

MEMENTO MORI

LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY
AT THE DR HAROLD SCHENBERG ART CENTRE
18 OCTOBER - 13 DECEMBER 2014





Kate McMillan, *Paradise Falls II*, 2011-12, HD digital film, 3:28 mins. University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2012



Nathan Beard, *Avunculus, Vale*, 2014, Lenticular print on silk and vitrine with objects, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist



MEMENTO MORI

*Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain.*

Sophocles, Oedipus the King

In a culture that seeks eternal youth and persistently celebrates beauty and the new, the concept of Memento Mori, or meditation on death, may appear uncomfortable and anachronistic. Instead, we try to flout death, putting our faith in medicine and science to prolong our lives ever further. When we do become ill, we are sent to a hospital rather than being looked after at home. Illness and death are no longer a part of family life, and fewer people in the community have direct experience of caring for the seriously ill, or of encountering dying. As a result, death is veiled; people 'pass away' or 'pass over' or are 'no longer with us.'

Yet for Sophocles and the poets, artists, philosophers and theologians who followed his lead over the following two millennia, being aware of your ultimate demise and using that knowledge to direct and shape your life was an important precondition of existence. For the classical world, the idea of *carpe diem* (seize the day) suggested

a more hedonistic approach, enjoy life while you can, but Christianity changed all that. When congregations in Medieval cathedrals sang *Mediā Vita In Morte Sumus* (In the midst of life we are in death), it was a prompt to reassess their moral progress as they moved toward the certainty of death. "In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin" (Ecclesiasticus 7:40). The concept of a judgment day, when the final accounting was made in purgatory, and souls found wanting sent into Hell, was a persuasive theological tool and a popular subject for artists.

Allegoria Sacra by the Russian collective AES+F is the final part of a trilogy that along with *The Last Riot* (2005-2007) and *The Feast of Trimalchio* (2009-2010) interrogates the concepts of purgatory, hell and heaven within a contemporary context. The four Moscow-based artists gained international recognition when their impressive projects, which weave together Hollywood with high fashion, advertising, mass media and popular culture with a hybrid of world visual cultures, were featured in two successive Venice Biennials (2007 & 2009). Their mash-up of cultural history is achieved through a sophisticated digital collage of still images, animated to create seductive, hyper-real video panoramas.

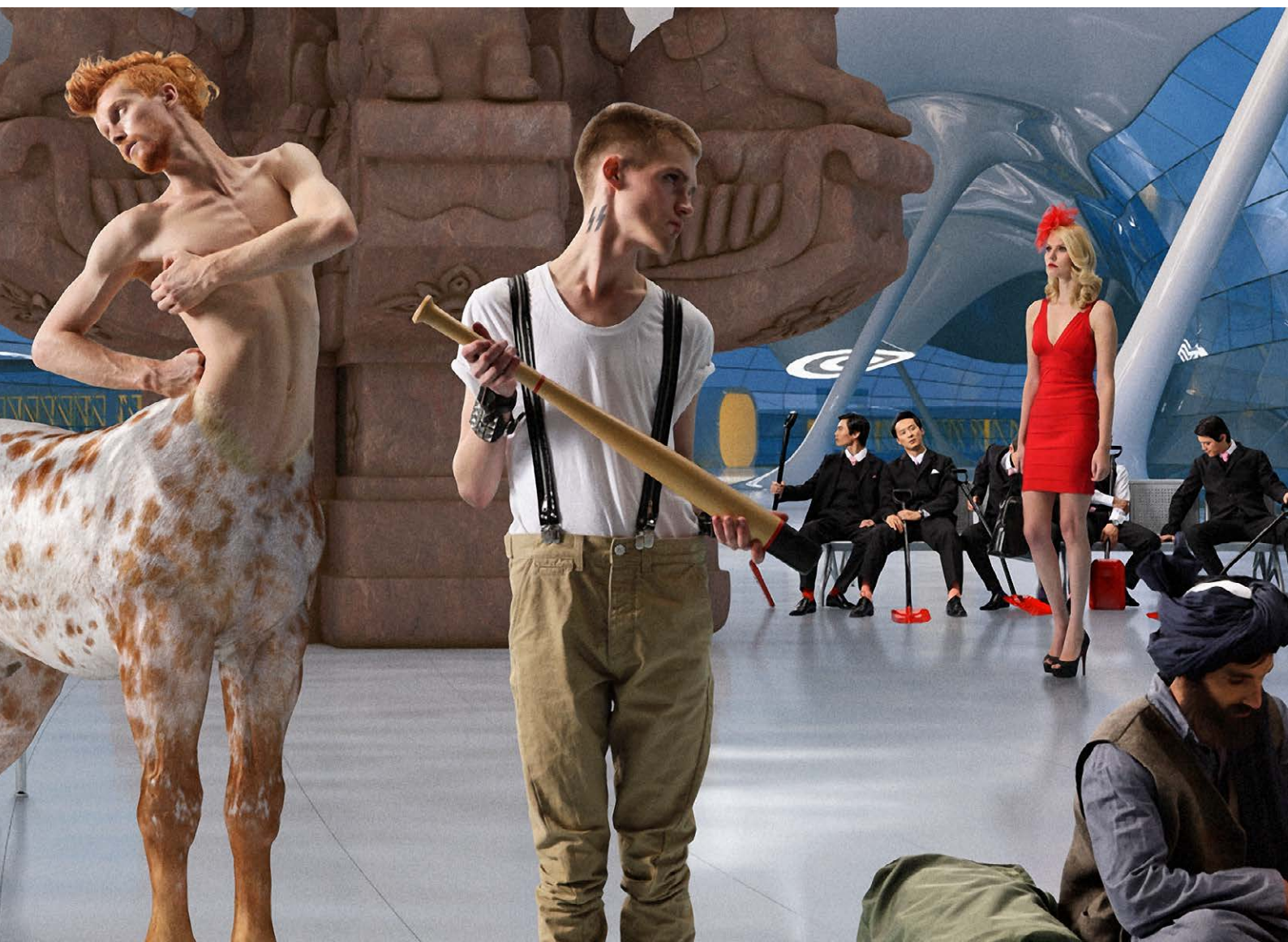


Created in response to a 15th century painting of purgatory by Giovanni Bellini, AES+F locate their souls awaiting reassignment in an international airport lounge.

"In *Allegoria Sacra*, we really placed the heroes of Bellini, sometimes literally recognisable, in a waiting area of an airport out of which no plane will ever take off again. Only the dreams and visions of "passengers," in which the viewer can guess something, drive the change of forms and ghostly movement. Purgatory, in accordance with Catholic faith, is a state in which the souls of dead sinners or righteous are waiting for Hell or Paradise. Our airport is undetermined in size, time and geography liminal space – a place of transition to a new state. In dreams of our characters, it is at one time covered by a blizzard, at another by the hot sands of a desert and yet another by a wild jungle. This, for us, is a place of collective memory, Purgatorium, where sacred symbols of various cultures mix. It is a place where the incompatible combines, where it is possible for Ganesh to meet a Centaur, the past (demon-cannibals) to meet the future (angels-attendants from *2001: A Space Odyssey*), where it is possible for old man Job to reincarnate into a child-mutant¹."

A key component of this exhibition was the invitation to four Western Australian artists to create and exhibit work that examines current attitudes toward death and dying. Richard Lewer responded with his *Last Will and Testament*, writ large on sheets of pegboard and notarised by witnesses and his lawyer. As well as distributing his assets he specifies the music to be played as his coffin is lowered (*Careless Love*), a burial site and the type of service he desires. Perhaps our last will and testament remains the most resilient of all Memento Mori in contemporary society.

For Andrew Nicholls the Dance of Death (*Danse Macabre*), when skeletons lead victims to their graves, was the catalyst to create a 13-metre-long chorus line of naked men facing their ultimate fate. Confronting their death with equanimity, acquiescence or reticence they dance toward the moment of truth. All the participants are well known to Nicholls — two are artists included in the current exhibition — so it becomes a very personal acknowledgment of life's end rather than a threatening image of impending death. That image is left to Susan Norrie, who creates the dark and dangerous space where judgment occurs in her 2005 work *Be seeing you (Dance of the dead)*.



Nathan Beard, on the other hand, confronts the death of a near relative, his uncle, and both celebrates his life and memorialises his death. His Thai cultural heritage provides a rich seam of imagery that he mines with care and respect to recreate the vibrancy of his life and a dazzling commemoration of his death. His uncle's shrine, which includes a lenticular print that shifts imagery with your orientation, silk banners and a vitrine holding his remains, creates an extravagant and passionate family memorial.

The echo of death and decay, degeneration and corruption, infuse all David C. Collins' photographic tableaux. Just as we discover within the delicate melodies of Mozart and Mahler the low rumble of imminent mortality, so within Collins' work we are confronted with a sense of our humanity. In the midst of life we are in death, and through these astonishing cinematic, styled still images he creates an extraordinary world of beauty and excess into which he weaves a compelling narrative about life and death. Another of the great Memento Mori tropes is the Isle of the Dead, a place where we all ultimately arrive as passengers on a vessel steered by Charon, the boatman. Inexorably we are led to its shores. Kate McMillan appropriates this image of ultimate loss in her video *Paradise Falls II* to highlight the plight of Aboriginal people condemned to

incarceration on Rottnest Island in Western Australia. Now a place of pleasure and escape, it remains in the consciousness of Noongar people a dreaded destination, a lost paradise, eternal prison.

Within the Christian world pondering on death emphasises the emptiness and transience of earthly pleasures, ambition and self-aggrandisement, all of which mean nothing at the end of life. One of the most potent ways to prompt this reflection is by charging everyday objects with the power to signify. In Robyn Stacey's *Vanitas* still life *Leidenmaster 1* and Ocea Sellar's *Still Life* video series, objects are given symbolic meaning; skulls remind the viewer of the certainty of death, flowers that earthly pleasures fade and decay and butterflies, bubbles and smoke denotes the ephemeral nature of life and fleeting time. It is a complex pictorial language that illustrates the concept of transience in its multifarious forms. Margaret Preston transformed her *Still life with sea shells and bowl of flowers* into a meditation on dying while Pam Debenham's *Still Life* takes the process one step further by replacing the flowers with instruments of mass destruction, Exocet missiles and nuclear bombs, quite literally the harbingers of death.



AES+F, *Allegoria Sacra* (still), 2011, 3 channel video, Acquired through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors Director's Project 2011 Art Gallery of South Australia.

Of all these symbols, the skull remains the most persuasive image of mortality. In the two small works by Paul Uhlmann and Sam Leach we are reminded of Hamlet's soliloquy on mortality, recalling Yorick's ribald wit and jocularly while holding his skull at the graveside. Beloved symbol of goths and metal heads, the skull persists as a symbol of danger, disputation and death. Although not a skull, Charles Blackman's *Girl with Flowers* prompts us to contemplate our humanity through a subtle and powerful juxtaposition of a young girl's black and empty face, contrasted with a posy of flowers, also doomed to die.

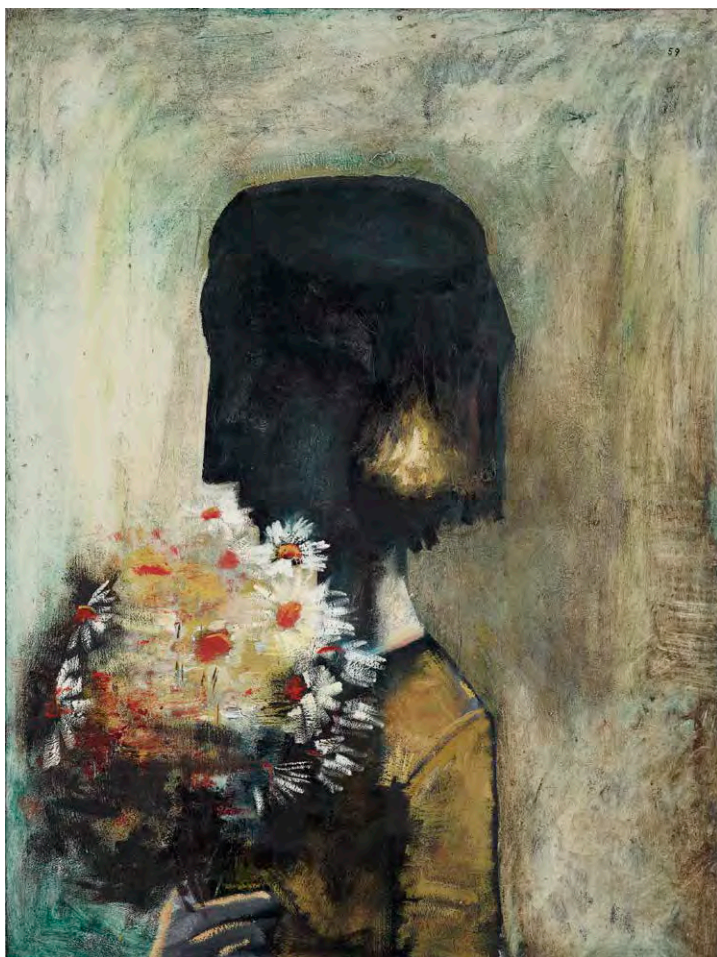
The arts provide powerful stimuli for meditation and contemplation. They can provoke and infer, allude and announce abruptly, they often take us by surprise and invariably open up a space for reflection. The four musical compositions commissioned from James Bradbury, Michael Grebla, Mark Holdsworth and Drew Woolley, played within the Westpac Gallery, are integral to the

curatorial rationale of Memento Mori. They encourage us to reflect on our attitudes to death and in tandem with the other works in the exhibition provide a prompt sheet for contemplation.

Memento Mori have been used as a stimulus to ponder on the brevity of life and use that knowledge as a guide for living. In an age when we try to ignore death, the arts make us aware of what it is to be alive and the responsibility we owe to ourselves, to our families and to our communities as participants in this extraordinary theatre of existence.

Ted Snell
Curator

1. C. A. Xuan Mai Ardia, interview with AES+F, *Art Radar*, accessed 25 August 2014 <http://artradarjournal.com/2013/11/08/a-new-silk-road-russian-art-collective-aesfs-on-allegoria-sacra-in-asia-interview/>



Charles Blackman, *Girl with Flowers*, 1959, oil on composition board, 121.9 x 76.2 cm. University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1960



Richard Lewer with Tony Garifalakis, *please god watch over me tomorrow*, 2013, enamel paint on poster print, 100cm x 70cm. Courtesy of the artists and Hugo Michell Gallery

LIST OF WORKS

AES+F, *Allegoria Sacra*, 2010-11, 39.39 minute, 3 channel moving image with sound. Acquired through the Contemporary Collectors Director's Project, Art Gallery of South Australia*

* Gift of John and Jane Ayers, Candy Bennett, Jim and Helen Carreker, Cherise Conrick, James Darling AM and Lesley Forwood, Scott and Zöe Elvish, Richard and Jan Frolich, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Dr Michael Hayes and Janet Hayes, Ulrike Klein, Gosia Kudra Schild, Ian Little and Jane Yuile, Dr Peter McEvoy, David and Pam McKee, Hugo and Brooke Michell, Jane Michell, Peter and Jane Newland, John Phillips, Dr Dick Quan, Paul and Thelma Taliangis, Tracey and Michael Whiting, GP Securities and anonymous donors through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors Director's Project 2011 Art Gallery of South Australia

Nathan Beard, *Avunculus, Vale*, 2014, Lenticular print, print on silk and vitrine with objects, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist

Charles Blackman, *Girl with Flowers*, 1959, oil on composition board, 121.9 x 76.2 cm. University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1960

David C Collins, *Amygdala*, 2014, Type C photographic print, 3 x 83 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Pam Debenham, *Still Life*, 1984, colour screenprint, 87.8 x 62 cm. Collection of Elaine Baker and John Cruthers

Sam Leach, *Thanatos deer*, 2007, oil and resin on copper, 30 x 20 cm. Collection of Felicity Johnston and Richard Barker

Richard Lewer, *Last Will & Testament*, 2010, acrylic on Peg Board, 240 x 700 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hugo Michell Gallery

Richard Lewer with Tony Garifalakis, *please god watch over me tomorrow*, 2013, enamel paint on poster print, 100cm x 70cm. Courtesy of the artists and Hugo Michell Gallery

Kate McMillan, *Paradise Falls II*, 2011-12, HD digital film, 3:28 mins. University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2012

Andrew Nicholls, *Quod fuimus, estis; quod sumus, vos eritis*, 2014, archival ink pen on watercolour paper, 76 x 1340 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Susan Norrie, *Be seeing you (Dance of the dead)*, 2005, oil on canvas, 140 x 133 cm. Cruthers Collection of Women's Art CCWA 882

Margaret Preston, *Still life with sea shells and bowl of flowers*, 1955, oil on canvas, 39.4 x 44 cm. Cruthers Collection of Women's Art CCWA 359

Ocea Sellar, *Still life series*, 2007, high definition video. Cruthers Collection of Women's Art CCWA 879b

Robyn Stacey, *Leidenmaster 1*, 2003, Type C print, 96 x 150 cm. University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2008

Paul Uhlmann, *Skull*, 2014, oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm. University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2014

MUSIC COMPOSED FOR MEMENTO MORI

James Bradbury, *Anamorphosis*, 2014, bass clarinet and flute, Ashley Smith: Bass Clarinet, Jonty Coy: flute, 3 mins

Michael Grebla, *Cheyne-Stokes*, 2014, solo bass clarinet, Ashley Smith: bass clarinet, 4 mins

Mark Holdsworth, *Primrose*, 2014, string trio, Jasmin Parkinson-Stewart: violin, Eunise Cheng: viola, Elizabeth Moss: cello, 5 mins

Drew Woolley, *Joe Christmas*, 2014, piano/harmonica and bass clarinet, Drew Woolley: piano, harmonica, Ashley Smith: bass clarinet, 4 mins

MEMENTO MORI CAMPUS PARTNER

We would like to acknowledge and thank our campus partner.

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

Emotions shape individual, community and national identities. The Australian Research Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions uses historical knowledge from Europe 1100 - 1800, to understand the long history of emotional behaviours. Established in 2011, under the Australian Research Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (ARC EHE), the Centre's research aims to improve the social, cultural and emotional welfare of modern Australians.

Headquartered at The University of Western Australia, the Centre has nodes across the country at the universities of Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland and Sydney. It has signed partnership agreements with five European Universities and developed collaborative research links with scholars from international institutions in 25 countries.

www.historyofemotions.org

CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ongoing partnership between the Cultural Precinct and the Institute for Advanced Studies generates many bounties and this project is one more to add to an impressive list. Susan Takao suggested a symposium addressing the concept of Memento Mori and wondered if an exhibition might accompany it, of course we said yes. Immediately I thought of the wonderful work Nick Mitzevich had purchased for the Art Gallery of South Australia by the Russian collective AES+F, *Allegoria Sacra*. Nick generously approved the loan and agreed to participate in the symposium. With such a beginning it was clear this project was blessed. Four locally based artists then agreed to create works for the exhibition and I would like to thank Richard Lewer, David C. Collins, Nathan Beard and Andrew Nicholls for their enthusiasm and commitment to the project.

We are fortunate to have the School of Music on our campus and I would like to particularly thank Ashley Smith for coordinating the project to commission four new short pieces to be played within the gallery as part of the exhibition. I would also like to thank Matthew Norman and Jamiela Khan from the postgraduate student on-line journal TROVE, who coordinated the commissioning of poems on the theme of Memento Mori for this project.

Thank you also to my colleagues in University of Western Australia Museums who always excel in each aspect of presenting and managing our exhibition program. I am extremely grateful to them all for their sensitivity, their diligence and their alacrity to respond to each new challenge with enthusiasm.

I am also grateful to Andrew Lynch from the Centre for the History of Emotions who was immediately enthusiastic about becoming our Campus Partner for this exhibition.

Cover image: Robyn Stacey, *Leidenmaster 1* (detail), 2003, Type C print, 96 x 150 cm. University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 2008.

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DR HAROLD SCHENBERG ART CENTRE
LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY
OPEN TUES - SAT 11AM - 5PM

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