

REVIEW: New Exhibition @MOCACleveland Celebrates Life By Contemplating Mortality



On View Thru Sun 6/8

By Josh Usmani

Last Friday, MOCA Cleveland opened their Spring 2014 exhibitions. The centerpiece is [DIRGE](#) - an exhibition of 23 national and international artists reacting to and reflecting on death and mortality, both their own and their loved ones'.

"Death is life's greatest certainty," says Megan Lykins Reich, *DIRGE's* Curator and MOCA's Director of Programs and Associate Curator. "This relevant and enduring subject matter finds new voice in *DIRGE*, which features thoughtful, powerful, distinctive expressions of contemporary artists who find meaning in mortality."

The show's title refers to songs expressing mourning. Similarly, the artists and their work document, react to, reflect on and deal with death, loss and mourning. The show's power stems from both the real-life experiences that inspired the works and the works' universal qualities. The thoughtful exhibition design creates both an atmosphere for reflection and a transcendental experience as you move throughout the space.

As you enter the first room, you are immediately confronted with two large, black and white photographs of graves (*Les Tombes #17*) by Sophie Calle. The tombstones appear to be sinking into the stone-covered ground - as if the grip of death itself is pulling them under. These large images are placed on the floor; leaning against the wall. This placement puts the graves at eye-level and brings the images into the viewer's space. The viewer's relation to the graves is amplified by the life-size scale of the photos and the reflective quality of the surface. When the viewer approaches the work, they literally see themselves in the photos.

Although these photos are placed in the vista (directly opposite the door), the large video projection to your right quickly demands your attention. Guido van der Werve's *Nummer acht, Everything is Going to be Alright* is a ten minute and ten second video of the artist walking on ice in front of a very large ship. The artist continuously walks calmly in front of the large, ominous boat as it breaks the ice just feet behind him. The black ship stands out against the white backdrop of clouds and ice. The icebreaker represents death as it stalks the artist.

DIRGE also features video installations by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Cecily Brennan and Hannah Wilke. Rasdjarmrearnsook reads to a circle of corpses, Brennan shows an old woman crying black tears and Wilke uses 16 televisions document the end of her own life.

One of the more unique works in the show is Kris Martin's *Still Alive*, a silver-plated bronze skull. This isn't just any skull. Using a variety of sources (including x-rays), Martin has done his best to create an exact replica of his own skull. Next to Martin's skull are Jim Campbell's *Cyclical Meter Base* and *Cyclical Counter Base*. These wall clocks' hands are set to move based on the rate of an unknown woman's breathing and blinking (respectively). Campbell's clocks redefine and personalize our units of measuring time.

The show includes a number of interactive elements requiring audience participation to "trigger" the work. Oscar Munoz's *Aliento*, appears at first to be a set of identical, plain, circular mirrors. However, upon breathing on the mirrors, a different portrait appears on each disc. This intimate act ties the viewer to the object in a very personal way.

The exhibition offers two opportunities to reflect and contribute your own thoughts and experiences to the dialogue. First, visitors are encouraged to use a hammer and lettering tools to stamp out the message you wish to see on your own tombstone. At the very end, MOCA offers visitors a final chance to reflect on your experience. The final corridor invites you to remember and memorialize a loved one you've lost.

While we can't mention every artist and their work, additional highlights include local artist TR Ericsson's tribute to his late mother and a new work by (arguably) the show's most well-known artist, Japan's Takashi Murakami. Murakami's *The Blessed* was inspired by the tragic tsunami of 2011 - which occurred almost three years to the day (3/11) of *DIRGE's* opening (3/7). The exhibition includes a number of additional, high-quality works.

Participating artists include Cecily Brennan, Sophie Calle, Jim Campbell, Vija Celmins, TR Ericsson, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Spring Hurlburt, Rosemary Laing, Steve Lambert, Kesang Lamdark, Teresa Margolles, Kris Martin, Matt Mullican, Takashi Murakami, Oscar Munoz, Mike Nelson, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Pedro Reyes, Dario Robleto, Guido van der Werve, Hannah Wilke and David Wojnarowicz.

MOCA is partnering with a number of local organizations in connection to *DIRGE*. Collaborating institutions include The Cleveland Clinic, Hospice of the Western Reserve, Cleveland Museum of Art, Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Cleveland Institute of Music and more.

"Hospice of the Western Reserve is honored to be partnering with MOCA to support this innovative exhibit that shines a light on what has long been a taboo topic on our society," explains Michele Seyranian, the organization's Business Development Officer. "By taking a fresh, candid look at the cultural, spiritual and personal experiences that color society's perceptions, this groundbreaking MOCA exhibition can help dispel many of the myths, and foster a healthy community dialogue about an experience that is inevitable for all of us."

The first of a four-part collaborative lecture series, *The End, Reconsidered*, will include individuals who have turned tragedy into meaningful experience. [Transformation and Purpose Through Grief and Loss](#) takes place on Wednesday 3/19 at 4:30pm. The other installments include [Draw Nigh: Approaching Death in a Culture of Immorality](#) on Thursday 4/3 at 7pm, [Communicating Death: Doctors, Patients and Mortality](#) on Thursday 4/17 and [Beyond the Body: Mortality+The Spirit](#) on Thursday 5/8 at 7pm.

DIRGE is a special exhibition. It's not just a collection of artwork - it's truly a powerful, transcendental experience. While you might expect the concept of death to leave you feeling drained if not depressed, *DIRGE* is a collective celebration of life through the contemplation of mortality. The more effort you put into contemplating the work in the show, the more you'll get out of it. The work is complex and sometimes difficult, but the themes are universal. Set aside some time to explore *DIRGE* at MOCA soon.