

DANCING WITH THE DEAD

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La mort apprivoisée

by David Hansen



Everyone and everything will be forgotten.

From the boneyard of anglophone literary history I excavate the remains of Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832), Regency cleric, sportsman, wine merchant, gambler and writer. Reputedly as brilliant as he was unreliable – one anthologist summed him up as ‘an eccentric man of talent, with little or no principle’ - Colton is remembered (or if not remembered, at least digitally embalmed) primarily as the author of *Lacon: or, Many Things in Few Words; addressed to those who think*, a collection of epigrams and aphorisms of varying degrees of originality and force. Amongst its gems is this panegyric:

Death is the liberator of him whom freedom cannot release, the physician of him whom medicine cannot cure, and the comforter of him whom time cannot console.

According to the first (1900) edition of the British *Dictionary of National Biography*, Colton suffered from what it describes only as ‘a painful disease.’ Colton’s entry also states that while visiting his friend Major Markham Sherwell at Fontainebleau 28 April 1832, ‘he falsified one of the remarks in *Lacon*, viz. that “no one ever committed suicide from bodily anguish, though thousands have done so from mental anguish”, by killing himself rather than submit to a surgical operation.’

In *Dancing with the Dead*, curated by Antidote Projects, we encounter through the white-light-shattering prism of contemporary art all the social and metaphysical paradoxes and ironies of Colton’s doctor, the liberator, the comforter, the Lord Humungus, the Grim Reaper himself.

Not in an obvious way, but.

In this anthology of contemporary approaches to mortality, there is, to begin with, a wholly admirable avoidance of the *memento mori* skull, that familiar cypher born in Early Modern tombstones and still life paintings and funerary accoutrements, and later adopted by subcultures from Yale University’s Order 322 to the Nazi SS to fans of the Grateful Dead, before becoming in the early 21st century the plaything of corporations and high net worth individuals and dumbarse artists: in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie franchise, in fashion statements from scarves by Alexander McQueen to Ralph Lauren cufflinks, and ultimately in Damien Hirst’s egregious diamond-encrusted investment vehicle, *For the Love of God*.

No, here we have abstraction, a serious search for the meaning in and of our ultimate, meaningless annihilation. It is conducted not by illustrative semiotic signalling, but by a more

subtle and open curatorial methodology, a kind of aesthetic séance in which unexpected formal and conceptual resonances are lightly traced amongst and between works of art, connections made present by the implicit presence of death. Of course, the space between heaven and earth is filled with troops and multitudes of the deceased, Zoroastrian *Daevas* numbering (in the words of the *Avesta*) in the ‘thousands of thousands ... ten thousands of ten thousands ... numberless myriads.’ In fact, the American ...demographer Carl Haub estimated in 2002 that the total human population over all time comes in at somewhere around 106 billion. These ‘invisible crowds’ (to use Elias Canetti’s formulation) of the past dead press in on us constantly.’

In the exhibition many of those dead are present. Bellicose savagery and slaughter are implicit in narrow survival, as we see here in Khadim Ali’s *Fragmented Memories*, in Pieter Hugo’s 1994 photographs and even in the indifferent acceptance of Pierre Mukeba’s portrait subjects. The works of Jemima Wyman and Lindy Lee and Stanislava Pinchuk speak to one another in a different way; here the fierceness of the goddess Kali, of the fullness of time, of the nasty, brutish, shortness of our span of years is turned and transformed, fear of death sublimated by the perfect geometry of the circle, the spinning wheel, the mandala, the pattern of a Bessarabian carpet.

Mojgan Habibi and Soojin Chang connect not only through their ceremonial atmospheres – respectively a lucent memorial installation and a Cambodian mortuary rite, but through the strange vector of burnt animal bones: Habibi’s *Simorgh* feathers are made from osteal ash, while in Chang’s video *Death Ritual (Shown in the Mirror)* we see bits of dead cow given a formal, traditional Cambodian ritual cremation. Meanwhile, in another screen-based work, Sarker Protick’s *Rasmi*, black blanks and images of rocks and flickering lights make curious intersection with the shard-shaped hoods and metallic-embroidered eye-holes of Fiona Foley’s *Analogues to Slavery*.

Which work brings me to one final observation. In the reception of art, context is critical. The impact of recent and current events – the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and across the world following the killings of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, and the Australian community response, with its focus on Aboriginal deaths in custody – has transformed this exhibition, giving its aesthetic and metaphysical speculations a harder, more political edge. We think not only of those recent deaths, but also of those ‘whom freedom cannot release’ – from oppression, prejudice, disadvantage.

Everyone and everything will be remembered.

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