Mercedes Kemp – Writer and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art Critical Studies

Lucy Willow - Visual Artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art Sculpture

School of Art, Falmouth University

TITLE OF PAPER: LOST FOR WORDS

Death, mortality, death café, dust, grief, loss, resurrection, death rites, ritual, memorial

*Cafe Morte looks at the way in which visual and textual cultures represent death and dying, mourning and grieving through art, dreams, desires, imagery and poetry.*

We will present this paper through research material generated from the exhibition Lost for Words exploring the themes of presence and absence in the artworks exhibited. The paper will take you on a virtual tour of the exhibition through which we will unravel a sense of loss each contains and within that the parallel experience of an unseen ‘presence’. The paper will take the form of a ‘conversation’ generated by particular artworks and how they relate to one another.

The ghosts of the exhibition were present as a living experience by the audience who visited. Absence, the realm of uncertainty arises within the works. When looking into the space of death something tangible becomes present. Images arise. Poetry gets written, meaning is found. Reflecting on absence reveals to us the core of who we love. The presence of that person is often felt more strongly in their absence. Out of this profound and paradoxical space artworks emerge.

*Bram Arnold* artist and PHD student’s dead fathers remains are literally present tied up in a handkerchief and presented as part of his installation documenting a walk taken with the memory of his father. Questions as to what we do with the remains of a body are raised in this piece. Our internal life is expressed though our relationship with the physical. Thoughts, emotions and experiences become present through the work in the exhibition. We are touched by the unseen fragments of dead lives.

*Viola Qian* international performance and video artist submits a video work projected onto the wall of a young woman leaning into an invisible presence. We are aware of her need for the physical body of this person and feel that they are actually their supporting her throughout the performance. It is a powerful reminder of the space that memories of experience occupy. Nothingness takes the shape of a person present like an atmosphere.

*Joanna Hulin,* artist and member of Café Morte group in her painting ‘Untitled (Damned Spot)’ depicts the anxious hand of a dying person. We are not sure of the gender, the painting finds its place in the unsettled unknown narrative that it evokes. In the absence of a body, an identity or fixed narrative we are left with the uncomfortable feeling of bearing witness to an anxious moment that we endure over and over again in the painting.

We would like to now invite the audience to select works of interest from the exhibition to discuss in the context of presence and absence.

The exhibition provided a space to connect with health care professionals and academics from different disciples interested in this area of research. The research generated from curating this exhibition have been thought-provoking and varied in their content covering topics such as how personal loss is represented in a work of art, how as artists we engage with the subject of grief within our practice, metaphorical death experienced in life, materiality of death as seen in dust and ashes, the memorial space, the vagina dentata and mythological death rites.

In the wake of death, the space after, creativity takes place. Death and dying are integral to art and literature. We are interested in how death generates a creative response in artists, writers and the individual through memorializing and making visible the space it occupies. Is creative expression elevated through loss? Does it become richer and deeper? Following death a metaphorical postmortem occurs where the space of death is examined, analyzed, questioned, taken apart and reassembled through writing, music, performance, ritual or visual art. Death rites bring out creativity.

CAFE MORTE is a research group established at Falmouth University School of Art in 2014 by Mercedes Kemp and Lucy Willow. It is made up of senior lecturers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, curators and artists. Its central focus is to discuss the rich and varied themes of death found in art and literature.