Tales of Mortality

Gregory S. Padgett

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE:

MASTER OF ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART

BY Gregory Padgett

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER, 2021
CATALOG

BY

Gregory Padgett

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between May 2018 and November 2021. It was present in an exhibition from November 22, 2021 through November 26, 2021 in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, Northern Illinois University-DeKalb, Illinois.
List of Work

1. **Deep Space**, Laser-Engraved Woodcut Print, 8” x 10”, March 2018

2. **Dwelling Place**, Silkscreen Print, 18” x 24”, May 2018

3. **Let This Pass**, Four-Plate Copper Etching Print, 9” x 13”, March 2019

4. **Wolf of Avarice**, Four Color Reduction Woodcut Print, 20” x 30”, April 2019

5. **Pickin’, Thinkin’ of You**, Lithograph, 12” x 16”, October 2019

6. **Looking Ahead**, Lithograph, 24” x 30”, January 2020

7. **Baptized by Fear**, Lithograph, 17” x 26”, May 2021

8. **Come Pain or Passing**, Lithograph, 15” x 20”, August 2021

9. **Tales Around the Campfire**, Lithograph, 15” x 20”, September 2021

10. **The Edge of Elegy**, Lithograph, 15” x 20”, October 2021

11. **Shade of the Cross**, Sharpie on Claybord, 9” x 12”, November 2021
Tales of Mortality

Tales of Mortality is a one-person exhibition of prints and drawings. The exhibited work is meant to be a representation of my psyche wrestling with notions of divinity and mortality depicted through narrative illustrations in a style evocative of American Realism. The narratives I depict combine haunting images of death, religion and nature as a call for deep reflection and open communication on the reality of impermanence.

Historical Influences

I have always been interested in the ability of a story to communicate meaning. Even when I was very young, I was fascinated with dark story books based on folk-lore that depicted characters who had to confront dangerous, fantastical creatures and come out on the other side of their predicament having learned a valuable moral lesson. One such story book that has acted as an influence on my body of work has been Paul Galdone’s The Monster and the Tailor. In Galdone’s book, a tale is told in which a poor old tailor is commanded to stitch trousers for the Grand Duke in a graveyard at midnight for ‘good luck’. And so, the tailor goes and stitches the trousers, while all the while being haunted by a giant monstrosity who had emerged from the gravestones. This giant begins to mock and terrorize the tailor in an attempt freeze him in fear. In this tale, the tailor had to overcome doubt, fear, and the unknown to accomplish his goal. In my childhood, stories like these that presented moral lessons provided me with a sense of clarity as to what is right and what is wrong, and I appreciated them for it.

Growing up in a Christian family and attending religious community events for most of my childhood and teenage years only reinforced a ‘black and white’ moral ideology similar to those presented in folk-tales. That moral ideology that I clung to as a part of my identity was
challenged on a fundamental level when I became a survivor of suicide loss in my first year of living away from home. This traumatic event made a once clear relationship with God and nature much more complicated and confusing. The loving God of my youth that represented goodness and fairness demonstrated the ferocity of nature and left me feeling unaware of how to cope.

Antithetically to the storybooks of my youth, my current body of work delivers concept and meaning through presenting narrative illustration in a morally ambiguous manner. By juxtaposing imagery that resembles folktale illustrations that might be seen in a children’s storybook with the moral uncertainty I experience in the present, I engage in a sort of processive act of coping with the traumatic events of my past. Each piece in this series is therefore an expression of my reconciliation between my own mortality and my beliefs in the divine.

I draw inspiration conceptually from contemporary artists who make work that deals with trauma. One such inspiration is to my work is French contemporary artist Christian Boltanski. Boltanski was born in Paris, France in 1944 to a Jewish father. Therefore, the lingering trauma of the Holocaust and World War II have had a prominent impact on his life and in turn his artwork. Although he considers himself a painter, Boltanski utilizes assemblage and photography to depict themes of mortality, memorial, and mourning. His work can be found in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Gallery in London, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In Boltanski’s *No Man’s Land* from 2010, the artist took over the Park Avenue Armory in New York City to create an enormous installation. In the center of the armory, Boltanski placed a gigantic pile of used clothing, while a crane continuously and methodically grabs the clothes, lifts them up, and drops them back onto the pile in a never-ending cycle. This imagery might conjure up feelings associated with mass death and suffering, as large piles of clothing were quite often photographed at concentration camps during the
Holocaust, such as the documentary photograph by Sydney Blau, *Dauchau Atrocity Camp*. The clothing from the victims of the Nazi party was saved in order to provide clothing with the next truckload of Holocaust prisoners, in a ‘never-ending’ cycle. With “No Man’s Land,” Boltanski manages to reconcile the intimacy of personal tragedy and the unimaginable horrors that have occurred to countless human beings. In this piece, each individual item of clothing represents one human life, bringing the viewers’ attention to its history and to the life that may have worn it.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of California in Santa Barbara, published an article about her experience viewing one of his installations, titled, *Mourning or Melancholia: Christian Boltanski’s Missing House*. In looking at his installation piece, *Reliquaire*, Godeau examines the ways in which Boltanski’s work as a whole could be perceived as generically elegiac while at the same time acting as a form of historical commemoration. Godeau compares the viewing of the work of Boltanski to Freud’s theories on ‘Griefwork’ by stating, “. . . a distinction that might be analogized to that drawn by Sigmund Freud between the affliction of melancholia and the work of mourning.” In describing his process, Godeau states that, “The sources of Boltanski’s images, the group snapshots, the faces in photo albums, or the obituary portraits are typically re-photographed and enlarged, so that the facial features become progressively generalized and decreasingly individuated. Accordingly, as they become less specifically recognizable - less indexical, in semiotic terms - they become more iconic.”

I am inspired by the way in which Boltanski creates a dialogue with the audience that presents visions of impermanence that are not about one specific person or group, but instead use symbolism to make the viewer connect on a personal level with imagery of the dead. The dialogue that is created by his work can at times be difficult to bear, but it is therefore all the
more important. By neglecting notions of mortality, humanity can never be truly prepared for its inevitability. Christian Boltanski asks his viewers to confront the dead, but instead of making them feel like others, he creates an empathetic, emotional response that can result in a greater awareness, understanding, and a call for reflection.

It is this call for reflection and awareness that I am inspired by Boltanski on a conceptual level. Through my process orientated work, I process my own grief, but invite others to reflect on their own experiences with loss. Displaying ideas through narrative akin to folk-lore imagery, viewers may subconsciously find themselves looking for the moral ‘lesson’ in my work, only to discover that I have no answers for them, only questions. For example, in my piece “Baptized by Fear”, I depict a young child on the banks of a river about to be baptized by a priest (fig. 7). Behind the figures, an enormous symbol of death rises from the water with a powerful gaze directed at them. As the title of the piece suggests, this piece questions if it is the fear of death and mortality that influences humanity to believe and devote itself to notions of divinity.

**Philosophical and Aesthetic Concepts**

My body of work not calls for reflection, but it also acts as a critique of western societies portrayal of death through mass media, as well as lack of education on grief. When dealing with my own loss, I was unaware of available resources or how to access them, and I felt lost. Death education in western society is mostly limited to counseling services and religious communities; which many people do not have access to. In mass media, death is portrayed inauthentically and for cheap thrills, neglecting to provide true education on the process of grieving or dealing with loss. In researching this topic, I came across contemporary artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. Her work became a heavy influence on my own, as it’s critique on western societies lack of death education is very forthcoming.
Rasdjarmrearnsook started creating artwork in the 1990s, and ever since her work has featured impressions of death in very candid depictions. In 2005, Rasdjarmrearnsook created a series of performance pieces, collectively called “Death Seminar.” In these performance pieces she attempts to give a lecture about death to real corpses that she ‘borrowed’ from a morgue. These corpses were oftentimes people who were “unclaimed” or “unidentified.” In the videos that capture her performance, Rasdjarmrearnsook is seen walking amongst the corpses, whom are covered by a white cloth on metal tables. She speaks to the dead as if they were alive, often in a conversational manner. She asks them how they died, and lectures them on what it must feel like to die. The whole piece is rather ironic, as the ones who are being lectured to, the corpses, are themselves the experts on death whereas Rasdjarmrearnsook is only speculating. She asks the bodies that lay before her questions such as “what do you want?” to which the corpses remain eerily silent. This compelling conversation is at once tongue-in-cheek and yet also serves to amplify the vast void of understanding between the living and the dead. When asked about these performance pieces, Rasdjarmrearnsook explains that joy and suffering are concerns of the living. And, in order to accept mortality, death must be explored through conversation and investigation. Through her performance piece she also critiques the education system of western society. According to Araya, the lack of grief and death education in public and post-secondary schools creates a culture of misinformed morality.

Although Araya’s performance pieces differ drastically in terms of delivery of concept than my own, I have been deeply inspired by her willingness to address these issues in such a forward manner. Inspired by her critique of western society, I began to investigate how her extremely candid work has been received from western audiences. This research led me to the article, *Speaking to the Dead: Images of the Dead in Contemporary Art*, by Mary O’Neill, who is
O’Neill’s research interests include the ethics of representation, loss, disappearance, and sorrow. It is interesting to note that O’Neill’s article that I am referencing was published in the journal *Health*, which is an interdisciplinary journal for the social study of health, illness and medicine. Thus, O’Neill’s article is much more than a study of art for art’s sake. In the article, O’Neill analyzes the work of Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work using a Psychoanalytic lens, and in particular Freud’s ‘Griefwork’ theory. This theory states that mourning is not a state of being, but rather a performative task. This task involves a painful act of obsessive remembering, in which the survivor of a deceased loved one conjures up feelings and memories of the bereaved to ‘resurrect’ them. According to Freud, by eventually accepting the loss of a loved one, one subconsciously loses a part of their own self. O’Neill describes this process as being extremely painful, and even says that many individuals desperately try to avoid this realization through a series of subconscious defense mechanisms. This may explain why Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work has been criticized by others as being overtly morbid and unhealthy. O’Neill is intrigued by this criticism, as images of the dead are saturated within popular culture, which remains largely unchallenged. O’Neill is interested in this dichotomy, and explains in her article that, “There is an apparent contradiction surrounding our tolerance for images of death; with the increase of the on-screen imaginary body count in computer games, television and cinema dramas, contrasting with the ‘taboo’ surrounding real death which seems as strong as ever.” Here, O’Neill attempts to explain that the images of the dead in popular culture are extremely dramatized and are viewed as ‘other’. The depiction of the dead in Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work however is unglorified and presents the viewer with an unpleasant
experience in which they are forced to dwell upon their own mortality and the mortality of those they love.

O’Neill’s article in combination with Araya’s conceptual work struck a chord with me; my entire childhood and young adult life was saturated with imagery of death and loss in the most insincere and dishonest manner. I grew up watching films that glorified violence and murder, and depicted death crudely. And so, when I came face to face with the stinging reality of death, I was frozen, unsure of how to cope with the immensity of it. It is most probable that a therapist or psychologist could have guided me through navigating those traumatic times – but finding one and paying for one at the time seemed like an insurmountable task. A study that was published in *Monitor on Psychology* in 2004 showed that 48 percent of Americans either had seen a counselor or therapist in the past, or were currently seeking care from a medical health professional within the past year. While this percentage is large, it still does not answer for the nearly 52 percent of Americans who will not see a therapist or cannot afford to. It seems as though the government, public education system, and mass media conglomerates have not done an effective job educating on the important topic of grief, trauma, and death education.

My more recent work targets this lack of sincere communication regarding mortality and grief in American mass culture through the use of narrative scenes depicted in an American Realist style. Inspired by American Realist artists such as Rockwell Kent and Andrew Wyeth, my work attempts to juxtapose narrative scenes that capture the fabric of Americana with haunting imagery of death, religion, and nature in a confrontational manner. Similar to Kent and Wyeth, the depictions of death and mortality in my work are not overly gory or dramatized, but instead often interact with the living figures, representative of grief’s incessant bearing on my heart and mind. Kent’s work often depicts figures experiencing a spiritual awakening in the
presence of nature, as if suggesting being closer to nature makes one more spiritually aware. This can be seen quite clearly in his piece *Godspeed*. In this piece, a lone sailor in the vastness of an arctic ocean encounters a figure of a divine presence. Through the expression and pose of the angel as well as the divine halo that encompasses her head, the viewer at once understands the immense scale of nature, as well as the compassion of the divine that is a part of it.

In many ways, my work is similar to Kent’s in that many of the figures depicted in my pieces encounter some otherworldly presence that exists in nature. However, whereas in Kent’s work the figures are often engaged in a form of spiritual realization, in my work my figures are depicted as often being oblivious to the representations of the otherworldly or unsure of how to respond. This can be seen in my piece *Tales Around the Campfire*. In this narrative piece, two figures – a father and a son – are depicted, embracing one another as they gaze through the haze of a campfire. (fig. 9.) I have always viewed having a campfire as being a time of reflection, inwardness, and honest conversation. Through the smoke, and on the other side of the campfire a skeleton appears to be strumming a guitar unconfrontationally – almost as if telling a tale. The two figures look ahead with the father being at once reminded of his own grief and also protective of the son, unsure of how to address the vision of grief and mortality before them. This narrative is at once a personal reflection on my own struggle as a father to have open communication on the topic of death, while also being symbolic of western societies propensity to inadequately discuss and educate on the topics of grief, death, and trauma.

My current work certainly brings into question the relationship between the divine, the origins of the natural world and humanities place in it. In all of my pieces, and even in my own psyche, I view my work as at once an act of grieving for the dead as well as a plea for understanding from divinity. I view this plea for understanding as a desire for a spiritual truth
and a yearning for a relationship with the divine. The late philosopher and theologian C.S. Lewis explains that humanity’s desire for a relationship with a divine presence is a form of logical evidence that there must be something in the universe that can fulfill that desire. In his book, Mere Christianity, Lewis explains this by saying:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. ... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthy pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing . . .

I tend to agree with Lewis here, in that although we all exist in a natural world, we do not fully understand it and view its chaos as unfair or unjust. And for many millennia, different cultures from around the world have looked for answers from some form of deity to explain their place in nature. While Lewis’s ‘proof’ is somewhat anecdotal, I do think the question of spirituality and mortality is worth investigation and reflection on a personal level. In light of today’s circumstances, in which materiality and social standing has consumed much of western cultures time and thought process, I feel it is more important now than ever before to engage in the act of reflection on the natural world, our place in it, and the potential relationship it may have with spirituality. After all, despite all of our accomplishments, wealth, or social standing – mortality will eventually affect us all whether we are prepared for it or not.

I believe that an honest reflection of a personal relationship with nature and an internal dialogue of the acknowledgment of our own mortality is an essential part of being human. Instead of ignoring death or dressing it up as a form of cheap entertainment, we should collectively engage in meaningful dialogue on its impact in our lives. This reflection can result in a call for action – that we spend the precious time that we have remaining in openness and
acceptance, while also helping us heal the wounds that come from loving so strongly those who have passed on.

**Technique and Process**

The entirety of my body of work in the *Tales of Mortality* series are narrative scenes that are drawn and developed completely internally, without the use of references. All of my pieces are performative acts of reflection on death and mortality, so it was important that all of my pieces represent narratives that are derived from and representative of my psyche. In all of my pieces, I engage in a processive and meticulous act of drawing the narrative scenes. Throughout the creation of the imagery and initial sketches, I engage in a hidden act of assemblage and collage in which many layers of sketches are placed on top of another to determine the final narrative composition. This stage of image creation is integral to my process, as the narrative often presents itself to me after hours of contemplation, rearrangement, and re-drawing. Similar to Freud’s explanation that grief is a performative act, my process is one that involves constant conversation and dialogue with myself in an attempt to communicate and express my internal reflections through my work. This process can sometimes be painful and elegiac as I dive deeper into the symbolism and narrative expression of my expressions of grief during the creation of the image. The style that I implement in my work is very drawing intensive, often comprised of obsessive linework and detailed mark-making. While drawing the image onto its matrix one mark at a time, I reflect on the memories and feelings that each piece produces within me, in a sense, I view it as a form of silent prayer, similar to a lonely walk in the wilderness. My methodical drawing practice prioritizes no one piece of imagery over another; the texture of the bark in a tree receives as much of my attention as the shadows cast on a figure’s face. This
allows the viewer of my work to delve into the smaller details and appreciate the intricacies of
the mark-making in harmony with the larger narrative at play.

The majority of the pieces in my exhibition are prints. The printmaking process was
integral to the conceptual themes of my work. In printmaking, the image is drawn or created on a
matrix and then is either processed or prepared for printing in multiples. The multiple originals
that are created through the printmaking process are important to my work, as I want as many
people as possible to be able to reflect on the themes and concepts portrayed in my work in as
authentic a way as possible. The process heavy nature of lithography and other printmaking is
also symbolic of my ability to communicate openly about the topics of grief and mortality. In
lithography, the stone or plate is drawn but then must undergo several stages of etching,
processing, and finally printing. These steps of processing can oftentimes alter the finality of the
originally drawn image, producing slightly different results than intended. Often my attempts to
discuss and communicate openly about the trauma I have experienced in my own life fall short of
the true inexplicable grief I feel within.
Works Cited


1. Deep Space, laser engraved woodcut print, 8” x 10”, March 2018
2. Dwelling Place, silk-screen print, 18” x 24”, May 2018
3. *Let This Pass*, Four-Plate Copper Etching Print, 9” x 13”, March 2019
4. Wolf of Avarice, Four Color Reduction Woodblock Print, 20” x 30”, April 2019
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11. Shade of the Cross, Sharpie on Claybord, 9” x 12”, November 2021
12. Show title painted on the east wall of the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery.
14. Exhibition shot of the west wall of *Tales of Mortality*. L to R: *Come Pain or Passing*, *The Edge of Elegy*, *Tales Around the Campfire*
15. Exhibition shot of the north wall of *Tales of Mortality*. L to R: *Let This Pass*, *Shade of the Cross*, *Deep Space*