The art of dying

How do the dying choose to represent themselves in the last phases of their lives? What issues are raised by photographs produced both by the dying and those closely associated with them?

This paper is based on my research for an exhibition currently on view at the National Portrait Gallery of Australia in Canberra. *Reveries: Photography and Mortality* is concerned with death of self, death of other, and reflections on mortality prompted by one’s own experiences, such as serious illness or the death of a loved one. Today I will be considering a small number of photographs from the exhibition, identifying their shared concerns and preoccupations. The photographs are by prominent Australian and New Zealand photographers and date from the last two decades, a period in which attitudes to dying and death have changed significantly. The reasons for this are complex but include the growing influence of the death awareness movement and the reaction against the excessive medical and technological interventions into the dying process that have characterized ‘modern death’. Also crucial has been the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the gay community’s development of new, highly personalised forms of ritual around dying and death.

My discussion of the photographs is informed by the work of American psychologist Robert Jay Lifton. In *The Broken Connection* (1979) Lifton argues that in response to our knowledge of death, human beings have developed a perpetual need for ‘an assurance of eternal survival of self’ – in other words, a sense of immortality. Many others have written of this phenomenon but Lifton’s argument is particularly useful because he identifies five modes of ‘symbolic immortality’ that can be seen in the photographs I have selected. In short, they comprise the biological (living on through one’s offspring); the theological (the belief in spiritual power including life after death); eternal nature (the human is survived by nature itself); the creation of ‘works’ that ensure an individual’s contribution lives on; and a state of ‘experiential transcendence’ so intense that while immersed in it time and death disappear. This latter state – of ecstasy, rapture, of losing oneself – Lifton suggests can occur through a range of practices that include religious or secular mysticism, sexual love, athletic effort, the contemplation of works of artistic or intellectual creation and so on.¹

It seems particularly appropriate that the experience of ‘losing oneself’ and ‘losing time’, a feeling of the continuous presence that can be equated with eternity or mythical time,² occurs at two unconnected but crucial points – the making of the photographs and our viewing of them.
The photographs I am presenting are very personal, the sum of an individual’s lived experience, but it is the links between the different bodies of work that I will focus on. The most obvious of these are the predominance of imagery of the natural world and of the domestic environment, the use of metaphor and the phenomenon of doubling or ‘pairing’, in which two different states of being – such as inside and outside, self and other, light and dark – are brought together. These states co-exist, gaining meaning from the interaction with each other.

Photographers who have chosen to work with natural imagery in the last stage of their lives include David Moore (Australia’s best known photojournalist who died in 2003) and Indigenous artist Michael Riley (a Wiradjuri-Kamilaroi man who died in 2004). Moore’s last photographs were of the moon; elegant, abstract images in which everything extraneous was eliminated. Michael Riley was ill with kidney failure when he created the digital images for *cloud*, his last completed work, which is distinguished by its ethereal presence and charged spiritual quality. The symbols of colonialism and Christianity, represented here by the Bible and the statue of the angel, appear alongside the iconic symbol of Aboriginal culture, the boomerang. Each object is equalised in visual terms, occupying the same position at the centre of the composition and sharing the same expansive visual field of a blue sky touched with wispy white clouds.

These photographs of the moon, sky, trees and birds (see also Olive Cotton’s *Vapour trail* and *The soaring bird* taken in the last years of her life) underscore the photographers’ desire to create a space in their works that is not ‘earthbound’, that is neither determined nor governed by the material and mundane aspects of everyday life. The horizon line is often abandoned or at best is given only a minor role in the lower section of a composition. Collectively these works also have a bearing on ideas about portraiture, extending the boundaries to encompass the possibility of the dissolution or dispersal of self – that is, the visual representation of an individual that is not dependent on any signs of a physical or embodied presence.

The prevalence of domestic imagery is in part a reflection of the physical circumstances of those involved; illness and immobility force a retreat from the external or public spheres in which photographers and their subjects may have been active previously. But the significance of domestic imagery goes much further than this, for it represents ‘home’ in the most fundamental sense, as the ‘centre of the real’. In the photographs of or by the dying, home has a multi-dimensional presence. It functions as a physical site personalized by material objects, a domain for ritual, and an emotional field in which intimate relationships are conducted and the most private thoughts and feelings are expressed.

As a reaction to modern death that typically occurs in hospital the desire to die at home has been widespread for decades: all William Yang’s friend Allan wanted, Yang recounted, was ‘just to be at home’. (Allan was suffering from HIV/AIDS and died in 1990). The yearning for home gives added poignancy to Carol Jerrems’s photograph of her hospital bed and the little shrine of personal mementoes she constructed around it during her long hospitalization prior to her death in 1980.
Within the close personal relationships represented in the photographs, touch, whether literal or implied, is brought to the fore, associated with care, intimacy and even grace. In his extended series of photographs of Allan, William Yang wrote of the ‘unexpected moment of grace’ that followed an extremely simple gesture. Allan ‘lifted up my hand and when it was at the level of his face he lightly dropped his forehead on it’.

This elevation of touch, of gesture has a broader significance, countering the situation in which the dying are alienated from others because of taboos around the expression of strong feelings and awkwardness about the physical displays of affection and tenderness.⁵

At this point I would like to introduce the work of leading New Zealand photographer Anne Noble and her installation In my father’s garden which combines still photographs, fold-out books and video images. When her father died suddenly from a heart attack a few days before Christmas her family was presented with a dilemma: should they ask everyone to come home early for the funeral or wait until everyone had arrived as planned? The decision was made to wait. Charles Noble was laid out on a bed in his favourite room and family life continued around him. In the photographs Noble took during the week she underlined the familial relationships of which her father had been a vital part, thus reiterating one of the symbolic modes of immortality identified by Lifton, that of biological continuity. She also poetically enunciated her own position on death, as part of life.

This concern with continuity is manifest in Craig Potton’s series of photographs of his wife Beverly which he has titled Beverly, my wife dying of cancer. In Potton’s triptych Beverly is flanked by portraits of her mother and sister. Care, love, is expressed through the act of photography, a means of keeping Beverly, and the memory of her, in the world. In the hours after Beverly’s death Potton set up a final family portrait in which he and son Michael posed with her body within their own living room, filled with the abundant detail of their domestic life together.

This is an intensely felt, autobiographical project but from Potton’s perspective, the photographs of his wife relate to more than their own circumstances. A few months after Beverly died, he commented that:

... to me …[the photographs] have something important to say about the human condition, which is that no matter how many things can go wrong, and how much suffering exists, and in spite of the damage we do to the natural world, there is something fundamentally good about human existence.⁶

Within the home environment objects have an important role, depending on whether they are invested with meaning by those who are living or those who are dying. The last negatives taken by Australia’s best known modernist photographer, Max Dupain, include a number of interior shots of his home in Sydney
which depict the rich accumulation of objects over a lifetime. Curiously, David Moore’s final proof sheet also includes a modest domestic sight. In amongst his sublime images of the moon are two negatives of the most mundane subject matter – pots drying in the dishrack.

On the face of it the simultaneous appearance of natural (Lifton’s mode of eternal nature) and domestic imagery may appear incompatible and yet it is reiterated across different photographers’ work. Axel Poignant, for example, made very deliberate choices on the last roll of film he exposed; he had been diagnosed with a neurological condition which he knew would prevent him from being able to photograph in the future. Most of the negatives were of his wife Roslyn and her activities around their home but he also took a self-portrait and photographed the setting sun from his bedroom window. The metaphorical associations are obvious.

I would suggest that such juxtapositions are in no way contradictory for they represent the realms in which meaning is most commonly made. In her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* Joan Didion stated that she found nothing inconsistent in the fact that she could find meaning in ‘the vast indifference of geology’ as well as in ‘the intensely personal nature’ and ‘repeated rituals’ of her life as a wife and mother.7

This brings me to the phenomenon I have described as doubling or pairing which recurs throughout photographs of and by the dying. It is expressed in incredibly diverse ways: a terminally ill patient holds a photograph of her younger self; Carol Jerrems photographed herself in the mirror before and after surgery. In the recent self-portraits by Melbourne artist, Peter Kennedy, his doubled image is formed by his own ghosted body and his cancer body. The cancer cells, represented in disturbingly vibrant and fluorescent colours, rough out Kennedy’s form but are not completely bound by it, floating seductively in the space between his cancer body and his ‘real’ body, his ghost.

In Anne Noble’s final portrait with her father, she juxtaposed her living presence with his dead body, already as white as marble. And yet, despite their different ‘states’ and positions on either side of the composition, father and daughter are not separated. It is the spatial ambiguity at the centre of the image, where black and white meet, that brings them together. Ambiguity is also evident in Carol Jerrems’s photograph taken in the empty hospital corridor where it is not possible to tell whether the light is receding, progressing, or doing both simultaneously.

Another variant of doubling can be seen in Olive Cotton’s last photograph, *Moths on the windowpane*, taken when she was 83 years old. It is an interplay between different states of being, between inside and outside, light and dark, self and the world. The windowpane is the invisible point of transition between two worlds, offering a passage from the interior world of the home, which is lit, to the outside where the
spectral gum tree stands silently in the dark. In photographs such as this one state is not subordinated to the other:

*To allow both to coexist on equal terms is to remain faithful to their importance. Such a view may enable us to look beyond dissonance, discontinuity and fragmentation, and understand that everything is connected.*

My final illustration is in effect a ‘limit case’ because it tests the boundaries of portraiture and representation itself. It is not of a dying or dead subject, dealing instead with another stage or reality beyond death. Sydney artist Anne Ferran photographed her father’s ashes being thrown into the air, creating an image that incorporates many of the elements I have outlined in my paper. The setting is entirely natural – a creek, trees, or what we would call the ‘bush’, and sunlight. The ashes are suspended in a state of indeterminacy; they rise and fall at the same time, and have both a physical and immaterial presence.

The photographers I have discussed do not belong to any school or group but their work can be seen as part of an ongoing challenge to a society often characterised as ‘death denying’ (and, on the flipside, youth-obsessed). Their photographs offer an alternative point of view based loosely on a unitary philosophy, or secular humanism, that aims to reintegrate life and death. Or, to think of it another way, they propose a view of the world that is ‘interdependent, integrated and ecological’.

**Note:** *Reveries: Photography and Mortality* is on show at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra until 5 August 2007 and is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue distributed by Thames & Hudson.

2 Ibid, p. 34.


