



WAYS OF PERCEIVING

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Introduction

“Morbid curiosity has always been with us, of course, from Neanderthal funerary rites to medieval memento mori, but a recent spate of high-profile collections has made death particularly trendy of late” (Asma, 2012).

The verb ‘to curate’ comes from the twentieth century and shows a change in how the term curator was previously understood as a person, to now being used as an activity (Obrist, 2015). The purpose of this essay is to outline the curation decisions for an exhibition on the subject of death and how we perceive it in different ways. The artists used within this exhibition will be Damien Hurst, Walter Potter, Alexander McQueen, Sarina Brewer.

The name of the exhibition will be ‘Paradise’. Some religions view paradise as a place you go after death. In religions such as Christianity and Islam, paradise is a blissful afterlife. Similarly, the Buddhist religion sees paradise as a state of eternal peace, and in Hinduism it is the union with the divine after death (Byerly & Silverman, 2017). Another meaning for paradise is a positive place such as a serene destination.

Death can be defined by the loss of life, but this definition is too simplistic to use as a discussion point for this essay. Philosophers often question whether we continue to exist after death in an afterlife, if our souls become reincarnated, if we cease to exist, or if we are our bodies, continuing to exist as a corpse (Olson, 2012). Perhaps this uncertainty is where our fascination with death comes from.

Place

Deutsche (2021) claimed that “space is not an entity but a relationship”. The space used for this exhibition has been selected for the atmosphere it creates and how this connects to the theme. The venue is Margam Castle. The imposing castle was built during the gothic revival so has key gothic architectural elements. The area inside the castle is dark and gloomy without colour. To add to this, the lighting is low during the evenings as a lot of the light in the space comes from the natural daylight. To ensure that the correct atmosphere is created, the opening hours of the exhibition will be after 7pm so that it maintains the dark ambience. The style of the castle signifies elements of the eerie and mysterious, and the darkness can be a sign for fear or for evil (Paolucci). This will garner a sense of uneasiness which is appropriate for the theme.

Visitors to the exhibition will be provided a map as they walk in. They will then see a series of plinths displaying Walter Potter’s works in the main area. The map will then guide them upstairs to see work by Alexander McQueen on a mannequin. They will then go downstairs to see works by Damien Hirst back in the main area. Finally, they will go down a corridor where works of Sarina Brewer will be displayed in shadow box frames in the salon style along the walls.

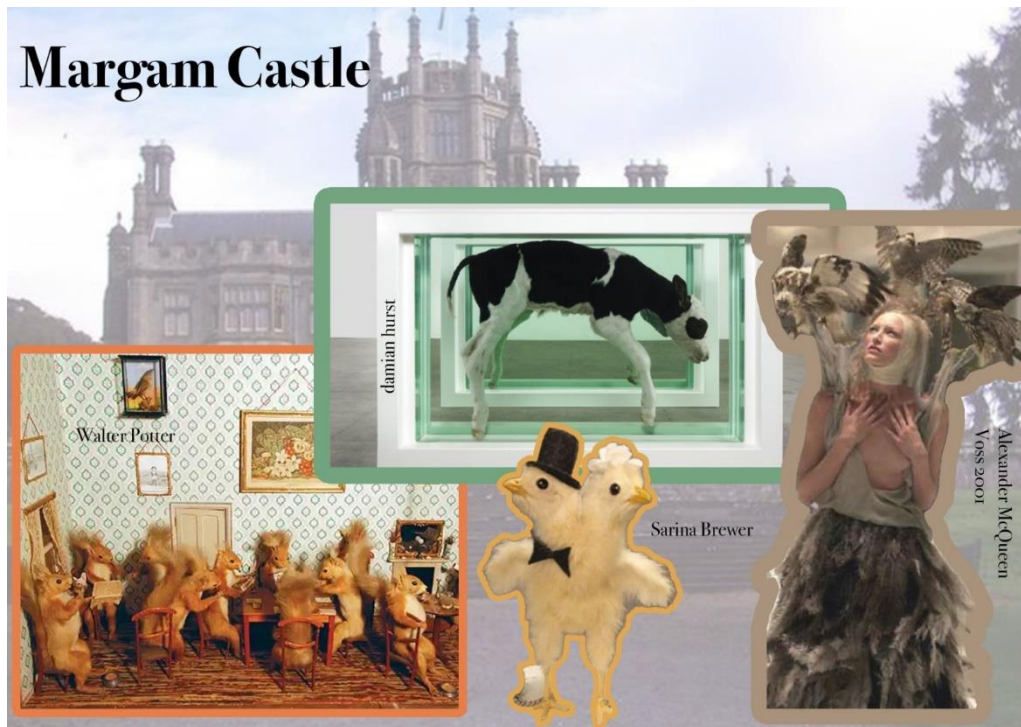


Figure 1: Margam Castle and artworks

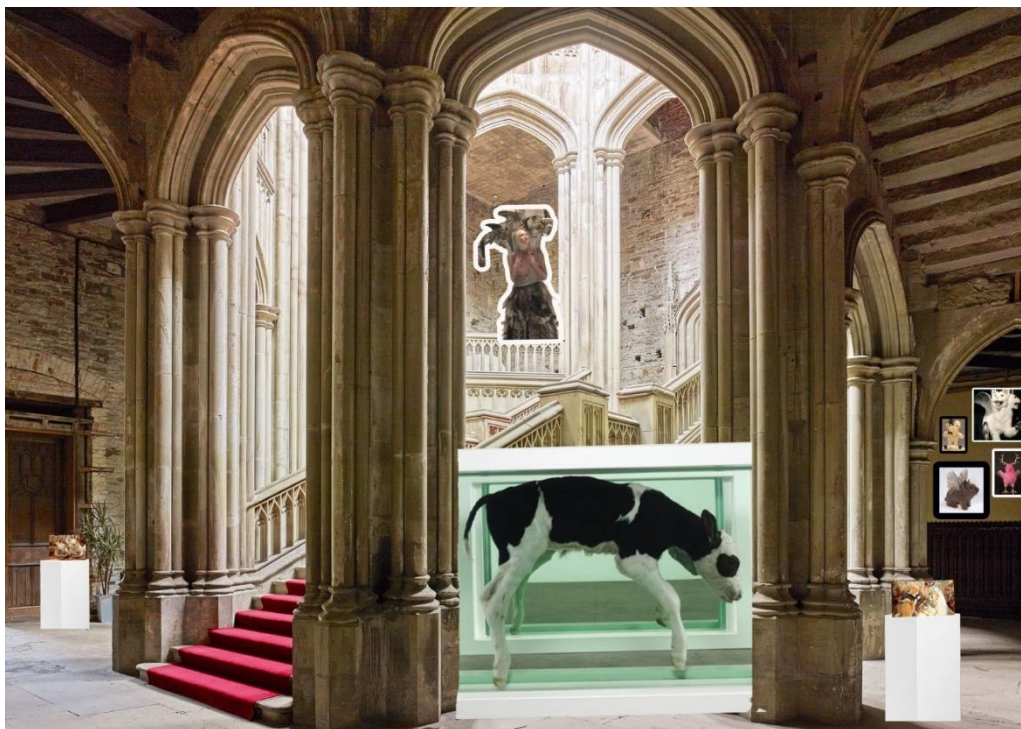


Figure 2: Inside Margam Caste and artworks mock-up

Context

This topic was chosen because a lot of art has themes of life and death, and tragedy. Art has often contained controversy and created shock value, so the exhibition highlights such pieces that focus

on death. Various artists were chosen for their work using taxidermy to show that death has been a theme in art across different time periods, and with different gender, sexuality and culture of artists.

Death has always been a theme in art. Some art works that include death are usually depicts it as a negative Obelisk Art History (2022). There could be many reasons for being fascinated with death. One could be that it is an inevitable part of life, or because it is seen as 'weird' or 'dark'. Doughty (2019) claims that we are scared to talk about it. "Most people in our culture are death illiterate, which makes them even more afraid" (p. 4). This makes people curious about death as it is something that is not often discussed.

Dead animals have often been presented in art in the form of taxidermy. Seeing dead animals does not usually evoke the same shock or disgust as seeing a dead human (Desmond, 2008). For instance, shops that sell meat for the purpose of eating show dead animals every day. Taxidermy has been used as a mode to display dead animals since the 16th century (Museum of Idaho, 2017).

Walter Potter

Walter Potter was a Victorian-era taxidermists known for his stuffed and mounted animals in human settings and clothing (Henning, 2007). This exhibition will include a variety of his stuffed animals including 'The Kitten's Wedding' (fig.3) and 'Rabbits' Village School'. These will be on panels, scattered around the space to give a chaotic vibe. To keep the audience entertained, this will be interactive, allowing people to touch the animals, getting them physically close with death.

'The Kitten's Wedding' is seen as the 'creepiest' tableau due to the 20 dead kittens, and the realistic elaborate Victorian costume (Handy, 2014). Potter favoured squirrels and toads in most of his work because their proportions and characteristics are closer the human anatomy than other animals. This is important as it brings down the wall between humans and animals and makes the audience feel more vulnerable as they will be better able to connect with them.



Figure 3: *The Kitten's Wedding* (1890) Walter Potter

Damien Hirst

Mother and Child (Divided) by Damien Hirst (1993) will be the statement piece to garner attention. The piece consists of four tanks, each containing one half of a cow or a calf, preserved in formaldehyde (Tate, 2009). This is a floor-based sculpture that people can go up to and view closely. The piece subverts the holy mother and child iconography in Western Christian Art, but keeping them forever separated, unable to retain unity (Dannatt, 1993).

This is one of his most controversial pieces because it shows a baby animal, which is often harder for people to accept because of their vulnerability and youth. Hirst describes his cutting up of animals as "like creating emotions scientifically" (Hirst cited in Tate, 2009). This is relevant as the aim of the exhibition is to get people to engage with their emotions and leave in a different emotional state to how they arrived.

Damien Hirst is included in this exhibition as he is a well-known artist who uses dead things in his art. This adds shock value, as the creatures used in his work add up to 913,450 according to the RSPCA (Cited in Bevan, 2017).



Figure 4: *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) Damien Hirst

Alexander McQueen

Alexander McQueen was a celebrated fashion designer known for his shock value. In his 2001 Voss Collection, the theme of nature crept into his work, with dresses made from feathers and razor clams. One dress was made from hawk feathers (fig. 5) and included a taxidermy bird headpiece that looked like the birds were circling the model and clawing at her hair (Murphy, 2021).

This artist was chosen because of his use of taxidermy in his fashion designs. One of the reasons he incorporated this into his designs is that he wanted to show his love of birds in his work (V&A, 2023). His two taxidermy dresses will be displayed on mannequins.



Figure 5: From Voss Collection (2001) Alexander McQueen

Sarina Brewer

Sarina Brewer is a female artist who creates eccentric work by morphing two animals together using taxidermy techniques. Her style is known as 'rogue taxidermy' because it uses taxidermy related materials such as animal hide, bones, and mummified remains, but it also contains non-taxidermic materials such as synthetic fur, and prefabricated urethane foam (Sarinabrewer.com, 2023). Her animals are all ethically sourced, which is a primary directive for her as none of the animals are killed for the purpose of art. "I think of all my work as a tribute or homage to the animal" (Brewer cited in Twin Cities PBS, 2020). Most of the animals are donated to from roadkill, natural death, or discarded livestock. Her inspiration comes from her imagination and mythology (Twin Cities PBS, 2020). Brewer states that using animals to try to get a point across is trickier than being a painter or sculptor because of the unusual medium. It is important for her that people understand what she does is also done out of respect for the animal and is sustainable.

Her work will be displayed in shadow boxes in a salon style on the walls. This is to make her work stand out as masterpieces, as salon style galleries were traditionally used for displaying art for the elite classes and the French bourgeoisie class (Altshuler, 2008). Traditionally, art that is considered a masterpiece has been produced by male artists. Showing Brewer's work in this style subverts this idea. Using shadow boxes also ends the exhibition in a non-traditional way.



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Figure 6: Frick & Frack (2001) Sarina Brewer

Synthesis

The exhibition brings together various examples of death within art. Potter acquired most of his dead animals through hunters, and dogs supplied him with dead rats (Handy, 2014). Hirst also used creatures that were already dead, but there are claims that some were “killed in the name of art” (Curtis, 2017). Potter could be seen as problematic as hunting is a controversial topic, with polarizing views of whether it is right or wrong to hunt and kill animals (Griffin, 2007), but not as problematic as Hirst. This could be because it was more acceptable to hunt and kill in Potter’s time than Hirst’s, with many people choosing vegetarian or vegan diets (World Animal Foundation, 2023).

Conclusion

To conclude, the exhibition is a collection of artworks that uses death in the form of taxidermy to encourage different emotions. The collection has been curated in a way that shows the different types of taxidermy in traditional and non-traditional ways, becoming more extreme as the exhibition progresses, starting with Potter’s traditional taxidermy and ending with Brewer’s collections of merged animals.

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