined house on Cortes Island they survived their maker. However, by bringing them to the gallery and attempting to prolong their lives as art, rather than being either consumed as food or rotting away naturally, Magor drew attention to them and accelerated their decay. Like a mythical hero of another story, whose immortality rests on staying in one place, their leaving is a form of sacrifice, as it involves becoming human and frail. This is the fate of Joachim, another character in *The Magic Mountain*, whose curiosity about the wider world induces him to leave the sanatorium only to return after a short time to die. The dilapidated house on Cortes Island had proved to be the perfect environment for storing preserves. It was a cool and dark place, which contrasted sharply with the environment of the gallery. The rapid deterioration was unwittingly caused by the gallery, the very environment that we associate with conservation and preservation. Some of the early interventions undertaken with the intention of preservation had the direct, opposite effect. Ironically this parallels Mann's personal experience of the sanatorium, where he developed an upper respiratory tract infection while visiting his wife. This event is recreated in *The Magic Mountain* (Humphreys 151). On another recipe card Magor again quotes from *The Magic Mountain*:

> And Hans says “Hermetics, hermetics! I really love that word, it reminds me of my grandmother’s jams and jellies. I used to walk into the pantry and see all these beautiful jams and jellies and I thought, there they are, all sealed away, locked up forever, not changing,” (Mann 511)

Throughout the correspondence about the work preserved in the gallery, Magor’s sense of responsibility for the jars is evident both explicitly and in the tone of her writing. Equally, the mimetic quality of this work, Magor’s sense of identification with it, represents a Wildean relationship between the artist and the piece. *Time and Mrs Tiber* is a form of portrait in the attic, but rather than deteriorating while the artist remains youthful, Magor refers, in her 1977 interview, several times to her desire that the work should last as long as she herself does (see also Keyser 2). Thus this work acts as a mirror in which Magor had hoped to see her own ageing process reflected. Under these circumstances, the unexpectedly rapid decay of the preserves threatens this relationship.

Magor is pulled between conflicting desires to acknowledge the ephemerality of the work and the desire to maintain it. In a review of Magor’s work Ann Rosenberg states: “Liz’s art poses philosophical questions and offers some intelligent answers.” (22) *Time and Mrs*

Tiber may no longer possess the visual qualities it once had; however, this does not mean that it is now mute and no longer asks philosophical questions. This was the work of a young artist, just six years out of art school. Her youth at the time of making the work does not suggest that this is not a thoughtful piece, clearly conceptualised and articulated. However, it does show that during our life our relationship with time can change, and that an artist whose works deal with time may well have a changing relationship with their work as they age. These shifting relationships do not reflect muddled thinking or a conceptual flaw in the work, rather growth and development of ideas that are themselves about something shifting and dynamic.

The young Magor offered a specific set of direct intentions, which shaped the work and which she communicated in conversations, correspondence and interviews. The correspondence from the older Magor demonstrates that nothing is fixed, that for some, being older may well mean being wiser. *Time and Mrs Tiber* may have lost visual qualities, to the extent of it no longer being exhibitable, but I would suggest that it is older and wiser, still asking philosophical questions and still providing intelligent answers. These answers may not be as fixed and sure as they were in 1977 but their very uncertainty may be the wisdom they offer. There is still the original knowledge of time and our efforts to defy it, and there is also new knowledge. This knowledge resides both in the work, which embodies our inability to defy time, and in the documentation in the National Gallery of Canada. This documentation gives us an insight into the development of thinking, both about this work and the broader philosophical issues concerning de-accessioning of work from gallery collections. The documentation also shows how the relationship between the artist, conservator and curators can be an enriching and thought provoking one in which all three parties learn in tandem for the benefit of the work. It shows the ephemerality of intentions and the effort involved in letting go of both ideals and a work of art.

Trauma, Art and Transubstantiation: a Conclusion

In the twentieth century there has been a wealth of visual art that deals with evidence of a wounded mind or body, from George Grosz to Pablo Picasso to Doris Salcedo. These depictions of trauma may be so literal, as in the case of artists like Kathe Kollwitz, whose powerful drawings depict harrowing scenes of pain, misery and wretchedness, that they require little interpretation, or are abject as described by Hal Foster in *Return of the Real* (127-70). Foster outlines two possibilities for the traumatic work: either it probes the wound by presenting the "obscene object-gaze of the real" or represents "the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation" (157). However, the works of Magor and Shepley provide

insight into the experience of mourning and a site through which it is performed, without the violent confrontation described by Foster. The gentleness of these works allows the viewer to engage without the possibility of disgust or repulsion, which are so often the responses to the works described by Foster.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth discusses the tale of Tancred and Freud's reference to it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

> . . . Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into the strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree: but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (Caruth 2)

Freud's interest in this narrative is the repetition of the traumatic event, while Caruth focuses on the "sorrowful voice" (2) that emanates from the tree. The story can be read in other ways however. My interest is in both the magical resurrection that takes place and the terrifying place in which this occurs. The deceased Clorinda lives again in the form of another, as if in an act of transubstantiation. This transformation allows an object to move beyond being a reminder of a lost loved one and to become the lost other. Works of art made when the deceased is still present frequently take the form of photographs of the dead, for example in the *Morgue* (1992) series by Andres Serrano, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Conversation* (2002), AA Bronson's *Felix 5 June 1994* (1994/99), or Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta's *Life Before Death* (2004). These works are powerful mementos of the dead. However, when the actual body is no longer available as the site of mourning a new presence is required and is created. Magor and Shepley have appropriated commonplace objects; for example, jars of preserved fruit and scraps of paper become the "tall tree" (Caruth 2) of the Tancred story and the world of art becomes "the strange magic forest" (Caruth 2) where the dead live, only to die again and again. Here the flimsy physicality of the works and, more importantly, their lack of permanence take on a new significance. Through their ephemerality the original loss is constantly in a state of being repeated – not in Freudian terms of compulsion but with acceptance.

Both of these works tell a powerful story of love and loss. Their fragile and elusive existence echoes the tentative connection with the world that is often the experience of those living with a painful loss. They allude to and appropriate old stories that are deeply embedded in our collective experience of the world but they also offer new insights.

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