

DANCING WITH THE DEAD

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**Catalogue essay written by
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In the western world, the concept of *Famadihana* is an unfamiliar and even grotesque one. In the traditional Malagasy ‘turning of the bones’, bodies of the deceased are exhumed from a crypt, years after their deaths, to join memorial celebrations. On these occasions, the unequivocal otherness of the dead is disregarded, and the boundary between life and death becomes permeable.

My experiences of death have included conversations that acknowledge that the subject is too large, too complicated, too distressing, and too taboo for over-tea-and-biscuits. People work hard to accommodate the individual eccentricities of grief, but often only to a certain point, beyond which it becomes distasteful. What *Famadihana* reminds us is that when you have lost someone, it is often difficult to accept that they are gone; that their absence can continue to affect us the same way as their presence. You can’t talk to them, listen to music together, or touch them, yet they can still provoke the same sense of longing or wanting to converse that they did when they were alive. You still love them the same amount.

A number of works in *Dancing with the Dead* take a sober tone in today’s world of constant change: Fiona Foley’s take on KKK-style hoods invites critical thinking on Australia’s ingrained racism. Jemima Wyman’s larger-than-life

mandala features the repetition of masks, watchful gazes and signs of protest. While the presence of textiles repeats throughout the selected artworks as a connecting motif, each artist presents a vision that underpins the connectivity of life beyond art, that traces how our everyday experiences shape us.

Bangladeshi artist Sarker Protick begins the framing of *Dancing with the Dead* with a dark and atmospheric three-channel video in which light and hope flicker in the shadows. Ingrained in personal experiences of loss and grief, *Raśmi* (2017-20) — meaning ‘a ray of light’ in Bangla — explores universal existential truths, being situated in a non-geographical, non-place. The focus of the work is finding light in the cosmos, the video ‘breathing’ or narrating a sequence of digital images juxtaposed with an immersive soundscape. The audio provides a continuous buzz, recordings of cool breeze and windchimes or cars passing by on a rainy day manipulated, distorted and merging with compositions by electronic instruments, creating an abstract vision as delicate as the subject of the work.

Of all the works in the exhibition, Protick’s is clean and minimal, and reduces thought to an essential idea extended from the human mind — what is limitless and what is possible in the entirety of the universe? The other video work in the show, *The Death Ritual* (Shown

in the Mirror), (2019), from Californian-born Glasgow-based artist Soojin Chang, further contrasts the interconnectedness of universal concepts with more limited, local engagement, showing how an online community can come together to witness intimate rituals in the face of darkness.

In her video, Chang sets out to explore the limits of visual representation in terms of surrogacy, the movement of bodies or migrancy, and deconstructions of species division. She declares: “I create or depict deconstructions of rituals — particularly consumption rituals — for audiences to face the ‘darkness’ of sociological and ecological problems and to see this as a very uneven surface that is open to transformation.” *The Death Ritual (Shown in the Mirror)* prepares the audience for death, and the rites enacted in her two-channel video aim to prepare viewers to find and accept the darkness within themselves.

Lindy Lee’s flung bronze installation, *Unencumbered*, (2019) shares the sleek and reductive aesthetic of *Raśmi*, yet the violence of the act of the artwork also mirrors *The Death Ritual (Shown in the Mirror)*. Fragments of boiling metal are ‘thrown’ against the wall; a single light reveals a reflective surface that engages the audience within the works. Finding the darkness of self is essential to Lee’s practice. “No matter how much I love or try to understand the other or myself, there will always be some mystery which is essentially impenetrable,” she explains. “We can never ultimately know with any intellectual certainty, the infinite depths of what exists —the ‘what’ and ‘who’ of we are has no boundary.”

At the forefront of Lee’s chosen means and modes of production practice is an

engagement with time in its existential and experiential qualities. She explores the ways in which humans interact with the physical world around them, while consciously referencing the intangible passage of time. Similarly, the relationship between time and the material world come into play in the work of Iranian born, Newcastle-based artist Mojgan Habibi. Her ceremonial installation, *Si morgh*, (2020) — refers to the mythical Persian bird that features in *The Conference of the Birds* by the 12th century Sufi poet, Farid ud-Din Attar. Bright and full of internal light, the artwork casts a glow over the room. A tunnel of cream fabric drapes from the ceiling, lit from within. Decorating the artwork are up to 2000 handmade ceramic feathers made from bone ash, binding the vast expanse of death to a particular time and place — commemorating the tragedy of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 75, shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran on 8 January 2020.

Also using natural motifs sewn onto fabric is the confronting and yet illuminating installation by Badtjala artist, Fiona Foley: *Analogues to Slavery* (2020). The two works play off each other in a balance of light and dark, their glimpses of the natural world uniting people across borders. *Analogues to Slavery* features pearls and shells, both imbued with particular meaning. The shells were hand combed by Foley on the island K’gari; they represent the artist’s attempt to understand through bodily engagement what it means to be Aboriginal in Australia. They also work to expose Australia’s very real (and as we have recently learned, not widely acknowledged) history of slavery - as colonists forced the Badtjala people to dive for pearls. While the black hoods evoke the masks placed over prisoners’ heads before

they were sent to the gallows, more broadly they also seem to represent the masks we wear in society to avoid dealing with these incongruent situations of right and wrong. The artist grew up in Queensland, in a time and place where racism against First Nations people was rampant. She was encouraged to reject such prejudice thanks to her activist mother: “With an Irish father and an Aboriginal mother, it was very anti-establishment, anti-monarchy, anti-English, anti-authority. We were raised to ask questions,” Foley says.

Mirroring Foley’s *Analogues to Slavery* installation is Australian-born, U.S.-based artist, Jemima Wyman’s black and white mandala, *Aggregate Icon (Black and white)* (2020). The larger-than-life artwork is visually intriguing and absorbing, as covered faces create a maze of repetition across the digital photo collage. In this work, Wyman reflects on the mask as an imaginary social space that exists beneath, and despite, the watchful gaze of networked surveillance. In *Aggregate Icon (Black and white)*, the artist draws on her multi-local perspective, as witness to the extraordinarily high incarceration rates of both African Americans and First Nations Australians. The recurring iconography (masks, bandanas, keffiyeh, *Scream* and *Guy Fawkes* masks) unite imaginary collectives under social camouflage, particularly in the context of protest — a pertinent strategy in current times.

In a powerful counterpoint to Wyman’s mandala, Melbourne-based Ukrainian-Australian artist Stanislava Pinchuk brings insight to the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in *The Red Carpet (4-6)* (2020). Monochromatic, in tones of muted red, Pinchuk’s artwork was first shown as a projection against the famous

Sydney’s Opera House stairs, a rendition of a classic Bessarabian rug that also encloses a data-map of the topography of Kiev’s Maidan square, damaged during the 2014 insurrection. The artist’s oeuvre often subverts the notion of textiles as ‘women’s work’; this work shows how she connects her own heritage to broader issues of women’s rights and place-and-space-making, illuminating even the most minute cracks of earth in dense and desperate conflict zones.

Echoes of textile art are also seen within the colourful and detailed *Fragmented Memories* (2017-18) series by Khadim Ali, in which he tells stories of his war-torn home in Afghanistan, and of the persecution of the Hazara ethnic minority. However, being now Sydney-based, Ali explores a more global or transnational perspective. Against the classic iconography of Islamic demons and a richly-patterned, colourful surface, Ali adds soldiers, guns, and the British flag: bringing to our attention the geopolitical context of the war and the continued presence of the U.S., U.K. and Australia.

As Ali automatically invokes his status as a refugee in his artworks, so does Pierre Mukeba in his installation *Artist Books* (2019-20). Born in the Congo, Mukeba moved from Zambia to Zimbabwe before finding safety and security in Adelaide in 2006. However, where Ali exquisitely melds his transnational perspective, cultural blindness is at the forefront of Mukeba’s works—the blindness of Western countries to suffering in Africa. “Each piece represents everyday life in Africa and expresses how the people feel,” Mukeba shares. “I try to keep my drawings as real as I can.” The artist does this in beautiful, highly stylised drawings, paintings, and fabric

collages, usually in the same colours of red, blue, yellow, and black felt tip pens. In *Artist Books*, the young artist challenges his usual scale (larger-than-life artworks on bed sheets) with an intimate and personal collection of faces drawn in Moleskine artist books, people tumbling out from the covers. However, subtle differences reveal embedded meanings: in one collection of books suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, a portrait series of older people appears against a dark grey background, the other side is left white, with gestural uses of negative space balanced against the innocent gaze of children.

Juxtaposed with the children in *Artist Books* are photographs of the 'Born Free' generation of black South Africans and the Rwandan *enfants mauvais souvenirs* (children of bad memories) in Cape Town-based Pieter Hugo's 1994 series (2014-16). Employing his characteristic, confrontational *mise-en-scène*, Hugo contrasts the vivid colours of the children's clothing and skin with muted backgrounds of rural life in the two countries. In these works, Hugo asks: how can we forget trauma? His expression of multinational solidarity is in bringing to light stories of children born on opposite sides of extreme darkness. His works invite us to contemplate ideas of freedom, survival and identity, using the truth-telling medium of photography. As he puts it, "Art has the ability to slow down our thinking process, to give us a time for reflection."

Dancing with the Dead brings together the practices of ten local and international artists whose respective narratives begin to undermine the perceived exoticism and grotesquerie of the *Famadihana* ritual. These works remind us that whatever our experience of 'dead' is, whether it be the loss

of homeland, spirituality, family or cultural freedom, that such significant experiences can offer illuminating insights, and fortify our love for the living. Paradoxically, their very difference, their intrinsic, impenetrable individuality binds us together in a universal way, putting momentary concerns into clearer perspective. As Lindy Lee has it, "if we don't enter the darkness, we won't find illumination. It's always worth the journey."

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