

INCANDESCENCE

Images we will never see of ourselves



An interview with photographer Maeve Berry, B.A. (Hons)

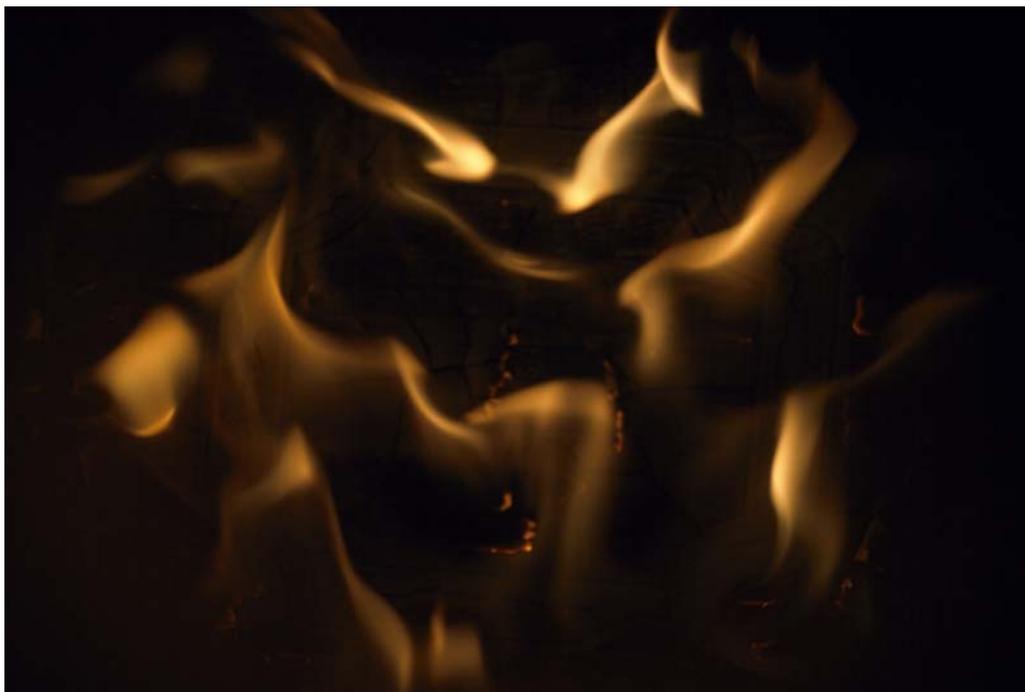
Q: How did you come to photograph death?

A: A lot of people ask that question and I like to think that this subject matter found me rather than me purposefully seeking it out. During the penultimate year of my Photography degree I had to make a decision as to the subject matter of my major project which would be exhibited in a public gallery. I discovered that I had been subconsciously gathering a wealth of research on the subject of death imagery; so, in essence, I felt the decision was made for me.

Q: Was it your initial aim to photograph in a Crematorium?

A: Not initially. I knew that I wanted to fill the void that exists in the modern art gallery with regard to the representation of death. My initial research was based on the premise that in modern society we are accustomed to viewing images of every race, creed, able and disabled body, ranging from the cradle to the grave but stopping just short of the grave. Death is inevitable but frequently avoided by image makers. Every one of life's events is recorded by the camera; our lives are commemorated through photographs beginning with the baby in the womb and this is reflected in public galleries. Great importance is placed on capturing all the great milestones in life such as christenings, graduations, weddings etc. All of these events are usually a time when all the family gathers. A funeral is also a time when all the family gathers but is treated very differently when it comes to recording the event in photographs.

The 'final' photograph is not prevalent in family albums, galleries etc. Death portraits, when taken, are kept very private and seldom circulate outside the immediate family or sometimes are kept secret by the person who took the photograph.





Q: From your research, did you have a clear idea of the images you wanted to take?

A: I was very conscious of the fact that the death imagery we are exposed to, is usually quite sensational, in that it is frequently images taken as a result of violence and crime, aftermath of war etc and that life stopped by the bullet seems to more 'viewable' than a death through natural causes.

For most people, the thought of photographing a corpse is abhorrent. I wanted the opportunity to bring death imagery to the gallery without causing offence or upset to the viewer.

Q: In a practical sense, how did you approach fulfilling your aim?

A: My initial steps towards fulfilling the project were visits to an undertaker with a view to exploring the various possibilities of bringing death imagery to the gallery. Through my contact with the undertaker I was offered the opportunity to visit a crematorium and this proved to be a turning point for me. I was taken behind the public areas and it was here that I felt inspired the most. My only experience of crematoria was, like most people, as a mourner, and to be behind the scenes was a total revelation to me. I had no idea what to expect but thought that it would most likely be similar to a factory type operation. Throughout my life, in keeping with the Irish custom of open caskets, I have seen many corpses. To see a scene that I would never be able to see of myself – stripped of all material trappings, bones laid bare, was a fascinating and compelling sight. It was also quite beautiful. After my visit to the crematorium I was convinced that I wanted to go forward on an artistic rather than documentary route.

Q: What was the reaction from your peers and others when you told them about your project?

A: I discovered that people are naturally curious to know what happens when they die, but few have the opportunity to see behind the scenes, and most are afraid to question. When friends and colleagues found out that I was spending a lot of time in crematoria they were curious in a joking sort of way to cover their embarrassment. Once over their initial embarrassment, they did genuinely want their questions answered. They needed information and to be reassured. I was happy to dispel the numerous urban myths.



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Q: What kind of questions did they ask you?

A: Was there a smell of burning flesh?

Are the coffins all piled up and burned together?

Do people get the right ashes back?

Are the coffin handles taken off and sold?

Are the coffins really burned, or are they used again?

Are gold fillings removed and sold?

Does jewellery stay in the coffin?

Is the cremator cleaned out after each cremation or do the ashes get mixed in with the next cremation?

What surprised a lot of people was how I spoke about the respect and dignity that I experienced behind the scenes.

Q: Do you feel that modern day attitudes towards death differ greatly from, say, the Victorians?

A: Absolutely. In Victorian times, death was more a part of the community; people were closer to death. It was common place for the corpse to stay in the family home until the burial. Family members would have washed and dressed the corpse. From mid 20th Century, social change such as progression in healthcare for example, resulted in deaths being more likely to take place in hospitals and for all preparations thereafter to be in the hands of professionals.

Q: Did your research show that people feel distanced or excluded when it comes to dealing with a death in the family?

A: Yes, my experience during the research revealed that the bereaved felt that caring for the dead was taken out of their control. I feel that the 'open house' policy that some undertakers and crematoria adopt is essential to the grieving process.

Bearing in mind that we live in an age where sex education, drugs awareness, health & safety issues and crime prevention classes, are prevalent in schools, I think it is a concern that there is no mention of death and no preparation is offered for the emotional, practical or financial impact that death brings. Education about death could ultimately dispel the myths and misconceptions held by the vast majority of people.





Q: Were you concerned about the viewers' attitude towards your subject matter?

A: I was very much aware of the sensitive nature of my subject matter and it was not my aim to shock or to be sensationalist. I believe that death portraits should have their place amongst the eclectic mix of portraits in galleries but I also accept that people may have difficulty in dealing with something they have no experience of; therefore any public images of death have to be respectful of the viewers' feelings. I knew that creating an abstract image would allow me to draw the viewer in, through curiosity and intrigue. There is an air of mystery about the images, which ties in with the mystery surrounding death itself. The images, in addition to being evidence of the human condition, are aesthetically pleasing and the gallery context, where one is expected to dwell and contemplate, allows the viewer to linger and reflect without feeling uneasy, or judged to have a morbid fascination – art allows this. To see an image like this helps demystify what is usually left to the imagination and allay the fears of the unknown.

Q: What has the project meant to you personally?

A: In keeping with my Irish heritage, I have always assumed that I would have a traditional burial. Having completed this project I now feel that the cremated body is an acceptance of finality; there is no pretence, and no mistaking that the body will ever be sensate again and I feel that cremation will be a fitting exit for me. Having worked closely with the crematorium I have no doubts or uneasiness about the process and know that I will be treated with dignity and respect

My images have provoked debate and encouraged thought and hopefully helped to demystify death for some viewers.

For my part I aim to 'spread the word' on crematoria's 'open house' policy.

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