

*Santa Muerte, Holy Death:  
Death and Burials in Barcelona*

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“The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?”

(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Premature Burial*)

I grew up on a farm, where death was an everyday occurrence. The realities of death, from which I was never protected, were at the forefront of my upbringing. Being raised by an Anglican priest cemented my understanding of mortality. Through the reading of scriptures and participation in religious ceremony I came to understand one thing- life is about death.

During this project I found myself cemented at a crossroad. My working practices as a sculptural artist had become challenged. It had become clear to me, that despite my intentions, my work was to no longer be a three dimensional piece. I had captured a moment in time through the lens of my camera that held more meaning and more weight than I had thought possible. This image was to become my final work.

And so it became. Photography became my medium, the cemeteries my sites and the graves my subjects. In the process of making I spent much of my time looking at and taking in the meaning behind the headstones found. The headstone featured in the work is very much a reflection of the rich Catholic history of Spain. Not only the subject, but also through the romanticised way it holds itself and how history moulds the perception of the viewer.

I truly grappled with the idea of a photograph being the final work. There was a division within myself, an on-going argument between my voice as a contemporary artist and my own personal view of myself as an artist. As a traditional sculptress I felt so strongly that I needed to make and produce something that the viewer could engage with through being in the same physical space as the object. Understanding my practice and myself more clearly now, I realise it was all about that single captured moment.

As Susan Sontag says “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or things) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to times relentless melt.” In capturing an image of the reminder of another’s mortality, I found I was reminding myself of my own fate.

There is a liminal space between living and dying, where one forgets and remembers their own mortality at the same time. In this space, there are mutable intersections where life and death meet and are one and the same. One cannot begin to exist without the other and to make the most of life one must accept the fact that by living, our death is inevitable. For me this is an embodied experience, it is a crossroads that I have faced before, it is ambiguous and powerful and throughout this project I have continuously debated where my own understanding sits within this space.

In Barcelona, I spent many days making my way through the Poblenou Cemetery and Montjuic Cemetery. I used this time to document the history of these spaces through the lens of my camera in the hopes of capturing a moment that reflected my thoughts. During my time there, I connected with death in a way I had not done before. I experienced death as a location and in this, was able to identify and acknowledge another cultural relationship with mortality. This personal connection with the site is as important to the work as it was in allowing myself to be present. I was able to go about photographing the space almost ritualistically over several weeks.

Spanish culture is imbued with the beauty of death. The way death and mortality are embraced was clear throughout my research and my lived experiences in Barcelona. The connection is evident in the actions that are taken both before and after death. The vigil and ceremony that surrounds everyone involved with preparing for death lends to and reflects the respect and love that is conventionally important in the whole process.

This work continues to be one that opens my eyes to my own need to connect with mortality. Not just my own, but also that of my friends and family. I am at this moment in time working through how to take on that sense of vigil and ceremony and put it into practice for the inevitability of loss to come, that of my mother. Learning how to embrace my own mortality and the mortality of humans as a whole is a daunting task and ultimately, is why I set out to document the remnants of life.

Through this photographic documentation there were countless moments I was stopped by the sheer beauty in each moment captured. The final photograph is one of those instances. I was in the Montjuic Cemetery for the afternoon and while walking around I was taken by how the light was reflecting off the water at the bottom of the hill and lighting the statue. I sat in front of it and looked at it through my camera lens. The thing that struck me was how the blue of the sky and the light hitting it almost muted the finer lines and details but also made it glow in the afternoon sun. The image that I was left with was more than I could have imagined. Although the colours and detail have been washed out there is a weightlessness to the piece. The light that was captured brings me back to that liminal space between life and death again. This photograph makes what I believe are moments of intersection, something that can be seen.

Through my research it becomes clear that some areas of death are tied into an almost ritualistic way of doing things. In the final days, a Spanish family congregates and comes together to be there and get ready for death. They rally around one another and make sure that everything that can be done to keep the person dying comfortable is done. The women usually take it upon themselves to care for the dying instead of putting them into a palliative care facility or hospital. This level of care and connectedness is in contradiction with how I always viewed those moments and days leading up to death and yet now I can think of nothing more beautiful than being surrounded by the love of those I care about, in a place that is calming and personal.

My work and research throughout my time in Barcelona was based on looking at a society's overall view on death and burials. Reflecting on my time in Barcelona, I have come to realize that this work is really about how I connect with death. The images that I have collected reflect the changes in how I myself view mortality.

On one of my many visits to Poblenou Cemetery, I stood back voyeuristically and witnessed a family and the way in which they came together in the space. I watched them clean the niche while the children with them ran around playing tag. I realized two things that day; firstly, it was important to these people to be there doing these things, almost as if it was their way of keeping that connection and love present even after death. The second, that we aren't born with a fear of death or mortality, that is something that comes later in life when we feel as though there is something to lose.

Mitch Albom talks about the lives that we all live between birth and death in his book *Have a Little Faith*, by saying "The story of my recent life. I like that phrase. It makes more sense than 'the story of my life', because we get so many lives between life and death. A life to be a child. A life to come of age. A life to wander, to settle, to fall in love, to parent, to test our promise, to realize our mortality – and in some lucky cases, to do something after that realization."

In witnessing this familial ritual, I once again was stunned by the beauty in death and the life that it takes on. The time and effort that goes into celebrating both the life and death of the deceased allows for them to hold onto the person they love. The calm that I felt in both Poblenou and Montjuic Cemeteries brought me back to the meaning of these spaces as they aren't there to represent the end, like I had once thought, but rather they create a space of love and remembrance.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of November each year, All Saints Day or Dia de todos los Santos is celebrated across Spain. It is a recognised national holiday that celebrates and honours the dead. Although traditions can vary, across most of Spain families come together and gather at their local cemeteries to spend time with their deceased family members. Over the course of the day, families spend time cleaning and decorating their family headstones, crypts and niches. Typically, you will find floral displays, candles, photos, religious mementos and notes left behind by the family. Over the course of the day there are also several Mass services held at the cemeteries for families to attend.

My first visit to Poblenou cemetery was exactly one month after All Saints Day had taken place. Even still, the time and effort that had gone into that day was at the forefront of what I saw. Beyond the flowers, mementos and photos there is a calm across the whole cemetery that encompasses and welcomes you. In a space that has seen more pain and tears than I could ever begin to imagine, I felt nothing but peace surround me. In looking back on this day, I realize I'm not scared of the physical act of dying but rather I am afraid of my own mortality.

Jonathan Franzen says, "The fundamental fact about all of us is that we're alive for a while but will die before long. This fact is the real root cause of all our anger and pain and despair. And you can either run from this fact or, by way of love, you can embrace it." Throughout my own experiences I have held onto that anger and pain, much to my own detriment at times. Yet now I strive to embrace the time that I do have with those whom I love, this is where the beauty and peace lies for me.

Throughout my work there have been two main artists that I have continued to refer to. The content of their works and arts practices have influenced how I went about my own

work. The first is Joel-Peter Witkin, whose photography work looks at life and death respectively. Although his work borderlines on grotesque, it looks at death as an object rather than a state of being. He works in that liminal space, taking what is very obviously dead but arranging it such a way that it is brought to life in his pieces. He places the objects in his work in an uncanny in-between space that questions materiality and embodiment, and in doing so he blurs the lines of what is too close for comfort within the viewer.

In an interview that he did with THE magazine in 2012, he was asked about his comments on his work at times being smarter than himself. His response to this resonates with me, not only in my own arts practice but in how my own piece came about. He says “trying to make a discovery represents growth and direction. Sometimes we trip, sometimes we walk faster and sometimes we make a leap. That said, sometimes what happens in the process of turning ourselves inside out to manifest a personal vision, we grow.”

The second artist is Sophie Calle, her work *Pas pu Saisir La Mort* or *Couldn't Capture Death*, stood out to me because of the ritualistic actions she took to capture the final moments of her mother's life. It was the way she was able to capture the exact second of intersection between life and death and yet could not define and pinpoint it that has stayed with me.

Calle filmed over 100 hours of her mother's final three months of life. She documented everything that she wanted to hold onto when her mother was gone. It was a way for her to understand and interpret what was happening, not only her mother but also herself. The final work was edited down into an 11-minute film which she showed at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

In an interview Calle did with Angelique Chrisafis from The Guardian in 2007, she explains the motivation behind the work. “It became almost an obsession. I wanted to be there when she died. I didn't want to miss her last words, her last smile. And I knew I had to shut my eyes to sleep, because agony was very long, there were [sic] a risk I might not be there, I put a camera there, thinking if she gave a last jump or start, a last word, at least I'd have it on film.”

Throughout this experience I have been able to connect to my own art practice on a deeper level and been able to delve into what I think and what is. It has helped me to grow as an artist. My piece has taken me to places both personally and professionally that I wasn't aware I needed to go. For me, this has been about embracing the liminal space and unpredictability of living, because although there is no cut and dry answer, there are moments of clarity. Those moments come when you least expect it, but it's about making yourself present enough to see them. The fear of mortality will always exist within us as humans though it is holding onto our lessons and rituals that we are able to push past that and live fully.

This piece is a reminder to me as an artist and as a person, that it is important to stop sometimes to look and listen to more than my own thoughts. Sometimes the answer is

right in front of you even if it isn't as clear as you would like it. That uncertainty is what makes life beautiful, it is also what makes death and mortality fascinating.

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