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After;life

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AFTER;LIFE

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts

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The School of Art

by
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Liminality.....	2
Death Guides.....	3
Triple Goddess.....	4
The Black Dog: Life.....	5
The Alligator: Death.....	8
The Opossum: True Death.....	11
Poetry.....	14
Research.....	16
Senses.....	17
Materials and Processes.....	19
Conclusion.....	21
Bibliography.....	22
Vita.....	23

Abstract

After;life is an exploration of the time and space between life and death. The installation, created from dozens of woodcut prints, creates this imaginary place, and encompasses viewers through sight, smell, sound, and touch. All elements of this installation are heavily influenced by Southern Louisiana culture and wildlife, and are meant to be familiar enough to provoke personal memory and experience. A set of rituals in the form of three poems, corresponding to three different spirit guides: The Black Dog, The Alligator, and The Opossum, lead the reader through the space from life, through liminal, into death.

Introduction

This body of work is an exploration of a concept that I encountered several times while researching death rituals across cultures. That concept, in varying forms, speaks to a phase between life and death when a person is considered neither alive nor truly dead. During this time, a spirit wanders the earth (or a separate plane) until a ritual is performed or requisite period of time passes. After which, the spirit moves from the in-between space into true death.¹ This body of work explores themes of life, death, liminality, ritual, and nature.

A great deal of the death is experienced through nature. Every day, the bodies of new dead animals line the shoulders of roads, and plants wilt and shrivel. We see death in wilderness with a much greater frequency than in our personal lives, with loved ones or friends. The death of plants and animals happens so often in fact, that we become accustomed to it, we don't give it a second thought. Although we dress our dead up in nice clothes, pump them full of chemicals, and box them up, separating them from dirt and leaves and wild animals, we know that the earth consumes us in the end. Like death, wilderness is inevitable and uncontrollable. Nature trumps all. In order to feel a semblance of control, people create mythologies and rituals to explain death, to make it more understandable. My work explores the intersection of how we experience nature and death, and the spaces created through stories and ritual.

¹ David Kowalewski and Lara De La Iglesia, "Psychopomps: Why They Matter", *Journal For Spiritual & Consciousness Studies* 1 (2014): 5-13

Liminality

I am fascinated by the idea that there is an intermediary space or time between life and death, where the soul waits. In some iterations of this idea, the soul has to perform tasks, wait a specific amount of time, or just wander around waiting for something to happen. Sometimes people view this in-between more abstractly, while others believe that there is a real, geographic space that exists where souls wander and wait. Maybe this place exists where the person died, maybe it exists in a realm separate from our own, or maybe it exists in a forest. This installation is my artistic interpretation of that space.

My in-between is in a natural setting inspired by my current environment. It is familiar; made up of plants that you recognize and inhabited by animals that you know, this space has recognizable elements from our living world, but it is different. It is a little darker, a little less saturated, and a little stranger. Animals also inhabit this space, yet they are a little different too. They are otherworldly or unusual. It is undeniable that the wildlife in Baton Rouge permeates the daily lives of its human inhabitants. The nature is so abundant here, there are explosions of flowers, caterpillars, and cicadas at different times of the year, possums and squirrels crawl in and out of every tree and neighborhood, the swamps are mythical and mysterious. By primarily using Louisiana species in my installation, I hope to tap into the familiarity that the viewers have with this particular region, so that they can connect to the art on a personal level and have room to use their own memories to fill in some of the unknowns.

Death Guides

After;life not only focuses in on the physical space between this world and the next, but also depicts several non-human creatures that inhabit the space. While researching death rituals I found many different examples of characters, goddesses, gods, or animals that, in some way, help wandering spirits, managing aspects of the afterlife. Each of these characters is an example of a psychopomp. A psychopomp is a spirit guide, a “conductor of the soul... through all of its transitions; before birth, before death, and after death”, and is also sometimes referred to as a death deity.² Psychopomps are generally powerful or magical, and often come in the form of familiar animals. They are just different enough from humans to be mysterious and unknown, to draw us in. All of these wandering sprits have very specific and complex backstories. They have their own personalities and often share traits with the animals they resemble. They have their own likes and dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, tragic love stories, and violent deaths. The mythologies surrounding death deities are poetic and beautiful, and say so much about the people who created them. I’m intrigued by the intricacy and intimacy of each mythology. This show is my attempt at creating that. These are my invented Louisiana death gods.

² Buck, Sheila. "Psychopomps: The conductors of souls" Bangor Examiner (ME), February 05, 2014

Triple Goddess

The number three recurs in mythology over and over. There are countless examples of triple deities, particularly goddesses or witches: Russian folklore's forest witch Baba Yaga, the Moirai sisters in Greek mythology, who cut the threads of life and controlled the fate of all human beings, and the Weird Sisters from Macbeth.³ ⁴ The list goes on.⁵ The number three is associated with the life cycle in that it can symbolize maiden, mother, and crone, birth, life, and death, or, in the case of the work in *after;life*, life, death, and afterlife.⁶

There are three main death goddesses in this project, each linked with one phase of the life and death cycle; The Black Dog, The Opossum, and The Alligator. There is one "ritual" associated with each death goddess. The rituals are meant to guide the recently departed souls through death, the after life, and into true death.

³ Sibellian Forester et al., *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) 165-169

⁴ "Fates." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6Th Edition* (April 2016): 1. *Literary Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 16, 2017).

⁵ "The Triple Aspect of Gods and Goddesses." *Seanchas* 3, no. 1 (1990): 7-12. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost

⁶ William Bysshe Stein. "The Old Man and the Triple Goddess: Melville's 'The Haglets'." *ELH*, 1958., 43, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost. 46-51

The Black Dog: Life

The Black Dog symbolizes the first in the cycle of three, life. She hides in the shadows and watches the living, waiting to see who is next in line to depart from this life. She is always hungry, always searching for new souls. Her stomach is full of snakes, who emerge to help her in her search. The snakes are textured like wood, like sticks and branches, and can easily hide in the forest. Sticks and branches have been used as tools since the dawn of humankind. At some point or another, we have all used a stick to poke at or spear something or to draw words in the dirt. In this mythology, sticks are a tool that helps to connect humans to the natural world, and are also symbolic divining rods. Sometimes the snakes can turn into sticks, divining the location of the soon-to-be departed to the Black Dog. In *Black Dog Ritual*, the reader, still living, is considering and trying to understand death through performing a specific ritual.

Black Dog Ritual

Find a black stick
Black like slicked pitch.
Dark black like the fur on a wet dog's back.
Dark black like the spaces between trees in a midnight forest.
Dark dark black like the snap of a bone in an angry jaw.

Balance the stick on your palms.
Cup your fingers around
rough mossy bark.
Wonder if it is the one but also know deeply that this is the one.
This is it.

Clutch it to your chest,
wild but gentle.
Don't ever lose it.

This stick is her.
Your mother? Sister? Was it your cousin?
No your grandmother. Your friend from school?
Your wife? Your little little baby? The mother of your baby?
cancer? car accident? botched surgery? childbirth?
old age, or wait was it a stroke? heart attack? miscarriage?

miscarried?
'This is her.

'This is all you have of her and all you will ever have of her, so don't lose it.
'Think about losing it.
Fear losing it.
Hide it under your pillow for three nights

On night one:
Dream of gnashing teeth.
Of four faces,
of four thousand wings.
Sleep in too late.

On night two:
Dream of a pen quickly scratching old parchment.
Oily black ink on ancient scraped calf's skin.
When you wake up you won't remember her name.

On night three:
Dream of the snip snipping of old shears
Sewing shears
Snip snip snip
Wonder- if you fall asleep again will you ever wake up?

Once your three nights have ended,
take the stick out back.
Bury it like a black dog buries a bone.

Mark the spot with something.
Something that smells a little like dirt
and a little like iron.
Something a little heavier than it looks.
Something like a smooth oval stone
that's little grey and a little white,
but when it rains,
it almost looks black.

'Try to forget about the stick for a while
But sneak quick looks at the spot
out of the corner of your eye.
Peek at it when you let the dog out,
and when you hang the laundry.
And after a while passes,
pretend like you've forgotten
about the stick.
And move on.



Figure 1. Morgan Anderson, *This is her*, 2017

The Alligator: Death

In Cajun mythology, it is said that if an alligator crawls under your house, it is a sign that someone in your family will die soon. The Alligator finds recently departed spirits and guides them into the in-between, the intermediary space after life but before true death. In *Alligator Ritual*, the reader has deceased, yet remains unaware of this. After seeing a gator crawl under their house, they try to shoo it away, fearing that it will bring death to their family. While crawling under the house to scare her away, the reader loses track of time and space, and is ultimately pulled out of the earthly realm and into the next by The Alligator.

Alligator Ritual

Don't be scared
When she slides under your house.
When you hear her jaws snap beneath
Your floorboards like sharpened glass,
You'll know what she wants.
Don't let her take it.

Find your broomstick,
the one mama gave you.
Swing it blindly under your house
until you hear a cold scaly thud.

Crouch.
Peek under the porch.
Two eyes gleam back at you
metallic and warm,
Better to see you with, my sweet.

Crawl under to meet her,
Slipping your belly across damp earth.
This is what its like to be a lizard, you guess.
Two yellow spots spread through the musky dark,
Yell to her,
You can't stay. You have to go.

She almost looks like she understands,
but claw by claw,
She swims farther into the earth.

Her tail may skim your skin
as you scramble to keep up
I think we're under the kitchen now.

keep following her
into the hollowed pitch
until you wonder,
how long has it been?
one year and one day,
or just a few minutes?

Damp dirt turns wet.
The darkness is water,
oily and black.
Let the velvet liquid bleed into your skin,
gulp it into your sloshing lungs,
let it seep into the folds of your brain and
your eyelashes and
your arteries,
your cells and mitochondria and DNA,
I am obsidian water.

use your new liquid eyes
to stare deeply into the
glowing orbs
that puncture the yawning void.
better to see you with.
better?

Keep staring even as your stomach steadily fills with something
like nostalgia or maybe it's dread.
A vintage craving,
or maybe it's just dark water.

Let her stare pierce your head and
drain the black liquid from your skull.
Your eyes pouring out like fat dew worms.

Leather claws grasp at you and
pull you out, water baby.
and drag your liquid body upwards,
and sink two gifts into your palms:
one tooth.
one eye.
better to see you with my dear.



Figure 2. Morgan Anderson, *Better to see you with, my dear*, 2017

The Opossum: True Death

The Opossum is the symbol for true death. In this mythology, she has created all life, and is waiting for our souls to return to her. Like opossums in the wild, who carry their babies in their pouch or on their backs everywhere they go, The Opossum goddess is a fierce and protective mother. She waits in the afterworld to be found by wandering spirits so she can finally take them back home, into true death. In *Opossum Ritual*, the reader is in the forest between life and death. They feel like this is a familiar place, but they don't know why. Through connecting with dirt and the earth in this ritual, they start to remember their own burial and recognize that they are no longer alive. They finally meet The Opossum, who comforts them, and leads them to true death.

Opossum Ritual

Where are you?
You know these trees,
But don't quite remember from where.

Beneath your feet, spongy earth
squishes between your stepping toes.

Stop walking, just stand.
Listen to the drone of the cicadas.
Smell the sharp apricot of the sweet olive tree,
Osmanthus fragrans

Dig three handfuls of dirt
out of the soft ground.
Big scoops of thick swamp mud.
Soggy dark clots of roots and worms
blacken your fingernails.

Slow your breath.
Pause and think,
How did I get here,
why can't I remember?

Sometimes you remember better when you lie down.
Fall back. Close your eyes.
Everything is soft and black like a bristled pelt.

Don't forget about the dirt;
pack it heavy onto your chest.
Laugh to yourself at the familiar weight.
dust to dust
You and the earth have a secret together.

If you want it bad enough,
the dirt becomes possum.
A small soft body,
long prickled claws,
teeth, and all.

Squeeze her tight to your chest,
digging fingers into dusty fur.
Try to not to be disappointed when she slithers off,
skittering dry leaves.

can you remember yet?

Let the soft weight of the dirt
sink into your chest.
Between each rib,
around ventricle and vena cava,
deep, deep,
all the way through,
'til it touches the dirt beneath you.
You can almost taste it;
damp earth, rotted leaves, death, life, waste, existing...
and after.

You remember.
The snap
of taut twine,
The whip
of air between
snips of sharp shears,
soft skin soothing your forehead,
smoothing your worry,
telling you
it's okay
age is a gift
to help you find your way back home
this isn't the end;
there is always after.



Figure 3. Morgan Anderson, *Where are you?*, 2017

Poetry

I have always loved to read, and am very influenced by creative writing and fiction, particularly poetry and magical realism. I envy the amount of control a good writer has over their audience. Words, when used the right way, can create imagery in the mind of each reader that is specific to their own lives, while also creating a general overarching feeling. I am attracted to artists that use words creatively to add a layer to their visual work, like Luigi Serafini, who created the *Codex Seraphinianus*. The codex comes in the form of a dense book filled with carefully rendered, scientific, silly, and mysterious illustrations of the ecology and inner workings of a magical world. Each page is packed with text, apparent descriptions of each illustration; but the text is in a strange language only understood by Serafini and the inhabitants of his magical world. The words are as much a part of the visual art as the illustrations are. The text is both vague and specific. We, as the reader, don't know what it says, but we understand the encyclopedic format. The reader is guided with just enough information to give needed structure to the work, but is also left wanting just a little bit more.

I have also been obsessed with Anne Sexton and Marilyn Chin, two confessional poets who use words to create scenes that seamlessly move from specific personal experience and imagery into vague yet descriptive dream-like states. Each of these women has their own specific style, but they both explore the delicate beauty of poetry as a medium, while jabbing the reader with quick brutal descriptions of mental illness, suicide, death, and violence. The end product creates a very specific feeling of enticing beauty mixed with vague unsettling darkness.

Kelly Link, the writer who has had the most influence on my thesis work, writes short fiction that explores the dark side of human nature and relationships in a magical realist world. Her work is heavy with animal symbolism that effects and builds both characters and setting in her

stories. The writing portion of *after;life* is my attempt to include words in my work in a conceptual way, allowing for a more guided experience of the visual works while remaining mysterious and ominous, ultimately leaving the viewer curious for more.

Research

A good portion of this project has involved research into the rituals that other cultures perform around and about death. Most of my research has come in the form of reading about ritual, death, burial traditions, witchcraft, and occult symbolism. As previously mentioned, I have been reading a lot of poetry and short fiction that focuses on death as well. However, it is important to mention that I have not been focusing in on one specific culture or another. I have been exploring ideas that are ubiquitous and far-reaching, more general rather than pertaining to one region or group of people. Ideas such as that of an intermediary phase between life and death, or the concept of psychopomps are seen in many different cultures across space and throughout human history. I am fascinated by this kind of human knowledge and practice, because it reveals a sort of collective subconscious in how we experience death as humans. This reveals that we come up with these ideas about death as a species, not as individuals; and to me, those collective thoughts hold the most power. I also want to be aware of and avoid exploiting specific cultures and people, therefore, I have kept my research broad and I've tried to focus in on my own interests and experiences rather than adopting them from specific groups of people.

Senses

Overall, I am more concerned with creating a feeling than I am with getting specific ideas across. I want to create an emotional space that creates an atmosphere of beauty, dread, nostalgia, and wonder. This installation includes elements that encompass many different senses in order to allow the viewer to become part of the space.

The smell of *Osmanthus fragrans*, the Sweet Olive flower fills the room, just as it fills Baton Rouge in the spring when the trees bloom. Whenever I smell sweet olive, it brings back memories of spring, flowers, and life. Since it is a common scent in this area, I hope that when each person smells it they will bring their own leafy, lush, Louisiana memories and experiences into the space.

The sound is a work created with the help of Andres Parada, a musician who creates music and sound in the film industry in Los Angeles. It is made of sounds that I recorded while performing animal burials and invented rituals in wildlife in Baton Rouge. There are sounds of water rushing, insects and frogs, and the drone of the cicada. Once again, these elements are familiar and allow the viewer to connect with the art by bringing their own memories into it. However, the ringing bells in the background take the familiar sounds into an unfamiliar atmosphere, they take us to somewhere otherworldly.

The leaves on the floor can be touched, stepped on, and kicked around. The crunch of dried leaves underfoot, a feeling usually reserved for the outside world, has been brought inside, expanding the traditional gallery space to another realm.

I want the general feeling to be one of mystery and confusion, but also familiarity. I want the viewers to ask themselves where they are. How did they get here? Why are they here? Why does this feel familiar? Death is personal and intimate, if this space existed, each soul would bring their own

lives and experiences with them into it. However death is also unknown, strange, and scary, and the afterworld would also be strange, unfamiliar, and unsettling.

Materials and Processes

In the early stages of creating this work, I knew I was going to have to choose my materials and processes carefully to fill the gallery space that was available. I came to graduate school to learn to work with different materials and to figure out how to create art that wasn't medium specific, but rather, used whatever processes worked for each different concept. So I stopped making prints, and forced myself into the discomfort of working with new materials. I started making things out of sticks and bugs, I tried papermaking, ceramics, working with resin, wood, making things with dead animals and bones, I tried performance art, photography and video. I learned a little bit about a lot of different things, succeeded a little, and failed a lot. This exploration allowed me to come back into printmaking with a more holistic view of what I want out of my art.

I wanted to create a space, and therefore needed to use a medium that allowed for the creation of large images, and I needed a medium that created easily reproducible images. Woodcut printmaking was where I really started in art. I am comfortable with it and felt that it was a good medium to use to create large works that I could experiment with but also felt like I could succeed at. The materials are economic, can be very large at a relatively low cost, don't require special processes to print, and most importantly, create multiples easily. Having the option to print multiples allowed me to experiment without fear, which helped in making important aesthetic decisions. I was able to try different color combinations and multiple strategies for placement of the different elements in each composition.

The woodcut aesthetic was perfect for this project. When looking up images of already existing death deities, the ones that hold the most interest to me are stylized and graphic, more about an idea or a collection of symbols rather than something hyper-realistic. The inherent stylization that comes with the process of carving wood to create an image lended itself nicely to the

concept. The process of carving wood creates a very medium specific type of mark making, through which, I explored using pattern and texture to create movement and interest in every day plants and animals. The black ink used in all of the prints kept the atmosphere dark and foreboding, while celebrating the rich, velvety blacks that are often sought after in the print medium.

The three dimensional elements in the space were created to bring the work off the walls and bring it into the space, allowing for more personal interaction. The cut paper leaves were purposefully air dried on uneven surfaces in order to make them twisted and warped in a way that mimics reality. It was interesting using paper, which is used primarily for two dimensional work, in a new way, and learning to use floor space as well as wall space to make an atmosphere. I wanted the sticks in the show to be three-dimensional objects that like the leaves, mimicking reality just enough to create a strange tromp-l'oeil effect. I like how small sculptures ask to be touched, but the fragility of the ceramic media creates a seductive tension between the desire to touch, and the fear of destruction.

The the three rituals were printed out en masse on thick cardstock in order to provide the audience with something to hold and touch, to read while they experience the visual art, and to take home after. Providing the viewers with their own copy of each ritual allows for them to be guided through the space, just as wandering spirits are guided through death by psychopomps. The poems can be taken home, and include printed foliage to remind each person of their experience in the space even after they've left.

Conclusion

Creating *after;life* was my first attempt at using printmaking to fill a gallery with a specific experience. By exploring death, wilderness, and ritual through the lens of Southern Louisiana nature and culture, I aimed to create a forest that mirrored my own conceptual interests. Although the forest is otherworldly, it is familiar enough that each viewer could encounter it through their own perspective while being guided by each ritual through life, death, and the afterlife. In the future, I plan on using different iterations of this work to further investigate the idea of transforming a gallery into a holistic work of art that encompasses multiple senses through the use of different media and unconventional materials. I am particularly interested in taking up more space, using more three-dimensional media, and making the experience much more like a forest, full of plants and foliage, dark and overwhelming.

I want the forest to be the beginning of my work. Wild, dark, and mysterious, sometimes terrifying, but always seductive. I want *after;life* to walk my audience through the nature of life and death, allowing them to remember and make new memories through my images and words. I want them to get lost in the woods, to fear the future, to wonder what the end will bring, but to know that no matter what, there is always after.

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Vita

Morgan Anderson earned a Bachelors of Fine Arts and a Bachelors of Science from the University of Arizona in 2013. Afterwards, she spent a year in the desert, focusing on education, life, and her cat, Bagheera. Morgan and Bagheera made their way to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to attend graduate school at Louisiana State University. Morgan enjoys sitting outside and watching animals, pressing plants, and reading about death. Upon earning her Masters of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University, she plans on packing up and moving to Los Angeles to work on art and read about death in a less humid environment.