

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MEMENTO MORI  
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*Memento mori*, a Latin phrase usually translated as "Remember that you are mortal," or "Remember you will die" describes the basis of the body of artwork that is my focus. Obituaries taken from newspapers, are the materials I use to explore poetic notions about death and loss. Obituaries reveal attitudes which influence my work as well as points of view which I sought to emphasize and later shift away from. My work leaves room for the viewer to sift through multiple levels of meaning while not imposing any singular interpretation.

# MEMENTO MORI

By

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## Chapter 1: Evolution of an Idea

*Memento Mori* describes the body of work I have been creating this last year and a half. Obituary pages from newspapers are the beginning point for this work.

In our computerized world of emails, blogs, and YouTube, newspapers remain the primary source for announcing deaths and memorializing the deceased. Newspapers, a nonpermanent material that ages and falls apart, is a more than appropriate material to begin a dialogue about death.

My body of work evolved from reading obituaries and realizing how little information they contain about the deceased; how an obituary is a compressed version of a person's life. After reading several pages, I began to draw and mark out most of the text using a black magic marker. My intent was to black out the list of names of relatives and friends leaving visible the less personal information, such as what a person did for a living or what their hobbies were; where they had lived or traveled or if they had fought in WWII. Seeing the result, I concluded that reading these extremely brief bits of biography was similar to reading only the cover of a book but never opening that book to get the details. As in poetic art, much is suggested by these small bits of information while the rest is left to the imagination, encouraging a more universal and interactive perspective as each viewer brings their own interpretation to the work. This initial piece became an exercise in exploring what people think is important to announce when someone dies. It was also a way to homogenize obituaries by presenting information to the viewer that could easily be relative to any number of people.



Fig. 1

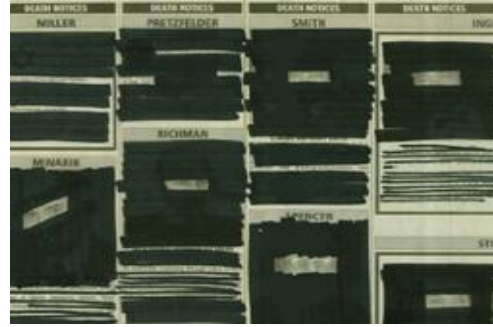


Fig. 2

Still focused on repetition and generic information, my next step was to rework obituary pages with the emphasis primarily on words such as repeated names, phrases and dates. On these pages, the eyes were left uncovered. I wanted to concentrate on commonalities that diminish other forms of identity (such as race, age, etc.) creating a less personal and more general experience with this art work. The repetitive wording seemed barely distinguishable from one page to another. This interchangeable nature of obituary text and photographs is described in the pieces I created with the plastic 'windows'. These 'windows' have an obituary photo in them (facing outward) and are mounted on top of existing portraits.



Fig. 3

The mundane repetition eventually led me to cover all the words and let the photographs speak for themselves. Without text, the viewer is left to imagine and create their own story about the deceased which underscores the interactive element of this work.

As the text was covered up, the small frame of the photographs came to feel confining. The photos seemed to want to expand. I accomplished this by drawing outside the formal boundaries of the obituaries to enlarge the portrait. This expansion encouraged the experience of moving beyond the expected, beyond imposed boundaries. One function of art is to go beyond limits - to not only challenge the accepted, but to confront what we accept as conventional. Drawing outside the margins further relates to



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



the idea of believing we know who someone is, when in fact, we may know very little.

What's more, it echoes the idea that some people live larger lives than others, casting their influence with a wider net.

The last aspect of this phase of exploration was to obscure even the faces leaving a page consisting of blocks of gray, white and black. This became the final distillation of the generic nature of obituaries while manipulating them with marks and drawing.

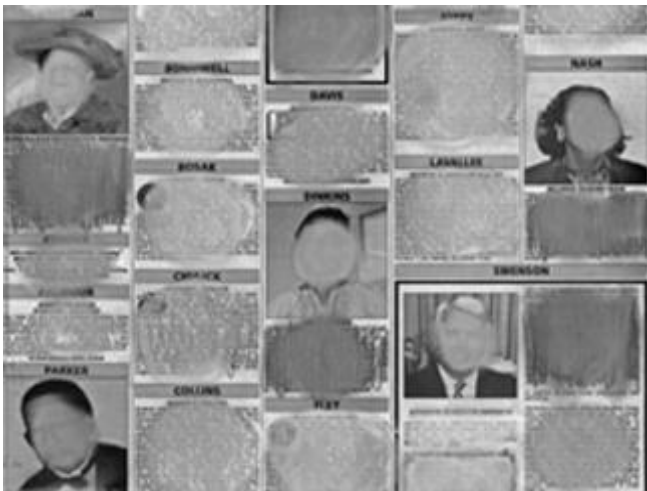


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

## Chapter 2: Memento Mori

Expanding the figures in the obituary photos by drawing outside the boundaries and using plastic 'windows' mounted on top of existing portraits freed me to think about obituaries as more than conventional images and text on a flat surface.

The significance of the frail and temporary nature of the newspaper became more pivotal in my thinking. Paper yellows, decays and becomes the dust under our feet. Newspapers are read, then thrown away or recycled. Some say people are born, live and die only to reincarnate.

Combining these ideas with earlier ones, I began to take single obituary sheets and cut out the photographs along with most of the text. Again, the missing text was the more personal information and what was left was the more generic. The result was a sheet consisting mostly of space, of 'air'; those spaces that had been hidden with black magic marker were now gone. The effect felt liberating. It was now not a matter of thinking about what was under the black marks as much as it was about filling in a space or just leaving it as is. This allowed for mental and emotional movement. It is the viewer who decides whether the space needs filling; whether the broken sentences need completion. Not being weighed down by black marks, the missing text and photos feel free to complete themselves; it seems less a struggle and more a process. The photos and text, rather than being hidden, are eliminated in one sense and in another, they are replaced with space, a void. The question then arises: What does one do with a void, with the loss of a loved one? What do we do in memoriam? The obituaries are examples of what is thought to be important to remember about someone; a person's status and

accomplishments are listed; their participation in religious organizations. Art is one way to memorialize someone, as is evident from the many statues, buildings, mausoleums and shrines around the world. Wrapped around and over each other as these sheets are, they form an aggregate; a silent grouping whose shadows are as significant as their substance. Departed loved ones sometimes are more powerful in absence than they were in life.

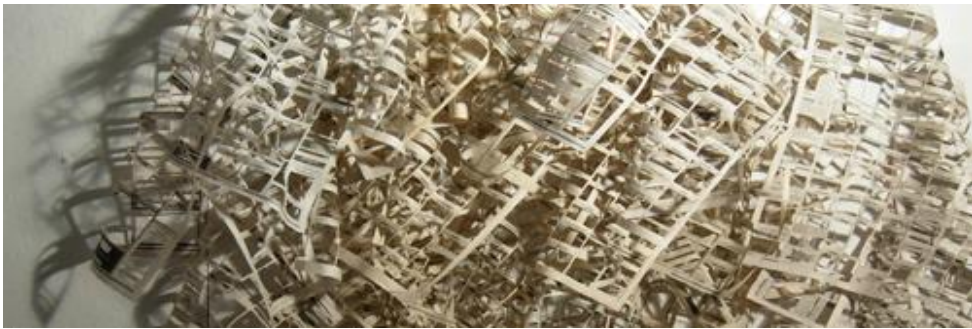
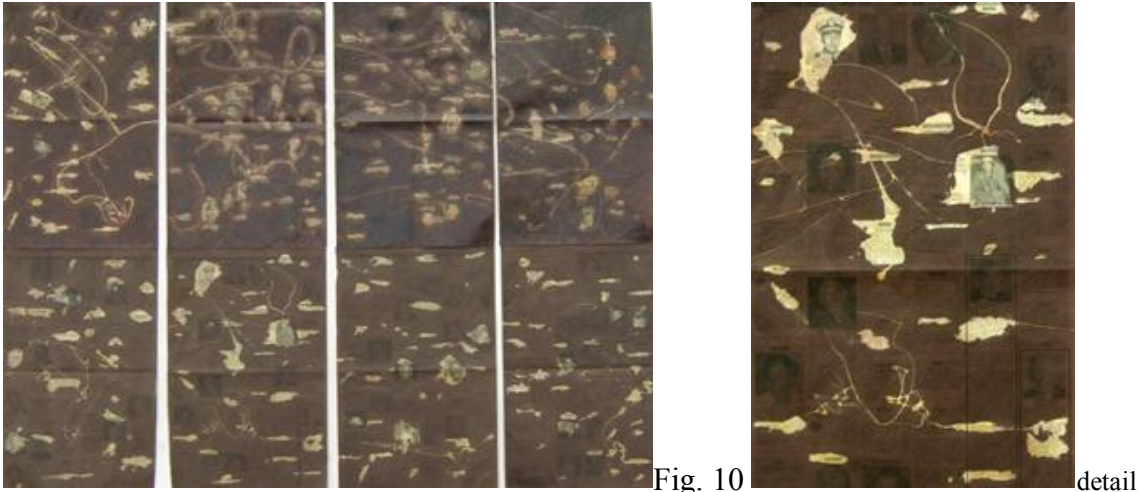


Fig. 9

Another approach I took to the generic nature of obituaries was to preserve fragments of text and portraits and emphasize these in order to move toward a more intimate relationship with the information available. I brushed and splattered polyurethane across portions of obituaries and then covered the entire page with a dark mahogany stain. This left only bits and pieces of information visible. In addition, the lines that connect one fragment to another imply the idea that everything or everyone is somehow connected; that we share this life, this earth, this universe. These lines can also be interpreted as roads or paths so that the sheets begin to look like maps, like a history, thus further suggesting how events in our life take us from one place to another, from one relationship

to another and that these experiences are connected. The lines of polyurethane function as bridges between text and photos that at first may seem unrelated. However, on further investigation they suggest universal connectedness, cause and effect and the inevitability of that one life potentially affecting all others.



*Sealed* (the ‘books’) was a direct result of noticing that the short pieces of biography in an obituary are similar to reading no more than the cover of a book. These consist of numerous sheets of newspaper glued together and soaked in polyurethane. On the surface is an obituary page. Besides not letting the reader in, these ‘tablets’ also encase the information about the deceased. It is like a tomb or coffin; it preserves as well as seals and thus creates a barrier between the living and the dead. It also serves as a memorial, a symbol to the deceased and thus, one could argue that it functions as a means of staying in touch with the loved one. This embodiment of conflicting or opposite interpretations

(i.e. barrier versus bridge) in a work of art, highlights one of the functions of art. Art has the ability to present contradictory ideas within a single work, thus uniting something which before may not have seemed possible.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

I also explored the idea of highlighting distinct text and images of obituaries, to move from the generic to the specific. To this end, I created small wooden frames and covered them with a single obituary on the front and painted them with either polyurethane, galkyd or varnish. The result is a small shiny box with photographs on the front and sides. It becomes a *Keepsake*, a treasure, a singular memento. These do not however lack some form of commonality in that the paper has become transparent so the text on the back side is visible. This makes the image less distinct, less present. The overlaying of text and image emphasizes one of the ways memory works - it can become layered and

busy with the quantity of information we recall in random sequence. As we remember our loved ones, the images, stories and incidents sometimes collide all at once.

Some of these boxes are covered with wax. The result is a ghostly image that requires the viewer to look closely in order to see the photograph. It is a way to represent the presence and absence, the way memories or images of our loved ones come and go over time.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

## Chapter 3: Conclusion

Obituaries are a cultural comment on significance, on what we value in this life and the footprints we leave behind. They are also a generational comment on presentation of self. The listing of relatives' names or the number of offspring followed by grandchildren and great-grandchildren along with information on place of employment and hobbies points to those aspects of a life which strive to make the deceased unique. The list of progeny are witness to the physical legacy of the individual. The vast amount of negative space in the piece *Memento mori* testifies to the significantly small amount of information that is in fact unique. This may be difficult to accept because people cherish their individuality. The idea that we are just drops of water in the great ocean of life leaves some people feeling uneasy. We cling to the ideal of uniqueness, especially in the West. Perhaps this is why some of the photographs or information in the obituaries is surprising and at the same time appear vulnerable. There have been several photographs of shirtless men, some photos of 'sexy' looking women. We may not expect this in an obituary however, those who choose these photos likely believe they are displaying an important aspect of their loved one. Often photos of young men, those under 25 years of age, look like they are right out of an MTV video. Some are shown snarling or angry. On the other hand, many older people are shown in photos taken in the 1930's and 1940's. What people choose to share and regard as significant can be telling.

My work touches on some of the issues surrounding death. It is a formal invitation to contemplate some of life's questions. Like art itself, the questions are larger than life and

leave each person to formulate their own answer. Obituaries are a reminder of what we make of our time on earth. They speak to our relationships, of what is important and how we want to be remembered (is it important how we are remembered?)

In a way, obituaries are a view of our future, of what we value. This is what art does; it asks questions and often these are questions we may not have had the courage to ask ourselves.

Creating artwork from obituaries is akin to talking about a taboo. Death is not usually a welcome topic of conversation and often is simply ignored. Some people publicly acknowledge their fear of death. Yet this work is not meant to disturb. Putting the topic in public view may generate conversation. It allows us to examine the process of how we feel and how we memorialize the deceased. Fear of death is often associated with fear of the unknown. Yet, how can we know something if we are afraid to examine it? *Memento Mori* is an invitation to a dialog with someone else or simply within ourselves. A function of art is to expose issues that are often ignored or overlooked. As a result, questions are asked, points of view are challenged, interpretations are thrown out while other ones are assembled. We leave with our world expanded, perhaps less sure of what we know but having been enriched by the experience.