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Reference and Reverence: An Exhibition of Photographic Works

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REFERENCE AND REVERENCE

An Exhibition of Photographic Works

by

Kenneth Chou

A thesis exhibition

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the Program of

Documentary Media

Ryerson Gallery, June 10th-23rd

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2009

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KENNETH CHOU

ABSTRACT

REFERENCE AND REVERENCE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN DOCUMENTARY MEDIA

2009

KENNETH CHOU

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

“The dead are our guardians. We give them a future so that they may give us a past. We help them live on so that they may help us go forward.”

Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, p. 158.

Reference and Reverence is a two-year long photographic project on the emerging trend of ecological burial in the United States. The body of work is a photo-based documentary that considers natural burial as an alternative to standard funeral practices. My thesis project is in book form as well as an exhibition installation. The work addresses green burial's newfound re-emergence as well as the examination of visual culture regarding death, dying, and funeral practices. In an era of environmental concern, the importance of planet stewardship and modern industrial burial practices are questioned. The reflection is one of re-visiting death as tradition, as well as one of contemplating our co-existence with the world.

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PRELUDE

Death and photography is a very personal and closely linked experience for me. Around the age of eight, I was encountered with a photograph I remember to this day. It was a photo of my father grieving at my grandmother's funeral. This image brought to mind questions such as: who took the image and why? In particular, I was struck by the fact that the photograph was made as a vertical composition. To think someone took the time to make this photograph (vertically) at a time of mourning became a strange fascination for me. In my early childhood, I was introduced to the relationship between photography and the dead, and in subsequent years it became a strong curiosity and a constant questioning of why I could never forget the look on my father's face that day.

When my grandmother had died on the way to the hospital, my mother was by her side. I would hear stories from my mother, about how she requested that she would prefer to die at home, the turning around of the ambulance, the narrative of death as it was told. It all remained very incomprehensible. As of this day, I have not experienced, directly, the passing of a family member. Death has always remained something unspoken in my family and an abstract concept I am unfamiliar and inexperienced with. *Reference and Reverence* serves, aside from its ecological and environmental issues, as an examination of personal preparedness in confronting the death of a loved one in the future, a situation that I am currently unprepared for as a result of my past.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with the dead.”

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 24

Sontag suggests photographs have become closely interconnected to our experience of the great unknown. Despite questioning why we choose to photograph the dead, the relationship we have with death through imagery is undeniably forced upon us in media; often distorted and out of context through television, violent films and photographs as well as the portrayal of current events through news networks. There is a need to re-contextualize and re-connect with death, and in the interest of this particular work, I hope to question the existing references to death in popular media, as well as present an emerging movement in burial practices in America with regard to ecology.

Reference and Reverence is an examination of ecological burial, the relationship we have with death and the eventual return of our physical bodies into nature. Ecological burial (or natural burial) is a process of releasing the deceased body back to nature in a non-destructive manner. In the era of environmental concern, natural burial ultimately ensures the sanctity of the land it rests on, as well as reducing the toxic use of formaldehyde and non-biodegradable materials in modern burial processes causing environmental damage.

Reference and Reverence is a series of photographic images on the topic of death and ecological burial, drawn from my photographic examination presented in book form. The key ideas explored are the modern social norms of death, ecological practices, and the

representation of death through a documentary perspective. While the mode of writing is historic and drawn from research as well as field experience, the visual format of the book will seek out a form of poetic expression. The written work will also encompass social, environmental and cultural issues, however the main emphasis of the visual documentation is a personal reflection on death as well as an attempt to re-address ideas of reference with the dead in contemporary North America. The following will present my documentary fieldwork and research. While reflecting on the historical relevance of death imagery and its functioning roles, I will also seek to examine death's photographic interpretation as closure, remembrance, and as a physical document.

Although the nature of this project touches on a broad spectrum of social, environmental and philosophical concerns, my main interest in the work is to increase the visibility of an alternative practice in the rituals of death. While informed of (and stepping away from) the tropes associated with images of burial and death, I hope to present an alternative treatment of our burial grounds with a sense of contemplation, and allow natural burial to be recognized as a viable alternative to treating the dead.

In my visual work I am seeking out the references made to the graves and their markings through a topographic study of burial sites, as well as an examination of a burial practice that is re-emerging from the American past. I am particularly interested in the methods in which the dead are referenced through expressions in the landscape with regard to ecological burial. Signifiers such as flowers, stones, ornaments and other natural markers of remembrance (or lack of) are a deliberate part of my investigation throughout the

project.

As of this moment there are no ecological burial grounds in Canada, therefore it is an emerging movement that should be fully considered and recognized as an alternative to the death process, as well as re-connecting ourselves to the localized approach of land stewardship, preservation, and ecology.

In the following, I will be present the geographic location in which I have conducted my fieldwork followed by my methodology. Subsequent chapters of the book will cover the history of death and burial practices from the beginning of embalming, and to note its rise to popular American acceptance. Later sections of the paper will contain personal field notes and experiences. Lastly, I will examine contemporary works of art and media representations of death.

PHYSICAL LOCATIONS: PRESERVES AND CEMETERIES

Green burial is the concept of burying the dead while releasing bodily nutrients back into nature. It is important to clarify here that a natural burial cemetery can vary from a preserve model to a completely conventional cemetery. The term cemetery applies to both models. The use of terms may vary, however it is most commonly recognized that a conventional green cemetery is a cemetery that only applies green burial methods. A conventional green cemetery does not have the appearance of a natural forest preserve, and it may employ chemicals for lawn care, treated headstones and even vaults.

A preserve model cemetery not only practices green burial absent of embalming fluids and excess material, it also tries to maintain an ecological link to its surroundings. In appearance a burial preserve offers minimal disruption to the natural environment, there are no paved parking lots. Many preserves offer bird watching tours, hikes, as well as nature education. The multiple functions of natural preserves are just beginning to be explored, but most often it is the sole purpose of re-connecting with nature that draws many potential plot seekers and naturalists to the forefront of this ecological movement.

The main location in which the project was drawn from was Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve in New York and the Foxfield Preserve in Ohio. Both locations are preserves fully integrated with its surrounding environment.

Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve is located in Newfield, New York. It is where much of my photographic work is drawn from and consequently forms much of my experiences out in the field regarding the practice of natural burial.



Figure 1: Location of Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve. SOURCE: Google Maps



Figure 2: Entrance to Greensprings Natural Burial Preserve. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou

Greensprings sits on one-hundred acres of rolling hilltop meadows located south of Cayuga Lake alongside the Finger Lakes region, just outside of Ithaca. The cemetery space is surrounded by four thousand acres of Arnot forest and another four thousand acres of Newfield State Forest. Burials prices start at \$900 dollars.

A fundamental difference between a preserve and a natural cemetery are its approaches concerning ecological preservation. The preserve concept involves obtaining permission to conduct cemetery operations in an ideal location, which binds the grounds with the surrounding natural landscape. In the case of Greensprings, the burial grounds help to ensure the surrounding Arnot and State forests are not subject to rezoning or clearing in the near future. A preserve also ensures non-indigenous materials such as trees and shrubs are kept off grounds. The property also serves for other recreational activities. Greensprings offers bird watching tours, hikes as well as nature education to those who are interested in visiting the grounds.

The Foxfield Preserve, like Greensprings is a natural burial preserve. It is the first of its kind in Ohio. Located in the county of Wilma on 619 acres, it is also the first preserve to be operated by a non-profit conservation organization. The Wilderness Centre is a part of the preserve. Its operations include nature education, hiking trails, and also offers workshops for children and adults such as astronomy, photography, and gardening. As a fairly new burial preserve, the grounds hold roughly six to ten recent burials. Burials begin at \$995 dollars and include the service of a funeral director, opening and closing of the grave.



Figure 3: Location of Foxfield Preserve. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou



Figure 4: Entrance to the Wilderness Centre and Foxfield Preserve. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou

PHOTOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

The project is a blend of both landscape photography and social documentary in a photojournalist style. I used a Hasselblad 500cm camera alongside two digital single reflex cameras, a Canon 1D MarkIII and Canon 5D. My intent was to expose slide film for the medium format images when involved in landscape images. I found positive slide film (Fuji Provia 100) to be very responsive to light as well as retaining true color characteristics, the entire process is printed digitally on Chromira printers while the film positives are scanned using an Imacon Hasselblad drum scanner.

In the series of images pertaining to events such as burials, I used the 35mm digital camera for discreetness as well as the ability to shoot for long durations in the field. I believe the quality of the medium format camera offered a superb positive which followed a more traditional approach to documenting landscape as topography while resolving the issue of uneven terrain and inclement weather which made larger format cameras problematic when making exposures, causing tripods to slip during exposure.

The approach of documenting the landscape with a medium format camera gave contemplation to what remains hidden from the lens, which is the metaphysical approach I sought to achieve by its use. I chose the dual format for the purpose of distinguishing the fleeting moments of human activity and burial to the eternal still imagery of rest. Part of the process involves making sure a large image could be made detailing the subtle details of each grave. I believe the markings created were essential to the images; this includes the stones laid out, flowers left behind, or simply the references made to the

scene by ornaments. The capturing of details highlights the significance of sites, as well as drawing contemplation of what is unseen, hidden below the surface.



Figure 3. Square format film (left), and 35mm format (right). PHOTO: Kenneth Chou

The use of colour was also deliberate in the sense of breaking away from traditional and black and white historical references to death and burial. As a contemporary photographic practice, I believe the combination of digital and film brings reference and draws attention to a modern practice, as established in photojournalism today while combining with an established genre of landscape photography. I believe *Reference and Reverence* should resonate with modern colour to better confront the immediacy of the issue as well as reflecting on the contemporary use of colour in photojournalism today. The format of the exhibit will consist of square 30x30 inch prints along with 18x24 inch prints, the book layout will be 14x14 inches. Within the book I wished to present a series of events which I have observed chronologically, in doing so presenting the landscape imagery within context to seasons and the burials which occur within the locations.

DEATH AND BURIAL: PRACTICES

“Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.”

William Gladstone, British Prime Minister (1808-1898).

The common burial and mortuary procedures that exist today came to prominence during the American Civil War. Embalmers had found a way to make a living by preserving deceased soldiers, sending them home via trains to allow a final view by the family. The dead soldier would then have a proper funeral according to the family's wishes and buried in a local cemetery.

It is also important to note that in this time, America got its first glimpse of war through the photographic works of Matthew Brady and company. Undoubtedly one of the most important photographers to document the Civil War, Brady also employed several photographers to visit the battlefield between 1861 and 1865. The images made using collodian process culminated in an exhibition "The Dead of Antietam" in 1862, which shocked the American perspective on the war and showed the gruesome reality of death in the battlefield. This proliferation of accessible images relating to death and war through mechanical reproduction presented a grim view of death in the American visual landscape. When the assassination of Lincoln occurred, the industry of funerals and embalming was already in place. Lincoln's burial became a spectacle, and created in the American mindset the model of modern death, which still continues today.

Lincoln's funeral began in Washington DC, then travelled for fourteen days before

finally arriving home for burial. It is estimated that over 500,000 people viewed Lincoln's body during his funeral. The technique of embalming, once the invention of ancient Egyptians, gained popularity and acceptance, and along with the rise of the industrial era, led the way to the American belief in preservation and viewing the body, and the need for elaborate, extravagant funerals.

It may well be the circumstance of three factors that contributed to the standards we have set today for a "good death"; photography, the spectacle of Abraham Lincoln, and America's industrial revolution. The emergence of photography in America, combined with the example of Abraham Lincoln's funeral resulted in what many Americans view as a funeral their loved ones deserved. As the industrialized age gradually took hold in America, many viewed death as an elaborate ritual, much in line with the extravagance of ancient Egyptian Kings. Home funerals became few, and funeral parlors evolved into a powerful corporate industry. Harrison describes the notion of closure, its purpose and ritual.

"To realize their fate and become truly dead they must first be made to disappear. It is only because their bodies have a place to go that their souls or images or words may attain an afterlife of sorts among the living."

Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, p. 1

During this period of my project I had obtained permission to observe and photograph an embalming at a local funeral home in Scarborough. I photographed a standard embalming procedure, and made some observations.

Distinct and powerful in odor, a typical embalming room has an acrid smell similar to a high school dissection lab. In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have deemed most forms of formaldehyde used in embalming an occupational carcinogen. Due to the decreased sensitivity to chemicals, symptoms of a runny nose, itchy throat or eyes means embalmers often do not realize the degree of exposure to toxic chemicals. Exposures can lead to brain, colon, kidney and various other forms of cancer for those who work in the environment.

Embalming requires chemicals and supplies such as embalming and cavity fluids, sealing compound, superglue, hypodermic needles, forceps, scalpels, and a clean hose. Since most pathogens can survive for long periods past the host's death, special care is taken to prevent any disease to the embalmer. The first step involves prevention of leakage from the body by stuffing of cotton or "A/V closures" (-A for anus -V for vagina) to effectively seal off all cavities. A suture is performed on the jaw to keep the mouth closed, sometimes for women with large breasts a binding is done with stitching to allow for a more natural look (and also to hold arms closer to the body). To set the eyes, cement and eye caps are used to hold them in place, the eye caps have hook features, which prevent the eyelids from opening once it is closed. Disinfectant is thoroughly used in all cavities including the eyes and mouth. A "muscular suture" is performed with a gun similar to a nail gun, which penetrates the upper and lower jawbones with a loud audible crunch of the bones; the wiring attached effectively seals off the mouth.

Once the pre-embalming is complete, the actual preservation begins with an arterial injection; blood in the circulatory system is drained and replaced with liquid preservative. The preferred injection site is the carotid artery, which sits on the right side of the neck near the collarbone; the artery is pulled out of the skin with a surgical hook and then an incision is made to facilitate blood drain. Once the blood is fully drained the replacing of the fluids can begin. In this particular case, or if the arteries are too thin, additional arteries in the legs and arms must be cut, with limbs raised to drain blood through additional arteries; extending the risk of blood splatter and pathogens escaping.

This preservative can be tinted with various shades to simulate blood and therefore producing a more pleasing skin tone. The deceased weight is calculated for an exact pressure of fluids being pushed into the body. Arms and legs are massaged to encourage blood flow. The process takes approximately twenty minutes to remove 3 liters of blood from the body. Once the dark color of the hose brightens, it is a sign that blood has been replaced by lighter embalming fluids, and the arteries are sealed off with a stitch, the entry cuts are also stitched up in a baseball like manner.

It needs to be noted that in many modern funeral homes, blood and excess chemicals are flushed directly into the city's sewer system.

Once the blood is replaced with preservatives, the cavity injection begins. Billions of bacteria reside and thrive on the internal cavities. For thousands of years this procedure was commonly called ripping the corpse, in which all visceral organs are removed and replaced with spices, grain alcohol and other items thought to preserve the body. Today's

embalmers essentially siphon abdominal contaminants through what is a trocar, a narrow two to three foot long tube that punctures the stomach, connects to an aspirator and sucks out all contaminants. The embalmer then punctures into the abdomen and subsequently punches through the inner abdominal wall to reach the heart, lungs, stomach, colon, liver, intestines and bladder. A smaller trocar can also be used to perform aspiration through the nose into the brain. The fluid that is used to fill the body cavity contains formaldehyde and phenol. The trocar is detached from the aspirator and connected to a bottle, which unlike the artery fluids is undiluted and much stronger.



*Figure 4: Large Trocar insertion. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou
Ogden Funeral Home. Scarborough, Toronto.*

The embalming is essentially completed, the rest of the procedure is cosmetic, with washings, hair drying, and ensuring there is no further leakage of bodily fluid.

Modern embalming is one of the standard methods in contemporary America in which we prepare the dead for remembrance. This practice is slowly transforming into one

which seeks to be environmentally sound as well as holistic. This traditional notion of a extravagant funeral, or a good death, must be examined. While much of the aspects of embalming (especially cosmetic alterations) are done in order to provide closure, to see a loved one a final time, we as the living must come to terms with its invasive nature both environmentally and for those who hold such hazardous occupations with regard to its practice.

The following are some quick facts and data gathered on the death-care industry in the Unites States according to Wikipedia:

Each year, 22,500 cemeteries across the United States bury approximately:

- 30 million board feet (70,000 m³) of hardwoods (caskets)
- 90,272 tons of steel (caskets)
- 14,000 tons of steel (vaults)
- 2,700 tons of copper and bronze (caskets)
- 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete (vaults)
- 827,060 US gallons (3,130 m³) of embalming fluid, which most commonly includes formaldehyde.

On average, a cemetery buries 1,000 gallons of embalming fluid, 97.5 tons of steel, 2,028 tons of concrete, and 56,250 board feet of high quality tropical hardwood in just one acre of green. Today's modern cemeteries can vary between 30-100 burials per acre.

With ecology at the forefront of current global concerns, we are challenged to seek alternatives in regard to reducing our environmental footprint as well as preserving

existing claims to sustainable habitats. The traditional notion of cemeteries now carries with it an implication of excessive waste with regard to embalming fluids and other toxic chemicals. The material expenditure of casket and concrete burials, once thought to be must have necessities for most burials are now under question. While cremation is another alternative, the process requires that an extra oxygen molecule needs to be added to the twelve elements of the body. This results in the creation of carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide, sulfur oxide, mercury, dioxin, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen chloride, hydrogen fluoride, cadmium and chromium, all of which are pollutants due to the process of oxide byproducts which do not naturally occur in Earth's biosphere.

Ecological burial is environmentally sustainable, and is now viewed as a viable alternative to conventional cemeteries in the US and UK. Most importantly, it acknowledges the human life cycle and our return to the earth as practiced since the beginning of humanity.

SEEING DEATH: FIELD NOTES

Samuel Hernandez was the first to greet me on my first visit in October of 2007 at Greensprings Natural Burial Preserve. Sam is the caretaker and gave me a brief tour of the acres of land at the site. Sam's job is to help out with families coming in to decorate graves, as well as run the day-to-day functions and general maintenance of the grounds. I followed Sam around, photographing the things he described, and recording audio of our discussion. Much of the audio consisted of details on practical aspects of natural burial and funerals. Sam described one instance in which he was at a burial and the body was poorly prepared for burial (due to improper storage of the unpreserved body). As a result the odour was noticeable. He speculated on why humans are repulsed by the smell of the dead, a characteristic deriving from a desire to not contract diseases. He noted how unfair it was to pollute the planet while alive, and continuing to do so after death in conventional cemeteries due to wasteful resources, pesticides and constant maintenance. There were also happy moments that he has seen, such as the kids who dived into the snow with their heads as a result of a long drive to their grandfather's burial.

In other trips I have continued to meet Sam and has ongoing conversations. He noted that I was not the first person to photograph the burial grounds. There are many reasons for people to visit, whether they are plot purchasers, bird watchers, or simply people seeking contemplation. I do believe no matter what the reasons are, these grounds are a place of contemplation. In response, I sought to slow down my working methods to hopefully capture an essence of the site's qualities. There are subtle hints of commemoration and reference presented at each grave, the gestures of burial are

presented and often overlooked unless it is examined closely. Each grave was unique in its arrangement and design, plants were chosen, natural ornaments such as shells and wooden toys are left behind. The references we decide to leave behind for loved ones, whether markings or small objects, became the reference I sought to capture.

My access to funerals became available through communication with Mary Woodsen. Mary is the president of Greensprings. She remains fairly involved in the daily functions of the cemetery as well as decision-making, as with other members on the Board of Directors. Due to the popularity of the Arnot research program at Cornell University and its ecological research, many of the members at Greensprings have had a prior keen interest in the environment. Mary was able to co-ordinate dates and provide access to the funerals through families who believed there was a necessity to document the movement of natural burial.

Families in most cases simply do not wish to have their funerals photographed. Many families wish to honor their dead stress free, in the privacy of nature and immediate members. As it suits the purpose (and the ideal) of natural burial, these are not families interested in spectacle. The families that I have been permitted to photograph have been few, there are no signed releases, simply verbal agreements with Mary and the families that the images would not be sold for commercial gain. For some family members I have spoken to, my document of their funeral would have been exactly what the deceased would have wanted. It is interesting to note that the families I have been able to photograph are, in a sense, granting the wishes of the dead. Ithaca is a town known for

its activism, in a sense, the dead are rested here as their final act of protest. Organic agriculture, forestry and environmental have a large following in Ithaca, therefore the progress to a natural burial has been in the works for some time. Greensprings is seen as benefitting the needs of a community concerned with environmental practice, as well as advancing the utility served by natural resources such as forests and land use.

Ruth Drew's body was flown up from Texas on October 17th, 2008. Her mother was buried at Greensprings just a year ago. The Drew family had purchased plots, and since then Ruth's mother had been buried several years prior. While the family decorated the graves I came to realize this was one of the ways in which families could now be buried together economically. In my subsequent trips, I have discovered several couples that have purchased plots together, and continually visit the preserve to bird watch and enjoy the landscape around Greensprings. Ruth died from breast cancer she had been battling for several years, she had always been a proponent of natural living and from what her family told me, this was what she would have hoped for. The family members read poems, several came forward and made short speeches, many cried while I continued photographing. For myself this was a glimpse of how the living chooses to depart from the dead, it was also an examination of death's rituals as absent from convention as one can imagine in today's society. As Ruth's burial concluded and each member had taken their turn shoveling dirt on the grave, her husband proposed going for Chinese food with the rest of the family.

Peter DeMott was a peace activist. At the age of 62, Peter died after falling while

working in a tree. DeMott gained notoriety (and served time in prison) when he hammered a Trident submarine with a van. The funeral numbered 300 guests, and was by far the largest single funeral held at Greensprings. The large crowd took turns filling Peter's grave with dirt, and sang in the -20 degree weather. A glimpse of spontaneity occurred when someone asked if there was anything they would like to do before filling the grave, in which one proposed to form a cross on Peter's coffin.



Figure 5: Funeral attendants burying Peter DeMott. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou



Figure 6: Laying stones (in a cross) for Peter. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou



Figure 7: Moments of mourning. PHOTO: Kenneth Chou

PHOTOGRAPHIC RESPONSES TO LANDSCAPES & DEATH

“As the primordial sign of human mortality, the grave domesticates the inhuman transcendence of space and marks human time off from the timelessness of the gods and the ethereal returns of nature. That is why gods are the not the original founders of place – mortals are.”

Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, p. 23.

Robert Harrison notes the anthropological fact that humans sheltered the dead long before they sheltered the living. The existing remnants of human activity resulting in a mound of dirt, surrounded by nature, absent of trace, have become consistent in the preserve landscape and therefore I have felt the necessity of photographing the landscape from a topographical approach. "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape", curated by William Jenkins in 1975 at the George Eastman House. Became a key moment in American landscape photography, as it was an exhibit that summarized a then young photographer's notion of landscape within the world.

The tradition in which I wanted to follow wished to reflect on many of the issues confronted in the topographic movement. Which involves investigating the environment, identity, and capitalism. Since many of the ideas which brought up in the new topographic involved man's influence or integration with the natural worlds, I wished to extend the notion to the project, and indirectly reflect man's consolidation with nature.

The motifs of dirt, flowers, subtle traces of human activity are identified from image to

image. The “New Topographic” movement became my primary mode for referencing the project because of the movement’s depiction of landscape as human activity. The term topography originated in ancient Rome, it’s meaning is the detailed description of a place. The emphasis on ‘objective’ descriptions and the suggestive notion of a documentary rather than formalist landscape was a necessity in fitting in with the approach of 35mm photojournalistic snapshots that are presented alongside the more formal views. The detail of the burial place is essential to the project as a social investigation, which led myself to exploring the landscape in the traditions of New Topographics and its outlook on man and the landscape. For those who are unfamiliar with the New Topographics movement in photography, it signaled an era in which mankind had recognized his/her own influence upon the landscape, in which the banality, scale, and the ferociousness of human encroachment on the landscape was forced upon the viewer through optical lenses. Stepping away from classical notions of painterly landscapes, the New Topographic photographers became interested in investigating the landscape not for its naturalness, but rather the new naturalness, which is human presence.

Since the notion of landscape and the project specifically deals with North American culture, it is perhaps of use to reference Ansel Adams and Robert Adams in their regard to the landscape. In *Crisis of the Real*, Andy Grundberg contrasts both Ansel and Robert Adams in regard to their ideals of the American landscape:

The widespread popularity of Ansel Adams's pictures is rooted in a purposeful exclusion: he photographed primarily in wilderness preserves and eliminated all signs of human presence. Robert Adams's images, however, show us what the land looks like once it becomes inhabited, focusing on the frontier between the human and natural worlds. (Grundberg 84)

In *Landscape as Photograph*, Estelle Jussim notes that while Robert Adams is concerned with the problem of segregating nature from man, Ansel Adams is quite happy to dissect (through framing) and record the concept of "wilderness" that is the grandiose romantic view of nature. In comparison to the works by Robert and Ansel Adams, is my intent that the images in *Reference and Reverence* question the elements of man and nature with regard to natural burial. The topographic approach I have chosen aligns my work much more closely with Robert Adams. While Robert Adams depicts human presence, *Reference and Reverence* depicts absence, or to a degree the consolidation of man and landscape. The landscapes are in fact transitory and temporal in the sense that the dead will eventually disappear entirely, reclaimed by the land. As the land alters and changes back to its "wild" form, the photograph will serve as a reference in itself. The gestures of death are captured in both forms, the human and the static, in a landscape that ultimately will claim both, leading to complete vanishing.

Although elements of *Reference and Reverence* are partly aligned with the genre of "New Topographics" and Robert Adams, I believe the images also serve as a sign of human reconciliation. This aspect of attempted human re-connection with nature is one of the underlying motivations for natural burial as a practice, and consequently *Reference and*

Reverence is my attempt at referencing the New Topographic as a gesture of human existence (and reconciliation) in the contemporary landscape.

Landscape photography often marks a certain timelessness, it is my intent however to note that the landscape in this respect is not timeless. Nature ultimately overwhelms the decaying body hidden beneath the dirt, erasing the time of an interrupted landscape; the image ultimately serves as a reference point and document prior to complete disappearance. The grave marks off human time from the timeless nature of landscape. As Harrison noted, the gods are not the founders of place, mortals are. The image merely serves as a temporal record, while in the timeline of the planet everything results in its eventual disappearance. This disappearance has an immense remembrance function. Harris notes this importance by the necessity for the dead to disappear, as to give their words, image and soul an afterlife.

In Sally Mann's work *What Remains*, the interconnection between death and the landscape parallels much of my own work, yet Mann's investigation is considerably more personal in approach as well as tone.

Mann's work is visualized in chapters; some are personal documents such as the passing of her greyhound and the incident of a suicide on her property. Other photographs include images of decaying remains on a human body farm. Mann's investigation is seemingly one of challenging her own buffers in respect to death while also following a trajectory. In one segment of *What Remains*, Mann reflects on the life of her father and

his perspective on death.

“As a physician, he’d seen his share of it. Among his efforts I found this picture that he took of a patient’s backyard. On the back is inscribed: “Graves of 4 children in one family who died in one year, Timber Ridge, Va, 194?” Death was normal back then. People died at home. Animals eaten by a family were usually killed on the property. Their culture did not have the buffers that ours does protecting us from death’s realities. But, even for the time, he was uncommonly direct man. Not for him the euphemisms of death – it was a dead body; not “remains,” nobody “passed,” there was no “eternal rest.” People died and that was it. (Mann 5)

What Remains begins with the documentation of her pet greyhound remains as a personal entry point. She later attempts to reconcile the disappearance of historical events through portrayal of landscapes of Antietam. Mann’s work traces the immediate effects of death and decay, eventually turning the camera to landscapes in which the process of living things end and memory begins. The transition from body farms to historical past such as Antietam serves as a trajectory from what is immediate about death, and what remains -- physically and in memory (and in history).



Figure 8: What Remains (death's Immediacy). Sally Mann: *What Remains*



Figure 9: What Remains (death in the landscape / memory). Sally Mann: *What Remains*

Sally Mann realizes that death is carefully hidden from us all, and has forged her own work in an act of examination, she also reveals how death is very personal to us all, and that she is also subjected to the dilemma of the death care industry. She writes:

And so, while I knew the funeral director was a kind man, and at heart a good man who just happened to make a living by selling his services during people's worst moments, I also knew what this conversation meant.

Financial ruin.

It's impossible to grieve when you're hearing things like, "He was so large, we'll need to order a special casket. It'll be here in two days. Of course, that does cost more..." "I think we'll need an oversized vault, as well..." "I know money may be a little tight, but I wanted to let you know, we do have vaults and caskets in that size range that are better/more watertight/element-proof..."

Vault, casket, flowers, plot, wake, funeral, mass...too much. Too much to think about, too much to make decisions about, too much to buy. And yes, of course I was "buying." I did not want, I could not afford, but I had to buy. What was the alternative?

I wanted to quietly slip out the back door and walk away. I wanted this production to become somebody else's problem. It was certainly driven by somebody else's expectations. I had no desire for a full-fledged mourning-and-wailing theatrical production. Dad had not been a terribly religious man, nor was he particularly tradition-bound. But none of that mattered. There was a death, and there was a funeral. It was simply *done*.

Death is expensive. In 1985, the final bill for getting rid of an inconveniently oversized body was \$10K, lumped atop an "estate" that was finally tallied up at negative \$40K.

Two years later, when once again I found myself going through the same ritual of "arrangements" for my brother (a victim of enthusiastic night driving on a dark country road), I made a pact with my own damned self: The death industry would never collect a dime from me.

In *Reference and Reverence* (and contrasting to *What Remains*), I have chosen to address the issue of death care and the modern funeral industry in perhaps a more poetic and socially investigative way in comparison to Mann's personal approach. In today's practice of documentary I believe it is no longer enough to be situated as a maker of images, the documentary practitioner must also serve as the voice of activism. The claim

of neutrality in times of environmental uncertainty must be questioned. As a Canadian citizen I realize that there are no alternative burial sites in the country. It is essential and also a timely issue to reconsider the biological origin of our self-being, as well as revising our relationship with death as a society.

IN CLOSURE

“Vicissitudes of our century have been summed up in a few exemplary photographs that have proved epoch-making; the unruly crowd pouring into the “ten days that shook the world”; Robert Capa’s dying miliciano; the marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima; the Vietnamese prisoner being executed with a shot in the temple; Che Guevera’s tortured body on the planks in the barracks. Each of these images has become a myth and has condensed numerous speeches. It has surpassed the individual circumstance that it produced and no longer speaks of that single character or of these characters, but expresses concepts. It is universal, but at the same time it refers to other images that preceded it or that, in imitation, have followed it.” (Ruby 11)

What Ruby discusses is partly the effects of death and its imagery within contemporary culture. Death’s imagery has become universal, which comes at a cost of subscribing to conventions absent of death’s details, issues with the environment, confronting the rituals of death, and simply the process of death is not revealed. All of which ultimately deludes our senses of death, similar to the conventions prior to photography, in which war had been glorified and a hero’s death was honorable. While the tradition of posthumous images have existed in contemporary America for approximately three hundred years, to this day, images of death remain the way most Americans see death. In *The Forbidden Zone* (1987), Michael Lesy describes the American culture of seeing death:

Our culture is permeated by images and accounts of death, but they are only fictions, works of the imagination, counterfeits. The real thing is carefully hidden. Photographs are cropped; news footage is edited. What finally appears is only a flicker, out of context, reduced to a rectangle of light or printer’s ink. Every Hollywood movie, television drama, and executioner’s song, no matter how explicit, is only a fabrication, mantled with art, artifice, and commercial interruption. Death’s fictions are everywhere available, shrink-wrapped like chicken legs and hamburger meat, but death itself is rarely revealed, only the image mirror image of our fear, dread, and fascination with it. Eighty years ago, people died at home and their friends prepared their bodies for burial. In England

and America, cemeteries were designed as parks where families strolled for refreshment, landscapes dotted with graves, where the living might contemplate the dead. Today, instead of gazing at death, we watch violence; instead of the long look at the steady state, we switch back and fourth from one violent epiphany to the other. Ordinary and inevitable death, death as an actual part of life, has become so rare that when it occurs among us it reverberates like a handclap in a empty auditorium. (Lesy 4)

In coming to terms with the photograph of my father. I too have realized that, as Michael Lesy notes, actual death has become rare. This rareness of death, absent of preconceived notions, became my father's face on that very day his mother died.

The photograph is lost, perhaps deliberately.

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