

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL
The Final Journey

*Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me
The carriage held but just Ourselves
And Immortality
Emily Dickinson*

At the time of writing, the death of Muhammad Ali as with many such high profile passings continues to receive extensive media coverage. This communality of grief, the Facebook remembrances and online sadnesses were something that resonated with Anne Parfitt when in the late 90s a confrontation with her own mortality coincided with the deaths of several notable individuals including Princess Diana, Linda McCartney, Frank Sinatra and Mother Teresa. It was at that time that she first began work on her drawings of pallbearers. Again in 2016 at the first anniversary in January of the loss of a friend and another cluster of reported celebrity deaths Parfitt has returned to her subject with a fresh investigative direction and these became the basis for her new work *Up Close and Personal*.

The delicate line drawings on show perform a rueful rosary of remembrance. These mournful memento-mori's with their elongated figures carrying their weighty coffined cargoes are rendered as lightly as ghost whispers. Garment shrouded in their long funereal frocks, the bearers appear unadorned and un-gendered moving sequentially through their last soulful sojourn. The very simplicity of the drawn lines conveys a feeling of ceremonial quietude, a bonelike stripping away of superfluous detail which gives a sense of the artist's very personal response to her subject matter. Specifically Parfitt is dealing in the drawings with the journey between death and grave, with the carrying of the corpse, the last metaphorically and physically heavy rites the living perform for the dead. And yet an important and levelling aspect of the work is the inclusion of a wicked sense of (gallows) humour. In one drawing a bearer struggles to keep the coffin upright, it looks suspiciously as if it is just about to topple over, in another the coffin appears to be perched on the head of a bearer in a kind of mad over the top pope's hat.

Writing in *Man and His Symbols*, Jung stated that '*humour and bizarre ideas form a bridge*

to the unconscious'ⁱ. By utilising a hand drawn aesthetic with the dark seriousness of her subject matter, and including satire within the process Parfitt highlights the ability of drawing to contain within it paradoxical meanings. In another way the frame-by-frame rendition of the drawings also alludes to cartoon / animation formats. However here again we find another contradiction. The Webster dictionary sets out the meaning of animate *L. animatus* as: *to make alive, fill with breath, give life to* yet here Parfitt can be seen as giving life to / illustrating death or at least the social performance of its final rites. Writing on animation in *The Illusion of Life*, Peter Hutchins states that: ' *In the space of animation the orders that would distinguish between Death and Life ...is contested in the work-shop of filthy animation. Abjection Incorporated*'ⁱⁱ.

Parfitt's figurative sculptures on the pallbearers theme deal with her subject in a different way. Counterbalancing the ghost whispering of the drawings, here the artist is dealing more concretely with the idea of weight. In these naturalistic rendered structures, pink arms and hands modelled in polymer clay are seen coming out of and holding up large slabs or forms made of unfired coarse crank clay. The materials have been specifically chosen as a conscious debunking of the formal use of clay in traditional sculpture and also perhaps as a counterbalance to the kind of overly grim public monuments usually erected as an all too late apologia to memorialise the loss of life from some despicable far flung (usually) colonial conflict.

Parfitt's *Flintstonesque* globular boulders, simply painted and unglazed to emphasise their rawness, are shown being raised up, arms appear out of a kind of primordial swirling matter as if being slowly swallowed up by the earth to which they will return. Again here there is a slightly humorous up-yours-death-shall-have no-dominion-defiance.

From the 15th Century to the present day artists have turned to art in the face of loss.

Sometimes the peak into the abyss is lifelike and chilling as in the foreshortened shrouded body in *Lamentation of Christ* by Andrea Mantegna created in the 1480s. Other times the

response is more nuanced. In *Left Behind* begun in 2013 the American photographer Jennifer Loeber reacting to her mother's death found herself 'deeply overwhelmed by the need to keep even the most mundane' of her mother's belongings and made a series of images including banal objects such as a tube of lipstick, a curling iron and a pearl ring as a thoughtful memorial to her mother's memory.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a *Year of Magical Thinking* Joan Didion wrote 'Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it'^{iv} and this seems precisely Parfitt's all this too will pass peek-into-the-tomb contention. Deflecting art historical seriousness with whimsy and low-brow materials, the works nevertheless retain an empathically moving and mournful power.

Alex Michon, June 2016

ⁱ *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung, Doubleday 1964

ⁱⁱ *The Illusion of Life, Essays on Animation*, Edited by Alan Cholodenko, Power Publications, 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ *A Brief History of Artists Grappling with Loss and Death*, The Huffington Post
Pricilla Frank, 3/11/2015

^{iv} *Ibid*