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Strangely and Completely Present

The absent body and breath of a lost loved one leaves behind a void that is clear, cavernous, and life changing. When death occurs close to you, it is as if you experience the whole thing after the fact. You never really see it in the present, as it is—honest and real, because it often appears surreal and impalpable. In today's society, we institutionalize and conceal the dead, as well as the process of death, and what remains often out of an attempt to protect someone's emotions or to ignore the reality of our mortal condition. In doing so, we risk not giving those aspects of life their due recognition. In his memoir *Heaven's Coast*, Mark Doty ponders over a body without life:

We see always flesh in motion, animated, disguised beneath its clothing and uniforms, its signals and armatures, its armor of codes and purposes. When do we look at the plain nude fact of the lifeless figure? Pure purposelessness—and thus, in the absence of the spirit, strangely and completely present. Never having a chance to see it, to assimilate our horror of it and go on to actually look, how would we know that the lifeless body is beautiful? (qtd. in Montross, 15.)

These eloquent words reflect the core concept of my thesis exhibition, *Strangely and Completely Present*. The various photographs that comprise the show are quiet visual moments of pause that value the corporeal and visceral nature of our existence. They not only seek the viewer's gaze through their formal beauty, but the viewer's acceptance as well. To look at death, connect with it and find beauty in it as we do with other life processes such as birth seems like a more productive way to live than to fear it and look away.

My photographs come from a desire to admit to everything that makes us human, especially since contemporary society appears to ignore that reality by finding every means of preservation possible. Technology's power and potential is currently captivating us all, and

creating an immortal body is its secret and most dangerous mission for the future. In fact, exploration of a post-biological state for the body has been going on for years particularly with the inception of the Visible Human Project in the late 1980s. The VHP as it is called, is an extensive scientific and pedagogical database that includes MRI and CT scan information of a male and female body along with digital images of the bodies after they were chopped, frozen, and sliced into thousands of pieces. (Lizama, 127.) Thus, the VHP project assumes a possible future for the body where the organic will be discarded, and humans will exist virtually.

As we get caught up in the allure of these technological feats, virtual realities, and digitalization in general, our bodies become more and more vulnerable to violation and destruction even before humanity has wholly accepted corporeality as its essence.

Therefore, this is an appropriate time to reflect on the importance of the body to our understanding of self as technology seeks to own the body, which has had a complex and contradicting relationship with religion, science, philosophy, and our public and private spheres—cultural institutions and domesticity throughout history. Although we idealize beautiful youthful bodies in the media daily, we admire less often what makes those bodies live, and eventually die. In the movie *Dead Ringers*, there is a dialogue between the protagonists, twin doctors, about the need for an aesthetic of the inside of the body.

The movie's director, David Cronenberg, believes that we will not “become integral creatures until we come to terms with our bodies,” which we have not been able to do thus far. (qtd. in Dery, 1.)

My photographs are an attempt at a visceral aesthetic, particularly *Via gaze and scalpel*, a series portraying various dissection specimens that have been cut open or apart for display. The specimens are set up in a domestic and somewhat clinical space with mainly white elements and clean soft light surrounding them. The photographs are quite large as well, so that the surface

details and textures of each specimen can be fully observed and appreciated as in *Specimen 5, draped in caul* where the rugae, or folds of a pig's stomach are distinctly visible. The clean white space that the specimens exist in is illuminating and provides a sense of purity to something that is generally seen as grotesque. Metaphorically, the luminous quality of the photographs represents the main platform for anatomical study; that revealing the interior of the dead body would "dissipate at once the darkness" as one influential nineteenth century anatomist proclaimed. (qtd. in Sappol, 77.)

Moreover, it parallels the use of white and clean light as a dominant visual element as employed in Laura Letinsky's *Morning and Melancholia* still lifes of remnants of meals and gatherings. Letinsky uses this motif because it represents a tabula rasa, or clean slate. (Letinsky.) Hence, the white space provides the specimens with an environment absent of preconceived ideas so that the viewer may look upon them in a fresh way. In addition, these photographs attempt to merge the significant contexts that have deeply coded the body throughout history: religion, science, and philosophy, with our more private and personal domestic sphere. For instance, in *Specimen 12, to come into being* a sheep uterus is opened to reveal a fragile fetus resting on a lace runner atop an old white dresser that appears altar-like against a stark white wall, which creates an unadorned homey setting that is also reverent and precise.

In addition, the series was greatly influenced by my research into the treatment of the dead by the living. This led me on a fascinating journey into the complex history and practice of anatomical study, including the popularity of anatomy theaters and museums, body snatching and grave robbing, government regulation, the dead body as commodity, and the fundamental transformation of the body as subject to the body as object in an intense quest for enlightenment. Where would modern medicine be without the field of anatomy? Its benefit to the living is irrefutable despite the ethical controversy that arose at the height of its progression and

popularity among the elite. For the rest of society dissection was seen as “a rape of the body,” and numerous anatomy riots and related incidents ensued in the United States and everywhere that supported a medical institution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (Sappol, 3-4.)

Furthermore, there were attempts by artists and anatomists during this time to create an aesthetic for the interior of the body. I had the opportunity to explore La Specola, a Museum of Natural History in Florence, Italy that is over two-hundred years old and houses a collection of 1400 realistic anatomical wax models produced between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These glistening wax models were incredibly detailed and took my breath away. They were displayed in elegant wood vitrines similar to how someone may encase their most precious keepsakes. Interestingly, they also resembled the relics of holy human remains I saw in several churches in Italy, although much less opulent and adorned. It was obvious that these realistic models were meant to be educational, yet there was also a sensual and artistic side to them as well. My experience of seeing these anatomical wax objects, as well as the religious relics displayed with such care and grace greatly influenced how I arranged and photographed the dissection specimens. For example, *Specimen 13, on a pillow*, was inspired by the attractive reclining wax female figure I saw at La Specola whose torso was cut open to reveal her innards spilling over. However, in this case a lab rat, bathed in glowing light with its interior revealed, is photographed so that it appears to be rising up above the viewer atop its cushion pedestal.

In his article on La Specola’s anatomical collection, Mark Dery refers to the lifelike wax models as “wondrous strange,” and that they point to a time when “death and disease was an everyday affair.” (Dery, 1.) In modern society we take for granted the progress made over the last three centuries in curing diseases and prolonging the lives of so many people. Even though the last decade has seen the widespread success of *Body Worlds* and similar exhibitions of

specially preserved cadavers in various poses and stages of dissection that not only celebrate medical progress, but also recall the anatomical museums of the past like Le Specola. My personal experience of was also an important motivating factor in the production of the dissection photographs. Even though I was a little disturbed by some of the displays, the child-like sense of wonder that filled me quickly dominated my overall experience of the exquisitely deconstructed cadavers.

Yet, more importantly Dery's comments reveal our loss of intimacy with death, and an awareness of mortality that is crucial to our understanding of self and being.

According to Drew Gilpin Faust the author of *This Republic of Suffering*, which explores death and dying during the American Civil War, death's "threat of termination and transformation, inevitably inspired self-scrutiny and self-definition." (Faust, xv).

Therefore, looking at death is not just about finding beauty in it, but also about a search for a true self in the body. During the Civil War, so many American lives were directly affected by the vast carnage that took place. In everyday mid-nineteenth century life, death was clearly visible—it was seen, it was smelled, it was heard, and it was touched. And because there was a direct intimacy with the dead, death could not be denied. The domestic motifs in my photographs such as the white chair in *Specimen 1, salt and earth*, and the glass vase, doily, and table in *Specimen 10, contained* provide a vernacular and familiar context for the viewer to consider their relationship with death in a more personal way.

The other photographs in my thesis, which also employ domestic motifs and supplement the visceral aesthetic of the dissection specimens, are a selection of visual metaphors that explore the relationship we have had with death culturally and psychologically throughout history. How we treat the dead, and the rituals we perform in their presence is greatly influenced by our fear of death and our inability to cope with the absence of an identifiable self in the corpse. The

photographs range from dramatically lit black and white images that draw from the anxiety-provoking film noir aesthetic of old Hollywood cinema, to earthy desaturated color images that emphasize the organic.

Two black and white photos, *Domestic Disturbance I and II* portray illuminated fragmented bodies strewn in quiet isolated dwelling spaces. They are both ambiguous in terms of narrative, and function to provoke a sense of unease in the viewer and an awareness of our temporal nature. Similarly, the composite panoramic photo *Between Absence and Presence* also incites an awareness of mortality in the viewer. The use of dramatic shadowy light creates psychological tension, and the solitary shrouded figure on an old worktable in the dark of night recalls the chilling stories of body snatchers and desperate anatomists from centuries past.

In addition, the use of brightly lit windows or spaces, shrouds, and the recumbent figure, are reoccurring motifs in my photographs. The latter is clearly employed in *Expectation in Repose, A State of Preservation, For the Sin-eater, Untitled* (with stained glass window and wrapped figure), and *Between Absence and Presence*, and appears to signify the obvious as a corpse is normally laid out horizontally. However, according to Philippe Aries in *Images of Man and Death*, the symbol of the recumbent figure was malleable and its meaning changed from one century to the next; from referring to the peaceful sleep of death, to a darker association with the corpse, to representing life and a reclining living person. (Aries, 56-58.) *Expectation in Repose*, which portrays a stoic young woman with eyes open, laid out across a bed, thoughtfully acknowledges this persisting cultural symbol of death.

The other two motifs, brilliant windows or spaces as seen in *Expectation in Repose, Mourning*, and *Domestic Disturbance II*, and the use of shrouds as seen in *A State of Preservation, Winding Sheet*, and *For the Sin-eater*, function symbolically in opposition to each other. Shrouds, or winding sheets cover the deceased and prepare the body for burial. Yet, in

concealing the corpse they remove from view the most powerful evidence of our mortality, and what Julia Kristeva termed “the utmost of abjection” and a “border that has encroached upon everything.” (Kristeva, 3-4.) The corpse reveals the limits of the body, it decays, and it disrupts the order of the living and therefore it revolts us. How can we come to terms with this inevitable state of being if we do not allow ourselves to sincerely see it?

Therefore, the brilliant light in several of my photographs provides an escape from the obscuring shroud, and can expel the darkness as the light does in my *Via gaze and scalpel series*. Also, both these motifs are utilized in *For the Sin-eater*, which is a representation of a nineteenth century funerary ritual in which it was believed that someone could take away the sins of the deceased by eating bread off of the corpse. In the photo, a shrouded figure in repose with an offering of moldy bread on his chest is dominated visually by the large chapel-like windows of light that command the viewer’s attention.

In general, these photographs, like the dissection series, while re-representing rituals and symbols from Western culture also seek to enter our private space which death permeated in the past. Today’s society on the other hand, has institutionalized death and concealed it from everyday life. In her series, *At the Hour of Our Death*, Sarah Sudhoff photographed at close range various domestic textiles that had been stained by someone’s body at the time of their death. Sudhoff recalls a traumatic experience of visiting her friend’s house after he had committed suicide and seeing no visible evidence that anything had happened. She felt this invisibility of the event made it difficult for her to fully mourn the loss and accept what had occurred. Moreover, Sudhoff views her experience as something that is common in modern Western society, and she quotes the long time scholar on death, Phillipe Aries who wrote, “Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of an individual no longer affects its continuity” (qtd. in <http://www.sarahsudhoff.com/>)

As Sudhoff's series pauses to focus on the mark of death, my photographs have a heightened sense of stillness for viewers to pause and reflect on our culture of death, as well as their own corporeality. For instance, the use of stark white environments and soft lighting surrounding the dissection specimens enhances the quietude of those photographs. Additionally, in the photograph *Necessary Inhumanity*, in which an unidentifiable figure rests his head wrapped in white gauze on a dining room table; the minimal environment and static centralized position of the body combined with an earthy color palette produces a still atmosphere for the viewer to contemplate on what they see. In this case, the viewer is asked to consider how the body must be depersonalized in order to become an anatomical body. As Christine Montross discerns in her thoughtful book, *Body of Work*, "Dissection, we will learn, will require us to turn off, in a sense, our connection with this humanity." (Montross, 25.)

Furthermore, the fact that the lifeless body is itself completely still like a photograph is what makes it so authoritative. In his short essay, *Utopian Body*, Michel Foucault meditates on embodiment and the utopias of the body it provokes. According to Foucault, the corpse informs us that we have a thing called the body and that it has a place because the body as a corpse assigns "a space to the profoundly and originally utopian experience of the body." (Foucault, 233). Through viewing the body as a corpse, we are able to see it as a whole and come to a better understanding of what it means to be embodied, and how that shapes our idea of self. Like Foucault, my photographs meditate over the physical body and its true significance on a personal and social level.

Overall, the photographs in *Strangely and Completely Present* represent a merging of cultural and aesthetic symbols, ideas, and contexts that have overwhelmed and obscured the body from past to present in order to visually reveal the densely coated contemporary body in all its complexity, ambiguity, and most of all visceral beauty.

From murky psychologically tense black and white photographs imbued with uncertainty, to luminous photographs exposing bodily mysteries, the process of self-examination becomes apparent. My own personal journey of coming to terms with my anxieties toward death, and the forming of a clearer understanding of the relationship between corporeality and my sense of being is made tangible and visible by this exhibition.

Moreover, as we continue to progress technologically as a species, we associate ourselves more and more with digitalization and virtual space, and less and less with nature and our biological essence. The post-biological body is imminent, and our connection with mind, body, and spirit is in turmoil whether we are consciously aware of it or not. Through *Strangely and Completely Present* I have responded to and explored this turmoil through artistic and visual means so that it may become more visible in society. According to Jane Wildgoose, from her essay *Grave-robbing, crucifixion, dissection: how far should we go in the name of art?:*

The urge to make art that inquiries into the workings of the human body, its vulnerability and mortality, is as pertinent now, at a time when medicine and science has so altered our expectations and experience of life, illness, beauty, aging and death, as it has ever been. If the relationship between art, science, society and death has become unbalanced it must be restored. (Wildgoose, 2.)

I believe that the relationship Wildgoose cites is unbalanced, and provides a place for a visceral aesthetic of the body in contemporary culture, as well as the motivation for continued exploration of the ideas set forth by this exhibition through the medium of photography. The silent exhibitionist nature of the photograph always seems to solicit the viewer's gaze and curiosity. It is purely for looking at, for as long as anyone would like to take the time to look at it, and most of all, it can be the means of coming to know something so inexplicable as: the lifeless body *is* beautiful.

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MFA Thesis Exhibition
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