

Death, As Seen by 8 Female Artists

By Julia Gomez Kramer

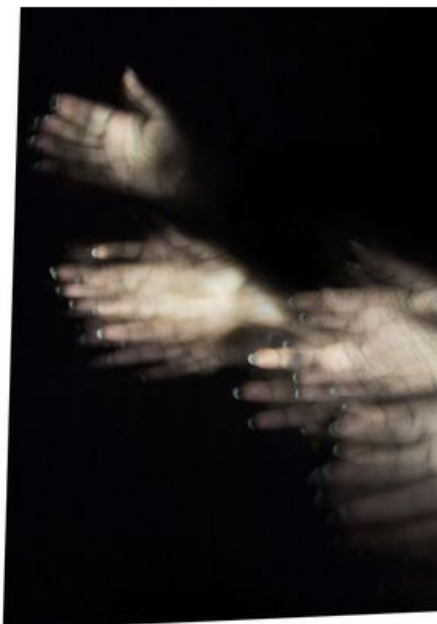


Photo: Clockwise from top left: Photos courtesy of Walter Włodarczyk, BRIC Cultural Counsel, Mimi Bai, and Cultural Counsel.

BRIC, the nonprofit arts organization just steps from Fort Greene Park, is expanding discussion of the mysterious, often taboo, and inevitable: death. BRIC contemporary art curator Jenny Gerow and Green-Wood Cemetery's Harry Weil worked together to curate their current exhibition, "Death Becomes Her." The show features the work of ten artists — eight in-gallery and two performance pieces later this month and next at Green-Wood — and their interpretations of death and the impact it has on the living. While attitudes toward death have shifted over generations (point me toward a millennial or Gen-Zer who doesn't meme about death) and varies across cultures, we're all in the same boat: There's no escape.

Keep scrolling to see how the eight featured artists think about — and represent — death.



Catalina Ouyang, *end of the line*, 2019, Alabaster and hair. Photo credit: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC.



Catalina Ouyang, *past imperfect (Lipotes vexillifer and Psephurus gladius)*, 2019, Hydrocal, gypsum, polystyrene, steel, burlap, dehydrated raw eggs, shellac, epoxy resin, color pigment, earth, and teeth.

Ouyang's work arises from a scientific approach and is excerpted from her Yale thesis show *fish mystery in the shift horizon*. It stems from the socio-ecological phenomenon "shifting-baseline syndrome," wherein scientists gather qualitative data through word of mouth, literature, and art, rather than numerical data. Her research circled around ideas of extinction, environmental collapse, and inheritance — or generational transference — in a diasporic framework.

"I grew up without any relationship to religion or spiritual practice, so I think my [perspective] on death is still fairly pragmatic. You end. Then some people mourn, in whatever ways they have been socialized to mourn."



Gyun Hur, *I wouldn't know any other way*, 2020. Hand-shredded silk flowers, vinyl print, and mirror. Photo credit: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC.

Hur focuses on the personal relationships our bodies have with death. Her vision was to explore the natural transitions of life and its vulnerability, as well as the process of unraveling emotional weight in life through the meditative yet unforgiving labor of making (as in, creating). She wanted to call attention to how, biologically, female bodies carry life and death — how the ritual of mourning is a labor that women have long carried within themselves. Three months leading up to the opening were dedicated to hand-shredding roughly 4,500 silk flowers. That repetitive, time-consuming process is a play on the meditative labor of making and the emotional labor required to maintain memories of the dead.

“We as women mourn, because our bodies have been violated by history. To share a very personal story, my most recent loss was a miscarriage. While agonizing over that loss, most of the time in silence or private conversations, it was my first time experiencing the wonders of my body in relation to death. I felt this exhibition would give me that opportunity to explore such transition and vulnerability.”

Heidi Lau / @heidiwtlau



Heidi Lau, *The Burial Chamber*, 2020. Glazed ceramic and water. Photo credit: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC.

Lau's collection of ten ceramic works is based on a tomb chamber and is heavily influenced by archaeological discoveries from the Qin dynasty, as well as Han dynasty jade burial suits. She has long been interested in Taoist mythology, but it was after her mother's death that she began diving into research of different funeral and burial rituals as part of her grieving process. Though the death-positive movement is growing (and is highlighted by this exhibit) she feels that it is still a taboo subject, even in the art world.

"All the works in the exhibition have made me think that perhaps there's a kind of transformation or even alchemy that could happen if you don't shut yourself off from grief but really sit with it and learn from it. Since death is ultimately inevitable, maybe it is okay to start thinking about it as a mental exercise."



Keisha Scarville, *Untitled #6* from the series *Placelessness of Echoes (and Kinship of Shadows)*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Cultural Counsel, BRIC.



Keisha Scarville, *Untitled #7* from the series *Placelessness of Echoes (and Kinship of Shadows)* series, 2016. Photo courtesy of Cultural Counsel, BRIC.

Scarville's photographic work, *Placelessness of Echoes (and kinship of shadows)*, was inspired by Wilison Harris's novel *Palace of the Peacock*, which explores the concept of a "possessed, living landscape." In an effort to provide viewers the opportunity to expand their perception of death, she "constructs a new topographic understanding of the landscape, which blurs the specificity between the body and the terrain."

"I am engaging the landscape as a place where both life and death are in a constant state of flux. I think of death as an inevitable and necessary gateway to the unknown. As a catalyst to transformation. It is a process that can be incredibly difficult and mournful, but also death can create spaces that are celebratory and contemplative. Photography has always been closely linked to death and posterity. The reason we capture images is to fight death and engage in life."

Kim Brandt / @kimbrandtkimbrandt



Kim Brandt, *Untitled (Green-Wood)*, Photo credit: Walter Włodarczyk. Photo: Walter Włodarczyk

A 14-minute, 46-second film by Brandt called *Untitled (Greenwood)* is set in the titular cemetery and shows how loss can be processed and understood through the physical and sensory experience of movement. Twelve dancers perform a walking score, following circular pathways around the Cedar Dell section of the cemetery. “Their lengthy and gradual emergence from hidden to visible, from pedestrian to performer, from above the audience to below them, invited a softening of our understanding of presence, and the accomplishment of nature’s sounds and colors at sunset as a contemplative and experience of transitions.”

“I think, as a person, I’d be surprised if anyone said they weren’t afraid. I’m not not afraid of death. I am extremely curious about it though.”

Mimi Bai / @meemeebye



Mimi Bai, *conjuring a future full of pasts*, 2019. Clay, thread, utility mesh, screenprint, jute, sand, canvas, and steel. Photo: Copyright: Mimi Bai



Mimi Bai, *conjuring a future full of pasts*, 2019. Clay, thread, utility mesh, screenprint, jute, sand, canvas, and steel. Photo: Copyright: Mimi Bai

Bai focuses on ghosts and hauntings. She avoids viewing death as an ending, but rather as a way for the past to have an effect on the present. She was able to express how death lingers — how it becomes something that molds and shapes — by connecting personal experience with the political, cultural, and social environment. The piece, a collection of 4,000 pieces of hand-sculpted clay pieces sewn onto netting and hanging from strings on the ceiling, was inspired by military-grade camo and ghillie suits, invoking the death of past life while assimilating into a new American one. She explained, “I tried to think through what immigration meant to me, that way in which I experience my identity as an immigrant woman, POC, and how that continues to be shaped by the past is all in this process of haunting.”

“Most of my family lives in China. My grandfather passed two years ago, and because of the distance, I only have a sense of its effect on my life through other people who loved him. I think my work uses death as a metaphor because the concept is abstract and relational in my life.”

██████████

Nona Faustine / @nonafaustine



Keisha Scarville, glimpse of *Placelessness of Echoes (and Kinship of Shadows)* (back left), Heidi Lau, glimpse of *The Burial Chamber* (front left), and Nona Faustine, glimpse of *untitled* (right). Photo credit: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of BRIC.

Faustine's photos, shot in Green-Wood Cemetery and inspired by the ancient Greek myth of Persephone, approach the concept of death from the perspective of both a woman and mother. In the myth, Persephone is kidnapped and forced to marry Hades, god of the underworld. Nona captures the story of Demter, Persephone's mother, searching for her daughter. "It was very important to highlight the ongoing battle that young women and girls face," she said. "In this country there's an epidemic of young black women disappearing, indigenous women being killed, of many people hurting. As a mother, the story line is very close to my heart. When you become a mother, you understand from the time we're born, we will die one day, you bring life into this earth and death is inevitable."

"It's a great mystery, but I get the feeling that there's something incredible out there past this life. As I get older, yes I don't want to leave friends and family, but it's also incredible to know that you will find out what's out there after this."

Rachel Grobstein / @rachelgrobstein



Rachel Grobstein, *Hwy 285*, 2018, Gouache, paper, polymer clay, fabric, cotton, balsa wood, string, and wire. Photo courtesy of Cultural Counsel.

