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You Make the Grass Green  
A Study of Photography and Death

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## Abstract

This exegesis investigates death related imagery and post mortem photography in the context of death anxiety and trauma studies. Analysing artworks where the body is present and art works where it is not. I argue that artists engaging in this topic exhibit respect for the subject matter and present their works with careful thought.

I also analyse my own work relation to artists and theorists who inform the photographs I produce. This is in order to solidify myself in the field and give greater understanding to the purpose and theoretical backing of my own images. I conclude that with careful thought, respect and thorough research into the ethical issues surrounding the topic, the production of death related imagery can be a helpful tool in demystifying the topic of death and can create a space for meaningful conversations/reflection.

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In loving memory of Haylie, Dorothy, Andrew, Leonard and Nicholas.

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## Section One: Introduction

This exegesis explores photography and its relationship to death and how death anxiety can be recognised and possibly alleviated through careful exposure to death-related imagery.

As a young child I experienced the loss of a friend as well as my grandmother which sparked my curiosity on the subject of death. Five years ago, with the death of my sister, I developed an intensified fear of death. Photography has become a way to comprehend the harshities that come with life, with the visualisation of fears and research that accompanies it easing my worries. My art practice predominantly focuses around trauma discourse and is underpinned by personal experience in order to communicate the emotions I am trying to summon through my photography. Responding to death and trauma has been prominent in my art practice, and I feel this project still fits within the framework of prior practice.

I begin this exegesis through the investigation of my own practice, outlining the three forms it has materialised as within this MFA study. Firstly, the photography of sites where people died; secondly the cameraless photography at family burial locations and finally; the exploration of funeral homes and the death industry through photography. This is underpinned with research based in post mortem photography and trauma related art as well as theoretical discourse around death and trauma.

In section three, four and five, I delve into the theorists and artists who inform the basis of my current project. This begins with a theoretical discussion of death anxiety and the effects covid-19 has had on communities' experience of it. I later explore spirit photography alongside the contemporary art works of Teresa Margolles and Ann Shelton who document death and tragedy with a specific absence of people within their works. This connects directly with the method I am using to communicate my own enquiry. In section five I look at Sally Mann, Andres Serrano and Joel Peter Witken and their photography of the human corpse. This is a direct investigation into something I

am specifically not doing within my own artwork, however the theoretical discussion of what it means to image the dead and the photographs' connection to death informs my own decision making.

Finally I will retrospectively discuss the works I have made in relation to the artists and theorists discussed throughout this essay. Throughout this process I aim to decipher what my contribution is with these works, and the positive effects my art could bring forth.

I want to state that my research and observations stem from my own lived experience as a Pākehā woman in her twenties, who grew up in a non-religious household and has thanatophobia (a fear of death). I acknowledge that other cultures have other approaches, knowledge systems and rituals of grieving that are different from my own experiences. In this project I will predominantly be working from the perspective of my own socio-cultural position.



## Section Two: Discussion of Works

*Where you went-* Photographs of Death Sites. A Road Trip with Mum.

This work was first imagined when I had the idea of photographing a charged site. I had been working with sites of burial and researching spirit photography<sup>1</sup>. A large part of spirit photography was the documentation of grave sites or haunted houses. Typically haunted houses are a site that is considered socially to hold a lot of trauma and is usually the site of death or speculated death. This got me thinking about the location where one dies. I believed that at a grave site there is a certain amount of energy held within the space and wondered if this would also be true in locations of death. My theory was, if I photographed enough death locations, I might be able to see some commonalities, something that would 'prove' that the trauma has been held (or registered) in a space, leaving some form of trace or emotional charge. I started by finding my locations through word-of-mouth and through the Internet. I found this an appropriate way of investigating my topic, as so much of death in this time is learned through the Internet (including social media platforms) and has for so long been information passed between people through word of mouth. This investigation led to me sourcing around 50 locations spread out across the North Island of New Zealand.

I requested that my mother join me on the trip. I was hoping that her presence would allow for conversations about the project and give a deeper understanding into my own family's beliefs and histories surrounding death. My mother, being in her sixties also has a greater knowledge of locations where people have died, with word-of-mouth, newspaper notices and personal experience informing her throughout her life. We began in Wellington and slowly over the period of eight days travelled up the east coast of the North Island and then made our way back through central Te Ika-a-Maui.

When photographing each location I opted to use a Holga 120s, this is a small plastic camera that has only six changeable settings, your viewpoint, between close and very

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<sup>1</sup> This research ranged from the late 1800s to current day and varied from professional photographers to amateur snapshots, mostly from European or American regions.

far, and your lighting, either sunny or cloudy. I chose this as my camera of choice to limit my ability to alter the images in camera. I wanted to allow the spaces and natural light to affect the film. I also wanted to use film to give each space the ability to create a tangible imprint direct to the film. I chose to only use 120mm black and white film as this would allow me to print large images and the black and white would let the emotion of each space be the prominent reading and bring forth feelings of remembrance and nostalgia in viewers. Writer Candice P. Boyd comments that 'As an aesthetic rooted in the past, black and white photography when applied to the present lends an authority to images by visually coding them as archival' (Boyd 1). She also notes that the use of black and white in modern day creates a 'sense of nostalgia' (Boyd 1).

During the road trip a lot of the conversation between my mother and I focused on the idea of death. We were all consumed by it for a prolonged amount of time and this became our fall back conversation. This included conversations of loved ones who had passed, our own fears of death and the dying process, and our funeral plans. We also shared our thoughts about the people and incidents that occurred at each location we would visit. I noticed early on that different sites evoked different responses from my mother and I. At some we would nonchalantly chatter and remark on the weather as I took my photograph. However at other sites there was a heaviness in the air that seemed to be felt by both of us. We would walk around the space in sombre rumination, stand for a moment and then get back in the car without speaking. It wasn't until months after that I confronted my mum about this, inquiring if she had felt what I felt. She agreed there were some feelings that words could not describe in those moments. As well as allowing these conversations to naturally occur with my mother, I unexpectedly found myself discussing death with everyone I came across during the trip. I was so densely consumed by the thoughts and the project that each house we stayed at, or each old friend we would visit, was accompanied by conversation and insights into others thoughts and feelings around death and death anxiety. These exchanges lead to writings<sup>2</sup> and documentation. The project allowed the ability to talk about death, with numerous people and in relation to sites both familiar and new to us.

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<sup>2</sup> A selection of this writing is accessible in the appendix.

There of course were ethical problems that occurred while constructing this work. For example, I keenly felt moments of doubt, and confliction; who am I to be photographing these locations? What purpose does it serve? And am I causing trauma to the family of those who died in these locations? My reasoning for continuing despite those queries are as follows. I chose not to include the stories of each person who died and how that occurred. I thought it was important that I knew this information while shooting, because I wanted to try to understand the space, the loss of human life, and pay my respect at each place. However, I do not think this specific information is necessary for the viewers. Unlike the work of Joel Sternfeld, who gives detailed accounts of the tragedies that occurred at each location he shoots for his book *On This Site* (Sternfeld 5), I wanted to keep this information private, for a few reasons. Firstly, I do not believe it is imperative that this information is known for the reading of the images to be effective. Secondly, I specifically want to focus on the feeling of each space, the mundanity of death and the passing of information concerning death. The feeling is constructed by the nostalgia and remembrance brought forth by my use of black and white film. The mundanity is recognised through the unexceptional spaces photographed and the written work that goes alongside these images provides information around the passing of knowledge between generations or friends and tells stories of casual conversations about death and memories. Lastly, I believe it is important for the sake of the families and loved ones of those who have passed at the sites that I do not disclose sensitive information. I do not want the space to become a representation of these people, for they are more than the story of their death.



Figure 1: *Location #42, Where you went.* Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figure 2: *Location #39, Where you went.* Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022

## **Untitled (Grave Blankets) - Cameraless photography of the dead**

Art historian Geoffrey Batchen considered in his book *Emanations* how cameraless methods of photography can allow the photographer to experience a certain level of artistic freedom and nuance, compared to the likes of digital photography (Batchen 5). German author Margareta Ingrid Christian also considers this, questioning if the absence of the physical camera gives space for the creation of more subjective imagery (Christian 320). However, Batchen, later in his book, also discusses the invention of the x-ray being a photographic image with links much closer to science. This technological development created a space for science to accept the photographic image, of what can not be seen by the naked eye, as truth (Batchen 15). This development gave scientific grounding to art practices and has in my opinion blurred the line between the two.

The grave blankets were my first solid idea at the beginning of 2021, coming from my investigation of a memorial site, commemorating those who died at ANZAC Cove during the second World War. At the centre of this space was a star that stated, beneath it was a container of soil from ANZAC Cove. This was an action that symbolises the burying of those who died so far from home. They became one with that soil and now they in some way have been returned home. I thought about this connection humans have to the soil once we have passed and decided to start looking into grave sites and the significance of the soil, what trauma it might be understood to hold.

I began this investigation by visiting my family members' graves within the Wellington region and later started travelling the North Island to create works. My first iterations were made using the cyanotype process. These works (Figures 3&4) are approximately 8 feet by 2.5 feet, replicating the size of a standard grave. These grave scaled cyanotype prints are created through the process of coating cotton material in a mixture of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide; these two chemicals create a stable light sensitive liquid that reacts to UV light. To make these works I travelled to the cemetery where my family members are buried and proceeded to lay the coated fabric on top of the grave, leaving it exposed for approximately half an hour, depending on the lighting conditions. On top of the material I lay flowers, foliage, water or parts of my body. The

resulting image eventuates through the blocking of light, stopping the chemical from exposing in the UV. After the fabric is washed the unexposed parts of the material return to their original colour, while the exposed areas turn blue. Before coating the material I like to spend time with it, often utilising the large sheets as bed sheets, in this way I can physically intertwine myself with the work. Making the final photograph a collaboration between my body and the body of those who reside in the grave. For this I took inspiration from Grant Ligard's work *Swan Song* in which he utilises used bed linen to question the stigma related to cleanliness and infectiousness of those with HIV. Because of his physical connection to the art work, even though it is exhibited posthumously, it still retains life. Because the sheet works as a giant lens it is able to photograph everything from the earth to the sky and all of the surrounding area. The soil below, often moist, creates a slight reaction with the photographic chemical by washing it while it is in the process of developing. My concept with this is that the large lens, photographing everything, has the most chance of recording spirits if they are there. Even though these will not be visible in the final image. The part of the image that is obstructed acts as a sort of window to the soil beneath it.

My second iteration of this work was utilising film and exposing it to moon light. I was inspired by the work of Justine Varga, who I discuss further in section four, and thought the attempt to use film would allow more sensitivity to the process and also have the ability to focus not on a flower at the centre, but instead be able to magnify the soil that brushes across the film after it is laid. The limitations I found with this method is that the processing takes some elements away. I no longer have my bodily connection to the work and the physical object is no longer what is presented as the final product.

The third iteration was that of luno prints, where I laid unexposed silver gelatin paper on the grave in the same fashion as the cyanotypes. This resulted in much smaller prints that display subtle tones of pink and brown. These works act like a rayograph by only capturing the imprint of the soil that was scattered on top of it but it also allowed me to display the print that was in direct contact with soil or if desired I had the ability to scan and reproduce at ease. However I found there was importance in scale and the feeling

that comes from a small image is very different from one whose size has a connotation of a grave.

In my final iteration of this work I revisited my first attempt. Again, I coated my grave sized fabric pieces in cyanotype solution and travelled them to the graves of my blood relatives. I laid the fabric on top of the grave and proceeded to cover the material in soil. This soil acts as a representation of my body, the dirt being dampened with my own bath water. In this process I introduce myself into the work, and the photograph becomes a collaborative self portrait of both me and my loved one, their body beneath and mine laying above. The resulting image is visually compelling, with large portions of the fabric returning to its original colour, being unexposed to the sunlight, and spots of blue dotted across the work in the places the light reached through the thinned soil<sup>3</sup>.

In the online article *Photography's New Materiality?*, the author asks the question, 'What propels this return to materiality and the emergence of an object-based practice in recent photography?' (Plummer 2). This question, for me, is answered within the same article. The materiality of a photograph when it is in the form of a unique object and not a reproduction, maintains the 'aura inscribed within the image' (Plummer 2). German philosopher Walter Benjamin also speaks of this in *A short history of photography* claiming that the long duration of time it took to take an image such as a daguerreotype allowed time for the sitter to grow into the image, and the aura of them is then inscribed into the object (Benjamin 17).

Working with such large pieces of light sensitive material requires certain physicality when interacting with the work, both prior to and after exposing it: the bodily movements to coat the fabric and dry it, holding it to my body and under my chin in order to fold it for travel; and once exposed, submerging my hands with the work in water, experiencing the cold and the weight of soaked fabric. This bodily interaction with the object requires thoughtfulness and care in order to retain the aura of the image. As stated above Benjamin suggests that, due to the prolonged length of time it took to

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<sup>3</sup> Images of these works are not supplied in this essay but will be present in the accompanying exhibition.

take a portrait, the sitter became part of the image that was taken of them (Benjamin 17). I suggest that in my bodily connection to the works and presence during the duration of the exposure, as photographer I also become inscribed in the works.



Figure 3: *Untitled 1 (Grave Blankets)*. Sim, Ginell. Installation. 2021



Figure 4: *Untitled 2 (Grave Blankets)*. Sim, Ginell. Installation. 2021



## **The Funeral Home**

I found that there was something missing in my photographic exploration. I had covered grave sites and the locations of death but had missed a step in between. I have approached this topic in the only way I know how. I have investigated all the places I think of when I consider death and I found it appropriate to look into the spaces where a dead body is handled. I also thought this would give me a chance to have conversations with people who have a very different view of death as they deal with it every day. I was interested to see if the exposure to death regularly had an impact on the thoughts and beliefs of those who hold these roles. I began by visiting a funeral home in Kilbirnie, Wellington. I had looked at it everyday when I lived across the road and had watched the heat haze emitted from the roof on a regular basis. This heat haze, the result of a cremation taking place, was something I had always found fascinating, moving, but slightly terrifying. I decided it was time to go inside and was welcomed in quite fondly.

I was able to photograph each space within, including the viewing room, chapel, morgue and cremation room. I opted at first for photographing on my digital camera and taking a deadpan approach, this meant photographing what I saw in front of me in a detached way. I looked at the space through my viewfinder and tried to document the spaces objectively. I thought it was important not to infuse the spaces with my emotional response, as I felt this was a neutral space, one that caters for all people, ages and religions. When speaking to one of the morticians, a young woman about my own age, she stated that she saw herself much the same as a surgeon, the only difference being, her patients were already dead. I found this an illuminating view that changed my perspective on the space. It was less of a space for grieving and more of a space for treating. I believe this is why the photographs within certain parts of the site feel detached.

The images that resulted from this visit depicted in one part a very well lit space similar to that of a hospital, seemingly sterile and void of personality. The spaces such as the viewing room and chapel gave me the distinct memory of grief and mourning, as the lighting, furniture and structure of the room are interchangeable with other spaces I

have come upon when attending funerals. I chose to visit another funeral home to compare the sites and found that it was much the same, however this time I opted to shoot on 35mm colour film. I found that colour was important in this setting, to communicate the brightness of the site and, in some cases, the limited emotion. This also became interesting in the images showing the chemicals used to embalm the deceased. The coupling of such vibrancy alongside such a morbid task is captivating.

It is my plan for these images to be presented in a book format, so the confronting nature of the images can only be experienced slowly, so as not to overwhelm my audience. Oceanscape images will interject the photographs of the funeral home and give a pause for breath and contemplation.



Figures 5 & 6: *The Funeral Home #1 & #2*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figure 7: *The Funeral Home #3*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figures 8 & 9: *The Funeral Home #4 & #5*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figure 10: *The Funeral Home #6*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figure 11: *The Funeral Home #7*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2022



Figure 12: *Untitled (Ocean Scape)*. Sim, Ginell. Photograph. 2021

## Section Three: The Denial of Death, and Death Anxiety in a Post Covid World.

*'The fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be' (Becker 15)*

My obsession with the topic of death began young. According to American anthropologist Ernest Becker this is to be expected for 'those who have had early experiences will be most fixated on the anxiety of death; and if by chance they grow up to be philosophers they will probably make the idea a central dictum of their thought' (Becker 14). My early exposure to death at the age of five and my experience of trauma at a young age are predictors of this fascination with the morbid. According to various studies that I will soon delve into, I am definitely not alone in my fear of death.

According to a 2014 study many common fears are actually grounded in the fear of death. Phobias such as 'flying, heights, animals and blood' can be directly linked to a fear of the outcome associated with those activities or things, this being a particular way of dying. This is true also of many mental health disorders such as OCD, panic disorders, separation anxiety, and agoraphobia (Iverach 582). In his book *The Denial of Death*, Becker analyses the connection between humans' innate fear of death and our obsession with 'the hero'. This discussion comes to the conclusion that people's fixation on 'the hero', say those featured in film or those whom statues are erected of, is a reaction caused by death anxiety. The ability to walk in the face of death and risk one's own mortality is met with the highest praise, and this is because it is humankind's greatest collective fear (Becker 11). When my study of this topic began I very much thought it would be personal to those who consider themselves sufferers of Thanatophobia (the fear of death) and would only be interesting to outsiders who wish to indulge in the topic. However I noticed increasingly that my work made some people uncomfortable, especially when they were encouraged to discuss it at length. This aligns

with various studies that claim death anxiety to be underlying in all people and only brought out, in most, when confronted with the topic directly (Becker 16; Iverach 582)

It is understandable then that my work could make people uneasy. I am compelling them to consider their own mortality and that of those around them. I also believed when first approaching this topic that this would not be as heightened for those with religious beliefs, as I assumed death anxiety would not affect them to the same degree. These assumptions were based on my experience as an agnostic woman who has largely viewed religion from an outsider's perspective. To get a deeper understanding of others' experiences, I have considered the writings from two different studies which have opposing ideas on the topic. In the first study they state that 'Higher religious beliefs and practices are not necessarily associated with lower death anxiety' (Iverach 584). However, a different study recorded lower death anxiety in a sample of terminally ill patients who had beliefs in a 'positive existence after death' (Lehto 26). I propose that even though there is possibly a lower level of death anxiety in those with strong religious beliefs there is still perhaps an underlying fear which is, as suggested by Becker earlier, present in all humans to some degree, as a survival code.

So at what point does this anxiety become an issue? Iverach states that there is a direct correlation between 'Mortality salience' (a reminder of personal death/mortality), and aggression towards those who have opposing worldviews (Iverach 583). I have observed the widespread political uproar in the past two years and question if the research around the Covid-19 outbreak and the media's coverage of it has contributed to this. During this time period much of the world has been exposed to continuous information and media coverage regarding the deaths of people both nationally and worldwide. I recall sitting on my bed during the first lockdown in New Zealand and listening to the statistics on how many humans had died in the past 24 hours. This was the daily norm for many New Zealanders, and this information monopolised the news for at least a year. According to Pradhan this has put the majority of the world in 'an indefinite period of mortality salient' (Pradhan 1106) and therefore more prone to aggression towards opposing worldviews. Another study of the media's effect on the Chinese public during Covid-19's initial breakout confirms these ideas, recording higher rates of emotional distress and



death anxiety in those who were exposed to more negative media during this time (Chen 983).

However, although this onslaught of information has made people more anxious about death it is possible that this has positively affected our rates of survival as a species. According to Becker, 'It is posited that the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation. But the fear of death cannot be present constantly in one's mental functioning, else the organism could not function' (Becker 16). The thought of death needs to be permanently underlying in order to ensure our survival as a species. The threat of death during the Covid-19 outbreak created in many an anxiety-driven need to be careful, and this may have been what drove mask use and self isolation, which ultimately saved lives (Chen 984).

The fear of death has the ability to shape society and has a tremendous effect on how we live and what we believe. How could I address this through an artistic lens in an appropriate and helpful way? How does an art project about the fear of death confront these issues without creating an environment that only brings forward anxiety about death? And, finally, what are the positives of all this within my own practice, and in terms of audience experiences?

Lehto states that the fear of death comes naturally at certain life stages and once it is overcome can lead to 'ego strength and maturation'(Lehto 27). Suggesting that this anxiety can be a vital part of the human experience. Lehto also questions if the absences of conversation around death and the western tendency<sup>4</sup> to conceal the sick and elderly has led death and illness to be an elusive topic and thus increased anxiety, as it becomes 'an unusual phenomenon detached from the natural order of events' (Lehto 29). This could be why some studies have shown lower rates of death anxiety in those who have a

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<sup>4</sup> Patterns of behaviour, ritual and language brought to Aotearoa through settler-colonial communities from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, which brought a combination of Protestant and Catholic influenced belief systems.

belief in where they will go after death. A 2012 study of older Mexican Americans found that more contact with the dead was associated with reduced feelings of death anxiety, as well as increased community unification (Krause 945). Perhaps if this underlying fear is addressed more openly within all cultures the rates of death anxiety would lower and community connectedness would increase.

There are a plethora of television shows and movies surrounding the topic of death, many with the aim of normalising conversations about death and what happens after. The reality shows *The Casketeers* and *Good Grief* both centralise around the running of funeral homes, and both present the career in a non-threatening and often comedic way, allowing audiences to see into the daily lives of those who work in the death industry. The American drama series *Six Feet Under* is similarly set at a funeral home and explores the main theme of human mortality. Documentary film *Dick Johnson is Dead* approaches the topic of impending death where director Kirsten Johnson turns the lens on her father who is dying of dementia. In this sombre yet playful film she and her father orchestrate a range of fake deaths in which the protagonist acts out his own demise, and in doing so reclaims his unavoidable death. The popular comedy series *The Good Place* focuses on what happens after we die, with a focus on heaven and hell scenarios and the study of ethics in relation to this. *Life After Death*, another popular documentary series, documents psychic medium Tyler Henry and his abilities to communicate with those who have passed on. These shows all in their own way demystify, humanise and remove the stigma surrounding the process of death, burial/cremation and the afterlife through a lens that often is not religious, making space for conversations around death and death anxiety in a contemporary setting. The popularity of these shows suggest that there is a market for conversations about death and the general public is searching out this dialogue. The discourse available through these mediums has provided me with a multitude of viewpoints and opinions to consider when making my own work.

## Section Four: A Portrait of the Absent Individual

### **From early spirit photography to Contemporary investigations into the trace of death**

My photography frequently returns to the attempt to photograph what is not visible to the eye. Whether that be a memory that lay dormant in some part of my brain, a feeling that has no physical semiotics for which to capture on film, or a person who no longer occupies space on this earth in a bodily form. This venture to capture an image of what can not be seen is nothing new, in fact it dates back to the early years of photography's invention in the form of spirit photography and has continued in different forms. For instance, depiction of sites where trauma has occurred, material investigations where matter or fluids relating to death are explored and the general exploration of death anxiety through art. Many artists and photographers are currently making work that links back to the same ideologies present here, in the attempt to capture traces of the dead or living without the body being present. Ann Shelton, Teresa Margolles and Justine Varga all approach these topics in varying ways and have been instrumental in the development of my own work.

Spirit photography, the attempt to capture imagery of phantasms with the aid of photographic chemistry, came into popularity in the late 1800s, a short three decades after photography's invention. Photography was viewed as a worthy tool for contacting the dead and helped to convince nonbelievers that life after death did in fact exist. Although, along with the positive welcome from some there was also negative reactions from others. The creators of the spirit photographs were also met with much scepticism and anger with accusations of fraud (Jolly 18). This sceptical thinking has only but increased in the modern day viewing of ghost photos, with photo editing technology now widely accessible and understood. Author Alison Ferris claims that 'Ghosts are all around us. But ghosts are not taken as seriously today, or taken with the seriousness, as they were through the nineteenth century, when many scientists and scholars examined the manifestations of spirits through telepathy, spirit photography and seances' (Ferris

45). Ferris goes on to note how ghosts have become part of a fictional realm appearing predominantly in popular culture, film and tv.

I question, is it so implausible that images of spirits could be captured in photographs? With modern technology we have become privy to viewing images of black holes or micro organisms which can also not be viewed by the naked eye, yet the acceptance of these photographs as truth appears largely unquestioned. According to Jolly there were beliefs that ghosts or spirits could have the ability to alter photographic imagery through the manipulation of ultraviolet light. This was feasible, because UV light is not visible to the naked eye however it is confirmed to affect photographic chemistry (Jolly 20).

Spirit photography in a way aims to capture a trace, the remains of the human spirit. Author Kitty Hauser defines a trace as a 'mark of something or someone, the residue of an occurrence or existence' (Hauser 59). She expands on this thought by saying, 'In order to operate as a sign, the trace must be visible. But traces themselves need not be visible - at least not to the naked eye' (Hauser 60). I am aiming in my own work to imagine the invisible traces left by those who departed earth or whose deceased body occupied the sites and document my wonderings. The photographs also document my own journey, each image captured at a location acts as a visible trace, a sort of foot print in the sand, to verify that I also occupied the space. New Zealand photographer Ann Shelton similarly approaches this topic of the trace in her series *Public Places*. The works depict outdoor scenes ranging from grave sites to bush paths, the locations Shelton describes as 'places where egregious and ill-fated events took place, or were purported to have taken place' (Shelton 07). Much like my own work, in my *Where You Went* series, the majority of the sites are left with no plaque, no mark, no visible trace to mark one's death, and the photograph of the space now acts as a trace itself. Hauser states that 'every trace implies a prior event, or sequence of events which needs to be reconstructed in order that the trace makes sense as a sign' (Hauser 62). The absence of visible traces within the image as well as the absence of any figures leaves open the space for investigation, and the viewer becomes the investigator looking for signs to uncover the narrative, to understand the site. Only with the aid of text can the

understanding be clear in what the images are about. However this does not stop one from looking.

Mexican artist Teresa Margolles incorporates human traces in a very different way. The artist creates exhibition spaces where, although not always visible, the deceased people are very much in the room. In her 2012 work *Aire* Margolles utilised two air conditioning units. These units required water filtration in order to cool the air. The photographic imagery of the space makes the room appear null of art work, all that is visible is two white air conditioning units placed on the floor at either end of a white walled room, as well a wall of thick plastic sheeting that hangs from the ceiling which acts as a room divider. As I have not had the experience of visiting the exhibition in person, my consideration of the work is based on reading of others' experiences within the space. According to Bacal, the initial experience when walking into the space is that of confusion, if you did not know what Margolles work is predominantly about you would assume the room to be empty. The room is described to be cool, with a chill that penetrates clothing and makes itself noticed. After a primary view of the room, wall text becomes the clear next step. This text informs its readers that the water used to humidify the room is sourced from a morgue, and was previously used to wash the bodies of murder victims (Bacal 25-26). Margolles has been criticised heavily in regards to the questionable ethics surrounding her work. In reviewing my own thoughts about the gruesome and confronting nature of the work I have considered the purpose and it is my view that the ethics of its creation has to be balanced with the purpose of the work. Within Margolles' works there is significant political background which upholds their reasoning for making such work and the message would simply not carry with the same power if attempted in a theoretical way.

Unlike Maragolles work, artist Justine Varga tends to collaborate with the living, her works focus not on death but do have a heavy focus on capturing the unseen. Varga has been a prominent artist I have considered when thinking about cameraless photography. One of Varga's images that had a profound impact on the understanding I have of my own images is the portrait of her grandmother titled *Maternal Line*. This work was created by allowing her grandmother to make marks on a strip of film and

then progress to coat the film in her saliva. This created a portrait of the woman, her saliva recorded in the image and within the chemical reaction that takes place. During a 2022 talk at Massey University Wellington Varga spoke of the freedom that comes with this method of portrait taking, here there is no anxiety related to having your portrait taken and focus on appearance. The image itself is a large scale print depicting tones of deep green and purple. Scattered around the image are a multitude of marks, which are the result of scratching into the film's coating. These marks look to be random and don't form any discernible shape or image.

Much like Varga's work, the deceased featured in my portraits are able to be photographed and make their mark on the negative although this is posthumously. The use of bodily fluid in Varga's work to create a portrait is replicated in my own. For when a body decomposes in the earth a certain trace of the person is remembered in the chemical makeup of the soil, this soil pressed against photographic chemical creates a similar chemical reaction, and thus a portrait.

## Section Five: The Materiality of the Human Body

### **Artistic explorations of the deceased human form**

French Theorist Roland Barthes theorises that a photograph is a 'micro death' that in taking a portrait of a person one is essentially killing them. This is due to the image only being able to capture the past and represent the subject as an object, one that is no longer present (Barthes 13/14). But how does this apply to images of those who are already dead? Barthes states in his book *Camera Lucida* that 'the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing' (Barthes 79). Insisting that photographs of the dead, in a way, can give life to those who have passed and allow them a space in the present through imagery that is relieved by those who are still alive. He comes to the conclusion that perhaps images of the dead allow us to view death as something that can live alongside us as opposed to only being 'a linear construct we move towards.' This attempt to give a new life to the dead can be viewed in the work of artists such as Andres Serrano, Sally Mann and Joel Peter Witkin.

Although this approach is not one I am planning on taking myself, I feel it is important to reflect on some prominent artworks that utilise the deceased human form.

*What remains* is a photographic book by American photographer Sally Mann, the book, which includes 132 images, focuses around the topic of death and includes imagery taken at the University of Tennessee's Anthropological Research Facility. The section of the work referred to as 'Body Farm', which I will be focusing on, depicts colour and black and white images of corpses in the process of decomposition. The deceased pictured had all agreed to donate their bodies to science. When viewing the images it seems clear to me that these are not just documentations of decomposing bodies. The shallow depth of field, vignetting and warmth present in the images creates a sense of movement and individuality, which both give life to the dead pictured. We are given the perspective of Mann's to view from, which is not that of a scientist but of a curious outsider, welcomed into a space that not many outsiders would be. This allows us to view the bodies from her point of view and see the corpses as people rather than objects.

In saying this, I find that there is still an undeniable flinch response when viewing the works. This comes with both intrigue and disgust and the inability to look away. Although this work does not have a particular political movement it is reinforced by, the works are approached in a careful, considered and respectful way. It does as American writer Susan Sontag would say, induce the 'Pleasure of flinching' (Sontag 41) but it also allows the viewer to do so in a soft way unlike the viewing of things like graphic war imagery.

When viewing these images I also consider the history of postmortem photography, death masks and mortuary paintings, it was once common place to document the dead. In the 1840s 'photographers recorded deaths and marriages at a ratio of three to one' (West 2). There was considered beauty in capturing the dead in a sort of ritualistic way, documenting their last moments before being committed to the earth. Writer Nancy West mourns the western detachment from the dying process, suggesting that 'in treating pictures of the dead like obscenities rather than as memento mori' (West 2) the process of grieving has changed. I consider if this change has negatively impacted the rates of death anxiety and if contemporary reintroduction of posthumous photography allows space for grieving and confronting the topic of death in a non threatening way.

Photographers Joel Peter Witkin and Andres Serrano also approach photographing the corpse in considered ways. Witkin in his 1990 image titled *Feast of Fools* presents a still life style composition that includes body parts sourced from a Mexican morgue. Within the black and white photograph one is able to make out two hands and two feet, as well as a small child in the centre of the composition with cloth covering its face. Surrounding these distinguishable body parts there is a selection of fresh fruit that look to be grapes and berries as well as what could be internal organs, although it is hard to make out. The image has a peaceful beauty about it, with strong contrast of the light and dark spaces and a vignette around the edges of the frame drawing the eye to the central figures. Writer Paula Mahoney, when considering Witkins' work, concludes that 'the image reaffirms the materiality of the body, and aligns the decay process as one of natural transformation' (Mahoney 55). The use of fresh fruit alongside the body parts creates a connection of humans as a mortal object, destined to decompose and return to



earth much like the produce it is presented with. The image does not feel disrespectful and much like Mann's work discussed above, there seems to be a certain level of care and respect that went into the construction of it.

Andres Serrano similarly sources his photographic subjects from within the morgue although his approach to photographing the subjects is very different. Witkins image utilises a memento mori style, creating a kind of memorial or shrine. Serrano on the other hand creates images that are much more direct in their depiction of death. His 1992 series titled *The Morgue* features close range, forensic style photographs depicting corpses. Each image is accompanied with text stating the cause of death and the year the image was taken. Much like Witkins' work we are restricted from knowing the identities of those pictured, with faces being partially covered in cases where the cause of death hasn't already made the face unidentifiable. The images, shot in colour, feel to me cold and detached and unlike both Mann and Witkins there seems to be little to no emotion or life within the images, instead we are given great detail of what death can look like and the corpse is presented as an object. According to writer Lauren Summersgill this presentation of the corpse as object is the reason Serrano's work was criticised so heavily; 'Serrano's presentation of the corpse is the failure to convey life in death' (Summersgill 138).

Susan Sontag states in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that 'Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity, it is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome' (Sontag 9).

This comment clearly describes the intrigue humans inherently have with topics that are gruesome, macabre or connected to suffering. Images where a corpse is present, such as Mann, Serrano and Witkins, definitely fall into the category of 'the spectacle' and one naturally has to question the ethics and values of the artist who produced such work. In Defence of Serrano's work Summersgill leans on the literature of Barthes arguing that the corpses are given life simply through the act of being viewed within the photographs, the corpse may not be a living thing but the photograph is a 'living image' creating a second life for those who have already past (Summersgill 138). She also argues that 'Beautifying the corpse, and elevating them from the abject to the sublime is a way of

lavishing care onto the corpse that is otherwise locked away in the clinical environment of a morgue' (Summersgill 165). I feel that this statement could similarly be applied to the work of both Mann and Witkins. In addition to this, the anonymity given to the corpse suggests that the photographs are not about the individual but are instead about the corpse as an object, and by extension, death as the final human act. This connects to my own reasoning for not including details of the deaths in my road trip series *Where You Went*. The anonymity gives space between the act of a specific person dying and the ability to think and talk about death as a concept and fear.

With visuals of death present in so much of humans daily lives, including movies, television, news, gaming, social media and the increasingly popular true crime documentaries, it seems natural to me that conversations about death and the human form post death would be investigated through a fine artist lens. With certain levels of anonymity and care given to the remains photographed I see no real issue with their presence in photographic imagery. But instead see it as an opportunity to reflect on human mortality, death anxiety and the corpse as a beautiful object in its representation of human life.

## Section Six: Results/Discussion

My aim for this work was to investigate the idea of death anxiety and the fear of death in a way that allowed space for my own self-reflection, and gave my audience a chance to do the same. I approached this through presenting my work in a very personal way, incorporating writing of my own experiences and emotional response to the subject. This creates a space for challenging viewers about their own underlying fears and granting them access to my world where I reflect on my own and with my family about our thoughts of death and how this has affected our lives. The purpose of this project was to create a space where the topic of death could be confronted in a respectful way, without the political messaging and overwhelming information that comes alongside reports of death through the media. I believe I have achieved this by creating images that are void of figures, do not include details of the deaths and have a very personal approach specific to my own fears. This mitigates the risk of my audience feeling too confronted or triggered by the content and therefore allows them to approach the topic more openly. My personal approach to the topic also aims to create a barrier between the harshness of the discussion and the feelings of the spectator, giving viewers space to contemplate my thoughts and feelings as a starting point. In my series *The Funeral Home*, which contains the harshest images of the exhibition, the presentation of my work in a book form gives my audience the ability to only view a maximum of two images at a time and the sequencing gives me the ability to curate the way my work is viewed in a very specific way. The addition of photographs that are taken outside of the funeral home acts as a breathing space and escape from the confines of a morbid scene. Reminding viewers that there is a world outside of this. The book format also gives viewers an easy escape in the event that the subject matter becomes overwhelming.

As discussed earlier in the essay, death anxiety is an underlying fear that all humans must have in order for survival. The rise of covid-19 and the death salient period that accompanied it lead to a lot of personal distress for many and the rate of death anxiety rising. There is the common trope of avoiding this fear and choosing to isolate death as something that happens to the old or very sick, something that happens to other people

but not me, not yet. This inability to talk about death openly is part of the reason death is such a hard topic, it is taboo and therefore elusive and mysterious. It was my aim through this project to confront the topic head on the only way I know how and in turn alleviate my own fears through exposure.

I found a lot of art work that also confronted the topic of death in different ways, but I didn't find artists exploring it through the perspective of fear. I am aware that my interest not only comes out of fascination, but also the inability to *not* think about it, which therefore propels a deeper dive into aspects of the post-death location and surrounding thought. I feel it is an important topic to broach as it is clear that it affects everyone who has the ability to comprehend what death is. My work allows for people to take an inside look at the thoughts of someone whose death anxiety is high and therefore can give an opportunity for self reflection and contemplation.

## Ethics

I would like to stress that a large portion of my thought process when making this project has gone towards ethical considerations. This will continue to inform my work. I do not wish to bring any spiritual harm or distress to my audience or those connected to the sites I have photographed and have taken precautions to make sure this does not happen. The images made at grave sites are all created at sites where my own blood relatives are buried, there have been conversations with living relatives to make sure this is okay and to make sure I cause no disrespect to the relatives or those who have passed away. I acknowledge that my work can be considered Tapu and that there needs to be measures in place to ensure the spiritual safety of my viewers. I will ensure that I continue to educate myself on potential ethical and spiritual issues and how best to implement strategies to avoid any harm. All images and objects will continue to be displayed with trigger warnings.

## Conclusion

I am afraid of dying, and I have learnt that this is a normal part of living. My obsession with death is not abnormal, but it has allowed me to approach this topic in a way perhaps not just anyone could. Throughout this process I have had the ability to share my fears with family and friends which has alleviated some of the stress related to my phobia. The artists observed and theorists examined throughout this exegesis have provided me with insight into death anxiety, spirit photography, cameraless photography and the investigation of the corpse as an object, as well as much more. I recognise that the fear of death is ingrained in me as a survival mechanism and I will never know the answers to all of the questions I have regarding the mysteries of death and dying. However I believe this project has created a space where these questions are welcomed and the reflection of these thoughts is encouraged. I have spent the past two years pondering and expect that this will not conclude at the end of my masters.

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## Appendix

A selection of texts to accompany my photographic series *Where You Went*

### #1

I walk the grounds with my mother in toe contemplating the short life of a girl I never knew. It's weird to me how we can go so quickly from gossip and giggles to this sombre rumination. We are linked by mutual feelings around the fragility of life. Mourning a little girl who would have been in her 40s now. There's this feeling in my stomach, akin to that of driving through a sudden dip in the road. I'm caught off guard somewhat because all my research seems so distant from the energy that this lost life has embedded in the sand beneath me. My delusions of being desensitised enough not to feel have faded and I watch my mum as she processes the same feelings. We don't talk about this. I take my photos, ashamedly questioning my motives, and we move on.

### #2

The field we walk is empty now, as two young children run giggling from the small hills. It's a rainy day and I was reluctant to get out of the car but now that I stand here the rain feels important. I feel the sorrow of this place amplified by the energetic squeals in the distance. There's something poetic about a child's squeal in place of a soldier's cry. Every step we make I find myself questioning my beliefs more and more. Wishing I belonged to a religion that provided me with an answer. An answer to the question 'What comes after death?' As a child I would go to church with a family that lived up the road, the father, and blond haired man in his 40s with a face that look un weathered, would often lay a hand on my head and pray for me, maybe he knew that my draw to the church was primarily for social reasons. Nevertheless, I attended. I have always been the type to question everything but I enjoyed the sureness of others there. They made it all seem so uncomplicated.

#3

We sit in the car with a cd playing hits from 2008, I have nicotine gum parked in the right side of my mouth, other than the music it's quiet.

“Did you know I've never seen a dead body?”

“Well I suppose you wouldn't have”

“Everyone has told me not to look, they said it would leave a bad memory in my mind, but I don't think I believe that anymore”

“You came close when Aunty Carol passed”

I was 12 when she died. I had always thought of her as an eccentric woman, she had hair that looked as though it was escaping her head, twining out from her clip in dark, chaotic ringlets. She wore skirts that looked like they had been stolen from the washing line of a hippy commune, and drove a purple car with dice in the window. I thought she was magnificent. Mum had told me stories of how aunty carol had travelled the world on her own, and how everyone thought she was crazy for doing so. She ended up converting to muslim after meeting a man in Zanzibar. When she passed things were done differently than how I expected. She died in the morning, and was buried by sunset. It was a day of chaos. Faces, unfamiliar to me, let themselves in through her front door and the house quickly filled up with food and chatter. Women bustled about caring trays and making calls, everyone was moving. I just sat and watched, wondering why no one was crying. My aunty lay on the moss coloured carpet in the spare room, wrapped in white muslin. I sat with her for a while, uncomfortably wondering what I was supposed to do or say. We hadn't had many one-on-one conversations when she was alive, so my quiet nattering felt insincere. I gave up talking and sat silently instead, waiting for the appropriate length of time to leave. In the late afternoon we made our way to the cemetery. I stood with the women, about 100 metres away, watching as men laid wood in her grave. Mum said that usually women aren't allowed to come to the cemetery, but because this wasn't our custom and because we promised not to cry too loud they would bend the rule for us. She said we couldn't go closer because they were trying to keep us safe. Safe from what I wondered.