In memory of Esther Parada

1938-2005
Harold Allen
Sophie Calle
Catherine Chalmers
Jason Lazarus
Barbara McDonnell
Vik Muniz
Esther Parada
Irving Penn
Gilles Peress
Michal Rovner
Mark Ruwedel
Alec Soth
Dennis Stock
Stephen Tourlentes
Brian Ulrich
On Death and Dying
Curated by John Arndt and Barbara Wiesen

Last year a generous offer was extended that if we ever needed to borrow a work from the permanent collection at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago, it could be arranged. Taking advantage of MoCP's generosity we inquired if we could put together a whole show selected completely from the museum collection; the museum agreed. But what was in the collection? Quite often a curator starts with an idea and builds upon that concept; instead we took a more playful approach asking what material is available, and what can be done with it?

Esther Parada's name listed in the inventory first drew our attention. Esther was on the faculty at UIC when we were graduate students there in the early 1990s. Esther had succumbed to a bout with cancer at the end of 2005 and had been on our minds. The photograph the MoCP had was one Esther had taken of a skeleton at a Native American burial site in the late 1960s.

Next we looked at what the collection held by other photographers we admired. We expected Sophie Calle to be represented by perhaps her famous autobiographical surveillance works; instead we found a photograph from a series we were unfamiliar with: the shot of a gravestone for twins. Michal Rovner's computer manipulated piece was an image of two bodies floating on a field of red (the Dead Sea at dusk). A possible theme was beginning to emerge.

As we continued to look at the collection, more and more photographs seemed to be dealing both directly and indirectly with mortality. Was the collection unusually weighted that way, or more likely, was it that part of what makes an artist's work compelling the willingness to unflinchingly approach subject matter that is uncomfortable, yet elemental to what it means to be human?

Repeatedly the MoCP surprised us in its ownership of the unexpected work by a given photographer. Irving Penn is most widely known for his stark fashion photographs and technically succinct portraits; however, what we found was Composition with Skull and Pear. Likewise, Vik Muniz's work often has a whimsical quality, yet his large photograph, Tony Smith from Pictures of Dust, is one of conceptual depth. Muniz used dust gathered from the Whitney Museum of American Art to recreate a photographic image of Tony Smith's masterpiece of minimalist sculpture entitled, Die, a work already layered with meaning to which Muniz adds increased possibilities. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The inclusion in this show of photojournalist images such as Dennis Stock's Untitled, from James Dean: A Memorial Portfolio, was an obvious choice for its compassionate, yet direct foreshadowing of the actor's death, while fellow Magnum photographer Giles Peress is represented by a grainy and chaotic vision of hell, a shot that anticipates death on Bloody Sunday, One Minute before British Paratroop Fires.
One of the pleasures of curating is making connections that come at the subject from an oblique angle. There is a risk, however, in going where the artist may not have originally intended. Harold Allen’s interest has been in architectural photography, particularly American usage of Egyptian motifs. His photograph, Van Ness-Parsons Pyramid, Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York, is undoubtedly fair game; however, Subway Vista, Chicago, takes on metaphorical content in the context of this show that it might not otherwise have. The formal similarities between the two photographs taken in the same year invite the possibility of a subconscious undercurrent to the production of both prints.

Like Allen’s subway piece, Mark Ruwedel’s landscape, Death Valley: Ancient Footpath Along the Shore of a Departed Lake, from his “Ice Age” series, can be read as a visual perspective pointing to an unknown. The death in Death Valley suggests the loss not only of a particular body of water but also the human life that once passed through that place. Similarly the landscape by Stephen Tourlentes does not immediately reveal its relation to the exhibition until one becomes aware of the title, Wyoming State Death House. With that bit of information, the glowing lights in the distance take on a sinister quality and the driest of foreground speaks of barrenness beyond what is literally presented in the photograph. Alec Soth’s Cemetery, Fountain City, WI, like Tourlentes photograph, features man-made light in a evening sky; however cold the glare, Soth’s landscape suggests a way station for the recently departed, a last comfort stop before entering the barely discernable cemetery in the darkened tree line beyond the fence.

Jason Lazarus hints at the political without revealing his hand in, Standing at the grave of Emmett Till, day of exhumation, May 31, 2005. In certain contexts, this image could be mistaken for a documentation of a minimalist earthwork, yet with the site identified, the clearness of the bright summer sky seems to point toward a hope for clarity of a racial tragedy. Brian Ulrich with his frightening photograph of a casket display parked directly next to an ATM (or ghost teller) in what appears to be a big box discount store, examines the implications of a funeral industry moving toward monopolization and increasingly aggressive marketing strategies.

Some of the toughest decisions we had to make were which of Barbara McDonnells’ many moving photographs of her father’s house (after his death) to winnow from the show. McDonnell gives us interior details with an intimacy that turns the home itself into a body of sorts — a container of memories, of past actions, and objects fraught with meaning — in addition to a structure framing absence.

And finally, Catherine Chalmers with her Praying Mantis Eating a Caterpillar, an image at turns both disturbing and comical, reminds us that we too are at times hungry and brutal, part of a larger web of living things, all of which share a common fate.

John Arndt

John Arndt is a multimedia artist, currently teaching at College of DuPage.
Subway Vista, Chicago, 1969, gelatin silver print
Untitled (The Graves), 1991, gelatin silver print

Sophie Calle
Praying Mantis Eating a Caterpillar, 1969, chromogenic development print
Standing at the grave of Emmett Till, day of exhumation, May 31st, 2005 (Alsip, IL), archival inkjet print
Barbara McDonnell

Desert Radiator, 2005, archival inkjet print
Vik Muniz

Tony Smith, from *Pictures of Dust*, 2000, silver dye bleach print
Untitled from Site Unseen series, 1976, Van Dyke brown print

Esther Parada
Irving Penn

Composition with Skull and Pear, 1979/81, platinum/palladium print
Gilles Peress

_Bloody Sunday, One Minute before British Paratroop Fires, 1972_,
gelatin silver print
Mark Ruwedel

*Death Valley: Ancient Footpath Along the Shore of a Departed Land*, from the series *Ice Age*, 1995/2003, gelatin silver print with graphite lettering on mount
Alec Soth

*Cemetery, Fountain City, WI, 2002, chromogenic development print*
Dennis Stock

Untitled from James Dean: A Memorial Portfolio, 1955/1979, gelatin silver print
Stephen Tourlentes

*Wyoming State Death House, WY, 2000, gelatin silver print*
Brian Ulrich

*Universal Casket, Chicago, IL, 2004, archival inkjet print*
On Death and Dying
Photographs from the Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago
Thursday, Jan. 25 to Saturday, March 3, 2007
Gahlberg Gallery

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Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Gahlberg Gallery

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