

To be alive and not inquire into, and be concerned with the problem and fear of death is to miss perhaps the greatest challenge of being alive. To do less, to avoid death, is to deny one's very humanity. J.P. Sartre

I have been working on this series "Denial" intermittently for three years and when people would ask me what the work was about, I would sometimes have difficulty saying the word. Often it would sound too pretentious or too morbid.

An interest in death is still seen as unhealthy and my personal experience, whilst being interviewed on local radio about the exhibition, would suggest that general-public perceptions of this subject still engender distaste and suspicion.

Yet in recent years I found I was part of a growing number of artists interested in the subject of mortality. Needless to say the AIDS epidemic has spawned an avalanche of such art, (most recently, "Don't Leave Me This Way", at the National Gallery in Canberra). In a recent issue of Artlink devoted solely to the topic of death, Peter Bishop states:

It has become commonplace to call an awareness of death a universal human concern. Such an expansive view can obscure it as an intimate experience which is given specific meanings through class, gender, ethnicity, age, religion and other cultural circumstances...It has also become a cliché to speak of the West's denial of death, a simultaneous separation from its actualities and yet at the same time, an immersion in ficto-death, as we become saturated by media-generated death related images.¹

Yet death is the one thing that ultimately we all do have in common. This notion is summed up by the medieval exhortation *memento mori*, which literally translates as 'Remember You Will Die'. The purpose of *memento mori* is to spur the viewer, however fleetingly, to contemplate their own mortality. As Peter Bishop states it is too simplistic to say that our culture simply denies death, but as individuals we no longer see death as a natural and inevitable part of our lives. Centuries ago Sir Thomas More wrote

We joke and believe death to be far removed. It is hidden in the deepest secrets of our organs. For since the time we came into this world, life and death go forward at the same pace.²

I came to this subject through personal experience, as many do, and found that attitudes to death in general and in particular were totally unsatisfactory

¹Bishop, P., "Art and Death", Artlink, Vol 14, No. 4, 1994 p 9

²Becker, E., Denial of Death, N.Y., 1973 p 82

in any real sense. I needed a time of immersion and then closure to fully realise these issues in my mind and in my work. This naturally led me to the cemetery where the outward signs of our recognition of mortality, the small homage we pay, results in the piles of silk flowers at the gravesite.

The few plastic flowers of the 50s and 60s, though now valued as items of nostalgia with their own kitsch charm, are now brittle and blached. It is the silk flowers which, vastly out numbering all other kinds of offerings, remain as the indelible impression of the modern cemetery. Whether they be a riot of bright, clashing, almost luminous colour, or, if they have been there long enough, as clumps of faded, mouldy blooms that have curiously taken on the cast of the real thing they so poorly mimic when new. There is a melancholic beauty in the subtle character that silk flowers acquire with age and it is in this way that they ironically mimic the body and its absence even more closely than the real flowers with their brief record of the passing of time.

However there are many layers of irony, as the leaving of plastic and silk flowers on the modern grave represents, in some measure, our societal denial of death more succinctly than any other act. The role of real flowers as symbols and even embodiments of transience is archetypal. Flowers are not only a tribute but an emblem of the acceptance of transience and beauty in the natural world and an obvious reminder of mortality. The long history of the iconography of flowers as metaphors in both art and literature is testament to this tradition. But the symbolism of the real flower has been subverted as we impose our own deep-seated fear of vanishing and fading onto the graves of our loved ones. Hence, the substitution of the cut flower with a simulacra, that by its very nature denies the ritual meaning and symbolic purpose of the original, represents a sharp juncture in our cultural understanding.

The attraction and repulsion that I felt at the sight of the silk flowers left a deep impression. This led to the body of work "Denial", in which I hoped to explore the irony inherent in this cultural phenomenon of subverted symbolism. The ambivalent attitude which I felt towards the subject is the mainstay of the work and sets up the binary oppositions of repulsion/seduction, beauty/kitsch, sterility/decay, and presence/absence.

The exhibition consists of a series of large Cibachrome images of silk flowers taken at grave sites a local cemetery in Darwin, NT. The photos were taken at very close range and contain no other information. The images were arranged formally in sets of two or three with a black mirror-like void or threshold as the central panel. Usually the iconography of roses and apples is one of femaleness and fecundity so there is a faint air of sensuality and sexuality as the conjunction of images speak of the corruptibility of the flesh as well as the plastic/silk denial of death. A small installation of rotting apple cores under perspex is allied with one group of photographs. As M.A. Lee states:

The roseate apples echo the fleshy tints of the rose petals, but show the

ravages of time which the plastic and porcelain roses try to evade.³

There is no body, nor any repellent, disturbing imagery here. The body is supplied by the viewer as he/she is reflected in each piece as they approach. In the lush, glossy surfaces of the Cibachromes, in the black perspex, in the shiny field of skin between the two plastic blooms and mirrored in the doorway itself. The absence is filled by the viewer thereby implicating them.

The exhibition "Denial" is both an immersion into the realm of death and a denial of death at the same time. The absence of the body and the inability to connect with a base feeling through the formal, ordered approach and the distancing, reflective surfaces creates a juncture. In this way the pieces act as *memento mori* as they encourage contemplation of mortality and yet reflect our cultural inability to deal with the actualities of death, mourning and grief. In some ways this show represents or is a mirror of a Western, antiseptic, intellectualised and formalised attitude to death as well as acting as a pensive space for meditation on mortality.

³Lee, M.A., "Denial" Catalogue, D.P.A.C., Darwin, 1994