MEMORIA

An Exploration of Longing, Desire and Transience in the Everyday.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family and to Noel.

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PREFACE

'In the midst of life we are in death' is a phrase from Ecclesiastes that my mother has reminded me of throughout my life. She instilled in me from an early age a sense of the fragility of life and the imminence of death.

This is a very personal body of work from a specifically feminine perspective. I have felt enormous pressure for most of my life to try to maintain what I believe to be an acceptable appearance. I have struggled with my weight and with acne for many years. As a result, I have constantly feared being photographed or being seen without my usual mask of makeup. This has caused me to feel a disjuncture between my inner self and my outward appearance. I have become acutely aware of the face as a mask that can be manipulated in many ways, and of the illusion that lies beneath appearances.

As a reaction to what I perceive to be an enormous emphasis on flawless appearances and beauty, in, for example advertising, magazines and film, I have been drawn to the overlooked, the discarded and the decayed in the everyday When sourcing material for this body of work, I have wanted to explore that which I habitually overlook in my everyday life; which has become so familiar that it is rarely noticed. I have particularly wanted to examine the significance of the everyday.

At the beginning of this project, I identified graveyards as spaces which I consistently overlooked and did not really notice. On entering one that I had often passed but had never been into, I was immediately struck by the poignancy of photographic portraits placed on graves. They raised many questions for me about portraiture and photography. A portrait is presumably placed on a grave to preserve somehow the memory of the deceased and to personalise what is otherwise just a name, revealing little about a person. But exactly how much portraits can reveal is something with which I have grappled throughout this project. Identity is, in many ways, linked to the face yet the face is so potentially mutable. Through an accident, plastic surgery or with makeup, someone's appearance can be completely transformed.

Looking at these memorial photographs made me think of how difficult it must be to choose the one essential portrait that would somehow represent someone's life. I was particularly interested to note that, even when someone had died, for example in their late seventies, often a glamorous studio portrait of them in the 'prime' of their youth was used. Many other issues around portraiture, identity and memory were raised as a result of my encounter with these photographs.

My sister refused to be photographed but would allow me draw her. I found the same applied to many women I drew. A portrait invested with the artist's hand seemed to be far less intimidating than the photograph which is seen to be too representative of reality. I wanted to explore the difference between photographic

and painted portraits. I drew and painted women in my everyday life who I felt had an unusual, unconventional beauty. I drew only women because I felt that more emphasis is placed on women's appearance. Of the many women I photographed and drew, all of them were incredibly critical of their own appearance and aware of their perceived flaws. The intention behind placing both drawn and photographic portraits together was to create a dialogue between these two media, and raise questions as to whether either one was more successful in evoking something of a person's personality and character. Although the drawn portraits are of people who are still alive, all portraits are inextricably linked to death and can be seen as memorials because, as one ages, each change is a kind of death.

I was also intrigued by the wide variety and the large number of floral arrangements placed on graves. Most of them were artificial, made of materials like ceramic and wire which are meant to withstand the effects of time. The majority of the flowers though, both artificial and real, were in an extremely weathered and disintegrated state. Although I had previously considered flowers to be superficial and insignificant, seeing the importance of their use in relation to mourning made me realise how pervasive their use is in everyday life. Their fragility and fleeting life can be seen as symbolic of ephemerality and transience.

Made of shells, flowers, bottle tops, car tyres and other everyday materials, memorial objects placed on graves symbolise the longing and loss felt by those left behind. I found many of them to be incredibly beautiful, but especially when they were in a faded, fragmented condition on the verge of being discarded. Beauty is most often associated with youth and perfection. I found beauty in the neglected, the seemingly mundane and the decayed. Questioning what can and cannot be defined as beautiful became a major preoccupation in my work.

Death is rarely considered an acceptable subject. I was initially reluctant to work with the source material that I collected from graveyards because of the negative responses I encountered. Thoughts of death are to be avoided, yet the desire to take photographs to preserve memories, or to make artificial flowers so that they will last longer than real ones, acknowledges the inevitability and imminence of death in everyday life.

While in the process of working with the source material I had collected, I came by chance across a book of Shakespeare's sonnets. While I was familiar with the sonnets, I realised reading through them how many correlations there were between the themes that I was working with and those in the sonnets: namely the deceptive nature of appearance, the fragile and transitory nature of existence and the ultimate futility of vanity. Shakespeare also made analogies between youthful beauty and the ephemerality of flowers. While this body of work in no way attempts to illustrate the sonnets, they did act as a source of inspiration in their creation.

The majority of the objects that I worked with, namely flowers, snapshots, portrait photographs, shells are commonly found in everyday life outside of the context of graveyards. It is their context that changes the way they are seen. A common thread that

links the sonnets, the artificial flower arrangements, the photographs and the portraits that I have used in my work, is that they all attempt to preserve youthful beauty and the memory of things now, or soon to be, lost against the effects of time.

Death exists in all things: while artificial flowers acknowledge the fragile and ephemeral nature of flowers, the desire to photograph something very often stems from the knowledge that it will not last.

My exploration of graveyards led me to an interest in European burial traditions of placing flowers and photographs on graves. While I made every attempt to research as widely as possible and although I am aware that there are many other burial practices, this is by nature a very selective and subjective view. I have mainly explored sixteenth and seventeenth century European attitudes towards death specifically because of the *memento mori* and *vanitas* traditions which were prevalent then. They are important to my discussion as they serve to act as a contrast to current attitudes towards death.

INTRODUCTION

The subject matter for this body of work has been sourced from my everyday life. The significance of the objects, situations and practices which form a part of daily life is often overlooked. By focusing on, and transforming that which is usually overlooked or disregarded, the very ordinary and mundane can begin to seem strange and unfamiliar. New interpretations can arise from this altered perspective and different context. It is often precisely because these objects are so familiar that they are so often taken-for-granted. Photographer Jeff Wall whose work, through a process of defamiliarisation, asserts the importance of that which is generally considered to be mundane and trivial, says that:

> Maybe the 'trivial' is just a failed version of the 'everyday.' The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and the richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. But at the same time, there is an openness that permits people to recognise what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere (quoted in Tumlir 2001: 114).[1]

Norman Bryson makes a distinction between 'megalography' and 'rhopography'. Whereas megalography is the depiction of greatness, the heroic deeds of gods and men, "rhopography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks" (Bryson 1990: 61).

In the context of a graveyard, familiar objects such as shells, flowers and photographs, act as 'objective correlatives'[2] for the emotions of longing and loss experienced by the bereaved. Their grief, and their desire to show that the deceased are remembered, are symbolically represented by these objects. Personal photographs can also be regarded as souvenirs, as "objects of desire" (Stewart 1993: 132).

> The photograph as souvenir is a logical extension of the pressed flower; the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing us penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative all the more poignant. For the narration of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia. (Stewart 1993: 138)

[1] This quote is taken from an interview where Jeff Wall discusses his work *The Flooded Grave* (2001), which is a digitally manipulated photograph of a grave, at the bottom of which is what appears to be the bottom of the ocean. This strange combination of images confounds usual expectations and encourages a reappraisal of familiar ways of looking.

[2] In his critique of Hamlet, T. S. Eliot claimed that "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot 1934: 145).

Personal photographs are regarded by some people as their most cherished material possessions. They represent a desire to revisit something or someone but a photograph is "yet one more of desire's tantalising red herrings" as it is only a "trace of a primal, lost, satisfaction. The real object ... is irretrievably absent" (Batchen 1997: 11). Although photographs can act as catalysts for memory, they do not in themselves contain it.

The portrait, particularly the photographic portrait, is one of the primary means of attempting to preserve the memory of a person. Yet how much appearance can reveal of a person's character or 'soul' is the subject of much debate. Eccher argues that appearance can "seem like an endless collection of masks that reality wears for the world from time to time" and that it is the "epiphany of disguise, of transformation" (Eccher 2000: 26).

The deceptive nature of appearance is a major theme in Shakespeare's sonnets. Throughout his work there is an awareness of a dichotomy between inward thought and outward appearance. The ephemeral nature of beauty and the transience of existence are also explored in the sonnets. Shakespeare draws an analogy between flowers and the fleeting nature of youthful beauty.

Flowers have a long history as symbols of ephemerality. The use of this symbolism was most evident in seventeenth century *vanitas* paintings. They issued a warning of the imminence of decay and the brevity of man's existence. By creating flowers out of materials meant to withstand the effects of time, the transitory nature of fresh flowers is acknowledged. Artificial flowers represent an attempt to concretise the ephemeral; a desire to deny what is seen to be time's spoiling effect on beauty.

"When Keats wrote the lines, 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever, its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness,' he attributed to beauty the subversive function of sustaining life in the face of deprivation, unrelenting pain and suffering" (Hooks, 1994: 45). Beauty appears to be an essential quality required in commemorative objects. It is as if the presence of beauty is somehow thought to counteract the ugliness of death. However, contrary to what Keats may have thought, very little lasts over time. The loveliness of beautiful things is also generally not seen to increase with time, as beauty is most commonly associated with youth. Women are punished more for the changes brought about by ageing than men. Beauty is seen as an essential feminine quality: Marlene Dumas says that "one cannot paint a picture, or make an image of a woman and not deal with the concept of beauty" (Dumas 1998: 96). Townsend asks:

> ... what has changed between Rembrandt's age, when he could find beauty and dignity in the body of a mature woman, and our own, when that body has become one, of many, that can only be imagined with disgust? The decrepit body is a failure of perfection, it points towards sickness and death, towards a generation that will succeed us. It tells us that we will not live forever, and we will not always live well. And it seems as though we have come to fear our own mortality so much that we can no longer bear to read the message that time inscribes on our skins. (Townsend 1998: 104)

That which is worn, broken and decayed act as reminders of mortality which point to the inevitability of death and as such are

considered undesirable. Lacan said that "it is death that sustains existence" (quoted in Dollimore 1998: 195) yet in contemporary culture, there is seen to be an avoidance or a 'denial' of death. . Whereas in cultures preceeding the eighteenth century, people were constantly reminded of death and the need to prepare for it, death has since been increasingly pushed out of everyday consciousness. In the twentieth century, death has been "relegated to the secret, private space of the home or the anonymity of the hospital, death no longer makes any sign" (Aries 1985: 266).

My final body of practical work is an artwork in the form of a book, called *Memoria: a visual sonnet*. Excerpts from Shakespeare's sonnets have been included and are intended to interact with the images, and provide some kind of context and departure point for their interpretation. The book is a 'visual sonnet' as it has been structured according to the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet in order to create a rhythm that echoes that of the text. The excerpts from the sonnets and the images in the book are meant to act in support of each other. While the text is not intended as an explication of the images, the images are similarly not intended to be illustrative of the text.

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

a. The portrait as memorial

The need to depict and commemorate individuals through portraiture is a practice common in many cultures. Historically, the portrait has been seen as a means of enduring; of challenging human mortality and transience. Artists have been, and are still in many ways, presented with the impossible expectations of capturing some kind of timeless notion of self; something that transcends the brief moment in time and represents something constant or essential about that person's inner being. Brilliant said that great portraits should

> concentrate memory images into a single, transcendent entity; they consolidate many possible, even legitimate, representations into one, a constant image that captures the consistency of the person, portrayed over time but in one time, the present, and potentially forever. (Brilliant 1990: 13)

The nature of the painted portrait since the advent of photography has changed. Painted portraits used to fulfill the more documentary role of providing evidence of existence that many photographic portraits do today. Although some kind of likeness is generally desired, portrait painting was liberated from having to be completely naturalistic. The artist's interpretation became more important as painting was expected to show something subjective about the sitter.

A central question in portraiture is the degree to which personality can be communicated through physical likeness. The portrait photographer and painter are both presented with the same challenge of trying to capture more than mere appearance. Whether they are successful or not is usually determined by how the portrait is viewed by the portrayed and those close to him/her. There is so often debate as to what extent portraits do or don't really represent someone. Goethe remarked that "one is never satisfied with a portrait of a person one knows" (quoted in Brilliant 1990: 21).

Many assumptions are made on the basis of appearance. Identity is in part determined by the image we present to society. Yet many people feel that their appearance does not properly represent them as they would like to be seen. Portrait photographer Duane Michals feels that he "always look(s) mean when photographed, yet I am much nicer than my face. I am not just this chin, these wrinkles, this nose. Do not be deceived by my face" (Michals 1988, 10–11). Christian Boltanski[1] challenges the notion that appearance alone can inform us of the character of a person, or that photographs contain some kind of essential truth. During the trial of the infamous Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie, Boltanski said, "Barbie has the face of a Nobel Peace Prize winner. It would be easier if a terrible person had a terrible face" (quoted in van Alphen 1998: 47). Boltanski touches here on the common connections made between beauty and virtue, and between ugliness and corruption. He went on to say that he has "manipulated the quality of evidence that people assign to

[1] Boltanski frequently works with found photographs of strangers, exposing the photograph's inability to contain memory or to somehow make the subject present. These portraits "signify not 'presence' but exactly the opposite: absence" (van Alphen quoted in Hirsch 1998: 37).

photography, in order to subvert it, or to show that photography lies – that what it conveys is not reality but a set of cultural codes" (quoted in van Alphen 1998: 47). The image causes viewers to look back into themselves and produce their own memories which are similar to what can be seen in the image. Looking at portraits of strangers, like the ones placed on graves for example, one can only guess as to the portrayed person's character and personality.

Figure 1: **Martin Droeshout** *William Shakespeare*(1623)

Artists throughout history have grappled with the challenge of representing something of the 'soul' of the subject through portraiture. In many cases, artists developed a formal repertoire of visual clues based on physiognomics, and social conventions of the time to portray some of the spiritual and intellectual properties of the subject, even when these physical traits did not correspond to reality. In the case of the most reproduced portrait of Shakespeare (fig. 1), it has been speculated that it was created many years after his death. It is presumed to be more symbolic of his legacy and corresponds to conventions of what was expected of an influential writer of his time, rather than an accurate description of what he looked like. His large cranium and overly large head when compared with the body, reveal the artist's desire to signify Shakespeare's enormous intellectual power. He is also dressed in Tudor dress to give him the appearance of a gentleman since this class was considered to be morally and intellectually superior.

Traditionally, African portraits also present an idealised vision. Creating a superficial likeness was not as important as showing details and symbols which alluded to the person's character and societal position. Commemorative images show the person in the prime of life. "To depict realistically the ravages of age, physical abnormality, or illness is considered disrespectful to the subject at best, grossly insulting at worst" (Borgatti 1990: 31).

A portrait can become particularly important after someone's death, as there is a desire from family members and friends to preserve something tangible which represented that person as they were in life. However, before the invention of photography, it was virtually impossible for the majority of the population to have portraits made of themselves or their family. Painted portraits were expensive and required great skill. The advent of photography, which was cheaper and more convenient, made portraiture more accessible to the masses. In the early years of photography, advertisers promoted the medium as an unprecedented means of preserving human likenesses beyond the grave (Pacey 1989: 66). Photography since its inception has been regarded as important in helping people come to terms with the loss of those close to them.

In the nineteenth century, postmortem photographs, especially of young children, were common. With the high infant mortality rate and the fact that many people did not have access to a camera,

many children died before being photographed. The postmortem photograph was the only method of providing evidence of their existence, as families very often did not have any other images of the deceased. Attempts were sometimes made to paint the eyes of posthumous photographs open. These stemmed from a desperate desire to try to have a portrait of them as they were alive. There was also a widespread practice in the nineteenth century of photographing the deceased as if alive. Large numbers of these images have survived and are evidence of how commonly accepted the representation of death was. According to Ruby the practice still occurs today in certain parts of America, although it is kept hidden as it is generally regarded as macabre (Ruby 1995: 189).

All photographs are, through the nature of their process, linked to death. Photographs are relics of the past which exist in the present. They are a result of a photomechanical process which leaves only a trace of the original, something akin to "death masks, cast shadows, the Shroud of Turin ..." (Krauss quoted in: Brougher 1997: 33). Their aim is to preserve memories, appearances and events, yet photographs from the outset are inextricably linked with death.

> All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. (Sontag 1978: 15)

Photography since its inception has been used as evidence to prove that something existed. For Barthes, the photograph could only attest that what is shown in the photograph had once existed: "The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (Barthes 1981: 85).

The introduction of cameras which were cheap and easy to use, meant that photographs increasingly became a part of everyday life. Before, the only photographs that most people might have owned were a few formal studio portraits of themselves and family members. 'Snapshots' were able to capture more casual, candid moments than studio portraits could. Photography became the predominant means by which families represented themselves.

The custom of placing a photographic portrait on a gravestone first appeared in the 1860's and has become increasingly popular (Ruby 1995: 122). Often idealised studio portraits of the deceased in the 'prime' of youth were chosen. The studio portrait is governed by even more conventions than the informal snapshot. There was a conventional way in which people were photographed which made many of them look strikingly similar. "Glamour – the studio portrait – is inherently in tension with the familial snapshot; not because it grasps the essence of the subject better – it does not – but because it peels away any pretension to know" (Bal 1999: 231). Essentially what is implied here is that studio portraits have a sameness to them; which eliminates individuality and any hope of eliciting much information about the person. Naturally people wanted to look their best in photographs. When going to a photographic studio, families invariably dressed up and were often clothed in a style that they would otherwise never have worn. They appeared (in Mark Twain's words) "too much combed, too much fixed up; and all of them uncomfortable in inflexible Sunday clothes" (quoted in Pacey 1989: 74).

The difficulty of finding one photograph to represent a deceased person's life; a photograph which somehow captures something of their personality or soul for those who are left behind, is discussed at length in Roland Barthes' *Camera lucida* (1981). A substantial section of the book is devoted to his relationship to a photograph of his mother as a young child which he found after her death. Immediately after she died, he collected all the photographs he had of her and looked through them, in the hope of discovering a photograph that corresponded to his memory of her. Looking through all the pictures he had, he searched for the 'truth' of the face he had loved but was left frustrated. He remarked that "it was not she and yet it was no-one else. I would have recognised her among thousands of other women, yet I did not 'find' her" (Barthes 1981: 63). Eventually he found one that he had not seen before. Whereas all the other photographs had seemed like masks to him, recording her appearance, but revealing nothing of her personality and character, in this image, "suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless" (Barthes 1981: 109-110).

Even though Barthes' mother died in her seventies, the only photograph which he felt properly represented her as he had known her, was one of her taken long before he was born, when she was five. He referred to it as the *Winter Garden Photograph* (Barthes 1981: 70). This picture showed her physically as he had never known her, yet he felt that other photographs, which he acknowledged were good likenesses, did not manage to show her as he remembered her. They attested to her existence but not much else.

> Likeness leaves me unsatisfied and somehow sceptical (certainly this is the sad disappointment I experience looking at the ordinary photographs of my mother – whereas the only one which has given me the splendour of her truth is precisely a lost, remote photograph, one which does not look 'like' her, the photograph of a child I never knew). (Barthes 1981: 103)

He never reproduced the image for public consumption as he felt its meaning existed only for him. It revealed something about her which only he could recognise. The photograph does not contain memory as much as it produces it and acts as a catalyst through which memory and nostalgia can be created. John Berger said that "unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances ... prised away from their meaning. ... Photographs in themselves do not narrate" (Berger 1980: 51).

Context is crucial when looking at personal photographs. Whether or not the 'truth' about someone has been captured depends on who is viewing the picture. A stranger's personal photographs seem impenetrable yet promise potential, of untold stories in need of a narrator. If photographs lose their proper context and narrative, "all ancestors become abstractions, losing their proper names; all family trips became the same trip" (Stewart 1993: 138).

Multiple readings can be taken from any personal snapshot depending on the context it is seen in. The experience surrounding the photograph is remembered and invests the image with meaning.

> The photograph of personal value is a talisman, in which the past is often perceived to reside so that it can be re-experienced. It evokes both memory and loss, both a trace of life and the prospect of death. Yet, while the photograph may be seen as a container for memory, it is not inhabited by

> memory so much as it produces it; it is a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated within the present. (Sturken 1999:178)

Although the photograph may have captured a moment in the past, the interpretation of it depends on the present. The image remains constant for as long as the film or paper lasts, but the meaning and interpretation may shift constantly as time progresses. "Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday" (Kuhn quoted in Sturken 1997: 189).

"Cemeteries are places where the public and private observances of death overlap. Placing a photograph on someone's grave is at once the personal act of the mourner memorialising the loved one and a publicly available monument" (Ruby 1995: 141). When photographs, which were originally taken for private consumption, are placed in a public context, the meanings and interpretations which can be derived from them inevitably change. They change status from personal to cultural objects. An example of a context in which personal and family portraits journey into realms of cultural memory and acquire new meanings is the *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial*[2] in Washington D.C. The names of nearly sixty thousand American soldiers who died in the war are inscribed in granite. Yet for the family and friends of the dead, names do not seem to be enough. Photographs, letters, objects and pictures are left there on a daily basis, as though "the names present the individual so powerfully inscribed in death that they demand photographs to bring the dead alive" (Sturken 1999: 182). The desire to place these objects at the memorial shows the need of family members and loved ones to personalise the names.

The personal photographs left at places of memorial, speak of a previous innocence, of hopes and dreams which were never realised. Photographs which show the deceased alive and in happier times, have a poignancy because of the subject's lack of awareness of what is to come. This is especially true in the case of young children, who become, through tragic circumstances, the epitome of innocence lost, of lives halted before their time. The ordinary, everyday nature of the events captured in these personal snapshots is what makes them all the more poignant. In trying to memorialise someone through pictures, there is a sense of a

> ... tragically produced photo album, its images chosen in an attempt to convey the facts of a life now gone. These images function as icons, along with the symbols of places visited and professions pursued, of the pleasures of life before the presence of death. In this context, the casual aspects of their snapshot qualities convey a terrible sadness. (Sturken 1999: 188)

The photograph can act as a catalyst to bring back from another life a set of ultimately unknowable stories, each charged with loss. The photographs left at the *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* and those placed on graves represent a desire for the mourners to revisit a time when the dead were unmarked by tragedy and also a time when family and friends were unmoved by the loss which now affects their lives. They are images of hope and prior innocence. For example, on the AIDS Memorial Quilt in America,

[2] Designed by Maya Ying Lin, the names of nearly sixty thousand American soldiers who died in the war are inscribed in granite. In terms of a memorial, it is considered unique in its emphasis on the individual over the collective and the loss of the individual in war.

photographs of the dead appearing vital, youthful and untainted by the debilitating and prematurely ageing effects of AIDS are sewn into the quilt. They are images which attest to a normal, healthy existence. Yet these photographs, which attempt in some way to bring the dead back to life, ultimately serve to emphasise their absence. Their stillness and silence provide a sense of finality. "Tokens of the departed are both exhilarating for their tantalising promise of access, and horrible because of the inevitable failure of that promise" (Blessing 1998: 151).

b. Flowers as symbols of ephemerality

Flowers play a significant role in the rituals of many cultures. In Western culture, they are used in courtship and are seen as essential at rites of passage such as baptisms, births, weddings and funerals. The everyday familiarity of flowers is a central concern in this project. They are a ubiquitous presence in daily life yet the significance of flowers in contemporary culture is often overlooked. They are frequently associated with craft and sentimentality and disregarded as merely decorative. They can however become "potent carriers of human sentiment ... As an expression of sorrow, flowers also have the power to transform loss into a poetic yet transitory symbol of life and beauty" (Viso 1999: 129). Beautifying the grave of a loved one with flowers, shells and ornaments is seen as a sign of love and shows that the deceased is still remembered. A possible reason behind this emphasis on beauty in relation to mourning is that beauty could, according to Danto, act as a "catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness" (quoted in Viso 1999: 129).

Inherent to the nature of flowers, especially when cut, is the fact that they will be short-lived. In their budding youth, their imminent demise is already anticipated. Flowers have a long history of symbolising the cycles of nature and the constant growth and decline of all earthly life. Due to their exquisite but fleeting beauty, they have often been seen as symbols of ephemerality and transience. Flowers left at graves might not be intended to be seen as such, but, owing to their context in a graveyard, and the fact that even artificial flowers do not remain in a perfect state for very long, they cannot escape this association.

Flowers have a long history as a decoration used to beautify graves. There is evidence from 150 000 years ago from Neanderthal graves that flowers were used in burials.

There was a close connection between the gods and flowers in ancient Rome and Greece as flowers were seen as having a kind of divinity closely related to the gods. Fresh flowers, particularly roses, lilies and violets were often used in memorials to show that the dead were still remembered. They were used extensively in funeral contexts where the corpse and funeral urn were decorated with flowers and wreaths of dry or artificial flowers were placed in the tomb. Wreaths were painted onto walls of tombs in Pompeii in an attempt to create permanent offerings to the dead (Goody 1993: 57). They can therefore be seen as similar to plastic or metal flowers decorating graves today.

Throughout history, the rose has been ascribed many different symbolisms. It is associated with feminine beauty, as well as with longing and desire. In antiquity, the rose was the most celebrated of all flowers. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the culture of the rose was neglected in Europe and fell into disfavour with Christian writers because of its associations with Venus and "voluptuousness and debauchery" (Goody 1993: 89). Only gradually did the rose make its appearance in Christian

iconography and rituals. Eventually, for Catholics, the rose became the most important of the flowers associated with the Virgin Mary.

Roses were also one of the most frequently used emblems of transience, as well as being seen as having a connection with earthly love. "The rose shows the brevity of Man's weak life, by its inconstancy and the fact that it abounds in thorns, just as Man's life is assailed by much anxiety. The rose also means the voluptuousness of fleshly love" (van Mander quoted in Taylor 1995: 57). A rose represented the fleeting nature of pleasure as it was seen as not only a "symbol of luxury, but carried a message of warning about life itself; a canker lay within the rose" (Goody 1993: 56). Shakespeare uses the symbolism of the canker hidden in a rose in the sonnets to allude to the deceptive nature of appearance and beauty. He made an analogy between the rose and youthful beauty to emphasise the fragile nature of beauty. Comparisons between youthful, feminine beauty and the rose continue to this day. International cosmetics houses Clarins and Lancome both employ the symbol of a budding rose, often in conjunction with a youthful female face, in their advertising and packaging for women's cosmetics.

Flowers have historically been one of the most popular subjects of still life painting, particularly the vanitas genre where the flower was transformed from being seen merely as an object of beauty to an object which was ascribed complex symbolic meanings. The flower's history as a subject in still life painting is important to the understanding of the symbolism behind the use of flowers. They were included for their simultaneous associations with the beauty of youth and the imminence of death. Still life painting "interrogates that which is within its reach: the ordinary, the everyday, the run-of-the-mill. ... There are few examples in the other pictorial genres of these array of things so ripe, things gone to seed, close to compost or loam. (Skira 1989: 7).

Since the end of the fifteenth century, still life painting increasingly focused on nature and appearances. During the seventeenth century, especially in Holland, the floral still life experienced enormous popularity. One of the most common analogies of the time was between the brief lives of flowers and the brief lives of men (Taylor 1995: 43). While beautiful objects, especially flowers, had always been the predominant subject matter for still life painting, suddenly they were shown past their prime, withering and sinking towards decline. Worn books with still legible pages as well as wilting and worm-eaten flowers were common motifs, suggesting the vanity of life and the proximity of death.

> The familiar objects of the genre assume a new symbolism: candles flicker, pipe smoke curls away, music fades, flowers wither, butterflies flutter for the last time, glasses fall and are shattered, bread grows stale, weapons rust, all things decay. New objects are introduced and these provide the key: the skull (often in association with a portrait), the watch (sometimes in pieces – it no longer tells the time), the hourglass. The symbols spell out the message: death lies within all living things. Soap bubbles float in the air, a child's game but also an image of man in the Latin proverb: *Homo bulla* (man [is] but a bubble). (Aries 1985: 193)

This new genre of still life painting was called *vanitas* painting. The word 'vanities' refers to a phrase from Ecclesiastes :*Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity). As a genre, it aimed to impart a sense of the imminent demise of all worldly things and to deplore excessive vanity.

There is debate over whether flower paintings which did not contain any accepted vanitas symbolism (the inclusion of a clock, an hour glass and particularly a skull) were intended to act as reminders of mortality (Taylor 1995: 48). Although most seventeenth century Dutch people would have been well aware of the associations with flowers of transience and death, flowers had many other associations: with spring and summer, for example.

> Flowers could be enjoyed for their colour and grace quite as much then as now. Even transience imagery could be viewed in various ways. One did not have to contemplate one's last end when reminded of time's fleeting nature. (Taylor 1995: 48)

In addition, extremely beautiful flowers were linked to the divine in Christianity. Such magnificent beauty was seen as an example of God's power and virtue. The inclusion of perishable subject matter such as flowers or fruit – or a watch, a common *vanitas* symbol – also alluded to the power of art to conquer time, to render things immortal. Dutch poems about flower paintings usually make the same point that painted flowers last forever. However, other paintings, with their flowers wilting way past their prime, seem to have been made with the "conscious aim of evoking the brevity of existence" (Taylor 1995: 51).

Figure 2: **Joel-Peter Witkin**
Still-life, Marseilles (1992)

More recently, artists have continued to link flowers with thoughts of death. Both photographers Irving Penn and Joel-Peter Witkin have created still-life compositions which have borrowed from, and directly refer to, the tradition of *vanitas* painting. Witkin attempts to celebrate both loss and beauty in *Still Life, Marseilles* (1992) (fig. 2). Flowers erupt out of a decapitated head, his replacement for the conventional *vanitas* symbolism of the skull. The emphasis on mortal remains and their fragments, juxtaposed with perishable produce such as fruit and flowers highlights:

> the absolute irrelativity of existence, which Witkin confronts with a poetics that, in accordance with the Catholic faith, considers death a passage to the supernatural but also experiences it as an extreme event, a closing of the life cycle. (Celant 1995: 34)

Figure 3: **Robert Mapplethorpe**
Calla lilly (1986)

Figure 4: **Robert Mapplethorpe**
Skull (1988)

As with photographs, flowers can have different associations depending on their context. Although Penn did not include flowers in his *vanitas*-inspired compositions, he often photographed both wilting and budding flowers. His desire to record the "transitory, the passing, the imminence of death ... and the ultimate sadness of all vanity" (Liberman 1991: 9) means that these flower pieces naturally develop connotations as symbols of ephemerality.

In a similar vein, Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of flowers were initially seen as having predominantly sexual associations, but became all the more poignant the closer he came to death. "In the lustre of their colours and their simulation of a sweet, morbid aroma, his graveside arrangements are comparable to nothing less than the highly polished gravestone sculptures in the cemetary of Genoa" (Sachsse 1996: 27).

c. Denying death

In 1915 Freud wrote that the prevailing attitude towards death, which he felt was one where death was put to one side, hushed up and eliminated from life, amounted to a "denial of death" (quoted in Dollimore 1998: 119). Two World Wars did not have the effect that Freud thought they would of significantly changing this attitude. Influential writers like Geoffrey Gorer and Phillippe Aries, writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, have also commented on a general distancing of death from everyday life. Gorer wrote in his 1955 essay '*The Pornography of Death*' that:

> death had become not so much forgotten as tabooed, suppressed and unmentionable – almost obscene. The natural processes of corruption and decay had become disgusting, and any consideration of them was regarded as unhealthy and morbid. (quoted in Dollimore 1998: 120)

Aries wrote that in "the most industrialised, urbanised, and technologically advanced areas of the Western world ... society has banished death" (Aries 1981: 560).

Signs of ageing and decay are considered unwelcome in modern society. John Coplans' large scale photographs of his own ageing body are images which serve to remind us of our own mortality. The display of ageing, decaying flesh is considered a taboo in a society that places such emphasis on youth and flawless appearance. Coplans says that, as an old person,

Figure 5: **John Coplans**
Self-portrait (seated figure) (1987)

> ... you don't exist. They don't want to have anything to do with you, because you're ugly, and old, and you're going to die soon, and they don't want to be like that. So you hardly exist. The time is going to come soon when you're dead and gone ... and you're in the way of the worship of youth and beauty. (quoted in Townsend 1998: 97)

Viewing others' mortality leads to thoughts of one's own death. The ageing body and face deliver the uncomfortable message that, no matter how much effort we make, we cannot overcome the inevitability of death and decay.

> Age cannot be seen to wither the ideal of beauty ... To aspire to beauty – to 'beauty' as it is offered to us in the images of advertising, of fashion and the movies – is to seek a kind of virginity, a guarantee that the corruption of the world and time has failed to affect us. (quoted in Townsend 1998: 97)

Susan Stewart argues that the idealised body is seen as attractive as it "implicitly denies the possibility of death – it attempts to present a realm of transcendence and immortality." This is in sharp contrast to the "body of lived experience (which) is subject to change, transformation and most importantly death" (Stewart 1993: 133).

Shakespeare's work often links beauty and death. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about the "paradoxical binding together of death and desire." In order to "banish one kind of loss (mutability) another kind (death) is embraced" (Dollimore 1998: 108, 111). Ageing is seen as a constant process of small deaths. "Death is not merely the eventual termination of life, but an impossible mutability within life itself" (Dollimore 1998: 115). For Shakespeare, death is unbearable yet not completely undesirable. Untimely death halts decay and means that the deceased will always be remembered as young and beautiful, not tainted by the effects of time.

The eroticism of death in Shakespeare's work grew out of an alliance created between death, violence, suffering and sex at the end of the fifteenth century. Thoughts of death were not avoided but were actively encouraged. Death and desire were linked in such a way that they gave rise to a new category of eroticism.

> It became necessary to find a name for it, and the one adopted denoted the sickly languor of bodies too tender, ambiguous; it was then extended to refer to the desirable corpse. The word was 'morbid.' It acquired a real aesthetic value, being understood as a variation of 'the beautiful,' and its effects were much sought after. (Aries 1985: 210)

Today, the word 'morbid' has more negative associations, used to denote that which is considered macabre and unwholesome.

A rich culture of visual artefacts incorporating the *memento mori* tradition was developed in response to death and became especially popular in England around 1600 (Llewellyn 1991: 13). Representations of the moment of death were intended to prepare people for death. The translation of *memento mori* is 'remember thy death.' Artworks and everyday objects like rings, spoons and snuff boxes were engraved with familiar *memento mori* iconography such as a skull, an hour glass, and the words 'live to die, die to live.' Symbols of death decorated everyday objects such as brooches, pendants and rings. They reminded people constantly of the imminence of death and the need to prepare for it. Inscriptions on tombstones were meant to be read by people in search of meditative inspiration and to act as a means of moral improvement. "As did the death ritual, the remains of the past were expected to instruct the present in how to behave" (Llewellyn 1991: 131).

The intention behind the *memento mori* tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries differed from that of the late Middle Ages as they no longer served to urge the viewer to repent in case

of death. They now "expressed the sentiments of modern man in the face of the nothingness that he was in the process of discovering" (Aries 1985: 193). *Vanitas* painting, which was linked to the *memento mori* tradition, emphasised death, but was most concerned with encouraging the viewer to contemplate the "right usage of life" (Skira 1989: 95).

According to Dollimore it was in the eighteenth century that death was first seen to be denied (Dollimore 1998: 120). Initially this attitude resulted from a "greater emphasis on individuality and on personal, as distinct from collective, destiny" (Dollimore 1998: 120). The Lutheran theory of *memoria* was established at this time (Llewellyn 1991: 123) and marked a major change in attitude towards death and its rituals.

> The phrase *'Memento mori,'* which encouraged men to think upon death and prepare themselves for the final journey was replaced by the phrase *"In Memoria"*, encouraging survivors to contemplate the life past of the deceased. (Snyder quoted in Ruby 1995: 142)

This change in attitude was seen as a sign that "men were more concerned with their image before man than with their image before God. Death meant a sad and tearful farewell to family and friends, rather than a sober transition to eternal life" (Snyder quoted in Ruby 1995: 142).

The practice of placing photographs on tombstones, which began in the early nineteenth century, can be seen as an attempt to deny death. Placing a photograph on the grave of the deceased as they were in life *before* the tragedy of death, shows a desire to make the subject present and to somehow overcome the finality of death. Victorian rituals surrounding death in the nineteenth century tended to stress the "deep difficulty of death; whereas the final aim of the earlier ritual was to place death in life in order to soften its blow" (Llewellyn 1991: 136). Women predominantly assumed the role of preserving family identity and memory. They created objects called 'remembrances' which served to memorialise people and events. "The cult of memory found its greatest expression in the memorialisation of the dead" (Lamoree & Bourcier, quoted in Ruby 1995: 164). Simpler kinds of commemorative art were usually made with whatever materials came to hand. They were designed to be set up in more humble locations away from sites specifically related to death such as cemeteries. The bereaved surrounded themselves with visual signs of the deceased in their homes, in their dress and in their jewellery to try and sustain the memory and the very presence of the deceased. This practice was not seen as morbid but was considered therapeutic (Llewellyn 1991: 134).

Llewellyn draws attention to the fact that social historians have long argued that the shorter life expectancy and higher mortality rate of cultures prior to the twentieth century contributed to a greater sense of the imminence of death in everyday life (Llewellyn 1991: 134).

The increased distancing of death from everyday life in the Western world in the past century has generally been seen as a result of medical advances, which have led to longer life expectancy. To think about one's own death or to talk about death has generally become regarded as morbid. In contrast to the late nineteenth century where postmortem photographs as well as

images of people on their deathbeds were common, death has become a taboo subject, hidden from view, kept out of everyday life. Death has been removed from the everyday environment as the majority of people die in hospitals or institutions rather than at home.

> Death had been converted from the work of an all-powerful nature or deity, an event entitled to respect, even acceptance, and compensating public and private ceremony, to an event with bad timing – that is, in a few years, the cause of a particular death would surely be overcome. (Norfleet 1993: 13)

Less than a century ago, people died at home and their friends and family prepared their bodies for burial. In England and America, cemeteries were designed as parks intended to invite contemplation and meditation.

> Today, instead of gazing at death, we watch violence ... Ordinary and inevitable death, death as an actual part of life, has become so rare that when it occurs among us it reverberates like a handclap in an empty auditorium. (Lesy quoted in Ruby 1995: 12)

Aries distinguishes between "wild" and "tame" death (Aries 1974: 14). A 'tame' death is one where death is accepted as part of the natural order of things. Either because of a fear of an afterlife, or because it is seen as an extension of sleep, death is met with neither fear nor despair but an attitude "half-way between passive resignation and mystical trust" (Aries 1974: 103). Death becomes 'wild' when it is seen as something to be feared and as very difficult to accept.
Much of the literature on death, particularly that written by Aries and Gorer, essentially implies that, by adopting a 'healthier' attitude to death by accepting and integrating it into modern life, it would prepare us better and make it less traumatic to deal with. Dollimore however argues that this attitude is "apparently incapable of acknowledging on the personal level just how devastating and unendurable death is or can be for those who survive" (Dollimore 1998: 123). He questions whether there has ever been a 'denial of death' and claims that we can begin to understand the "vital role of death in Western culture only when we accept death as profoundly, compellingly and irreducibly traumatic" (Dollimore 1998: 126).

Aries, Lesy and Gorer's texts quoted in this essay date from a time before the devastating impact of AIDS had become apparent. The advent of this disease has caused a considerable change in attitudes towards modern medicine, and possibly even towards death. However, death as a result of HIV infection has in many cases been hidden because of feelings of shame which have been associated with the disease.

The effect of the disease has been a subject of many artists' work in the last two decades. Artist/ photographer Nan Goldin has photographed many of her friends in the final stages of infection with full blown AIDS. By doing this, she asserts the need to represent her response to death, attempting to counter the "dominant social attitude that marginalises human mortality, that refuses to accept its significance within individual and social life" (Townsend 1998: 135).

Figure 6: **Felix Gonzalez-Torres**
"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers) (1987–1990)

Felix Gonzalez-Torres tried to come to terms with the experience of the loss of his partner Ross to AIDS through his work. *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* (1987–1990) comprises two identical clocks[1] joined together which keep the same time. The implication is that either one could stop at any moment. He felt that a sense of the fragility of life inspired him to appreciate life more than he might otherwise have done. "In confronting Ross' death, Felix was also confronting his own, and with it the full extent of his desire for life" (Rosen 1997: 45).

South Africa currently has one of the worst HIV/ AIDS infection statistics in the world. Many other factors, including increasing violence, diseases such as cholera and high road death tolls, are contributing to the possibility of imminent death becoming an everpresent reality of living in South Africa at this time.

An analogy can be drawn between the current situation in South Africa and the effect of the plague in Shakespearean England, although the two situations are very different in many respects. In 1564, the year that Shakespeare was born, nearly a third of the population of Stratford-upon-Avon died of plague (Greenblatt 1997: 3). Death was an everpresent reality of life. Life expectancy at birth in early Modern England was very low. Even when the plague was dormant, conditions were harsh and starvation common. Despite the frequency of death, we cannot assume that people were not intensely affected by loss as there is evidence of severe grief. It is not surprising therefore that the sonnets, and many other of his works, contemplate mutability and the instability of all mortal things.

Only as time progresses will it become evident whether, unlike Freud's prediction that war would change attitudes towards death in the twentieth century, AIDS will significantly alter the way in which death is perceived in the twenty-first century.

[1] Clocks have been used extensively in *vanitas* and graveyard imagery to symbolise the fleeting nature of time and the imminence of death.

d. Transience and notions of appearance in Shakespeare's sonnets

A sense of the transitory nature of all mortal things is a theme which underlies many of Shakespeare's sonnets. The sonnets and the portraits and flower arrangements sourced from graveyards are linked in that they all represent a desire to try to preserve that which is ephemeral and mutable: the sonnets because Shakespeare strove to immortalise youthful beauty through poetry; the portraits as they captured a moment that no longer exists; and the flower arrangements because most of them are not real, but made of artificial materials like plastic and ceramic. The excerpts from Shakespeare's sonnets included in this project reflect on the power and the futility of vanity. These excerpts were chosen because of their correlating themes with the images included in the book of mutability, the illusion behind appearances and the fragile and fleeting nature of life.

Shakespeare's sonnets are divided into two main sections: those that refer to a young man (this is generally accepted, though there is some debate as there is only one sonnet which specifically refers to him as male), and those that refer to a mistress, the 'dark lady' of the sonnets. Most of the excerpts included in the book come from the section devoted to the youth. A constant element in these sonnets is the effect of time. The seasons, day and night, plants and flowers, particularly the rose, are used to evoke a sense of the passing of time and the inevitability of decay. An analogy is made between flowers and fading beauty. Ageing is symbolised through the inevitable march of the seasons and through day passing into night. Day also follows night, as spring follows winter, but there is little reference to any ideas of rebirth or continuation after death, except through having children.

In the first seventeen sonnets devoted to the youth, Shakespeare urges him to have children in order to preserve his memory. However, perhaps because his advice was not taken[1], the following sonnets assure the youth of immortality through his poetry. It is ironic then that, despite Shakespeare's many assurances that the young man would be remembered through the sonnets, his identity is unknown. Shakespeare talks about revealing his 'truth' or 'essence' but very few inherently personal or specific descriptions of his beauty or personality exist in the sonnets. Although Shakespeare's poetry has indeed survived over time, very little is known about the young man or the 'dark lady' of the sonnets. Even though Shakespeare urges the youth to have children to guard against the loss of youth and beauty, Shakespeare himself compensates for his own loss and frustrated desire for the young man by writing. "He empowers himself by writing unforgettably of the powerlessness of everything under the sway of time" (Dollimore 1998: 106).

Shakespeare was fascinated by the youth's fragile, temporary beauty and the fact that, soon after reaching his prime, decay and age would take their toll. As with the contemplation of flowers in vanitas paintings, youthful perfection prompted Shakespeare to

[1] Or perhaps for financial gain, as the youth is thought to have been a potential patron.

contemplate and anticipate inevitable future decay and death. Dollimore suggests that

> even as time, death and mutability are deplored in the sonnets, their indifferent power is strangely revered ... an acute sense of physical beauty is inflected by an even more acute fascination with mutability and loss ... Beauty becomes not just the victim of time but its measure – even, in places, its effect. (Dollimore 1998: 105)

Although Shakespeare obviously finds the young man's youth and looks attractive, he also identifies with the destructive effects of time. "There is a strange and compelling complicity between time and its chronicler such that we might go so far as to say that the author of the sonnets is enamoured more of death than of the boy" (Dollimore 1998: 105).

The major theme which runs through the sonnets, even more powerful than the themes of mutability, desire and the effects of time, is the deceptive nature of appearance. The Elizabethans were extremely conscious of appearance and how they were represented, but also had "an especially acute consciousness of appearance as *dis-guise*" (Vendler 1997: 264). A deep and knowing commitment to illusion was part of everyday symbolic practice in Renaissance England (Greenblatt 1997: 58). Throughout Shakespeare's plays, especially in his dramas, disguise is shown to convincingly fool others. It is as if by changing their clothing and superficial appearance, they have changed their identity. Shakespeare "draws heavily upon his culture's investment in costume, symbols of authority, visible signs of status – the fetishism of dress that he must have experienced since early childhood" (Greenblatt 1997: 57). Shakespeare's is a world where "outward appearance is everything and nothing" (Vendler 1997: 60).

The distinction between inward thought and outward appearance is markedly clear in many of Shakespeare's works, particularly through the use of the soliloquy. The soliloquy is "a continual reminder in Shakespeare that the inner life is by no means transparent to one's surrounding world" (Vendler 1997: 59).

In many of the sonnets, beauty is admired and seen as ultimately desirable, yet Shakespeare also warns constantly of its fragility and its transience, and therefore the inevitability that it will be taken away. Everything and everyone that is considered beautiful eventually becomes less so. Shakespeare's notion of beauty does not allow for any alternative ideals, nor does he acknowledge the subjective nature of beauty. As roses are universally admired, so according to Shakespeare is human beauty instantly recognisable and without exception powerful" (Vendler 1997: 263). Beauty is also specifically linked to youth. While many sonnets praise the young man's physical attributes, he also speaks of the inadequacy of appearance in conveying anything of the character of a person. An excerpt from sonnet 24 reads:

> For through the painter must you see his skill,
> To find where your true image lies ...
> Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art,
> They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

This sonnet has as its subject the "failure of representation (even while it produces a true image of beauty's external form)" (Vendler 1997: 143). A person's 'true image,' according to Shakespeare, lies beneath the exterior.

THE PRACTICAL BODY OF WORK

a. A visual sonnet

The final body of practical work for this MFA project is in the form of a book, the title of which is *Memoria: a visual sonnet.* The inherent qualities of a book: namely the possibility for a narrative; a progression from a beginning to an end; its intimate, personal nature with connotations of family photo albums; and the layering of images and ideas, compliment the personal and nostalgic nature of the images used as subject matter. A book is also used as a symbol on gravestones, where it is representative of the deceased's life with birth as the beginning and the closed book symbolising death. A sense of progession is created when paging through the book, evoking the passing of time.

It is possible to remove the book from its box and open it out. One of the reasons for using the binding methodology of the concertina format is because it is potentially malleable. The book is constructed in such a way that it can be viewed in a traditional double page spread format or can be pulled open so that a 'line' can be viewed in its entirety, with four pages seen at once. By opening it out even further, the potential is created for different juxtapositions between images. Providing an opportunity for the images to be seen in different contexts like this was an important concern because various combinations of pieces are then possible.

Excerpts from Shakespeare's sonnets which had references to themes of memorial, transience and fading beauty were included in the book. The text and the images in the book are meant to act in support of each other. While the text is not intended as an explication of the images, the images are similarly not intended to be illustrative of the text.

Memoria is described as a 'visual sonnet' as it has been structured according to the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet in order to create a rhythm and order between the images that echoes that of the text. The rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Two double page spreads make up one line of the visual sonnet. Although iambic pentameter was too complex to incorporate using the images, each pair of rhyming lines do however have a similar rhythm and combination of elements. Each pair of text pages do 'rhyme' in that they are worked in a very similar way.

The rhyming couplet at the end of a sonnet is conventionally expected to stand apart from the rest of the poem in its treatment or in its content. It can potentially sum up, or possibly contradict, what is said elsewhere in the poem. Therefore the rhyming couplet in the book was intentionally conceived to be aesthetically different to the rest of the sonnet. A sequence of images was created by repeatedly drawing and painting over the same piece of paper, while photographing stages along the way. A superceding of one drawing by another, as well as a sense of a progression over time is implied. The idea for the reworking of a single matrix and the documentation of each stage, was partly inspired by William Kentridge's animations and his process of

constantly transforming a single image. The stages of the reworked drawing now only exist as images in the book as, in order to create each new stage, the previous one had to be destroyed.

Each text page always appears first in the sequence of four pages. The text relates to, or informs the images in the line in some way. The text pages are treated differently to the other images in the book, incorporating real objects and photographs for example, as they are meant to act as a contrasting element and to have their own identity. They are intentionally sparer and less worked to create a pause at regular intervals. The text is intended to be a neutral element and therefore the typographically classic face of Times New Roman is used.

b. Source material

Both painted and photographic portraits form a major part of the practical work. The photographs were sourced mainly from cemetaries where they had been placed as memorials. However, all portraits can be considered to be memorials, even if the person depicted is not dead. Life is a process of constant change where each change signals a kind of death.

The majority of the imagery was sourced from graveyards in the Cape Town area. Photography was the primary means used to document the photographic portraits on gravestones, wreaths and other relevant objects. Some found objects which had been discarded or found alongside graves were collected. All the flowers collected as imagery were badly weathered and in the process of disintegrating. When flowers start to die, they are generally no longer considered to be of any worth and are disposed of. Most of the flowers were at a stage where they were about to be thrown away, yet it was in this fragmented state that I found them to be most beautiful. There is a paradox here as, in their decayed state, they serve to mourn the loss of youth and beauty yet it is precisely this loss which can be seen as beautiful.

The rose was the most commonly used flower in floral arrangements and in images on graves that I encountered. Roses therefore predominate as imagery throughout the book. The imagery most commonly found inscribed onto tombstones reveals a desire to create a poetic representation of death; for example, sunsets, the image of a closed book or a dove in flight suggesting transcendence.

In most graveyards that I visited, segregation between white, coloured and black communities still exists. The majority of them, regardless of race or affluence, are in a state of complete disrepair and neglect. Vandalism is rife and once spectacular monuments from the early part of the twentieth century have mostly been defaced or destroyed. However, within this general landscape of neglect, there are many examples of well-tended monuments. In some communities, despite an obvious lack of financial resources, everyday materials like shells, dried flowers, bottle tops, car tyres and straw are innovatively transformed into exquisite objects. Small town cemetaries in general had the most unique, hand-crafted objects and were the best maintained.

Mixed media works on paper using a wide variety of materials were created with the intention of forming the basis of the book.

The inspiration for the format of the mixed media originals was the idea of a book laid out so that all its pages are seen simultaneously. The original intention behind these pieces was to deconstruct the book's pages, which would allow working with them as modular pieces, as if working with a puzzle. Experimentation with various combinations of pieces created different sets of associations and resonances depending on which images were placed together.

c. Method and process

In my book, extracts from the sonnets have been handwritten over many of the pieces. They are woven and embedded into the surface and partly painted over, with some words legible and others partly concealed. They are only partly legible, suggesting forgotten or irretrievable stories which can only be partly grasped. Handwriting is seen as more personal and highly individual; reminiscent of love letters, personal notes and diary entries. It can be seen as an alternative 'portrait' of a person as samples of handwriting, when analysed, are thought to give clues to character and identity.

Computer technology and digital printing enabled layering and the combination of photographs, drawings, real objects, painting, textures and text into one format, namely the digital inkjet, or giclee, print. By printing them out as digital prints onto paper, I was able to make all the elements work together in a more coherent form. Working with the possibilities of the Adobe Photoshop software application made it possible to turn photographs, objects and drawings into ghostly veils and soft layers, evocative of fading memories. This subtle layering would not have been possible using traditional drawing or collage techniques.

Photography plays a dominant role in the work both in the collection of the original source material (which often entailed rephotographing photographs) and in translating the mixed media pieces into digital form.

In the case of the original mixed media pieces, giclee prints acted as a contrasting element when, for example, they were combined with very textural drawings. They were integrated with other pieces through being drawn and painted over. By the time images such as these reached their final state in the book, they had been through a process of transformation and mediation through being rephotographed. Almost all the images in the book are scanned from medium format (6x7) transparencies. Due to the effects of artificial lighting and the process of translating them into digital images, many pieces were significantly different to the originals when they returned as raw scans. This transformation was used as a starting point to a new alternative for the work. Working in Photoshop and Quark Xpress provided the freedom to experiment with each work so that it could be adjusted or entirely transformed from the original. The images in the book are not intended to be identical reproductions of the drawings from which they originate: some images are completely transformed from the originals while others have not been significantly altered.

Images are alternately revealed and concealed. Portraits were painted and drawn over, or sometimes partly erased to suggest

both the fragility and vulnerability of exteriors, and the fragmented nature of memory. Glazes were painted over portraits, making them appear to lie just beneath the surface. They become impenetrable and just out of reach; as though they are slowly disappearing. Many of the photographic portraits are made, through the process of multiple layering using Photoshop to appear to be vanishing like ghostly apparitions.

An improvisational approach to working was adopted with most of the original pieces. Most of them have undergone a number of transformations, with many layers of paint and ink being applied. I very rarely made many preparatory drawings before starting on a piece but preferred to work with them more intuitively and spontaneously. By constantly working over images, I wanted to evoke the idea of a passage of time, of objects, memories and photographs constantly being replaced and superceded. The images in the book have also been altered, some more drastically than others, through Photoshop which enabled me to experiment with many possible solutions. The multiple layers are meant to suggest a deeply buried and ultimately unreachable history. Embedded into the pieces are many different layers of images: of drawings which have been painted over or erased; collaged petals; photographs and digitally printed collage elements as well as digital prints. My aim was to create a rich, complex surface where remnants, stains and traces of underlying layers were still partially visible; where present and past reside in the same image.

Mistakes and unintentional effects were incorporated during the process of drawing and painting. Marlene Dumas' improvisational approach and her reworking of her 'reject'

Figure 7: **Marlene Dumas**
Rejects (1994)

pieces, which have a quirky, imperfect aesthetic, were influential. Using rejected pieces was important as an analogy can be made between them and the discarded subject matter that I worked with. Reworking my own discards challenged me to be more experimental in my approach and often resulted in works that led me in new directions.

Transformation of the imagery was largely facilitated through drawing. I altered my mark-making and emphasis, drawing delicately or more gesturally, depending on the intended effect. Evidence of the hand in the work is important as it relates to the very personal, crafted quality of much of the subject matter.

d. Materials

A wide variety of materials and techniques were employed when working on the mixed media pieces; including: oil, acrylic and gloss paint, watercolour, oil and chalk pastels, collage with photographs and inkjet prints, photocopy transfers, drypoint, monoprint and digital printing. Oil-based media made the application or removal of layers at will possible, albeit with unpredictable results. High quality oil pastels allowed drawing over any surface, regardless of the number of layers which had built up underneath. Watercolour was used to create delicate, fragile areas. The extensive use of dripping turpentine partly dissolved some of the drawing materials and paint, creating fragmented, multi-layered surfaces which showed remnants of images from many different stages. The dripping effect suggests the eroding effects of water on things left outside exposed to the elements. As the subject matter I worked with was most often faded and disintegrating, I wanted the surfaces of the works to have a similar feeling of degradation and weathering. Liquin, an oil-based medium which extends oil colour, was used to create subtle transparent effects and layers. It was also used to soften and blend pastel drawings.

e. Colour

White paint and ink were used in many pieces to erase partly what was underneath so that only traces of the underlying image would show through. It was then possible to continue reworking the image. White can be seen as a symbol of both purity and erasure. Red roses are often associated with romantic love; white lilies with funerals. Red, gold, brown and white are associated with autumn and winter; black with night. Their use is important for their correlations with Shakespeare's references to autumn and winter. The metallic coppers, golds and silvers were made to look tarnished and weathered as they appear in picture frames and ornaments left on the graves. The use of very bright colours was avoided. Instead the main palette consists of subtler and more muted colours that were more in keeping with the weathered, rusted and faded subject matter. The colours of many of the objects were deliberately altered in order to defamiliarise and remove them from their everyday context.

The use of non-naturalistic colour when working on the drawn portraits was intentional to try to differentiate them from the photographic portraits. The painted portraits are meant to be more interpretative and subjective. The colours used were those which I felt were most appropriate in attempting to convey something of their character. I was not concerned with achieving a perfect likeness though I did want them to recognisable in some way.

f. Paper

All the images extend to the very edge of the paper. It was important that they bleed into other images as they were constantly shifted around, placed next to other pieces, and worked over the join between them to make a new image.

Cotton paper was used for both the mixed media pieces and the book. BFK Rives paper was used for the original drawings. It is a

very tough, resilient paper which made it possible to work aggressively and with multiple layers. Its surface quality changed and strength improved after many layers of paint and ink had been applied. A lighter weight cotton-based paper was used for the book.

The organic nature and sensual, tactile quality of cotton paper is an important element as it is more appropriate to the subject matter than the smoother, glossier papers that are more traditionally associated with inkjet printing and digital images.

THE PRINTS

Figure 1

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines

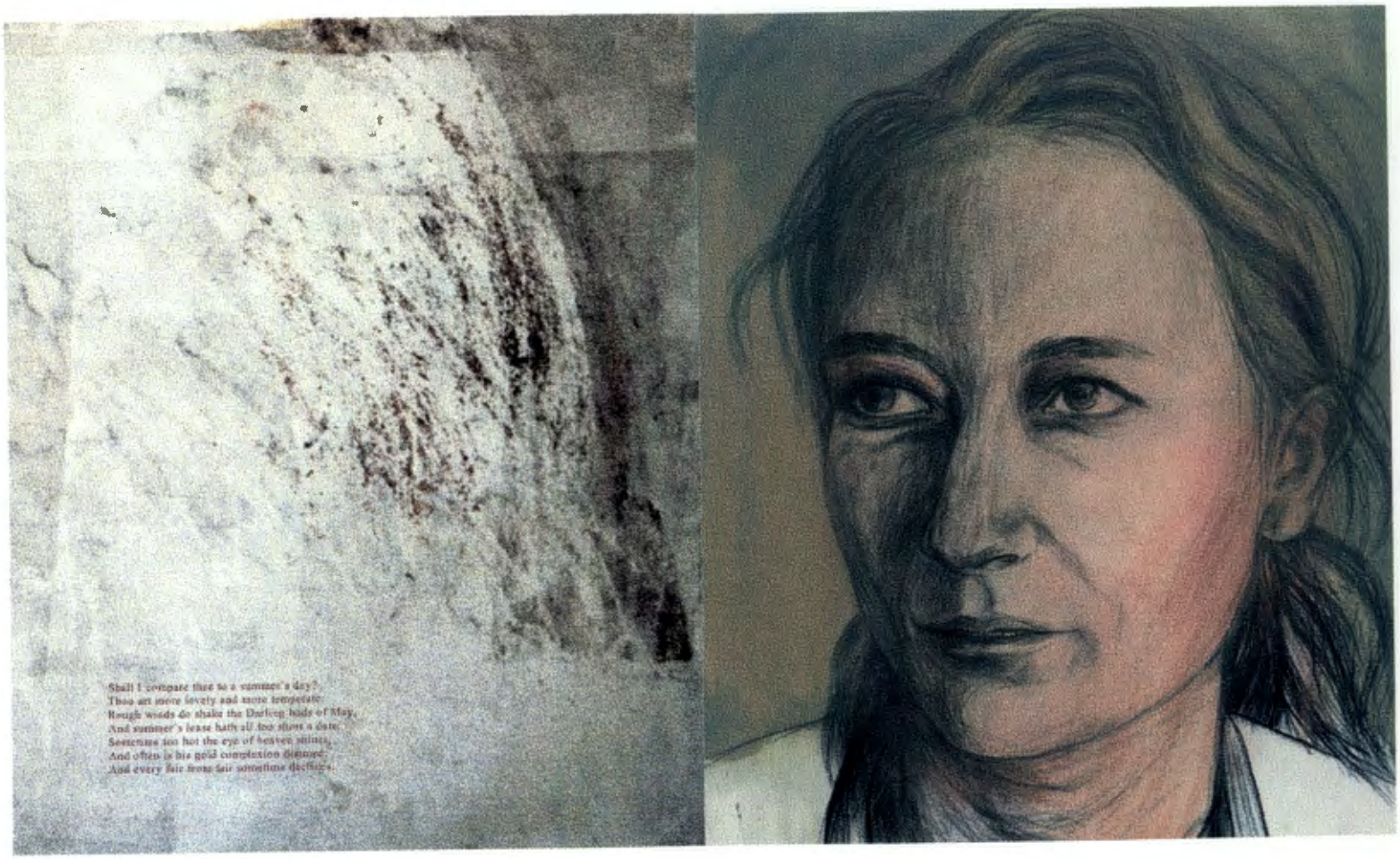
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Figure 2

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now
Will be a tattered weed of small worth held

Figure 3

Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled
Thy beauty's form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
And perspective it is best painter's art.
For through the painter must you see his skill
To find where your true image pictured lies,
Which in thy bosom's shop is hanging still,
That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes.
Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.
    Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art,
    They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

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Figure 4

Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend

Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend

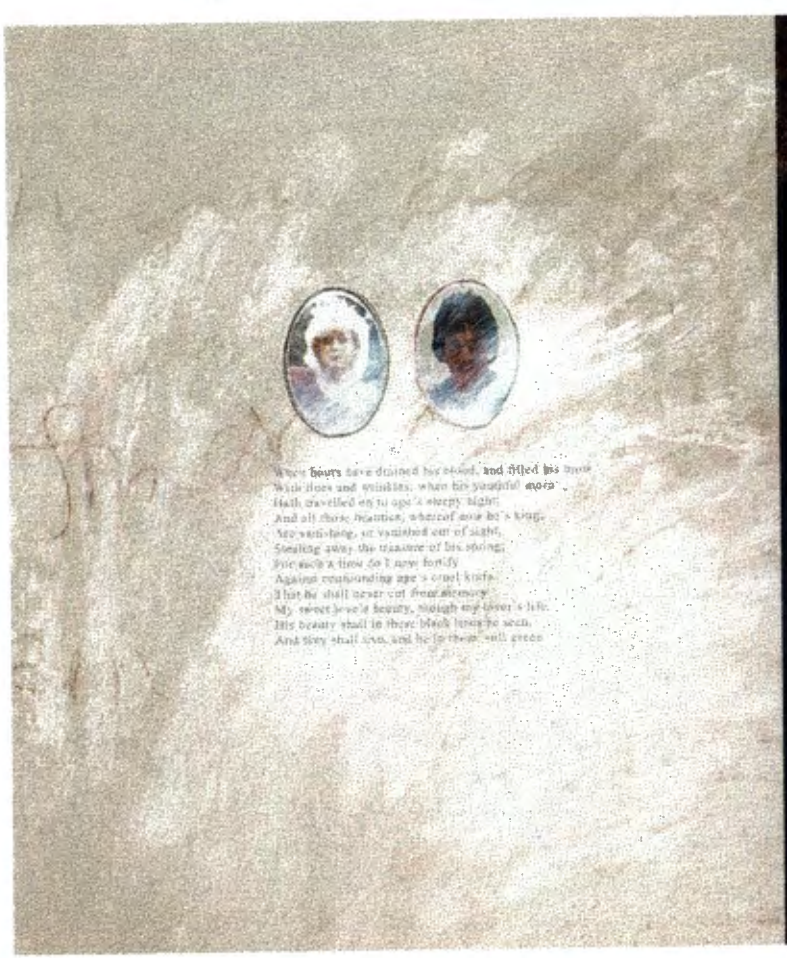
Figure 5

Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn,
When beauty lived and died as flowers do now.


Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn,
When beauty lived and died as flowers do now.

Figure 6

When hours have drained his blood, and filled his brow
With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn
Hath travelled on to age's steepy night;
And all those beauties, whereof now he's king,
Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,
Stealing away the treasure of his spring;
For such a time do I now fortify
Against confounding age's cruel knife,
That he shall never cut from memory
My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life.
His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,
And they shall live, and he in them, still green.



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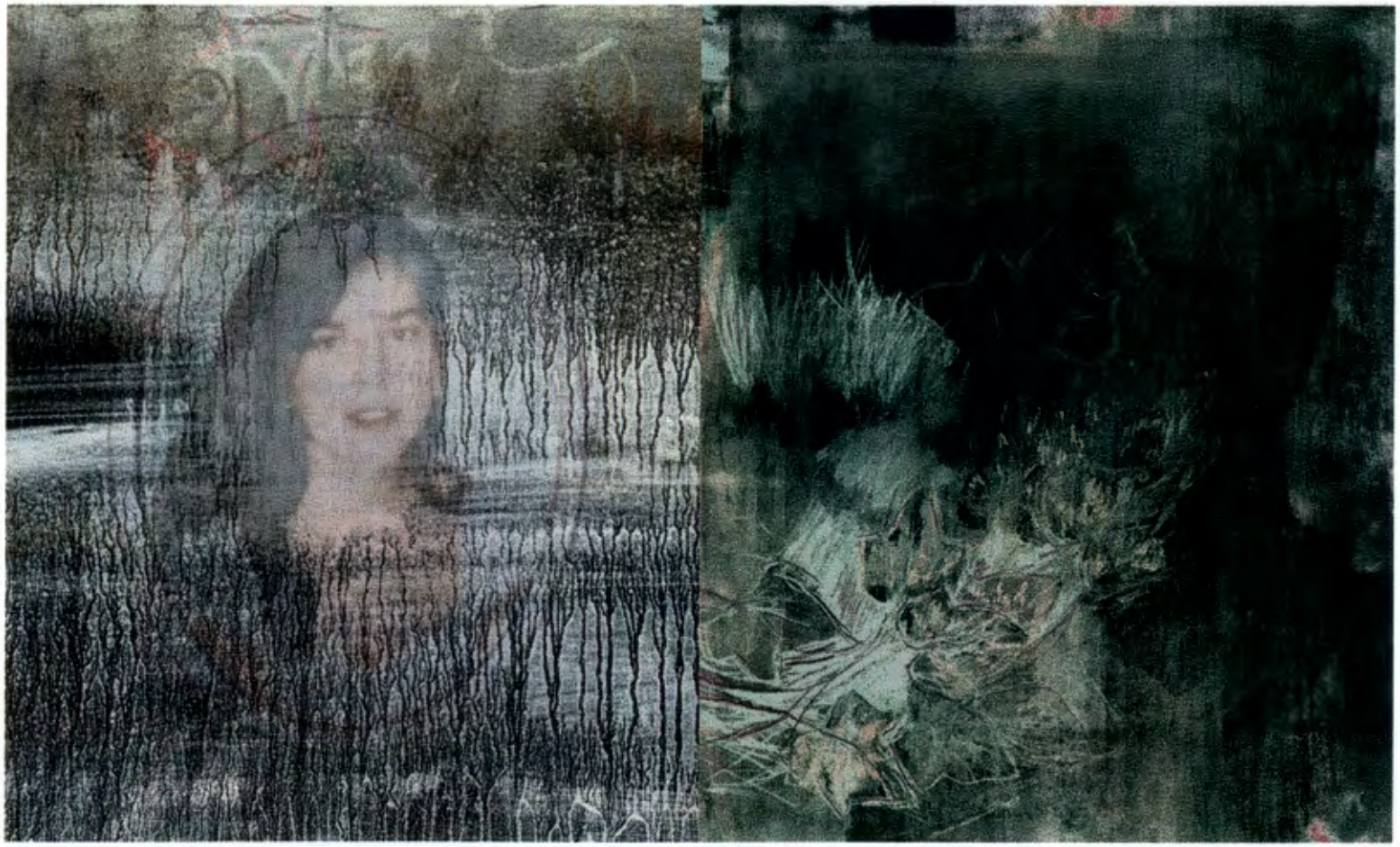


Figure 7

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die

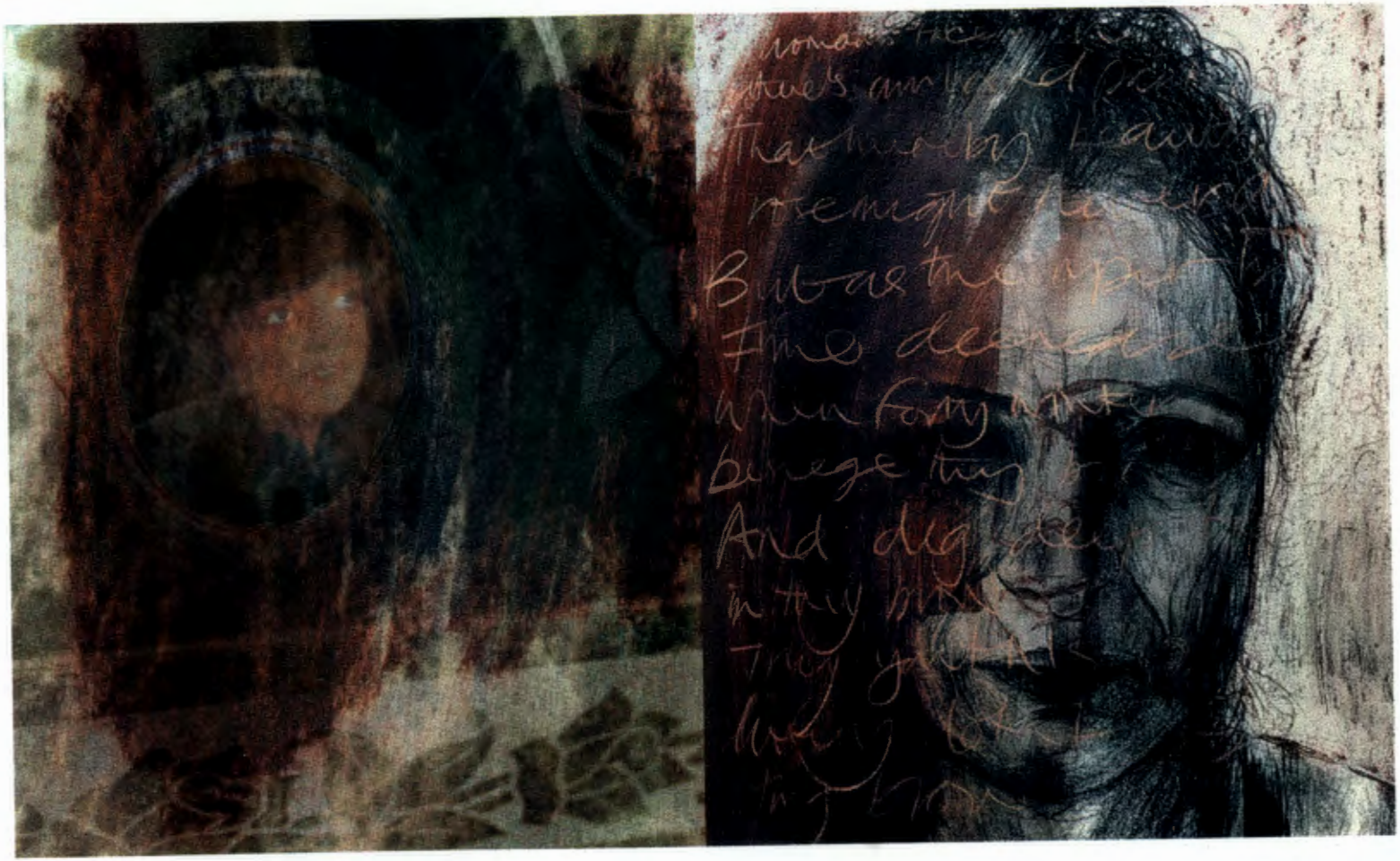
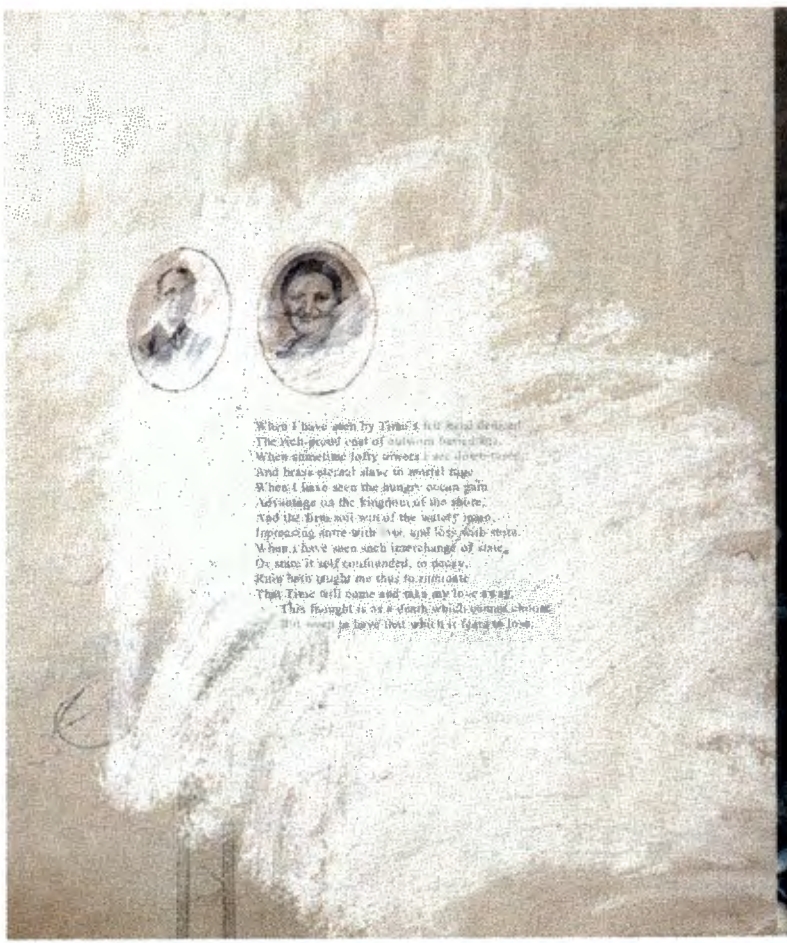


Figure 8

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age,
When sometime lofty towers I see down-rased,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage.
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store.
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state it self confounded, to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.



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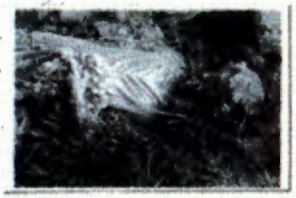
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.


MEMORY

Figure 9

For never–resting time leads summer on
To hideous winter, and confounds him there;
Sap checked with frost, and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o'ersnowed, and bareness everywhere



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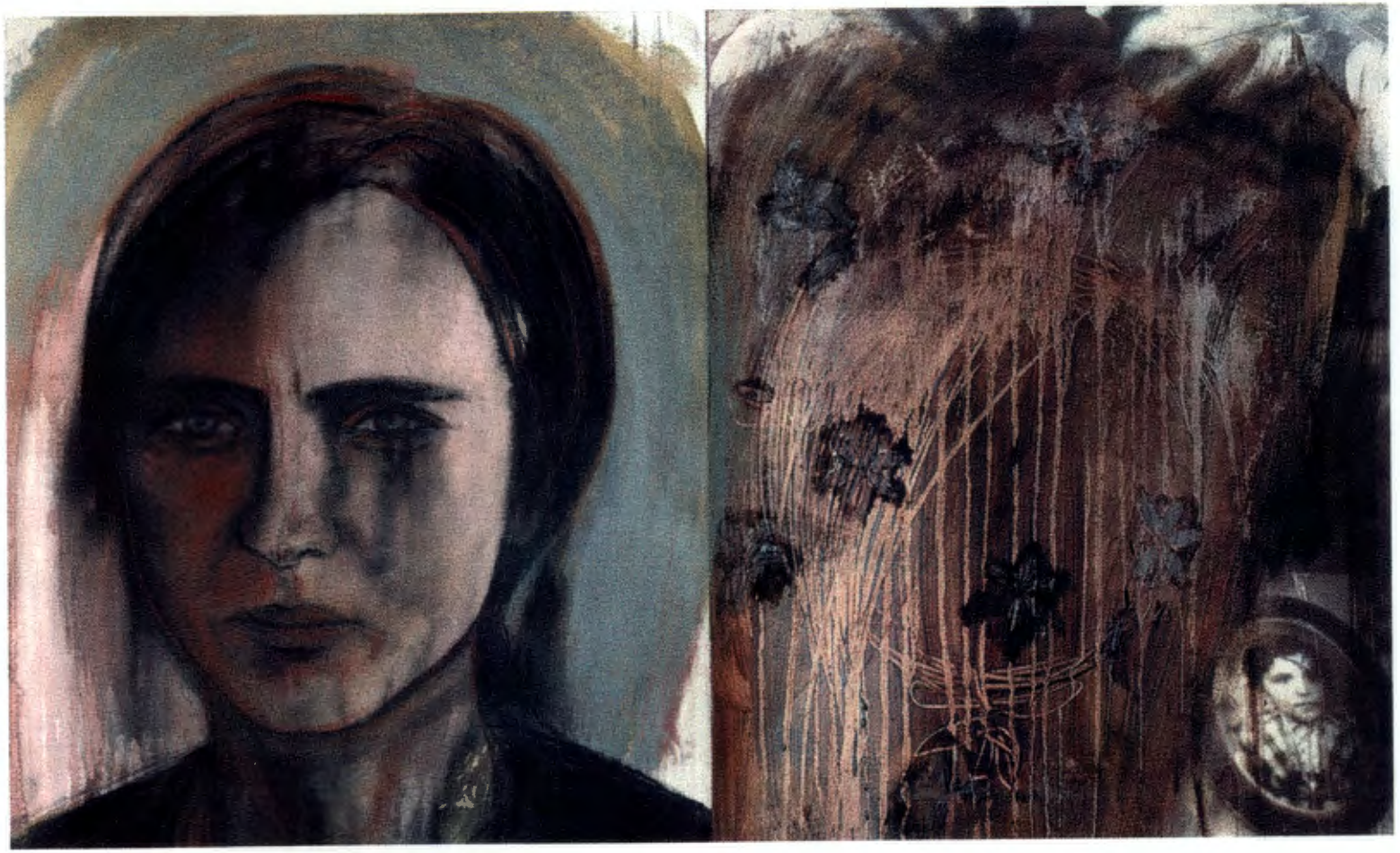

Figure 11

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power.
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

Nor brass, not stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their powers.
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

Figure 13

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silvered o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard:
Then of thy beauty do I question make

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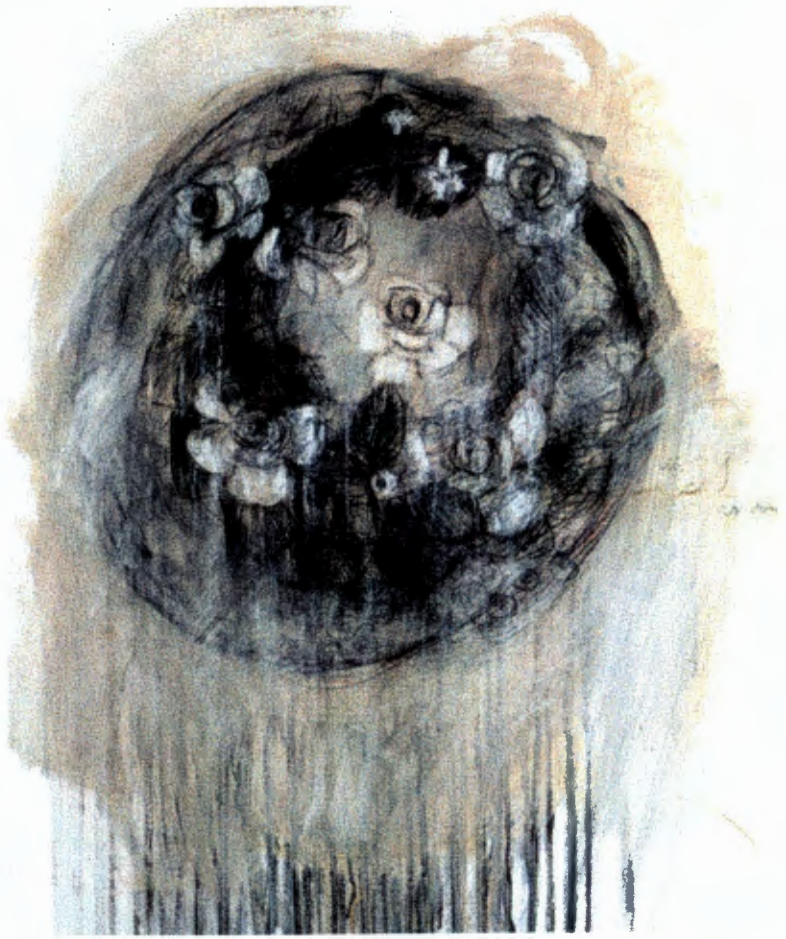

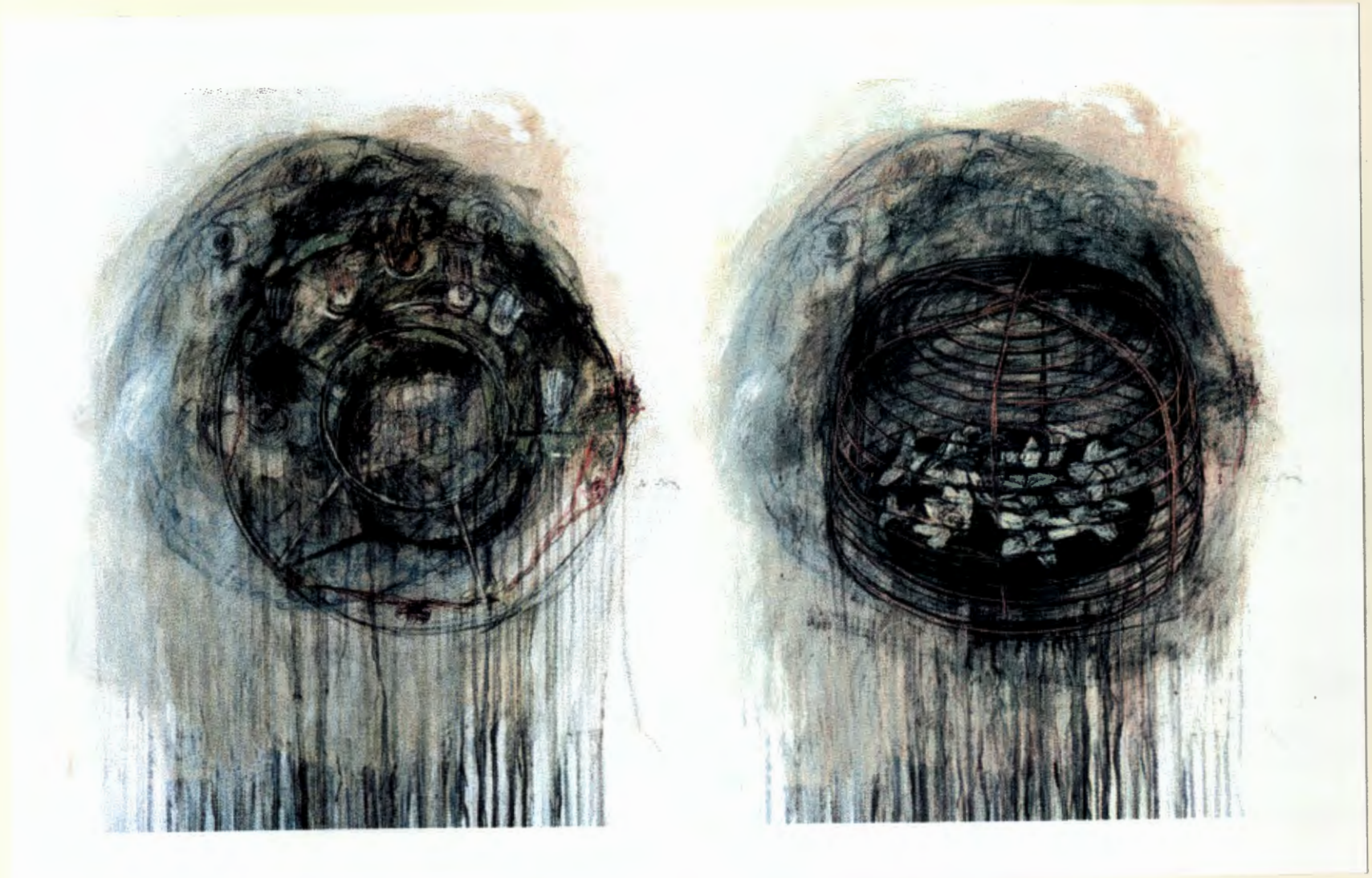

Figure 14

That thou amongst the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow,
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence

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Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
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EPITAPH

Prior to this project, I had never entered a graveyard nor been to a funeral. It was in the first graveyard that I visited, in Maitland while photographing suburban decay, that I took pictures of the memorial portraits which were to inspire this particular project. The graveyard was a familiar part of my daily landscape, yet the exploration of it was something new and strange. The objects left there, particularly flowers and photographs, are the same as those seen in everyday life where they are not usually associated with loss and death. I had already been working with decaying flowers and with portraiture, but they assumed new symbolism and meanings in the context of the graveyard.

Working with this subject matter has been a humbling experience which has significantly altered my perspective on life. Although some graveyards are sad, neglected spaces, the exploration of them has not been a depressing experience for me. This is partly due to the fact that the objects and monuments that I have worked with are symbolic of the enormous love and sense of longing felt by those who are left behind.

I do not believe that looking so closely at loss and rituals of memorialisation make it any easier to deal with the death of someone loved. However, if this project has revealed anything to me, then it is the importance of a sense of life's fragility and the imminence of death in developing an appreciation of the present.

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