

DEATH



# DEATH

curators: Felicity Fenner and Anne Loxley

1 April - 1 May 1993

**Ivan Dougherty Gallery**

The University of New South Wales • College of Fine Arts

## An introduction to DEATH

This exhibition takes a timely look at death through the eyes of Australian artists, mostly of the 20th century. Not wanting to simulate the cultural stereotyping of death embraced by the media and film industries, the exhibition avoids deliberate morbidity and sensationalism in favour of presenting a range of attitudes toward the subject of death by a chronologically and culturally diverse group of forty four artists working in a variety of media. Ours was the lucky generation; untouched by Depression or World War we grew up believing that the lucky country would protect us from premature experiences with death and disaster. In many ways it has. We live longer and enjoy a higher standard of living than our ancestors, though the tragedy of AIDS has forced a confrontation with mortality whether we like it or not.

**This is a terrible time to die. Death has never been so mysterious, so obscene or shameful an occupation as it is in our time. The dying are at a loss how to behave themselves, and their families are even more confused about the meaning of what is happening and the proper decorum for the proceeding.<sup>1</sup>**

Germaine Greer's reflections of twenty years ago have equal relevance to contemporary Australia's social discomfort about death: public rituals for the dead are restricted to ANZAC Day marches and state funerals; private rituals are all but lacking. With a materialist lack of faith in the notion of soul, what can we say to the dying? How can we comfort the bereaved? Although the AIDS epidemic has by necessity prompted the gay community to develop mourning rituals and strategies for remembering its dead, stigmatisation still haunts the process of death. And the wider community, especially the anglo-saxon mainstream, has few established rituals for coping with the concept and reality of death. After the coffin has been deposited into the earth or disappeared beyond the electronic curtains of the crematorium chapel, the deceased may be mourned at a wake, yet the final swig of whiskey and the last comforting pat mark the end of the public mourning ritual.

**The number of deaths in 1990 was 120,062. The major causes of death in the community were diseases of the circulatory system (accounting for 45.2 %), neoplasms (25.6%), diseases of the respiratory system (7.5%) and accidents, poisonings and violence (6.6%). As well as differing by age, the relative significance of certain causes of death also varies by sex. In Australia, as in most other countries, females have lower death rates than males.<sup>2</sup>**

Desensitised by the clinical frankness of statistical information or made larger than life by sensationalist and romantic media packaging, death becomes divorced from the everyday and, ironically, more palatable to the human psyche. While grim horror movies such as *Silence of the Lambs* draw record audiences worldwide and TV dinners are served up with a myriad of objectified death imagery flickering into our lounge rooms, the sight of a real life dying or dead person unnerves the late 20th century sensibility. Perhaps because artists' responses to death are inherently personal and subjective rather than supposedly objective reportage, their work assumes a poignancy not shared by the TV news.

**It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realised a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying.<sup>3</sup>**

The demise of the extended family resulted in the institutionalisation of the sick, aged and dying, which has in turn alienated the fit and healthy majority from the physical and psychological experiences of death. Death is relegated by society to the too-hard basket, often referred to in half-whispered tones of embarrassment or cheerfully trivialised with wit and irony. We are encouraged to dry our tears and get on with life, to effectively shove our grief under the carpet and deal with it privately, keeping up a brave face not for the sake of ourselves but for the benefit of a society lacking the infrastructure to deal with the trauma. For a large proportion of contemporary Australian society, the business of taking out a life insurance policy and paying in advance for a funeral and plot (structures designed to exploit our fear of burdening others with the awkward details of death), is the sole confrontation with the inevitability of death. For some, religious convictions offer solace in thoughts of afterlife and reincarnation.

**Peter was not quite like other boys; but he was afraid at last. A tremor ran through him, like a shudder passing over the sea; but on the sea one shudder follows another till there are hundreds of them, and Peter felt just the one. Next moment he was standing erect on the rock again, with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him. It was saying, 'To die will be an awfully big adventure'.<sup>4</sup>**

Death has always been a fundamental concern of art and literature, philosophy and psychology, though the concealment and sanitisation of death in our society is paralleled in the scarcity of exhibitions of Australian art of the dying and dead. Valorisation through art of pioneer and war heroes and victims have played crucial roles in the formation of the nation's identity, and contemporary artists have been concerned with metaphorical and conceptual deaths (including the death of painting itself), yet representational narratives about the conclusion of ordinary human lives have never warranted sustained curatorial attention. Like eroticism, death is a recurring theme for many artists, holding a similarly tacit fascination for audiences granted occasional viewings.

**ACCIDENT AFTERLIFE ANGELS AIDS ANZAC APOCALYPSE BURIAL  
CRUCIFIXION CUSTODY DISEASE DROWNING FILICIDE HELL  
HOLOCAUST HUNTING LOVE MASSACRE MEDIA MORGUE MURDER  
PRISONER QUEER RAPE RELIGION REMEMBRANCE SICKNESS  
SKELETONS STARVATION SUICIDE VIOLENCE WAR**

Most of the works in the exhibition date from the last fifty years and address at least one of the above listed aspects of death. Hindsight undermines the romantic/propagandist intent of many 18th and 19th century portrayals of death. The 1853 engraving of Captain Cook amongst allegorical figures and Neptune seems ridiculously ostentatious by late 20th century standards, and even evocations of our more recent war heroes by Will Dyson and Sidney Nolan are bathed in poetry and sentiment. Vicki Varvaressos' *Ballad of Mauthausan* subverts the stereotypical representation of male heroes found in many of the official war artists' works, juxtaposing the soldier's shocking vulnerability at the moment of execution with his wife's naive optimism, bringing the atrocities of war into the domestic sphere.

Australia's oldest and ongoing battle between its indigenous inhabitants and European occupants is, significantly, hardly referred to in 19th or early 20th century art. To document the massacre and maltreatment of the Aboriginal race would have contradicted the country's Terra Nullius political status, and early Australian artists employed in the colony as recorders of its settlement would not have risked political provocation by transgressing the boundaries of their brief. Charles Kerry's studio photograph of a black policeman shooting dead one of his own race provides a rare but necessarily staged portrayal of racial conflict in the colony, while Dubourg's *Field Sports of the Native Inhabitants* (1813, after J.H. Clark) falsely reassures the British audience for whom they were commissioned of the Aborigines' uninterrupted Arcadian lifestyle.

Contemporary images of indigenous displacement and death are less ambiguous. Fiona Foley and Ruth Waller address the cultural and bodily violence perpetrated against the Aboriginal race through white man's insistence upon racial stereotyping, social and political conformity. In these works, death is the ultimate cost of unmitigated racial repression. Foley's bone scattered land and Waller's hanging figure represent the tragic finality of death and unlike Dubourg and Kerry offer no theatrical distancing from reality.

Equally confronting in its factual intensity is David McDiarmid's *Toxic Queen*, which grew out of the artist's "anger, frustration, confusion" at the AIDS crisis and society's inability to accept, let alone cope with the magnitude of its devastation. Largely drawn from gay and straight media journalism on AIDS issues and individual stories, *Toxic Queen* contextualises autobiographical elements in a succinct documentation of today's tragic plague. In contrast to McDiarmid's deliberate provocation, emotional responses invoked by George Pavlu's photographs of corpses in the morgue are symptomatic of cultural conditioning rather than affects of artistic intent. Unlike the Victorian tradition of photography as memorial, to which John Park's dead infant belongs, the anonymity of Pavlu's subjects strips them of emotional resonance, placing them, despite their melancholic beauty, into the genre of documentation. The documentation of and media obsession with investigations into death is dissected in Catherine Rogers' photographic series *The Nature of Evidence*, which examines the facts and mythology surrounding the Azaria Chamberlain case.

Death is a cinematic spectacle in Tucker's *Assassin*, in which the fantasy of a bleeding shadow makes death a compelling but disturbing fiction. Younger artists are influenced by the stylish mystique of film noir: Louise Hearman's proportionally disparate and eerily ephemeral figures occupy an ethereal rather than earthly zone, and Stewart MacFarlane's ambiguous narrative is also complicated by sinister undercurrents. Like the cinematic tradition they borrow from, these works are removed from the commonplace reality of death by their strangely surreal narrative and theatrical compositional devices. The allegorical skeleton of death, which originated in medieval morality plays, appears in the work of Donald Friend, Tony Tuckson and Ruth Waller, leading the dying in a playful jig that is life's final journey.

In their mindscapes of death, Peter Booth and Ken Unsworth prophetically articulate the unknowable. Visions of afterlife occur in apocalyptic scenes inhabited by weird hybrids; the swirling hot colours of Booth's work describe a post-holocaust nightmare and Unsworth's smoky monotonous are more meditative but equally disquieting.

This exhibition is potent with many aspects of death, yet to discuss all the works in detail would be to obfuscate and force an order on to the chaos of death. The works selected are largely narrative based representational images of death that, on the whole, circumvent social and artistic metaphorical structures created to deal with the issue. A few of the images here have been made famous through reproduction in publications, many are little known and others have never before been exhibited. The ubiquity of death in art (and life) is reflected in the Salon style installation of the exhibition and given society's frigid attitude towards the subject, **Death** may be a confrontational experience.<sup>5</sup>

—Felicity Fenner and Anne Loxley

<sup>1</sup> Germaine Greer. *Not a time to die*. from **The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings 1968-85**. Picador. 1987. p.146

<sup>2</sup> statistics from Australian Yearbook 1992. p.162

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin. *The Storyteller*. from **Illuminations: essays and reflections**. Schocken Books. New York. first published 1968. p.93

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Barrie. **Peter and Wendy**. London 1911. p.143

<sup>5</sup> **Death** is the precursor to a more comprehensive exhibition planned to take place before the end of the millenium. which will examine broader definitions and explorations of death in art from the 20th century. combining key images from international artists with those from Australia. Some of the notable omissions here (including Juan Davila's AIDS paintings. Brett Whiteley's *Christie* series and William Dobell's *The Dead Landlord*. which are all sadly missed by the curators of this exhibition) will hopefully be included next time.

## DEATH - List of Works

### Peter Booth

*Untitled* 1978  
oil on canvas  
91.3 x 152 cm  
Private Collection

*Untitled* c.1978

oil on canvas  
25 x 50.5 cm  
Private Collection

*Untitled* c.1978

charcoal on paper  
55.7 x 75 cm  
Private Collection

### Arthur Boyd

*Dog devouring a cripple* 1943-44  
ink & wash  
38.7 x 26.5 cm

Collection: Museum of Modern Art at Heide

### Adam Cullen

*The Otherness when it comes* 1993  
cat, ethafoam, masking tape, gel toothpaste, nylon cloth, steel coat hanger  
courtesy the artist

### Domenico de Clario

*D: E: A: T: H: (The Question of the Alphabet in placing Seed within the Wheel)* 1989  
enamel, pencil, semen and blood  
6 panels, each approx. 108 x 73 cm  
courtesy Mori Gallery

### M. Dubourg (after J. H. Clark)

from *Field Sports of the Native Inhabitants* 1813  
*Fishing No.2*  
*Hunting the Kangaroo*  
*Smoking out the Opossum*  
*Throwing the Spear*

hand coloured aquatints  
each 17 x 22 cm  
Collection: S.H. Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia (NSW)  
Gift of Mr Graham Cox

### Will Dyson

*The Mate (in Memory of W. Machine Gun Company, Messines Ridge)* 1917  
charcoal and wash  
55.3 x 44.7 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

### Michael Esson

*Versalian Interpretation 4* 1992  
colour pencil and graphite on paper  
105 x 135 cm  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

### Fiona Foley

*Givid Women and Mrs Fraser* 1992  
xerox, rat traps and dilly bags  
130 x 200 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

### Donald Friend

*Nature Morte* 1945  
pen and ink  
31.7 x 38.1 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

*Nature Morte* 1945

pen and coloured ink and coloured wash  
31 x 40 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

*Study of a Skull for 'Songs of the Vagabond Soldiers'* 1981  
pen and ink  
24 x 34.7 cm  
Private Collection

*The Muse of Anzac* 1982  
pen and ink  
25 x 30 cm  
Private Collection

**Jeff Gibson**  
*Still Death (Self Portrait I)* 1990  
cibachrome  
49 x 36 cm  
courtesy Annandale Galleries

*Still Death (Self Portrait II)* 1990  
cibachrome  
49 x 36 cm  
courtesy Annandale Galleries

**James Gleeson**  
*Surrealist Crucifixion* c.1950s  
oil on canvas  
98.2 x 77.8 cm  
Collection: S.H. Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia (NSW)

**Richard Goodwin**  
*Messenger* 1987  
steel, clothing and acrylic resin  
60 x 145 x 100 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

**Murray Griffin**  
*Hospital Ward - Thailand Railway* 1946  
vegetable dye  
34.4 x 50.8 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

**Weaver Hawkins**  
*Man* 1950  
oil on canvas  
123 x 303 cm  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

**Louise Hearman**  
*Mission to Seaman* 1988  
oil on canvas  
274 x 274 cm  
Private Collection

**Ivor Hele**  
*Two dead Japanese in foxhole, Timbered Knoll*  
1943  
charcoal  
37.8 x 27.7 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

*Sketch for Operation Bulimba*, 1965  
acrylic, ink and crayon on paper  
33 x 48.5 cm  
Private Collection

**Alexander Hogg**  
*The Landing of Captain Cook* 1785  
engraving  
33.2 x 23.0 cm  
Collection: Old Government House, National Trust of Australia (NSW)

*The Death of Captain Cook* 1785  
engraving  
33.7 x 22.0 cm  
Collection: Old Government House, National Trust of Australia (NSW)

**Ian Howard**  
*Untitled* 1992  
mixed media  
40 x 50 x 11 cm  
Collection: Sonia Ryan

*Untitled* 1992  
mixed media on board  
47 x 57 cm  
Collection: College of Fine Arts (The University of New South Wales)

**Robert Jenyns**  
*Still Life with Mao* 1980  
painted wood in perspex display case  
courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney

**Louis Kahan**  
*Dying Soldier* 1941  
pencil  
17.3 x 25.5 cm  
courtesy the artist

**Charles Kerry**  
*Aboriginal and Black Tracker* 1890s  
copy photograph  
Tyrrell Collection, Australian Consolidated Press

**Richard Larter**  
*Untitled* c.1964  
oil on canvas  
120 x 183 cm  
courtesy Watters Gallery

**Elwyn Lynn**  
*Four Burnt Paddocks* 1987  
oil on canvas  
153 x 203 cm  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

**David McDiarmid**  
*Toxic Queen* 1992  
colour photocopies  
each 29.4 x 21 cm (framed/bound)  
courtesy the artist

**Anne MacDonald**  
from the series *Inconsolable* 1992  
Type C photograph  
11.5 x 15.5 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

**Stewart MacFarlane**  
*Gravity* 1992-93  
oil on linen  
153 x 122 cm  
Collection: Cleminger Australia Pty Ltd,  
courtesy Rex Irwin Fine Art Dealer

**Anthony Mannix**  
*The Black Angel of Oblivion*  
ink on paper  
34 x 69.7 cm  
Private Collection

**Noel McKenna**  
*Measure of Rougher than Usual Handling* 1993  
oil on board  
53 x 83.8 cm  
courtesy the artist

*Hospital Change Table* 1993  
oil on board  
36 x 41.5 cm  
courtesy the artist

**Carol Marando**  
*The dead uncle* 1990  
oil on board  
17 x 24 cm  
courtesy the artist

*Brazil no.1* 1991  
etching, 5/5  
15 x 18 cm  
courtesy the artist

*Brazil no.3* 1991  
etching, 1/5  
15 x 18 cm  
courtesy the artist

*Brazil no.4* 1991  
etching, 3/5  
15 x 18 cm  
courtesy the artist

**Mark Morte**

*The Triumph of Death* 1993  
mixed media  
75 x 51 cm  
courtesy the artist

**Sidney Nolan**

*Drowned Soldier at Anzac as Icarus* 1958  
acrylic on card  
25.4 x 30.4 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

*Shellburst Soldiers II* 1962

textile dye on card  
52.5 x 63.8 cm  
Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

*Burke*

mixed media  
61 x 49 cm  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

*Glenrowan Sentinel* c.1975

oil on board  
60 x 90 cm  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

**Chris O'Doherty**

*urgent warning!*  
ink and colour pencil  
39.5 x 29 cm  
courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney

**John Park**

*Child laid to rest in its coffin* c.1920  
copy photograph  
from Barry Groom and Warren Wickman,  
*Leichhardt - An Era in Pictures: The Photography  
of J.G. Park*, Macleay Museum, University of  
Sydney, 1981

**George Pavlu**

*Ecco Homo*  
series of colour photographs  
each 28 x 35.5 cm  
courtesy Macquarie Galleries

**Catherine Rogers**

from *The Nature of Evidence* 1986  
silver gelatin photographs  
each 50 x 40 cm  
courtesy of the artist

**Sam Schoenbaum**

*Dead Pete's Ridge* 1992  
acrylic on canvas  
31 x 45.5 cm  
courtesy the artist

**George Schwarz**

*Untitled* (from *Memento Mori* series) 1980  
photo montage  
48.3 x 37.9 cm  
courtesy Stills Gallery

*Untitled* 1992

48.3 x 37.9 cm  
photo montage  
courtesy Stills Gallery

*Untitled* 1992

48.3 x 37.9 cm  
photo montage  
courtesy Stills Gallery

**Nigel Thomson**

*The Artist answers his Critics* 1983  
oil on linen  
160 x 125 cm  
courtesy Robin Gibson Gallery, Sydney

**Tiwi People**

(Bathurst and Melville Islands)  
Pukamani poles  
ochres on carved ironwood  
varying dimensions  
Collection: The University of New South Wales

**Albert Tucker**

*Assassin* 1954  
oil on composition board  
62.2 x 81.2 cm  
courtesy the artist

*Children of Athens* 1940

oil on cardboard  
47 x 29.7 cm  
Collection: Museum of Modern Art at Heide

**Tony Tuckson**

TD716  
pencil on paper  
10.4 x 15 cm  
Collection: Christopher McKenzie

## TD714

pencil on paper  
10.4 x 15 cm  
Collection: Christopher McKenzie

**Unknown Artist**

*Brittania seated on an Eminence with a Lion at  
her Feet* 1853  
wood engraving  
30.5 x 19.7 cm  
Collection: Old Government House, National  
Trust of Australia (NSW)

**Ken Unsworth**

*The Mirror & Other Fables* 1983-84  
oil on paper  
203 x 152 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

*Untitled* 1987  
charcoal on paper  
76 x 102 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

*Untitled* 1987

charcoal on paper  
76 x 102 cm  
courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

**Vicki Varvaressos**

*Ballad of Mauthausan* 1982  
oil on canvas  
162 x 214 cm  
courtesy the artist & Watters Gallery, Sydney

**Ruth Waller**

*Death in Custody* 1987  
oil on canvas  
76 x 182 cm  
Collection: Ian Gunn

*Black Recuerdo*, 1986

charcoal on paper  
97 x 66 cm  
Collection: Frank Watters

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