Remember Me. The Changing Face of Memorialisation

Interdisciplinary conference, 5-7 April 2018, Hull, UK

Synopsis

This paper was presented in the form of a letter read at the same time as showing a short film depicting a sea burial off the coast of Cornwall. The work is 6 minutes in length. The visual underwater landscape that the film depicts has become a map of my late sons memorial ground. Metaphorically it is where I go to visit him. It has become a psychic memorial site raising questions as to the need for a physical place of remembrance. Working with ephemeral and time based materials such as dust and human ashes I invite the audience to contemplate transient ways of remembering the dead as an on going process that is not fixed or associated with one place in time. My research focused on the idea that creative practice allows for important bonds to continue with the deceased. Death has been described as the edge at which all narrative ceases. Words, image making and sound emerge from this powerful darkness. My research explores through creative practice the on going relationship we have with the dead and how they continue to influence our lives.

Dear Jack

All at sea again. It is hard to imagine how many human remains lie on the seabed. How many burials at sea have there been? I look out to sea and death stretches out for infinity like the night sky. Perhaps the ocean acts as a mirror? When I look up at the sky at night it is empty and black. What I see in the blackness are reflections of all the souls in the water below going on forever without end. Waves of historic deaths wash onto our shores. I see the ocean as a vast map depicting all the deaths there have even been at sea.

Following your death I carried your body for ten years reluctant to give you up to rest in one place. When I travelled to new places I would release small teaspoons of your cremated remains in locations around the world feeling the weight and responsibility of remembrance, the inheritance of your young life contained within them. The world became a memorial site setting you adrift in places you could only imagine. Yet it was on this particular grey day in August following a series of heavy and damaging storms that raged along the northern coast of Cornwall that I quite clearly heard the ocean calling you back. Have you ever listened to the ocean cry after dark? Awake at night you can hear the soft distant wailing as the wind brushes over its surface. The souls of the drowned telling their stories to those that will listen. At night the ocean cries its salt tears heaving under the weight of mourning its dead. At times the sea tosses and turns with its own sadness throwing up violent storms and sucking more human life into it. Like grief itself it can be a fearful monster, terrifying and unpredictable one moment and then gentle and sublime the next. No wonder we fear it; the personification of death itself.

Being at sea and viewing the landmass from the water turns what you know upside down. The horizon seemed to slip into the sea. Carrying your ashes under one arm I became adrift in the greyness of the day. *All hands on deck at dawn sailing to sadder shores.* I was bobbing hypnotically on the gentle lull of the water in a colour that resembled Payne’s grey. Grey edges its way towards black. It hovers in the shadows between the night and the day between waking and sleeping, between endings and beginnings. It is an on going state unlike blackness, which turns the corner eventually into light. It is the colour of fog, of mist, of unknowing, of endlessness, of melancholia. You do not come to an end in grey. It is the colour of shadows, of dust.

After your death I realized I had been living with grey for many years as it seeped into me without me noticing. The air around me formed into droplets of melancholia that filled my lungs with this greyness. From there they spread into my blood cells and throughout my body until the feeling of grey was all that I knew.

Did you know that the soul is thought to linger in the place of death where there is sudden loss of life? The site becomes a place where communication can take place between the dead and the living. The dead are thought to reside in these places and can still be reached by the living. At sea the body cannot be fixed or trapped in time. It becomes transient in the same way that we remember the dead as an on going changing process. Communication takes place in the vastness of the ocean as a whole. The ocean is a transient memorial ground shifting and changing like our memories of the dead. The ocean too is where I go to communicate with you.

When I stand before the ocean with my eyes closed I breath in the essence of that haunted landscape. I imagine that the mournful sound of whales can be heard singing to all the dead children of the sea. Lonely and deep it is both painful and beautiful like two fish swimming in opposite directions, one gasping for the light, the other hiding in the darkness below. Bereavement is very much like that. If you hold a seashell to your ear it is not the waves that you hear tumbling to the shore but the whisperings of the dead.

Black engulfs me in a gothic fantasy, wild and terrifying, delightful, sublime and intoxicating. Grey is just grey like a grey day. It is the colour of nothing. Yet there is softness in grey and a gentle wondering within its shadows of where it will take you? It is the space of the liminal, the interlude. Death maybe seen as the colour of black but we remember the dead in grey. The statue of the weeping woman weeps grey tears from a graveside in Montmartre, Paris. Within cemetery walls we walk amongst the dead in hues of grey stone mirroring the internal landscape of loss.

Grey is the colour of grief softened by time.

I opened you up and gently released your body into the water a little at a time. The absence of light made our senses finely tuned to otherness, the irrational space that lay below. The blue grey edges its way towards black, as all light is temporarily lost under the lightweight of your falling. You fell. Your body shattered into a thousand pieces an avalanche of particles taken away by the sea. *Your port in my heavy storms harbours the blackest thoughts.*

It hovered for a moment in the shadows just below the surface with the light piecing through drifting between endings and beginnings. Yet in that moment of sea mist and perfection you were summoned by the darkest hue beneath the surface. Beauty beyond imagining as I watched your body hover just beneath the surface pausing for a moment in the light before giving way to the pull that took you down. The swell of the ocean began to breath you into another kind of being. I knew we would never see you again. Your final gift became the sublimity of your parting. The silence, the mystery, the lightness within the grey. You fell like ocean rain swirling in the undertow becoming once again nebulous echoing the formation of stars of distant galaxies that now belonged to the sea. I sat in the boat. I was above the surface, you below watching your body collapse into the motion of the sea, fragments moving towards the invisible horizon. A horizontal world waiting for you below. You lingered and hung like a gentle sea mist below the surface reluctant to leave and after a while of watching I could see you were neither floating up nor down but blowing along on an imaginary wind. You were drifting in otherness.

I have become haunted by the sound of your body giving itself up to the sea. I listened a long time after you were visibly gone.

So the seabed too will become grey in time as I draw a resting place for my soul and yours, where I can be present once again in the past. *At sea again* in this grey I will fall softly landing with you in this underwater grave.

With love always