D L E I A F T E H

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Artist Statement

The process of printmaking communicates my personal battle with depression and loss. Through the creation of a series of plastic panels and fiberglass resin casts, I am able to explore and encapsulate various moments along the timeless cycle of life and death. This work is a physical exploration of the vivid memories that are engraved in my mind by personal experiences with the effects of suicide. Each block depicts a specific moment in which I've felt the pain of this reality weigh on me. These instances fuel my mark-making and manifest themselves as birds in their natural habitat.

-Jasmine Davis

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"Death slid into your heart, and you carried it in your breast" –Vauvenargues (Mora 196). From the moment it happened, I have been a changed person. We have not always been able to see change or the process of death, but rather we have seen signs from it.

In this senior comprehensive project, I sought to explore the notions of both life and death, and how one affects the other through their inexplicably intertwined nature. As individuals, we attempt to keep our loved ones alive through memories, pictures, and sentimental objects. In my experience, we try to use anything in our possession to build a basis to remember who someone used to be, what their favorite items were, and small habits they carried out, etc. Over time we begin to adopt these habits as our own to not forget these people we once held dear. However, I find these practices have become second nature to us in a way that feels like the desire to prolong life. Part of this ritual after death is actively engaging in keeping death at bay and seeking to extend a piece of their life. This idea is not solely my own, but one that I find others can relate to as well.

In her recent TED Talk, anthropologist Kelli Swazey discusses the habits of an ancestral Torajan families from Indonesia that actively practice a method of living that includes the dead. When someone dies, the body remains in the home with the family until they are ready to say goodbye. While science would illustrate the health risks in this practice, Kelli's talk gives insight on how children grow up with memories of interacting with deceased loved ones, celebrating important moments and even helping with the care of the deceased family member. In Torajan culture, the mental aspects of prolonging a loved one's life outweigh the scientific ones that oppose this lifestyle for health reasons. The proximity to death becomes much more than a biological approach, it becomes a social process that the whole Torajan culture can support. By learning from this culture, we can understand their approach to death "can change the way we die, and transform the way we live" (Swazey).

Death is something that we cannot control, counteract, or stop, but rather it is always approaching. "Death is a movement" (Ireton 66). Even as we begin our time here on Earth as infants, we

are beginning to die. “Death is not like the last point on a line, but like the movement and direction of the whole line” (Kreeft 40). We are slowly approaching our demise. Certain events in life lead toward decisions, lifestyle changes lead to locations, and before we realize it, we have been traveling straight toward death. “Death is not simply the end of life, but an event which shapes and constitutes life-interiority” (Mora 172). By interiorizing or internalizing death, we transform it into life (Ireton 70). It is something that we keep personal and intimate within ourselves.

There is a timeline of death. “Life and death enter into a running scene-by-scene dialogue” (Zwingenberger). We live and mature, we gradually begin to age, we start to lose things (control of motor skills, vision, hearing, etc), we begin to change, and our experiences culminate into this one life that seems to suddenly begin to evaporate. This decline is not systematic, but begins slowly, and then speeds up as we age. Our bodies stop giving us life; they decay and become one with the earth. But at this point, what begins to happen to the person? Do they disappear along with their physical body? Is surviving death an option? What does it mean to live, and what does it mean to die?

While I find that some people are afraid of death, and others embrace its cool touch, it is something that we have all given thought to. In depicting various elements of what it means to be alive and how we perceive death, we understand the common notion that death is when the body breaks down and is no longer able to function. Death has many connotations, and each conjures up a different image. Some say death is a calm and simple way of passing over as if into another world, or afterlife. Others will tell you it is a more exact science of departure, expiration, and decay. In Mongolian cultures, upon death, the bodies are returned to the earth (May). Yet, it is unknown if death is passing into a great beyond like Heaven, or whether it is simply an unemotional transition over the threshold into another life. It is possible that this afterlife will leave us as ghosts, and then again it is possible we will no longer exist in any shape or form altogether.

Since death is a variable, and comes at different times for different people, I see where some people spend their entire lives waiting for death to hunt them down, and fight for the last seconds of life. Others pray for its chilling embrace and silent veil of protection from their own problems, in the form of suicide. They play the waiting game, silently watching. Knowing that the end is near provides them with a kind of solace. This comfort simply helps them cope with their problems and their haunts.

Conversely, there are those who believe that they will be able to exist past death. This notion is not a new one, as people have been trying to leave a piece of themselves behind for others for years. This is evident in a number of works of art, from drawings in the Chauvet Cave, to the Egyptian pharaohs, to Michelangelo's *David*. Each illustrates a slightly different aspect of post mortal self preservation, but each aims to give life to the idea of the person so that they may be remembered when they are no longer around.

With the desire to continue past death, Yale professor Shelly Kagan tells of two criteria for surviving ones death. First, he mentions the same body with no physical differentiations, and secondly, the same personality. In his book *Death*, Shelly Kagan discusses two views, that of the physicalist, and the dualist. The physicalist view is one in which the mind and body are one and the dualist sees them as separate entities (Kagan). In the ideal continuation to the afterlife, one would still be considered the same person, have the same personality, and would look and act like the same person. Alternatively, the dualist perspective supports the division of mind from body, as two separate units in which death is the destruction of a body (Kagan).

As a dualist, my experiences and beliefs show that I support the division of body and mind, and that only the mind is necessary to continue on as the same person. While the body can change, only our ideas and memories are the key parts of what individualizes us. I believe personality has to remain unchanged so that we may still exist after the death of our bodies. "Death is paradoxical. We can cease

to be without dying, and die without ceasing to be" (Kreeft 203). Without the ability to remember memories and relate to the previous personality, there is no real sense of the person left. The brain is the key part of the body that functions to define who we are and what desires we have. The part of our body that makes up our personality includes thoughts, ideas, memories, goals, etc. Memory is itself a mausoleum. The body itself is not the person, but merely the vessel that held their personality. Personality is the key to being able to survive one's own death, or to continue existence from one point in life to another.

"Change is permitted so long as it is gradual" (Kagan 129). So we are slowly dying and slowly overlapping our ideas and experiences from one stage of death into another. On the outside, the world is simply going to view this process as life, with an abrupt change to death. However, we are simply experiencing the two in an overlapping fashion all the while dying. The point that our bodies die, is the end of the story, and the last stage of life (Kagan). We individually experience the tunnel of our lives, where the outside world has to wonder and guess what stage we are in. But as long as we have this overlap, we are continuing to exist until the death of our bodies.

For this reason, my installation acts as a tunnel, framing my work on both sides of the viewer. I hung the plastic panels on the wall, with two feet of space between each. Out from the wall approximately ten feet, I suspended my resin casts across from their respective panels. This allowed me to make work on both sides of the viewer as they walked from the first, to the last panel. Not only did this provide me with a way to show both the panel and the product it helped to create, but it also helped guide the viewer to understand the full printmaking process.

Over the course of the semester, my goal was to bring substance to the work that investigates the ideas and notions around life and death. Each of the three panels I created represents a different stage of the timeline of death. I wanted my work to drive home a connection between these two worlds.

The importance of and relevance between these two themes were accentuated by my intention of having three large four by eight foot panels. In addition to the creation of the panels themselves, I also constructed a number of “prints” from the blocks, but not using traditional materials like paper or fabric. Instead, I made a casting or imprint of the relief carved block from fiberglass resin. By pouring this substance onto the panel, allowing it to harden, and after a time removing it by peeling it away, I created my work. This resulted in a colored transparent imprint of my panel image.

Printmaking is a meditative process that has allowed me to carve away the negativity, and leave the good in an image. By removing the black, I am left with the pure white that remains. Reflecting upon the permanence of our decisions with both the ups and downs is the process of creating a masterpiece for me. Comprised of memories and an understanding of life, I employ printmaking to bring these notions to fruition. Each new cut metaphorically represents an individual action, and comes together after a period of intense work to solidify its own history. Through an over exaggeration of size, my work too has become larger than life in an attempt to emulate the power that comes from my own experiences.

My work has been influenced by Belgian muralist ROA, who grew up creating images of rodents and small animals. In life and death themed murals, his painted work appears in major cities across the world, (see figure 1). Although his work was primarily done as paintings, he did a majority of it in black and white, which lends much understanding to the printmaking medium. His imagery deals with animal representations of “consciousness in the areas they once inhabited” as a dialogue of human interaction with nature (http://www.streetartbio.com/#!roa/c1kgk). Additionally, Hans Baldung Grien’s work lent inspiration to my project. Specifically his piece “Death and the Matron” (figure 2), reminds viewers of the gruesome omnipresence of death.

In the first panel "*Waiting*," there are two vultures, sitting on the branches of a tree. Vultures are symbolic of patience and resourcefulness (Venefica). For this reason, I chose a vulture to represent my first stage of death: waiting. Life is something that does not wait, but will continue to move on with or without you. However, death is inevitable and has no choice but to wait for the perfect moment to grab a hold. Sometimes this can come early on, expected, or as the only option. This is the moment I illustrate in my first panel, that actively acknowledges the viewer, and is comfortable waiting until the end of time. Typically, scavengers like vultures do not kill but rather wait until their prey dies naturally, or something else kills it entirely. In creating this panel, I felt as if I were a vulture, waiting for the inevitable silence. After all, it is only a matter of time, until life and death culminate at the point where they both exist, and neither exist simultaneously. Historically, vultures have been included in art through statues such as "King Vulture" from 1734 A.D. currently in the Art Institute Chicago, and in drawings such as the "Red-headed Vulture and Long-Billed Vulture: Leaf from the Shah Jahan Album" circa 1615 A.D. (Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History).

For my second panel "*Four Twenty-Six*," I illustrated a single raven upon the topmost branches of a tree. "Generally thought to be a symbol of sadness, loss and death in most European countries," I allow the symbolism of this bird to permeate the piece (Russel). In challenging the viewer to interpret this particular raven as a figural representation of death, or synchronously as the possibility that death has already struck, I draw attention to a number of birds across the three panels. While the raven is perched much like the vultures in the first panel, we also notice that this panel highlights a solitary bird, rather than two. "Ravens are symbolic of the black hole in space, which draws in all energy toward itself and releases it in new forms" (Fuhro). As the time has progressed between the two panels, there is a feeling that death itself has permeated into both of the surrounding panels. The raven expresses the dawning of night and the realization that death is inescapable. In this takeover there is certain stillness in the moment. Historically, we can trace ravens back at least to Shakespeare's Macbeth, where "Lady

Macbeth sees the raven as a herald of misfortune as it 'croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan'" (Fuhro). Even in modern England, tombstones are sometimes called "raven stones" (Fuhro).

Another large part of my influence came from artist Leonard Baskin who was known for his somber forms done in pen and ink drawings and prints, largely of ravens and other birds. He was a great artist who was able to capture "the eerie intersection between daydream and nightmare and between the human and animal worlds" (Asikis). My work sought to echo his importance of mortality as a recurring theme in his figurative work. "If his figures did not appear to be actively suffering or simply dead, they often appeared to be in numbered, introspective states" (Smith).

Although death is portrayed in a negative light and representative of loss, not all depictions of death are negative. Some cultures are able to transform death into something positive. For example, "the Caviteno … bury their dead in a hollowed-out tree trunk. When someone becomes ill, they select the tree where they will eventually be entombed" (May). From this practice, I drew the idea of creating my last panel, a tree.

In the third panel "*Tomorrow*," a serene depiction of branches of a tree is viewed from below. Symbolically, trees represent eternal life and act as immense and enduring supports of strength and protection. Rooted in earth, with branches high up in the sky, trees can provide shelter and security (Presley). The Vedic school of thought, a form of Hinduism, believed trees to be a sacred and primary form of living beings, possessing great knowledge and having witnessed the rise of civilization (Presley). After shedding leaves and seeds each year in the fall, we see that trees begin to go into hibernation in the winter, as a form of death. Then, in the spring, they begin a period of rebirth, in which they sprout new buds and leaves, and enter again into the circle of life. The branches are cyclical and show that life goes on despite what we think or want to believe. Trees are the places of birth and death, where death on one level means life on another.

As a series, the three panels work together in a unique way. From left to right, there is degradation in the number of birds. In *Waiting,* the two birds visually play off of each other, give a sense of companionship, and create the scenario of waiting for death. The second panel, *Four Twenty-Six*, shows a single raven perched upon a branch. Visually echoing the written work of Edgar Allen Poe, the bird seems to be speaking out, but frozen in a moment of realization that death is evident, with nowhere to go. Lastly, the rightmost panel, *Tomorrow,* is an open immensity of branches. This shows the empty expanse of loneliness felt after death has claimed its victim.

Initially I treated my work as a two-dimensional surface, and employed a process of printmaking. I sketched out my designs, carved into the King Starboard[1], and removed the excess material. This technique created a series of flat images. But as I have learned throughout my time here at Allegheny, printmaking is so much more than the cuts and lines that make up an image. It tells a story, and lets you understand the history of that story through a series of cuts. Each mark varies from the next, in thickness, texture, and size. Together these marks depict a picture and take the viewer along a journey via touch. As an experience for both the viewer and artist alike, the sense of touching the work is a participatory unification of empathy for the two parties to connect.

Traditionally when a printmaker displays work, only the print is shown, as the block is often worn from printing, a mess of colors, and used as a tool rather than a piece of art itself. However, I feel differently about this common notion, and see the block as an important element of the story. It gives a vivid sense of what the artist wishes to convey in the creation of lines, and shows the raw emotion pinpointed at the crux of where idea and block converge. To bring my ideas to the next level, I transformed the static ideology of two-dimensional art into that of three-dimensional art. By using the printing block itself as a mold, and pouring four gallons of fiberglass resin into each panel, I was able to

[1] This is the same plastic material used to create bathroom stall dividers.

make a bas relief, or sculptural relief print. Next, by letting this material coalesce, it created a cast of the panel, and formed the negative image of what was originally carved out. This operation allowed for two main accomplishments: first, a way of printing the block itself without using the traditional forms of paper or fabric, and second, allowing the creation of a three dimensional tactile work.

There was a strong motivation to break the norms of traditional printmaking in this project. Beginning with the chosen panel material, to the printing method, and even to the typical installation method, I desired a different approach to the ancient art form. By pushing the boundaries, I was able to more fully understand my art, and how this process was guided in terms of its own history. I was also able to challenge the common gallery stigmas surrounding policies on touching the work, by specifically creating work meant to be touched and worn down by viewers. Where galleries and museums alike have incorporated policies that warn against any touching or feeling of the art, it is a common and frustrating experience. Some works are meant to be viewed at a distance, some up close, and some are even meant to be smelled, touched, and in some cases, tasted. Each piece is a creation of the artist and by that account an extension of the artist themselves. By not allowing the viewers to fully experience and understand the work, the artist is not succeeding, and the viewers are getting cheated out of an experience. The oils from human skin is said to be harmful to the art, and can enhance the process of degradation (http://www.artic.edu/visit/museum-guidelines/why-we-dont-touch). In this project, I strongly advocated to support the element of touch in my work. Touch is a powerful sensation that allows us to experience life through added dimension to our understanding of materials and objects. Touch gives feeling, and although we have visceral emotions, the physicality of this sense creates a memory and sensation that cannot be fabricated any other way.

As recently as February 2015, the Prado Museum in Madrid has opened six paintings made via “Didu”- a technique providing texture and volume to the paintings, for the visually impaired (CBS News).

Now the blind are able to gain a fuller and more satisfactory experience of the art. Where the blind typically feel the face of someone they meet for the first time, to gain a sense of features and an understanding of the person, they are now able to do the same thing to a work of art. This provides a bond in which the blind are able to understand the work on a deeper and more personal level.

By using fiberglass resin, I hoped to create a surface that would not degrade from human interaction as quickly as canvas or paper. The initial yearning for fiberglass resin originated from the desire of having a material that represents the fragility of life while simultaneously possessing a smooth and almost liquid texture. With a high tensile strength, and low torsion strength, the fiberglass resin will only support its own weight while hanging by a strand. I wanted to illustrate the harsh reality of death in the fragility, and the calm and reserved nature of its effects in the texture. The resin I initially envisioned was clear, echoing the function of a window. My ideal resin was an almost watery substance, like tears, or moments of sadness that escape the eyes, the windows to the soul. Windows often show us things that we cannot have as they serve as barriers and cages that show we cannot easily attain the desires before our very eyes. I wanted the clarity of the resin to resonate this feeling in the viewer. They serve as barriers and cages that show we cannot easily attain the desires before our very eyes. The fragility of life is evident in my work, as it hangs by two single strands of cable, imitating the delicate nature of the resin that has the potential to come crashing down at any given moment in time.

Heidegger's philosophy of death gives a few interesting points about death, namely, ownmost, non-relational, not to be outstripped. The first, ownmost, is a view that describes death as our very special moment that each of us will eventually have. While death can be experienced in the same manner and proximity, it is never something that can be shared simultaneously in the same understanding, hence the second term, non-relational. Next, we have the phrase "not to be outstripped", which tells us that the impending threat of death is inescapable (Zorn). Jean Paul Satre

tells us that we are therefore forced to create ourselves. It is important to understand that we must first be existing humans, before we can create an essence for ourselves. By creating ourselves and giving essence to our existence, we have the power to become anything we want, and are condemned to be free and left alone without excuse (Sarte 34). “The death which I shall become already moves in me freely” Jules Supervielle.



Figure 1:

Roa

Untitled

2009

Street Art Graffiti

Chicago

http://thefoxisblack.com/2011/06/06/roa-hits-up-chicago/

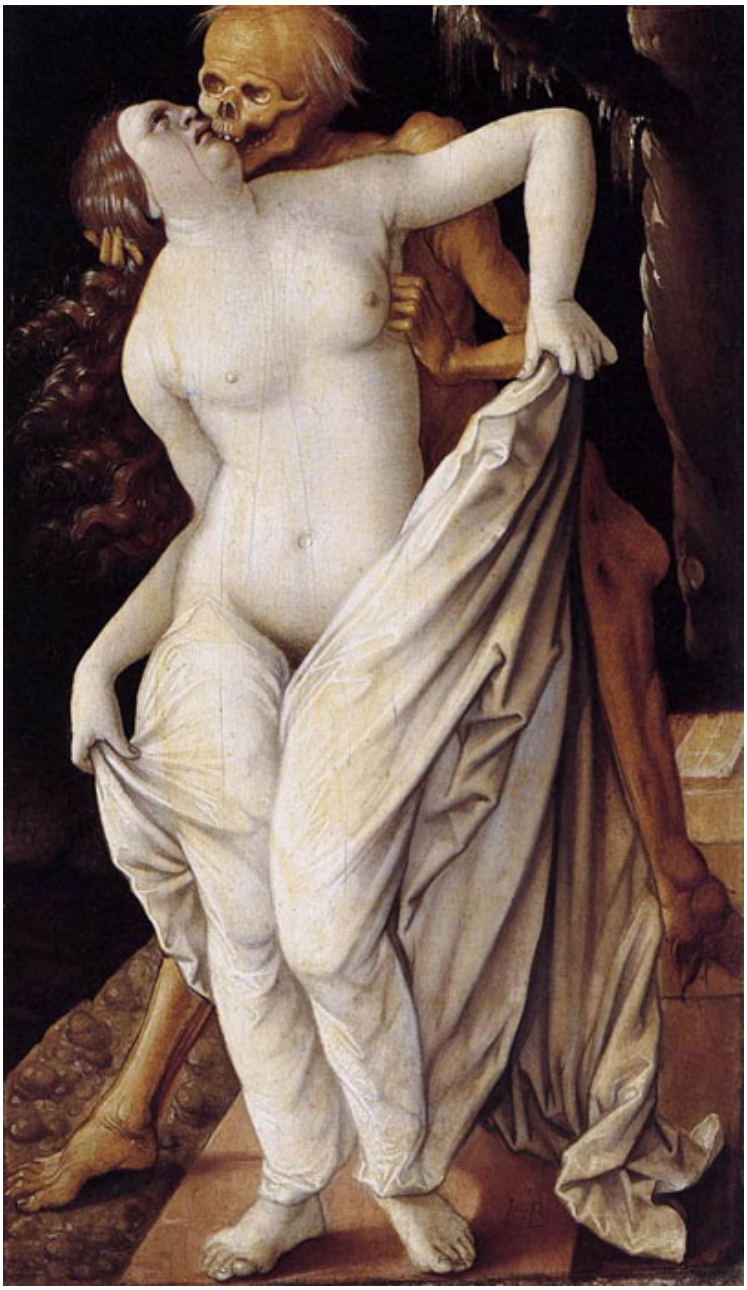


Figure 2:

Hans Baldung Grien

Death and the Matron

1518-20

Oil on Panel, 31 x 19 cm

Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

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