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He went into a coma. I saw the nurse give him a glass of water but the water just ran out of his mouth. He didn't respond to touch. I half expected him to be cold but he was burning with fever. His pulse was racing. Later this evening Jeffrey rang me up and told me he had died.



The day before I had thought that he had looked like a corpse, but the difference between Allan in a coma yet alive and Allan dead was an indescribable abyss.

on DEATH... Helen Ennis

Timeliness is a notion that I've found very compelling of late. It seems well suited to describing those small actions that are manifestations of significant shifts in attitude. Such actions don't necessarily bring about social change but they are of their time and are also timely.

One such action is William Yang's small but telling adjustment to his well-known series *Allan: from the monologue Sadness*. The series from 1988-90 originally comprised 18 photographs but recently Yang decided to add another photograph - of Allan taken shortly after his death.

Until then the 'last' photograph of Allan showed him in a coma, burning with fever and unresponsive to touch. It was through words, through his handwritten diaristic entry beneath the image, that Yang spoke of Allan's death: "Later this evening, Jeffrey rang me and told me he had died." Now the situation is very different. In the newly exhibited image Allan is unequivocally, emphatically dead, and Yang writes: "The difference between Allan in a coma yet alive and Allan dead was an indescribable abyss."

Yang's decision to incorporate the post-mortem photograph is related in part to very specific personal circumstances. Exhibiting the image any earlier may have distressed Allan's friends and family; Yang therefore thought it necessary to wait until sufficient time had passed.

It should be noted that taking the photograph in the first instance was not problematic. Allan had collaborated on the project from the outset and his friends concluded that he would have wanted Yang to photograph him after death. The care taken in the preparation of Allan for the final viewing is obvious. He wears a scarf emblazoned with the phrases "Freedom From Want" and "Forever" and the soft toy,

Felix the cat, which he had posed with in the first image in the series, lies beside him.

Bringing this post-mortem photograph into the public domain now also relates to a broader cultural phenomenon - the increasing visibility of death. According to a press release for an exhibition *Six Feet Under* held at the Kunstmuseum in Bern, Switzerland, in early 2007, "death is 'in' again". There is an abundance of evidence to support this view. In the last few months alone post-mortem photographs of figures as diverse as writer Susan Sontag, singer James Brown and dictator Saddam Hussein have been widely circulated in the mainstream media in Australia. All this is in addition to what has become the daily fare of graphic images of victims of war, violence and natural disaster occurring overseas (yet, we still remain reticent about publishing images of our own dead).

During my research for *Reveries*, an exhibition commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery that features work by photographers from Australia and New Zealand, I have been astounded by the extent of post-mortem photography in contemporary practice. Since the late eighties, for example, in instances of neonatal death, hospital staff have encouraged parents to photograph their baby as part of the grieving process; they also take photographs on the parents' behalf. In the area of vernacular photography - that is, by non-professional photographers - digital technologies appear to be ushering in a new era, enabling friends and family to photograph their dying loved ones with relative ease and in complete privacy. Because commercial processing can now be bypassed altogether after-death photographs can be kept securely within the intimate circle.

FAR LEFT
William Yang No.17 Allan
from the monologue
Sadness 1990 gelatin
silver print, ink

LEFT
William Yang No.18 Allan
from the monologue
Sadness 1990 gelatin
silver print, ink

RIGHT
William Yang No.19 Allan
from the monologue
Sadness 1990 gelatin
silver print, ink

19. "Allan." From the monologue "Sadness."



Ann St, Surrey Hills, 1990

William Yang.

About two weeks before he died I read his diaries. (Jeffrey had asked me if I would like to talk at the funeral.) AIDS was a tragedy that was for sure, but as well he had an addictive personality and his day to day life was full of desperation. I hadn't realized the extent of this and it came as a shock. Yet there were moments of clarity when his fresh zest for life shone through. I would say at the end he was accepting & courageous.

At the service I read selected extracts from the diaries and I said that I believed in the afterlife and I wished his soul well on his new journey.

Post-mortem photography also has a presence in the public sphere through the work of photographers active in the art world over the last two decades. William Yang's works are especially well known but other examples are by Australians Jonathon Delacour and Frances Mocnik and New Zealanders Bridgit Anderson, Anne Noble and Craig Potton. It is this particular form of after-death photography that is presented in *Reveries*.

The timing of these developments - from the late 1980s to the present - is significant. It coincides with the international 'death awareness' movement that had its origins in the late sixties. This emerged in reaction to the 'modern death' characterised by hospitalisation and an ever-increasing amount of medical and technological intervention. Responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic have also been fundamentally important with members of the gay community creating new, personalised rituals to deal with the overwhelming realities of death and dying.

There are, of course, many different reasons for photographing the dead and each occurrence involves a unique set of experiences and circumstances. However, post-mortem photographs also share a common language that speaks not only about death and dying but about photography, representation and portraiture as well.

The first of these shared features can be described as relational. Often there is a direct connection between the subject and photographer - through friendship, through love. Allan and William Yang were friends (they had originally been lovers). Anne Noble's subject was her own father who died suddenly. Craig Potton photographed his beloved wife Beverly during her illness, on her deathbed and in the hours after she died. In these cases the photographer's presence is governed by the terms of their intimate relationship with their subjects. It is with permission that the photographer has come to occupy this highly charged personal, privileged space.

In such circumstances a paradoxical element to post-mortem photography becomes evident. This arises from the photographer's

emotional connection to their subject, and the detachment that is integral to taking a photograph. Photography (still or moving) enables an intense, sustained form of scrutiny not possible with other media. Its evidential authority is perfect at the moment of death, a fact rendered more poignant by the desire to secure a final image of the subject, an image that will last forever.

It is here of course that photography and memory intersect. Anne Noble's installation *In My Father's Garden* is a thoughtful, wide-ranging meditation on the power of the visual in the construction of memory and the interrelated notion that the creation of memory is an act of will.

Post-mortem photographs also engage with complex notions of time. Contrary to my expectations I have found that they are not so much about the end of something as about an ongoing process. Invariably they are positioned within an extended narrative (Annie Leibovitz's photographs of Susan Sontag are typical in this sense), and so to remove individual images and isolate them is to misrepresent them. Bridgit Anderson's photograph is part of an extended series *Caring for the Dead*, taken over the course of a year spent with a firm of funeral directors in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Photographs taken after death generally mark a point of transition from one state, or time, to another. Thus in William Yang's series on Allan time loops back on itself. Yang's final image is of a young, smiling Allan photographed before he became ill. The decision to end with this is significant because it invokes memories of Allan and a sense of continuity, of his continued presence.

Such post-mortem photographs make it possible - for those who see them and come to know them - to live differently with death. And, ideally, to live better.

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Curated by Helen Ennis, *Reveries: Photography and Mortality* is on show at the National Portrait Gallery from 27 April to 5 August 2007



Bridgit Anderson *Body Preparation - Mortuary 2* from the series *Caring for the Dead* 2005 gelatin silver print Courtesy of Campbell Grant Galleries



Anne Noble from *In My Father's Garden* 2001 type C print

Anne Noble and John Gray from *In My Father's Garden* 2001 type C print



...PERFECT AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH ...
an image THAT WILL LAST FOREVER.