

Memento Mori: A Positive and Contemporary Reflection Through Visual Art on a Life Spent Well

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Abstract

“Memento mori”, a Latin phrase meaning “remember you must die”, is generally conceived as morbid. But there is a long and fascinating tradition of artwork based on this concept that is designed to encourage a more beneficial appraisal of the time a human being spends on the planet. In a world where the media inundates the social sphere with negative stories and where people have been desensitised to the significance of death, the topic is compelling. In many cultures nowadays consumerism is encouraged and extravagance is promoted. This consumerism can function as a distraction that helps people avoid thinking about death, but it certainly does not help one to truly prepare for something that is inevitable.

The present practice-inspired visual arts analysis explores memento mori with compassion, insisting on the layers of unanticipated beauty and aesthetics that survive in the traces humans leave behind as evidence of their ephemeral existence. Furthermore, it posits positive new ways of representing an age-old contemplation that is universal and spans all cultures.

Keywords: memento mori reflection, visual arts, cultural and philosophical perspectives, time, aesthetic traces of existence

Introduction

With this article the aim has been to describe the new ways of representing an age-old and universal contemplation: one's mortality. It further explicates how exploring humanity's ephemeral nature can lead to the development of an aesthetic where the focus is not the negative aspects of that contemplation. It intentionally steers away from the morbid depictions of death and instead demonstrates how *memento mori* can be used to focus on life and living, all the while expressing gratitude. With this unique, compassionate approach viewers are prompted to think about their own mortality and embrace the time they have.

The individual's consideration of time is necessarily related to his or her own mortality – time as the fundamental element of a human life span. There is a specific beauty in the various spiritual narratives that are the result of the *tempus fugit* motif. Herein we will not only observe the continued relevance of the *memento mori* motif within the visual arts, but will also explore it through a self-reflective process by using my own work as exemplar.

Memento Mori Origins and Examples in Art

There is a long tradition of *memento mori* artwork designed to remind the viewer of their mortality (Tate.org, 2018). The first known use of the expression *memento mori* in English is said to be in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1* (Laurie, 2014). Stoics have described *memento mori* as the practice of meditating on the fragility of life. So this perspective asks 'What if reflecting and meditating on that fact was a simple key to living life to the fullest?' (Daily Stoic, 2019). This approach has been used across the centuries and into modern times to raise awareness that one must "seize the day".

Images such as the "Dance of Death" or "Danse Macabre" fresco (Hrastovilie, Slovenia, 1490) still powerfully resonate with viewers today. This fresco and other versions of the dance of death concept depict a person alongside their dead self (represented as a skeleton) repeated at all stages of their life. Sometimes a corpse is featured to remind the living person to consider their worldly ways, such as in "The three living and the three dead" from the Serristori Hours illuminated manuscript (Florence, 1500). This idea is believed to be derived from a French poem from the late 1200s whose concluding line is "*as you are, we once were; as we are, so shall you be*" (Townsend 2009, p.44). Dance of death was a major theme for artistic output during this period, and prints of its images spread quickly across Europe (Townsend, 2009). This was a harsh and grounding reminder, as people of all levels of society were portrayed (even kings were shown dancing with their dead selves).

The "Vanitas" still life was also a substantial part of the *memento mori* tradition in art. "Vanitas" artworks grew in popularity in the 1600s (Tate.org, 2018), but the underlying notion of preparing oneself for death with images and art objects dates back to as early as the thirteenth century. Skeletons and skulls were common images that made appearances on the borders of pages in prayer books, often being accompanied by the phrase "*Remember you will die*" (Townsend 2009, p.44). This is a religious age where it was commonplace to think of human lives as preparation for the afterlife. The existential nature of *memento mori* and its underlying ponderings of the meaning of life make the concept ageless.

More traditionally a *memento mori* art piece would be a portrait with common symbols such as a skull, an hourglass or clocks. The low flicker of a candle flame about to be extinguished and symbolised fragility and fleeting nature, along with images of fruits and flowers (Williams,

M. 2009). Besides these symbols, the Vanitas still life had the added purpose of bringing awareness to the vanity and materialism of life. Vanus is derived from the Latin word meaning “empty” (O’Toole, 2018). It is a reminder not to be distracted by worldly pleasures and to always be aware of the temporal nature and eventual worthlessness of worldly goods. To aid in this purpose, there were material objects represented, such musical instruments and wine. The concept itself may have originated in the Bible’s first line of the book of Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Antonio de Pereda’s “*Allegory of Vanity*” (Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1632–1636) is an example of a Vanitas still life that includes many symbols to represent time, including a globe to represent the turning of the world. There are several skulls depicted in de Pereda’s work along with an hourglass and a clock. An extinguished candle and old images are present. Different gold tones are used to emphasise the worldly possessions and the impermanence of wealth. Symbols depicted in memento mori art still have incidence in the work of modern artists. In a recent memento mori themed exhibition, curator Ted Snell eloquently described artist Andrew Nicholls’s work, which is influenced by Dance of Death, as “becoming a very personal acknowledgment of life’s end rather than a threatening image of impending death” (Snell, 2014, p. 4).

Of all the memento mori symbols, the skull remains the most familiar and relatable as an image of death across virtually all cultures. Picasso, master of all styles, had recurring representations of skulls, both animal and human, such as the “*Goat’s skull Bottle and Candle*” (Tate Britain, 1952). Prior to the use of skeletons, a devil was used in allegorical lessons and as a reminder regarding worldly pleasures, and during the latter Middle Ages an “animated skeleton” was considered a very powerful image.

Contemporary artist, Damien Hirst was interested in the precise dividing line between life and death. He is renowned for controversial works and shock art. This differs from my focus but there is a shared underlying interest in themes and an agreement that, to a great extent, the mysteries of death and surrounding questions will remain a mystery and must be left unresolved. Hirst’s butterfly paintings may be seen as more of a celebration of life and thus, more light hearted than his other works. He was interested in how lifelike dead butterflies still appeared. Butterflies’ powers of attraction are quite universal, a fact that helped make this a choice motif for my work as well. Butterflies were also a traditional memento mori symbol to represent the fleeting nature and fragility of life.

In addition, Hirst’s diamond encrusted skull piece “*For the Love of God*” (White Cube Mason’s Yard, London, 2007), although clearly commercialising and creating a play on questions of the value of an artwork, is a commentary verging on exploitation on capitalist art. In this piece Hirst has beautified the symbol of death: Luke White has described Hirst’s work as a transformation of the skull into “an enigma, an obscure, sublime object of desire” (White, p. 4).

A darker side in Hirst’s contemporary art was obvious in works with animal carcasses such as *Mother and child divided* (Tate Britain 1993). This was a more formidable reference to death and decay. My work introduced shortly, will intentionally navigate away from this confronting imagery, in spite of sharing an interest in common. The title of Hirst’s 1991 piece *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Somebody Living* is a great line to prompt thought for the need for memento mori.

On his part, Ron Mueck is a contemporary artist whose work reflects the continued relevance of memento mori, with its traditional symbols still prevalent. Mueck has taken this universal symbol to a monumental scale, stacking galleries with one hundred skulls that, while realistic in appearance, are each 1.5 metres high. A study of mortality, his installation “*Mass*” makes resonances to Dutch Still life painting and the “*Vanitas*” painting genre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Figure 1). Mueck celebrates the Skull as a “form that links all humanity and pays homage to a symbol that has stood within the art of essentially all cultures and religions” (Azzarello 2017).



Figure 1: My niece at NGV – shows the scale of Mueck’s skulls

When viewers visit this massive installation, they are given a startling reminder of the transient nature of life. Nina Azzarello (2017) described the installation as “an imposing wall of human heads that resonates with a simultaneous and strange sense of impermanence and eternity” (Azzarello 2017).

Memento Mori in Contemporary Art Practice

I will be analysing my own work at this point – in an attempt to illustrate how the notion of memento mori is interpreted in an individual’s practice. While I avoid the most common macabre metaphors in my work, it contains diverse “remembrance of death” concepts. My work can be described as a contemplation, aiming to capture a new way of positively representing this irksome pondering about death. Alongside this, other works will be explored as a comparison. These relationships to death tend to have more confronting and unsettling images – even shock tactics. Though this approach purposely avoids the morbid, skulls have come into one series of my work but with a new aesthetic, one that aims to evoke a re-thinking of our associations with traditional symbols and the skull motif in particular.

Art Practice 1: Beautifying the skull. This resin series is made in response to the most well-known memento mori symbol: the skull. The work aims to question and evoke a re-thinking of our associations with this traditional symbol, the symbol that links all humanity. It is a series that explores contemplating mortality in a new, contemporary way that finds and incorporates beauty. They are an aesthetically reimaged memento mori, prompting us to rethink what we associate with the skull whilst making reference to some other traditional memento mori and vanitas images.



Figures 2A and 2B: *Resin skull with butterflies* *Resin skull with clock parts* Debbie Walter

Butterflies (left) symbolise the fleeting and fragile nature of life. Historically they have also represented resurrection and the soul (Neve, 1974 p. 131). Clocks and clock parts feature in the second example above (right) as a reminder of our limited life span. Other Memento mori symbols depicted in the resin *Beautifying the skull* series include skeletal leaves, reminding the viewer that earthly pleasures fade. The leaves show that beauty may be found in the effects of the weathering of time and that there is no antithesis in the seemingly opposing factors of beauty and decay. Flowers commonly represent life. Flowers are prominent in another of my resin skulls, a symbol linking back to the traditional memento mori reminder of delicate worldly pleasures that fade. Moreover, these flowers form a beautiful preserved memento, a captured moment in time.

The skull has been beautified to explore how it can become a contemporary memento mori and to demonstrate how this can help remove any sense of dread one may associate with it. This series intentionally strives to transform the skull shape into an adorned polished artwork. The pieces are displayed propped up on shiny glass stands accompanied with their image reflected in a mirror. A literal reflection to prompt reflective thoughts whilst also making reference to the vanity associated with mirrors.



Figure 2C: *Resin skull with gold coins* Debbie Walter

Coins are used to question the true value of wealth and the cost of time. Gold coins were chosen to emphasise the eventual worthlessness of material objects in line with the Vanitas concept. It is a reminder to consider the wasteful distraction of worldly, superficial, material pleasures. Many become slaves to the procurement of those coins at the cost of valuable and limited time.

The resin skull depicted in figure 3.D has a doubled appearance depending on the angle from where it is viewed and the light. The aim on first appearance is to be attractive to the viewer with its glittery sparkle and “bling”, then from a second view point an hourglass is revealed, a traditional memento mori symbol used in Vanitas still life’s. A hidden symbol of time to get people to ponder how they are spending it and to bring to light the time wasted on superficial worldly/material distractions.



Figure 3.D: *Glamour Resin skull with hour glass* Debbie Walter

These works celebrate life and its beauty and are a tribute to the gift of life.

Art Practice 2: What Is a Year of Your Life Worth?

This series is a time-based art project. A contemporary memento mori reminder of fleeting time “What is a year of your life worth” is also about the traces humans leave. The spaced timing is a key conceptual aspect, as a mark was completed for every day for a year. This project is derived from the question: what is the value of a year in a mortal lifespan? It was also a project questioning if this brief time is spent well, particularly with regards to the time spent in the safety of a regular, paying job. This resulted in a sizeable series made up of 365 mixed media pieces. Through making a mark each day, a year in the artist’s mortal life span was recorded, visually gaining aesthetic form from the collection of inscriptions left. These are traces of existence, culminating in the preserved record of a year of the artist’s life span.

There is a clear link with the exploration into the effects of time, evident in emulated erosion, rust and the patina-effect paint. This aims to capture the weathering effects of time and the look of corrosive materials and eroded landscape. Also, regularly appearing in this series were mementoes preserved in resin (including those making reference to Memento mori and Vanitas) such as clock parts, keys and skeletal leaves. This is a multimedia work that includes text from priceless letters from the artist’s grandfather... capturing moments in time and memories in layers.



Fig 4A: Title -*What is a year of your life worth* (In progress). Each 11.5cm wide x 9.5cm long. Acrylic and mixed media on board Debbie Walter



Fig 4B Title: *What is a year of your life worth?* (Examples -Detail) Debbie Walter
Acrylic and mixed media on board
Each 11.5cm wide x 9.5cm long

Art Practice 3: Postcards: Another year apart

A second time-based project, simultaneous with this one and continuing production for a second year, is based on a postcard made from my own imagery, sent home weekly to my parents over the year 2018. Now, with the completion of that year, the text and imagery from the 52 postcards will record the interaction, the relationship and the time frame, forming the basis of a series of artworks to be completed in 2019. I aim to bring art together with the important things in a mortal lifespan: the connections we depend on like family, whilst continuing to explore the ephemeral nature of these relationships. The time-based aspect is

important to the project as a reminder of our fleeting time and in order to prompt thought on how it is spent, continuing the aim of bringing memento mori into a new contemporary and compassionate aesthetic.

The text from the postcards forms layers in the subsequent Palimpsest artwork, while adding the relatable quality of a personal record of interaction, story and relationships of individual lifespans crossing paths. The postcards have been created using original photographs from the artist's travels and cropped sections of their existing artwork, most of which are already recordings of markings of time, including the effects, colours, rust and mossy regrowth of layers. On closer inspection there are dates and text, often rustic in appearance, with some worn and illegible print. Other surfaces point to evidence of time and place. All of these aspects combine as reworked imagery juxtaposed into suggested landscapes. Ultimately the remnants will be imbedded into the landscape as recorded traces in the earth. The addition, text and stamps add a quality reminiscent of traditional collage such as the work of Kurt Schwitters (Cardinal, 1994).



Figure 5: Work in progress exploring composition. A section of the *Postcard project: Another year apart* Debbie Walter



Figure 5.2: The *Postcard project* detail Debbie Walter

The close-up example above shows that sometimes the text is used to form and suggest parts of the landscape (in this case hills on the horizon), combined with other painterly areas that may resemble the organic formation of rock walls, cross section of a cliff face and soil.



Figure 5.3 Title: *Letters in time layers landscape* Debbie Walter
Acrylic on Canvas 2015 71 x 35.5 cm

Art Practice 4: Reflecting on Memento Mori

In this piece a skull has been created from resin and attached to a mirror with added painted layers, suggesting the earth and a cross-section landscape. When the viewer looks at the piece they see themselves reflected through the skull, creating thus a literal reflection on life/death...a Memento mori. Memento mori is reflecting on one's mortality, thus this piece reminds the viewer of this in a literal sense when their own face is partially reflected back through this familiar symbol associated with death.

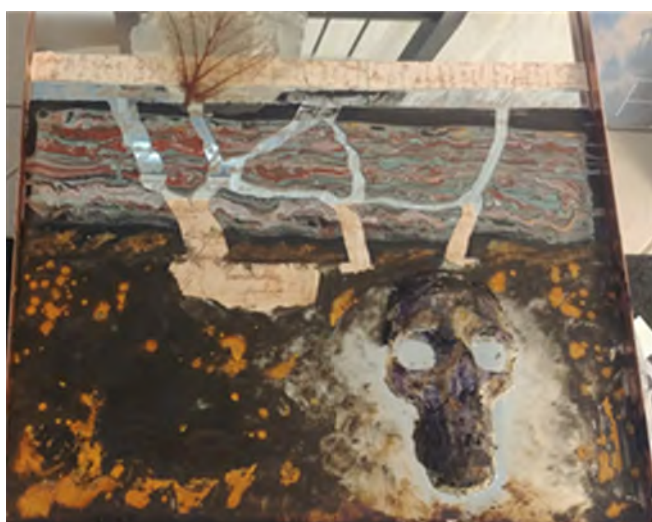


Figure 6a & 6b: *Reflecting on Memento Mori* Resin skull and paint on mirror Debbie Walter

In *Contemplating spending a lifetime*, money is depicted in the form of notes, taking the traditional Vanitas symbols for wealth (usually coins) into a contemporary setting whilst continuing to be a reminder of the temporal nature of worldly possessions. This memento mori piece prompts the audience to question how limited mortal life spans are spent, particularly in reference to how much time one spends working. It wants the viewer to share in reflecting on how much time they devote to work and the true value of the money earned at the cost of their time. Hence the skeleton in the bottom right hand corner is a reminder that, regardless of wealth, people all end up in the same place.



Figure 7 a: *Contemplating spending a life time* Debbie Walter



Figure 7b: *Contemplating spending a life time* Detail Debbie Walter

Conclusion

Memento mori continues to be a very relevant and powerful process of self-reflection. Artists continue to contemplate mortality through their work, including through this artist's/author's practice, which transfers expressions of memento mori to contemporary formats and new aesthetics. This paper has examined how artwork can explore contemplations of mortality and how the visual arts can bring the viewer closer to a work with which they can connect, while demonstrating that the topic of death does not need to be engaged in with a sense of dread. With these illustrations, this artwork provides a space to aesthetically provoke thought and open the viewer to a perspective on what can be gained from a relevant understanding of memento mori. It asks one to rethink one's acknowledgment of limited time in the twenty-first century, thus focusing on a relevant appreciation of its value.

This practice-led research should provide insight into the way in which the negative connotations associated with memento mori can begin to be derogated within the contemporary new aesthetics. It has been argued that memento mori is not morbid and is more about a mindfulness of the value of time and the insightful awareness that that time is limited. On a more practical plane, the author hopes that an awareness of memento mori brings satisfaction and contentment by helping the viewers feel that they are in a better position to make decisions on how their time is spent, and there is comfort to be gained from that.

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