



Donald Moffett: Mercy (detail, 1991)

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Death Warmed Over

By Peter Schjeldahl

"The Interrupted Life"

The New Museum of Contemporary Art
583 Broadway
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Upstate recently I enjoyed the autumn foliage—that perishing glory—and was riveted especially by a lovely, heartbreaking little trick of nature with certain trees whose leaves turn pale yellow. Seen from afar when an exact mix of yellow and late-summer sullen green is reached, the trees are ringers for trees in springtime, mimicking the tender light green of May. So in the moment before its extinction the landscape flashes an illusion of new life, which you could say either mocks hope or holds out a consoling promise, or both, if you want to indulge in the pathetic fallacy, and why not? I am for grasping metaphors wherever possible, because one cannot live without metaphors.

The New Museum's much-discussed "death show" begins with a work by Donald Moffett that efficiently combines metaphor and moral exhortation. Installed in the museum's lobby, it comprises 100 identical small, round light-boxes, each bearing a gorgeous photograph of a fleshy white rose overlaid with the printed word MERCY. The rose is a metaphor of life's sweetness and fragility, life's deservingness and need of the special consideration—deference of power to the

powerless—that is mercy. The repetition of the word all over the wall evokes the harmonized shout of a gospel choir. Addressed to the AIDS catastrophe (each light-box, we are told, represents 1000 deaths), Moffett's piece suggested to me that after all these horrible years we may be developing a public rhetoric of mourning that consoles, even as it confronts, relentlessly.

Then I saw the rest of the show and changed my mind. This is a ghastly show, on purpose but with a purpose deeply added. It is masochistically numbing—deadening, in fact. I came out of it with my sensibilities thoroughly on the fritz, except for a rebellious urge to hilarity. What can you say about the tone of a lurid exhibition about death titled ever so daintily "The Interrupted Life"? Isn't that like calling something about plane crashes "The Inconvenienced Flight Plan"? This show and its oversized catalogue (with dense theoretical essays printed, to nicely funereal but hardly readable effect, on dark gray paper) manage to be alternately gross and fussy. Still, the organizers must be credited with bravely raising a subject so important that the occasion for having a go at it should not be wasted.

France Morin, the curator in charge, starts from the unexceptionable premise that Western, and especially North American, culture is fucked up in its dealings with death. She proceeds unwittingly to demonstrate why, taking an approach that, like the cul-

ture's, is oblivious to our need for serviceable rituals, availing metaphors, and other common ways to avow while allaying our fears. In this society we die as we live (and as we make art): pretty much alone, or in fragmentary communities. We quite sensibly keep the brute phenomenon of death out of sight and out of mind, because under the circumstances contemplation can hardly be other than a useless ordeal. Morin seems to think that unflinching scrutiny—a "long hard look at death," in her words—is the solution. More likely it is an aspect of the problem, or would be if it were even possible.

No one has seen death. It is a concept, not a thing. You can look only at such evidence of it as corpses or yellowed leaves, and if emotional coping is your aim you probably had best start with the leaves, or maybe dead small animals if you are really tough. Like many of the artists incautious enough to submit their individual expressions to the charnel spectacle of "The Interrupted Life," Morin goes straight to dead humans, often mutilated, and thus makes an excellent case for repression.

(I thought of a friend who had to tell her little daughter that the hamster had died overnight. "Where is he?" the girl asked. "Well," said my friend, mind swimming with metaphysical conundrums, "his body is in the cage." Her daughter wailed, "Where's his head?")

There are morgue photos galore. There is an interestingly re-

pulsive, continuously projected film by Peter Greenaway, *Death in the Seine*, that uses an erudite historical pretext (mortuary documents from post-Revolutionary Paris) to justify innumerable avidly slow pans of naked actors playing dead. And jaded aesthetes may savor a collection of mostly 19th century sentimental photographs of dead children in doll-like poses. Good works by Christian Boltanski, Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, and others don't stand a chance here, their subtleties drowning in the ambient Grand Guignol. The point of it all, for anyone less injured than a coroner, can only be morbid titillation: aesthetic sensation taking over from feeling in a last-ditch responsiveness to horror, after which all the hatches of the heart shut down tight.

How to keep the heart open in face of death? Other cultures know how. They do it with festivals—always at least partly religious, of course. Without quasi-religious balancing of fear and reassurance, if only in a metaphor's suspension of disbelief, thinking about death at all may be a mistake. It will only make you feel bad. (It may incline you to make others feel bad, too, on the misery-loves-company principle that possibly explains this show.) The festival with which I am a bit familiar—the Mexican, especially Oaxacan, Day of the Dead—tells me what a successful cultural integration of death can be like: funny, frightening, and profound. It works by blurring distinctions between the living and the dead. In

Oaxaca on November 1 you get that the dead are not exactly dead. You also get—as I didn't right away, having it sink in dismayingly when it was too late to withhold my emotional participation—that the living are not exactly alive. It's a trade-off: some of our life for them, some of their death for us, and laughter to seal the bargain. Death is embarrassing. It is rad-

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ical disempowerment, you could say. The dead require mercy that may include the mercy of humor to cover the awkwardness of their situation, in which we will join them soon enough. While alive, to rehearse being dead—with propriety, with panache—seems a secret of death festivals, of which our culture is grotesquely bereft. (Maybe the saddest thing at the New Museum is a section of blank books in which visitors are invited to write their thoughts on death. Whether earnest or flip, the several dozen entries I read were uniform in all-American crashing banality.) Art might partly and intermittently make good the lack, but only with extreme tact. To anesthetize fear with shock—building up calluses on painful nerve ends—is a tactic properly left to horror movies. We want something else from art, something that publicly nourishes delicate, deep roots of feeling. ■