

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition curated by Ulysses Castellanos  
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**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## Faces of Death...

by Ulysses Castellanos

Death leaves its mark everywhere around the world. Rich people and poor people, criminals and outstanding citizens, celebrities and “nobodies” are equally affected by it. It is ruthless and final. But what does death mean to us as a culture, and how do we deal with it?

Growing up in El Salvador during the civil war in the late 70s, I was surrounded by death. There were corpses on the street on a daily basis. People that I knew intimately would be “disappeared,” killed or forced to leave the country in fear for their lives. However, though its spectre hung in the air like a bad stench, I did not fully realize what death was all about until one night, during the wake for a friend’s dead brother. Looking at the corpse in the open casket, I felt compelled to touch it, to connect with this person. I reached out and touched the corpse’s arm. The body, cold and stiff like a slab of meat, was no longer animated. It was an object, an empty shell.

When I arrived in Canada in the early 80s, the war in El Salvador was all over the news, and I became aware of another aspect of death, one that was sinister and scary. For even though death was in El Salvador for everyone to see, the Salvadoran media would never report on it. It merely carried on with its mundane procession of American sitcoms, cartoons, spaghetti westerns and commercials for toothpaste and laundry soap. To me, the images of war and carnage that I saw in the Canadian media were shocking. Strangely, the people around me were unaffected by it. Death had become yet another image to be processed along with millions of other images in advertisements, television shows and print media. This dichotomy fascinated me: the cold lifelessness of a corpse versus the culturally codified, abstract concept of death as seen in the media and popular culture.

Thinking about the aforementioned dichotomy between death as portrayed in the media and death as visceral, direct experience, I became aware that not even the real-time sensory experience of death, such as witnessing a murder, or stumbling upon a corpse on the street, could offer a true

understanding of death. Death is an obscure, indiscernible reality. It is uncanny and cannot be completely (or at least satisfactorily) grasped.

We are flesh-and-blood sentient beings who have never been to “the other side.” What happens to our identity after death is open to debate, but there is one desire that unites the many differing camps: the need to explain, understand and express our awe at the extinction of life, the end of all things, and to do the same regarding existence’s possible continuation in an afterlife.

In his essay for the 2006 exhibition *Six Feet Under / Autopsy of Our Relationship to the Dead*, Switzerland curator Bernhard Fibicher speaks of two ways in which contemporary art deals with the subject of death: One is to reclaim rituals concerning death (which have hitherto been the realm of religion and more recently been picked up by the funeral home industry and the media) and to reinterpret, recombine and restage these rituals using the idioms of contemporary art. The other approach is to bring the corpse back to the fore in order to shock the audience with a visceral representation of death.

To these two tendencies, a third can be added: the humorous sublimation of death, wherein death is turned into subject matter for comedy.

The works presented in *DEATH... IT'S OUT THERE* explore several aspects of death: death and violence, death and loss, death and popular culture, death and nihilism and what purportedly comes following death, the afterlife.

In the gun culture of the United States, firearms are seen as an aid to preserving life. Firearms protect people from their enemies. They are a form of self-defense and a natural right of every individual. This emphasis on self-preservation creates a state of fearful paranoia, which in turn leads to violence.

Representations of firearms are a major element in contemporary popular culture. War films, action films and westerns, for instance, would not exist if there were no firearms portrayed. A large percentage of TV programs feature guns prominently. Crime, war and law enforcement are major themes in literature and television, with firearms playing a role across all genres.

Zorica Vasic's video *Shooting Range* illustrates America's fascination with guns and violence. Culling videos from Internet advertisements for shooting targets and rearranging them into an onslaught of brutality, the artist shows children and elderly ladies wielding powerful automatic weapons designed for armed combat. People shoot their guns sometimes with such excess that the whole affair takes on a surreal quality. In Vasic's video, the shooting range target becomes a surrogate for the helpless victim

of gun violence. The targets are sometimes static, sometimes motorized. As they are shot down, they slowly rise back up; once in place they are shot down again, creating a feedback loop of violence.

Faisal Anwar's video *As Simple As That?* deals with this issue of violence from a different perspective. The work was created post-9/11 in Pakistan at a time characterized by the artist as rife with global tension and strained Indian and Pakistani relations. Shot in the city of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, at a butcher's home where people go to procure meat for their family meals, the video documents the killing of a baby goat and uses this killing as a metaphor for what we are doing to each other around the world. The title *As Simple As That?* refers to the fact that things are not so simple, and it directs the viewer not to take what they are about to see as mere sensationalism.

Using conventions borrowed from art house and horror cinema, Anwar creates an atmosphere of ominous foreboding through the use of stark black and white footage that has been shot in a hand-held style at varying speeds. This is accompanied by a sparse soundtrack composed of Buddhist chanting, drumming and haunting guitar melodies. The baby goat screams as it is held down, and when the butcher slits its throat the effect is shocking. The work is gruesome, eliciting strong reactions from viewers, but it raises the question: Why is this so shocking when it happens every day?

Mourning, the painful feeling that a person suffers at the loss of a loved one, is another theme addressed by contemporary art in relation to death. Juliana



Zorica Vasic, video still (detail) from *Shooting Range*, 2006



Faisal Anwar, video still (detail) from *As Simple As That?*, 2006

Schewe's video *Still* surreptitiously captures the friends and family of the artist's grandmother as they genuflect in front of the casket during her funeral. The camera has been tucked away, hidden under a table. The coffin dominates the composition. The picture plane is presented as a symmetrical square that is surrounded by larger black vertical borders on either side, giving the composition a claustrophobic appearance, as if the moving image itself is contained within a box. Schewe manipulates the speed of the footage so that the movement of the mourners alternates between slow and regular motion. At times, the image stops in a freeze frame, perhaps as a way of pointing out the brevity of our time on earth. There are no young people in the video; the mourners are nearly all older. As the mourners move closer to the camera, their legs obscure the composition, and the viewer becomes aware of the intrusive nature of the video. None of the mourners know that they are being recorded, so the camera lens breaches a highly intimate and personal and vulnerable moment.

Greg Staats' video *Wave* presents the object of loss as an aural experience. Staats trains his camera at the frosted glass of his front door, videotaping shadows cast by tree branches outside his house. The result is a number of eerie forms that move like grey ghosts across the screen. An otherworldly soundtrack consisting of a funeral song performed in Mohawk by Staats' grandfather, grandmother and uncles (all of whom had passed away long before the video was made) accompanies the image. The recording, made by Staats' grandfather in the 1950s, was discovered by the artist posthumously. The harmonies are dissonant and lyrical at the same

time. By combining the shadowy images with this song of faith and mourning, Staats alludes to the loss and remembrance of a simpler time, a way of life that will never return.

The theme of death is experiencing a renewed vogue in popular culture. Television shows like *Six Feet Under* and *Dead Like Me* enjoy a great deal of popularity in the Americas as well as in Europe. *CSI* and *The First 48* are highly popular reality TV shows (the latter featuring real corpses and real police detectives) that follow detectives as they find corpses in abandoned lots or blood-drenched apartments and process clues to solve the crime. The zombie, once a staple character in an obscure horror subgenre, has now become the stuff of modern urban folklore, in which scientific disaster is combined with religious scriptures of the rising of the dead in order to provide us with a contemporary vision of impending doom. The film *Shawn of the Dead* is a comedy in which the world is taken over by flesh-eating zombies.

Drawing on such sources, Emily Gove takes a humorous look at death and uses the idea of murder as a metaphor for competitiveness and treachery in female social interactions. Gove's photographs draw inspiration from zombie films, pulp fiction novels and art history texts, combining these influences into a humorous and disturbing concoction wherein several characters are in the process of murdering one another. Whether the action takes place in a movie house, a construction site or an insurance office, the characters in the photographs are constantly engaged in the act of murder, with both victim and killer portrayed by the artist. The aspect ratio of



Emily Gove, detail from *Untitled 1*, 2006



the large-scale photographs is similar to that of wide-angle movies shot in Cinemascope. This is no accident, as Gove creates a film narrative that is told as a static image.

Gareth Brown-Jowett's *Semi Automatic Clips* addresses how Hollywood films glamorize war. The artist has taken clips from *Saving Private Ryan*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Patriot*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *The Thin Red Line* and *We Were Soldiers*. The artist recuts them, preserving only images of the natural beauty of locales in which these film battles took place; in other words, highlighting what Brown-Jowett calls "the beauty of war." These images are combined with audio segments from battle scenes recorded at a reduced speed. The sound segments create an uncanny effect of anxiety, as if the fighting that one can hear in the distance will soon arrive and explode in full force like a tropical storm. Brown-Jowett asks, "If the director is attempting to create a realistic portrayal of war for the viewer, why have they chosen to include images of beauty?" It seems that the inclusion of these clips of natural beauty in Hollywood war films is merely a way to romanticize death and violence.

New York artist Joe Coleman views murder as a service to humanity, and serial killers as merciful individuals who fulfill the important role of ridding the world of overpopulation. He sees gun violence as service to the community and has celebrated murderers like Charles Manson, Ed Gain (the inspiration for *Leatherface* and Hannibal Lecter) and John Wayne Gayce in many of his paintings. In Coleman's Malthus-inspired philosophy, this is not the time for birth, but a time for death. "There is much hate right now in the world, because nature

at this point wants to encourage warfare." Nature wants humanity to exterminate itself, and those of us who murder others should be viewed as heroes, not pariahs.

Joe Coleman's nihilistic view of murder as salve is echoed in Jubal Brown's *Death Day Suit (with Self-Inflicted Wounds)*. However, where Coleman directs his destructive tendencies outwards towards humanity, Brown directs them at himself. The video was inspired by Lisa Steele's seminal video *Birthday Suit*, in which the artist, nude, shows her many scars in front of the camera, and describes how they were acquired. Steele's scars were the result of falls and accidents. Brown's, in contrast, are self-inflicted.

Shot in the artist's bedroom, the mise-en-scene of Brown's video is dishevelled and menacing. A shotgun can be seen hanging from a nail on the wall. A white bed, reminiscent of the one in David Lynch's *The Alphabet*, provides a childlike eeriness. The words "Fuck You!?" are crudely written upon the grey-blue wall. The video's aesthetic is dark and hopeless, like that of Jorg Buttgerreit's film *Der Todesking*, a cult masterpiece which blurs the line between art and exploitation, featuring one murder or suicide for every day of the week. Like Buttgerreit's film, Brown manages to be heartfelt and beautiful as he displays a large scar near his hand ("Left wrist, age 18, suicide practice") or describes how an ash stain on his forehead was made by stabbing it with a cross made out of burnt church wood.

Central to our quest for meaning in death is the possibility of an afterlife. What happens to us after we die? Do we go somewhere else? Do we retain our identity? Do we become nothingness,



Gareth Brown-Jowett, video still (detail) from *Semi-Automatic Clips*, 2006



Su-Ying Lee, video still (detail) from *Spiritualized*, 2006

disconnected atoms and molecules that will be recombined to become other beings or elements? Do we reincarnate?

Su-Ying Lee purposely seeks to understand this reality. The death of her brother and the pressure of traditional Chinese culture to provide for her aging father instilled her with a great sense of guilt. Her video *Spiritualized* features images of a decaying fish on a beach, covered in flies. As the camera closes in on the flies, a soothing, guided-relaxation-recording voice accompanied by a Tibetan prayer bell directs the viewer to “relax” and “let go” in order to achieve “mindfulness in sound.” The process of bodily degeneration is important to the artist, as she contemplates approaching old age, her own mortality and the deterioration of her own physical body.

Jack Burman’s photographs of corpses and bones inspire reverence and calm. His large-scale photograph *Capela Dos Ossos, Portugal* was taken inside a chapel made entirely from bones that were collected from graveyards in the 16th century. The image in the photograph is of an altar with a crucifixion image; the altar is made of human bones. Rather than appearing gruesome, the image is a beautiful reminder of the precariousness of life and the power of faith.

*Brazil #13*, shot at a Brazilian medical school, features the corpse of an elderly woman on an autopsy slab. The autopsy has already been performed, so the body is cut up in pieces that have

been reassembled for the next class. In Burman’s hands, the cadaver acquires an air of quiet dignity, a regal equanimity. Burman photographs his cadavers after they have been carved by the scalpel, and always in a dignified, respectful manner. These images elicit feelings of attraction and repulsion, for in these cadavers we catch a glimpse of our own mortality.

Through representations of Hades and Valhalla, reincarnation, heaven, hell and purgatory, and in the rituals associated with mourning and loss, we use the vehicle of the arts to explore the undiscovered realm of death. From tribal burial rites to the infernal world of Dante; from the phantasmagoric creations of Henry Fuseli to Ingmar Bergman’s metaphysical cinema; from the musings of turn-of-the-century spiritualists to William Blake’s mysticism and the negations of materialist philosophers, the concept of death has played an integral role in the shaping of our identity as a people. As John Alan Schwartz, the writer-director of *Faces of Death* (an explicit cult film depicting various ways to die) puts it: “The only way to understand death and dying and the afterlife is to look at death right in the face.”

Although *Faces of Death* is widely reputed to be more artifice than fact, Schwartz’s statement, nonetheless, touches on an important point: Try as we might, we cannot hide from death. The artists in this exhibition have not only had the courage to find meaning in death through their work; they have been brave, or, perhaps, simply curious enough to look at death in the face...before it looks in theirs.

## About the Curator

Gallery TPW curator-in-residence Ulysses Castellanos is an artist and independent curator living in Toronto. Past curatorial projects have included Matt Bahen’s *Fatal Surveillance* at A Space, *Rules of The Game* by Gustavo Artigas for the Images Festival, and *Edible Women*, featuring works by Jennifer Matotek, Cecilia Berkovic and Maria Legault at DeLeon White gallery. The *I SEE A DARKNESS* residency is made possible with the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

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