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Eros and Thanatos: Images of Life and Death in Contemporary Art

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Eros, representing the confluence of all those tendencies within us that aim to preserve life, and Thanatos, representing the impulse toward death, are central forces in human existence. Eros (the will to live) and Thanatos (death instinct) have been major themes of artists within the western tradition. Many artists have chosen to share with philosophers and poets the task of exploring the meaning of these forces. This exhibition addresses the artists' roles in expressing concerns relating to the meaning of death and their contribution to our understanding of the subject. How do artists' perspectives differ from those of the philosopher, clergy, doctor, or funeral director? What, if any, special insights can artists provide, and what are the sources of their insight? Questions such as these are fruitfully explored within the context of different cultural attitudes and changing aesthetic ideas in art, and in relation to the medical, religious, and funeral professions.

Despite a more open climate in American culture for the discussion of sensitive subjects like sex, death has, at present, replaced sex as social taboo. The violent media spectacles of murder, airline crashes, and war scenes, nevertheless, make it an inescapable part of daily life. Arguably, death as a voyeuristic experience has become a part of nightly television entertainment. But death as personal encounter is something to be avoided in polite social conversation as well as in individual consciousness. This type of modern media age vicarious encounter with death represents a change from prior ages when death was a first hand experience. Simulations of death through television and other media are not the same as direct personal involvement. Indeed, it is possible that the distancing from the reality of death, which allows us painless access, may actually contribute to decreased sensitivity.

Death has been a subject of concern throughout the course of western civilization. It has been, and continues to be, viewed with ambivalent feelings. At the same time, the twentieth century marks an important turning point. Paradoxically, there have never before been such massive possibilities for encountering violent death: the atomic bomb, holocaust, cult and drug inspired killings, and AIDS. At the same time, we live in a culture with relatively few ways to find consolation for welcoming death. Of major importance is the shift in the twentieth century from a culture that essentially believed in God to one in which relatively fewer people find consolation in God in the face of death. This development follows the prediction of Nietzsche and others writing in the late nineteenth century, who proclaimed that 'God is Dead.'

The reasons for contemporary attitudes toward death are complex; the widespread abandonment in the twentieth century of traditional religious beliefs, found in Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Judaic notions, entertain-
ing the possibility of life’s continuation after death through resurrection, reincarnation, or memory is one. Hope for the eventual triumph over death by means of continuing progress in medical technology is another. The loss of appropriate cultural rituals and symbols to express the meaning of death and to memorialize the dead in the context of life is also a factor. Finally, the literal banishment and isolation of the dying from the living in medical encampments effectively removes dying from public visibility.

By turning over the primary management of death to the medical profession, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, American culture has managed to take less and less notice of it. This situation can be compared to Foucault’s “dividing practices” used by the medical profession to separate the mad and the sane. Often, it seems, the dying are isolated from the “healthy” much as the mad are separated from the sane. This banishment of the dying diminishes the importance of death as a part of life’s essential activities. The ability of religious practitioners to comfort the dying and the survivors is currently being hampered by their operating in the shadow of the medical team and the funeral establishment. Their effectiveness is further undercut by skepticism surrounding traditional beliefs on which their authority rests, and doubts about the ability of traditional religion to deliver on promises concerning life after death.

In many instances, the principal agent concerning death is the funeral director. His role is indeed complex and confusing. At one level the funeral director functions as a kind of artist whose task is in part to “present” the dead person for a final appearance. The results are at best tasteful, but can often be ghastly with little representational or other symbolic value. On another level, the funeral director acts as counselor and teacher comforting the survivors, and helping them to cope with grief and loss. The consequences of delegating the control of dying and death to the medical and funeral professions are to deny family and friends their rightful and responsible participation. Dying and death are in danger of becoming mere commodities for these industries.

In what ways do visual artists’ efforts accommodate our understanding of death? In a fundamental sense, an artist’s role is similar to that of a
philosopher: to reflect upon its various aspects and to express his or her insights. Works of art based on the theme of death create visual categories through which human beings are able to imagine and interpret their own and others' experiences of death. Art helps us to see, as Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that, "every living moment is a sliding toward death" and that existence must be asserted in the face of this fact.

One of the artists' roles then is to observe and contemplate the meanings of death, and translate their perceptions into works of art. When successful, artists are able to place our fears and hopes within a more universal and public framework to be shared by all. They may help us to sort out and clarify our feelings. Art thus offers an alternative to "objective" medical, biological, and legal approaches to death, and enriches the context for thought and feeling relating to death. Artists contribute to an understanding and acceptance of death, and its relationship to other aspects of life. The results may include a heightening of individual and cultural sensitivity, and a clarification of feelings about death and its place in life for the viewer. By expressing fears and concerns about nuclear destruction, holocaust, and AIDS in reference to their own mortality, artists may increase the consciousness of others.

**Death Images in the Art of the Past**

Death is a consistent theme in the visual arts, dating back to pre-historic times. As a means of understanding the role of artists as interpreters of death, it is useful to look briefly at the past. In ancient Egypt, manuals such as *Book of the Dead* provided a comprehensive system for responding to death intended to influence how people were to think and act. The pyramids, which functioned as tombs, and their contents, together with elaborate preparation of the body (mummies), were a part of this system.

Greek and Roman depictions of death were guided by more or less benevolent views. Socrates argued that death is either annihilation or a migration to a different stage of life. The Roman Marcus Aurelius viewed death as a necessary phenomenon of nature. Neither regarded death as an evil. While images of death in these ancient times varied widely, Greek vases, Roman jewelry, and other art forms regularly presented death in gentle images. A typical example is Charon in his boat receiving the dead from the winged figure Hermes (Greek) or Mercury (Roman), for transfer to a future place of existence. The death of Sarpedon, the legendary hero of the Trojan War, represented on a Greek vase, dated 510 B.C., (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is a variation of this tradition. Winged figures transporting the dead are also seen in Etruscan art.

Images found on Greek vase paintings and Roman emblems frequently allude to some form of immortality, as in the depiction of Charon. Underlying Greek and Roman artistic expressions concerning death is a strong philosophical belief, reflected in the writings of Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and others, that the preparation for death in life is the learning of truth, justice, and goodness. The person who has lived according to these self-validating virtues need have no fear of death. At the same time, the seriousness of death for these ancients is reflected in their concern over burial and funeral rites. Both the Greeks and Romans considered it proper conduct to bury the dead in order to stop the restless wandering of a departed soul.

The late middle ages, with its apocalyptic crises centering on the plague termed "the Black Death," produced the most vivid and pervasive death imagery in art. Millard Meiss' work on painting in Florence and Siena after the black death documents this era in painting. Meiss notes that paintings such as Francesco Traini's *The Triumph of Death*, ca.1350, (Camposanto, Pisa) portray suffering of the sick, the horror of rotting flesh, and the sudden, unpredictable coming of death. Ironically, and despite certain major differences in belief and culture, this era most closely parallels our own. The artists of the late middle ages were confronted with overwhelming fear, guilt, and sorrow resulting from the black death, just as artists of today encounter these concerns in the face of nuclear extinction, holocaust, AIDS, and cancer. In the middle ages, the severity of attitudes toward death reflected the widespread severity of social conditions. There existed the belief that death was a punishment for sin, with vivid portrayals of death in life. Concern for the fate of the soul was reinforced by reminders of the horrors of damnation in hell. The plague, the punishment of heretics, and the ever-present force of death in all aspects of life, made death an inescapable theme for artists to confront.

At the popular level, the theme of death emerged in the "dance of death." This theme was translated into a set of prints by Hans Holbein the Younger. This series of forty-nine woodcuts published in 1538 portrays death as the uninvited companion in the lives of all. The *Dance of Death* reveals death as a leveller of all social classes — kings and beggars receive the same treatment. *Vanitas* was the name given by Lucretius to this "ever present stalking of death," and before him the writer of Ecclesiastes, reminds us that the wise man no less than the fool, the good man no less than the sinner, must die. (Ecclesiastes 2:15-17, 8:2-4.) In the spirit of Ecclesiastes, Holbein uses his pictures like goads to remind his audiences of their need to prepare for the unexpected, untimely visit of death. Holbein's images are also social commentary, revealing his sympathies for the poor, and his disdain for the wealthy and their lawyers, who favor a rich man's bribe over a poor man's justice.

Death in the time of Holbein was viewed in a Christian context in contrast to the twentieth century where the Nietzschean proclamation: "God is Dead" is more prominent. Holbein's *Dance of Death* is intended to serve a moral end, that is, to prepare viewers for their inevitable destinies. In these images, death is portrayed in part as violent and seemingly evil.
However, Holbein also represents death as a benevolent companion of the plowman and the blind man, as well as of the aged for whom the continuance of a life of suffering would be without moral purpose. While Holbein shows death as the inevitable, he does not represent it as a final end in his Dance of Death. Rather, he finds in the resurrection of Christ a hope for triumph over death. This hope is reflected in his concluding the series with The Last Judgment, “What you are, I once was; what I am you will become.”

Even more stark is Hans Holbein the Younger’s Dead Christ, 1521, Basel Kunstmuseum, done a century later. His Dead Christ is placed on a thin horizontal surface, resembling a slab in a morgue. The effect is doubly powerful because it shows Christ, whose resurrection in Christian tradition symbolizes the possibility of life after death, in a common state of mortality. Holbein’s work is shocking because, as John Berger has pointed out, he has here captured an image of death with no hope for redemption.

El Greco’s Burial of Count Orgaz, 1586, Church of St. Thomas, Toledo, which covers an entire wall above the grave, offers a more hopeful view. In the upper portion, is the resurrected Christ figure surrounded by Peter, the Virgin Mary, and the hosts of heaven. Below, St. Augustine and St. Jerome ceremoniously lower the Count’s body into the grave, as the mourners look on.

Memento mori, a reminder that all must die, extends beyond the “dance of death” and is a persistent theme throughout history that continues today. It was especially important in the art of the fifteenth to the seventeenth and also, in the nineteenth centuries. Masaccio’s The Holy Trinity with the Virgin and St. John, 1425, Maria Novella, Florence, a fresco portraying the Holy Trinity with Christ on the cross attended by Mary and John the Evangelist, includes a striking example of a Renaissance memento mori: a skeleton lying on a sarcophagus, with the inscription in Italian, “What you are, I once was; what I am you will become.”

 Similarly, it is not without purpose that the Count’s soul, a tiny figure held by an angel, is stationed half-way between heaven and earth, leaving open the possibility that its destiny remains uncertain. Even here there is no certainty about death.

Most images of memento mori are more restrained, and less dramatic than the examples cited. They might include a skeleton, an hour glass, the wheel of time, an overturned glass, or a winged boy holding an inverted torch represented in the context of a still life or portrait composition. Memento mori images range from a panel-picture representing decay and putrefaction with a grotesque human head resembling a modern Dracula figure, accompanied by an hour glass, and scales, representative of the fifteenth and sixteenth century tradition of horror inspired art designed to warn the rich and great of the vanity of wealth and earthly titles, to more polite and controlled reminders found in Dutch and other still life and portrait paintings particularly in the seventeenth century.

What emerges is that attitudes toward death reflect attitudes toward life. Closer to our times are certain Victorian feelings about death. Victorian artists on this subject are largely governed by cultural ideas preferring beauty and polite feeling, as opposed to violent, shocking images. To the Victorian sensibility, says art historian Quentin Bell, “the expression of any sincere emotion is necessarily dangerously close to a breach of manners.”

While it would be misleading to presume a uniformity of views for the Victorian era, or any other, the paintings produced under Victorian aesthetics bear out a tendency to avoid or gloss over the
violent uncertainties of death. Typical of death images produced in this context is John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, and Henry Wallis' *The Death of Chatterton* (both in the Tate Gallery, London). Ophelia lies face up in a lush wooded stream as if asleep. Her tragic death from a broken heart is concealed in an atmosphere of gentle beauty. Wallis' painting of the death of Chatterton shows a young boy sprawled on a bed in front of an open window as if asleep. The picture again conceals the desperate arsenic suicide of a desperate young genius poet facing failure and starvation in London. The reality of death is slightly more evident in Millais' *The Vale of Rest* (Tate Gallery, London). Here a young girl shovels dirt into an open cemetery grave surrounded by tombstones attended by a seated figure in nun's habit. The serenity and beauty of the scene is offset by the obvious symbolism of the shovel and by the presence of a tiny skull located above a cross strategically placed on the folds of the nun's habit. Given the tendency of Victorian artists to mask the reality of death in a shroud of beauty and social refinement, it is not surprising to see an accompanying popular culture of mourning paraphernalia including pin cushions, brooches, aprons, lockets, necklaces, earrings, parasols, and even bathing costumes.

As a transition to twentieth-century treatment of death, Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, 1880-1900 (fig. no. 2), Musée Rodin, Paris, and *The Burgers of Calais*, 1884-1895 (Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.) are exemplary works. While these works are subject to a wide range of interpretations, both relate to the theme of death. *The Gates of Hell* includes a "dance of death" and explicit references to the past, including the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. The main intent of the piece, however, is a profound and moving statement about life and death. *The Gates of Hell* serves as a link between past and present. Rodin insists here that human suffering relating to death is a common link between persons of the past and the present. He did not envision for future generations any hope of spiritual peace. Metaphorically, as Elsen has noted, Rodin suggests that the artist-thinker has replaced Christ in the seat of Judgment. Unable to condemn or save souls from their destinies, the artist can but
Timothy Barnes, A Journey, 1986
comprehend and express truthfully in his art the human condition. 21

_The Burghers of Calais_, created for the city of Calais in France, portrays the emotions of six men who voluntarily offered to sacrifice themselves to save their city. Their gestures reveal the feelings of each as he contemplates death. Rodin’s approach to death establishes the direction of many artists in the twentieth century. He offers a highly individualistic and personal approach to the subject, devoid of institutional restraints, and lacking a prescribed orthodoxy, or past conventions. Even while incorporating conventional symbolism of the past such as the “gates of hell” and the “dance of death,” he reinterprets these symbols of the past to conform to his own vision of life and death. Rodin’s individual approach to death is reflected in much of the art of the twentieth century.

Artists of the early twentieth century adopt the role of compassionate commentator suggested by Rodin. Boccioni’s _Mourning_, 1910, private collection, New York, uses simple elongated, angular lines, and expressive mask-like forms to show the grief of an aging woman. 22 Tougher pictures relating to death appear in the Neuesachlichekeit (new realists) German artists of the 1920s and later. Richard Ziegler’s, _The Young Widow_, 1922 (fig. no. 3), (collection of Marvin and Janet Fishman, Milwaukee) shows a young widow standing nude before a mirror wearing a mourning veil, black stockings, a scarf, and a cross around her neck. She is taking stock, preparing to offer herself on the streets. The picture shows the impact of death on life viewed from the artist’s individual perspective. It is a thoughtful, and compassionate view of the situation by an artist who is helpless beyond his ability to give a truthful account. Carl Hofer’s _Dance of Death_, 1946, Berlinische Gallerie, Berlin, evokes once again the “dance of death” image. Only here it serves not as a warning about the future doom of the soul, but about the suffering experienced in the mid-twentieth century, most likely invoked by the Holocaust.

Contemporary Artists’ Responses to Death

Artists of the late twentieth century work in a culture where ideas concerning life and death are substantially altered from the past. Modern philosophical views have changed from St. Augustine’s _City of God_, 413-427, that death is a punishment for sin, and that redemption is possible by voluntary conformity to divine laws. Contemporary notions are less severe about death as a form of punishment, and less certain about the continuation of life after death. In the spirit of Nietzsche, major thinkers of the twentieth century such as Freud, Sartre, Heidegger, and Baudrillard, contend that individual awareness of death confers upon persons a sense of their own individuality and heightens their sense of life by giving it a sense of urgency. 23 Heidegger argues that since each individual must face death alone, the awareness of death provides a sense of individuality. For these philosophers, to avoid the consciousness of death is to refuse to live authentically. However, neither a dignified sense of personal individuality nor even Bertrand Russell’s (also Leonardo Da Vinci’s) assurance that a happy life well spent need not fear death, is sufficient to reconcile contemporary persons to the thought of death. 24 Many, often for circumstances beyond their control, lack the material requirements for the happy life that is supposed to ward off any fears about death. Others concentrate on material possessions and achievements to the exclusion of spiritual values which are necessary for genuine happiness and to reconcile them to the reality of death. Underlying the views of these philosophers is the question of the finality of death as an event that cannot be fully comprehended. Such uncertainty contributes to an all pervasive avoidance of death.

These conditions are heightened by other cultural developments. In America, there are tensions between a youth oriented society which equates aging and death with obsolescence, and a relatively recent doubling of life expectancy. For most youth and middle-aged today, death is remote, something that thinking about can be postponed until far into the future. As noted earlier, the expanded role of medical professionals and hospitals in the care of the dying has further insulated persons from death. Once the care of a dying person is turned over to the medical team, it is often very difficult for friends, family,
or clergy to have access to the dying, or to participate in the experience even if they wish to do so. The denial of death in contemporary culture is further reinforced by the expectations that advances in medical science soon will defeat death. Given this state of affairs, it is relatively easy to screen out the personal reality of death most of the time. 25

Increasingly in the fragmented and depersonalized contexts of contemporary urban life, the individual faces death independently of family and community traditions and structures. Funerary practices that depend on close family associations and a sense of community no longer serve the purposes of the isolated urban individual who often must face death alone, relying upon professional services to conduct the necessary business related to death. Moreover, we live in an age of simulation, made possible by fantastic developments in holography, video, and computer technologies capable of creating any imaginable possible worlds or states of affairs. This includes simulations of a science fiction-like world where death does not exist, capable of rendering our times oblivious to death by generating images that foster its denial. All of these factors contribute to the cultural climate in which artists of our time formulate their images of death.

The role of the artist as a provider of meaningful images of death capable of stimulating constructive thinking and feeling about the subject has become increasingly important in the light of the above considerations. In today’s world, however, art competes with popular culture and the media to provide interpretive symbols, and influence our responses to death. Death is a familiar theme in contemporary rock music, TV soap operas, and even “Star Trek.” Often news media simulations, which are limited to showing a few seconds of victims of natural disaster, airplane crashes, or acts of violence, heighten anxiety over death without stimulating thinking or feeling. Responses to such media “information” are more complicated than this; nevertheless, the challenge is to go beyond popular culture and the media in contributing meaningful symbols for responding to death.

The present exhibition is of works of art produced during the late seventies and eighties. It includes the perspectives of American, African-American, Asian-American, and European artists, and one African artist who lives in Paris. The choice of works includes those by artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Ida Applebroog, Joseph Beuys, Ross Bleckner, Audrey Flack, Keith Haring, Robert Morris, Odd Nerdrum, Ping Chong, and others, as well as by emerging artists such as Paul Benney and Werner Tomaszewski. The art selected represents a wide variety of postmodern styles.

While the works are all contemporary, several artists depict death symbols used in art of the past. Ouattara’s Samo the Initiated, 1988 (no. 37) incorporates an Egyptian-like entombed figure, and Abakanowicz’ headless Sitting Figure on Iron Seat, 1988, though constructed of burlap and resin, is reminisc-
they recur in contemporary art, are intended to carry the same meaning as in earlier cultural contexts. How are we to understand their references? Are the symbols merely appropriated for their formal, compositional worth? Or, are they raising in a new cultural context the hope of rediscovering values that link death to life in meaningful ways? Are the crosses, the references to ritual, and the skulls simply artistic conventions? Or, are they intended to function as symbols of hope for a spiritual triumph over death as they may have for people in prior ages?

Viewers of this exhibition are invited to ponder such questions. Their reflections in the setting of the Haggerty Museum galleries take place under the watchful gaze of silent faces frozen in Ping Chong’s video installation, Tempus Fugit, 1990 (no. 14). For this artist, the video medium functions as a death medium. Once a moment is captured on film it is no longer “live.” In this video, alternating passages of dark and light move across a succession of multi-racial human heads representing ethnic diversity. Now and then a black line crosses the screen, intended to portray time as the agent of death. As with earlier memento mori themes, Ping Chong’s Tempus Fugit confronts the viewers with their mortality.

Not all of the works shown in the exhibition incorporate or refer to conventional symbolism. For instance, David Wojnarowicz’s Where I’ll Go If After I’m Gone, 1988-89 (no. 43), employs post-modern concepts combining photo-collage and acrylic paint to develop a complex image consisting of male figures, a human embryo, palm tree, white donkey, various organic shapes, possibly intended to represent the pervasive AIDS virus. Applebroog’s Crimson Gardens, 1986 (no. 5), divides the picture plane into abstract rectangles and uses the various sections to isolate comic-like figures. Her richly suggestive images in this picture are about dying, pollution, isolation, and possibly the remembrance of a past life as symbolized by the empty garden. The more conceptual works in the exhibition, such as Bruce Nauman’s Dead, 1975 (no. 34), Jenny Holzer’s Bodies Lie in the Bright Grass . . ., 1983-85 (no. 26) from the Survival Series and Beuy’s L’arte e una Zanzara, 1981 (no. 8), which interpose verbal and visual elements, reflect current theories of visual simulation that are intended to expand or subvert conventional approaches to images in art by uncovering their political and psychoanalytic dimensions.

As a group, the artists broadly mirror the concerns relating to death discussed above. All reflect on the larger human problem of understanding death in the context of a meaningful life. Tomaszewski’s In Service of Exchange, 1986 (no. 40), is a
provocative response to materialist concerns of contemporary society with reference to the greed and corruption in the urban worlds of corporate business and Wall Street traders. The three-dimensional construction of paper mache-mixed media and drawing simulates a pile of skulls that form the structure of the piece which incorporates actual business pages from a 1940 New York Times. Tomascewski’s piece can be experienced on many levels; it also draws upon the tradition of memento morti, warning the viewer of the shortness of life.

For the most part, the images of death relating to such concerns as AIDS, the homeless, and terrorists are restrained. Perhaps the strongest image is Haring’s Untitled (For James Ensor), 1989 (no. 25), a two panel work. The first panel shows a skeleton urinating on a group of flowers with Haring’s familiar baby image which he uses as a symbol of life in the upper right. The second panel provides a closeup of a menacing skeleton embracing a giant sized group of flowers. It is difficult to supply a precise reading for Haring’s image. One reading is that the work is intended as visual metaphor contrasting the life-destroying AIDS with life affirming forces symbolized by the baby and the growth of the flowers. Perhaps Haring’s piece is a simple reminder that life forces persist even in the face of death.

Throughout the exhibition questions are raised, and hints are given about the possibility that death is an end or a kind of finale. Applebroog’s garden path in Crimson Gardens, 1986 (no. 5), suggests a wall where the path has narrowed; and the “sleeping,” wrapped figure in Nerdrum’s Sleeping Courier, 1986, (no. 35), is located in a metaphorical “end of the earth” setting filled with mysterious, and enigmatic forms and spaces. Behind the bent human figure, in Paul Benney’s painting, What Dark Is This?, 1986 (no. 7), stand three skeletal horses waiting to lead the figure to an unspecified end. On a more whimsical level, a cheerful angel, in Rodney Alan Greenblat’s Saint Belle Flower, 1987 (no. 23), promises an end that
does not appear ominous or threatening. Rather, the ringing bells and the warm cheerful colors summon the viewer to a “happy ending.”

It is, of course, possible to think of death as a negative end with no future, and no sense of fulfillment. However, the term “end” has a rich history which also includes fulfillment of a goal.

The concept of “end” is currently undergoing a revival of interest among certain postmodern theorists who refer to the end of history and such matters. Applied to the political aspects of culture, it has been suggested by some postmodernists that the present and immediate future of western civilization are to be marked by emptiness and boredom with little expectation for significant ideological or cultural advancement.

Arthur Danto, philosopher-critic, and others have speculated on the so called “end of art,” and environmentalists have expressed concerns over the “end of nature” both expecting no significant future for these respective entities. All of these discussions of ends reflect, in one way or another, the influences (often misapplication) of the philosopher Hegel, whose examination of ends in art, history, and nature refers to the meaning or purposes of actions or events.27

For artists today, and for all those living persons who contemplate death as an end, there are choices as to how to view “the end.” The Greek philosophers’ notion of telos, which is as ambiguous as the English “end,” offers several options for understanding death as an end.28 It can mean simply a fortuitous boundary, such as “the end of the road,” or a more formal sense of a goal reached or intended. In the latter sense ‘end’ might refer to an understanding of death as emergent out of the combined productive powers of active choices made during a lifetime within the limits supplied by nature. Such an end might result in the sense of a happy death, without any necessity to affirm or deny the future. Many of the artists working today seem open to such an interpretation of death: such as Applebroog, Benney, and Greenblat.

Robert Kuschner, who is not included in the exhibition, actively embraces an art of happiness in the face of death, as Donald Kuspit has pointed out.29 A similar attitude is suggested in Thomas Lanigan Schmidt’s decorative painting St. John the Baptist, 1976 (no. 39), which conveys a aura of transcendence in the face of a violent death. Both Kuschner and Schmidt exemplify the sense of a happy end as suggested above. They represent through decorative structures and enigmatic motifs a spirit of questioning, enabling their work to transcend the tragic elements of life.

On the other hand, it is possible to find among the artists of our time representations of death based on an alternative Greek tradition: telos, seen as the chance product that emerges from the clashing of blind forces. Hegel’s “bad infinite” which consists of endless succession of action and events devoid of meaning reflects a similarly negative “end.” These views are essentially materialist views, like those of the ancient atomists and their modern successors for whom living and dying, are but part of an undirected, meaningless succession of events, or an end that could lead to nothing more than extinction. There are hints of such an end in the works of Morris, Disappearing Places (Ossowa), 1988 (no. 32), and Joe Nicastri, Tower (Homage to Barbara Tuchman), 1989 (no. 36), and in the works of artists not included in the exhibition such as Chris Burden and Lucas Samaras. Nicastri’s work consists of a burned out altarpiece studded with sharp nail points, which underscores the pain and destruction associated with death. Morris has made death, understood as a path toward extinction, the central theme of his art.

Burden has confronted death through dangerous performances (he once stood against a wall and had himself shot in the left arm from twelve feet away), and by revealing in his art society’s tendency to engineer itself toward destruction. Samaras uses his art to demonstrate that every person carries within himself his own death. All are working under contemporary cultural forces such as the threat of nuclear disaster, memories of the Holocaust, and the senseless violence perpetrated by modern urban societies. For these artists death has become a driving force in their artistic searches for an understanding of life, as Kuspit has so convincingly documented.30

Conclusion

Death emerges then as a major concern for artists of the past and present. In general their images reflect and contribute to feelings and thoughts in every age. Artists respond in diverse ways depending in part on broad cultural views and their personal beliefs. Perhaps the most valuable contributions of artists is their ability to represent a variety of feelings and attitudes on death and to stimulate their audiences to greater awareness. In the late twentieth century, particularly in America, there exists a climate of denial and an unwillingness to incorporate death into the positive meaning of life. Artists cannot resolve all of the cultural tensions surrounding death resulting from loss of religious beliefs, fears over catastrophic death, or the abandoning of the dying to medical and funeral industries. However, artists have provided symbols that heighten awareness and sensitize people to the need to address such concerns in as humane a manner as possible.

Tom Stoppard’s Gilderstern from the play, “Rosencrantz and Gilderstern Are Dead,” reminds us that each person must ultimately consider his own and the deaths of fellow human beings. Gilderstern ponders the subject in these words:

No, no. Its not like that. Death isn’t romantic . . . death is not anything . . . death is . . . not. It’s the absence of presence, nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming back . . . a gap you can’t see and when the wind blows through, it makes no sound.

Hearing nothing from Death itself, it remains for mortals to consider the voices of artists, poets, and philosophers whose perceptive images and thoughts help to probe the eternal silence that is called death.
NOTES


8. See, for instance, Osler, 709.


16. For example see Osler, *Aspects of Death*, fig. 41, 481.


27. Frank Fukuyama’s article “The End of History?” which appeared in *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, brings to public attention in the political sphere a theme borrowed from the philosopher Hegel, but with a different understanding. The theme is also explored by Arthur Danto in reference to “The End of Art” and by Bill McKibben in a report on “The End of Nature.”

28. This discussion of telos has benefitted from the comments of my colleague William E. Dooley.
