

“INTO THE VOID” at Greenleaf Gallery, Whittier College

When I was asked to create a show for the Greenleaf Gallery at Whittier College, my first order of business was to come and see the space. Site specificity is very important to me, and I needed to get a sense of the gallery in order to decide which work I would show. One of the first things I noticed in the gallery was the bronze plaque commemorating the dead of World War II [or is it I? suddenly i'm uncertain as i e-mail this to you...] prominently placed below the window. This is an odd thing to have in a gallery space, and I decided that it was important to include it in my display rather than attempting to ignore it. I thought I might go back to my studio and gather all the work I had made over the years that had anything to do with the basic questions of existence. Of course when I really thought about it, I realized I had much more work on that topic than could be shown in this space, so I limited the show to some key pieces that would work well together and this exhibit is the result. My interests when producing work are often philosophical in nature. Having lived through the slow and painful process of watching a loved one die at very young age, I have pursued existential issues around death and decay, memory and loss, time and history, and their relationship to photography and representation ever since. Reading Roland Barthes' "Camera Lucida" was a transformative experience for me in that it really solidified the peculiar relationship between death and photography.

In the summer of 2001, I was fortunate to receive an invitation to complete an artist's residency in Wilmington, Delaware. I went there to work with cancer patients and survivors, teaching them self-portraiture through pinhole photography. This project was called Lucid, and I will be continuing it this spring in Northridge, California with members of The Wellness Community. During my residency in Delaware, I also had an opportunity to make some images that I had been thinking about for years. I photographed myself all night while I slept. These long exposure images in dim light captured something not that's not really visible; the subtle movement of a sleeping body over many hours on a surface that is basically still. The images combine and allude to several contradictory aspects of being: life and death, movement and stillness, darkness and light. They are very curious.

My name for the series is "Where am I when I'm asleep?" The idea for the title of this project may be couched as a joke, but it reveals a very basic fear. When I was a child I would sometimes lie awake at night unable to sleep. I was trying to imagine what death might be like and resolved to myself somehow that it was like sleeping for eternity. No consciousness, no dreams, no memory, no soul; no idea that one had ever even existed in the first place. This terrified me to the point that I could not sleep at all. Years later as I watched my partner finally stop breathing after her long illness, I saw death a little differently. Peace after all her torment seemed not such a bad thing. I had a better appreciation for the possibility of being ready to let go of life, to stop fighting what was inevitable. These are some of the ideas that drive the creation of the work in this exhibit.

The images I have included here depict or refer to the deposition of Christ, the time it takes for a wound to heal, X-rays and a self-portrait in the style of my great-grandfather's Russian 'death mask,' shadows of various circular found objects, a collection of New York Times Obituary pages from the 1998 winter solstice to the 1999 winter solstice, an altered image of an altered image by the french artist Yves Klein in which he 'leapt to his death,' several of my long exposure pinhole sleep images from Delaware and a drawing with tracings from a variety of sources. The sculptures also refer to the passage of time, death and the void, nothing and something, the whole and the part. The strong circular motif can be read in many ways; sometimes as a void, sometimes as a hole in something (missing a piece, or one) through which we might look, sometimes as a whole or a cell and other times as a circular process. Take a while here in this space; art is best consumed slowly.

Brian C. Moss, 2003