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Preemptive Mourning

Rachel Warren

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by

RACHEL WARREN

Under the Direction of Jeremy Bolen, MFA

ABSTRACT

Preemptive Mourning uses temporal, analog photographic practices to confront viewers with questions surrounding cultural funerary practices and the discomforts of death. The photograph, as a memory object, is simultaneously a reminder of the lived experience and a representation of what is no longer. I use the cemetery as my subject, a physical landscape that acts as an archive itself. The space exists, long after the material body decomposes, serving as a placeholder for a thing no longer there. Performance at the cemetery site is the crux, each subsequent work building upon each other to invite contemplation on the transformative power of decay, the interconnectedness of all living things, and the enduring legacy that permeates the very soil beneath our feet. Through returning to these in-between spaces of life and death, I grapple with my own mortality in an anticipatory catharsis.

INDEX WORDS: Performance, Photography, Cemetery, Grief, Mourning, Death, Funerary practices, Time, Grave, Burial, Lumen print, Temporal, Ephemeral, Digging, Durational performance

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to everyone who has experienced death in their life. May you find your own way forward with your grief.

For my family, who never doubted me as an artist, and always allowed me to make the work that I needed to make. To those days where my parents stood in as my models, my equipment assistants, and always as my moral support.

To my best friends, who have continued to support me through all my endeavors, who have always encouraged me and supported me as a person, and as an artist. Thank you for all the late-night talks, laughs, and tears throughout our decades of friendship and incredible help installing this show. I would not be here without you.

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To my Georgia State cohort – In these three years, I have learned so much from you all and have made friendships that I hope will last our lifetimes, no matter where we end up after. I am forever blessed to have accomplished this degree by your side.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

1 INTRODUCTION

Preemptive Mourning uses temporal, analog photographic practices to confront viewers with questions surrounding cultural funerary practices and the discomforts of death. The photograph, as a memory object, is simultaneously a reminder of the lived experience and a representation of what is no longer. Photography usually is regarded as this permanent, stagnant image. It can be replicated and copied, but always has a relation to death through its slicing of life. It fragments time, providing a glimpse of an instance we can never get back. My work connects the way photography freezes time to the ticking clock of our own mortality. Ephemeral photography – an image that is unfixed and continues to be light-sensitive – creates a unique object that exists in a durational range. The very act of viewing the image is predicated by the loss of itself. This short-lived lifespan asks us to reflect upon our own: if photography is not the immortal marker of time, then what do we turn to? Photography's sensitivity to light, and therefore its impermanence, contends with the materiality of loss itself. We, as individuals and as humanity, do not last forever, and I allow my images to be fleeting moments.

This exploration allows me to use unconventional methods – microscopic cameras, unfixed photos, sculptural lifecasting, as well as performative videos, expansive installations, and large format photography. In my work, information can be revived and buried, revealed and obscured. I employ analog photography and unique photographic objects to explore our mortality, because these objects have a clear beginning, lifespan, and end. I use the cemetery as my subject, a physical landscape that acts as an archive itself. The space exists, long after the material body decomposes, serving as a placeholder for a thing no longer there. Performance at the cemetery site is the crux, each subsequent work building upon each other to invite contemplation on the transformative power of decay, the interconnectedness of all living things,

and the enduring legacy that permeates the very soil beneath our feet. Through returning to these in-between spaces of life and death, I grapple with my own mortality in an anticipatory catharsis.

2 BACKGROUND

My work has always reflected upon death. I am influenced by my early series *Inheritance*, in which I explore the weight and absence left behind, as I look at my relationship to three deceased grandparents who passed when I was a child. My piece *Heavy Mourning* [Fig 2.1] became the core of that series, in which I enact a performance of grieving rituals. *Heavy Mourning* gets its title from the first thirty days of mourning – the most extreme grief represented after someone passes. In the piece, I create three images consisting of me as a baby being held by each grandparent. This was then made, through darkroom processes, onto expired fiber-based paper. These prints were then buried in a cemetery for thirty days. Each day, I brought three white carnations, which are common funerary flowers and symbols of innocence and untainted love, to lay above the gravesite. Through time and natural process, the photos and flowers began to be destroyed, leaving only faint traces of the image that was created. After thirty days, I re-inter the prints and collect all of the remains to be displayed, with the ninety flowers in vases inherited from my grandparents.

This work has been important to my growth as it brings forth the importance of ephemeral objects in my practice. This ability to let something fade from your grasp, allowing yourself to lose access, with a hint of chance, became a reflective part of my work. The ephemeral nature of an object fading away allows me to find respite in allowing time to take its course. This work also galvanized my interest in the cemetery. As I would visit every day, I was struck by the fact that I was often the only one there, aside from the occasional maintenance

worker. The cemetery was meant to be a space that people could mourn in, and yet, no one was there. Graves laid unvisited. It was quiet.

Figure 2.1: Rachel Warren. Heavy Mourning. 90 white carnations, inherited vases and 3 re-earthed unique silver gelatin prints, 30 days durational performance. Three 4 x 6 inch images. 2017.

Figure 2.2: Rachel Warren. Heavy Mourning (detail). Re-earthed unique silver gelatin prints. Each image is 4 x 6 inches. 2017.

Aging, [Fig 2.3] or as I affectionately call it, my death clocks, is another work that influenced this thesis. In the summer of 2021, household anxiety was high. COVID-19 was still rampant, and I had recently quit my job because of their lack of regard for safety to limit contagion. I was living with my parents, trying my best within my limited power to make sure they wouldn't get sick. I was struck by this anxiety and helplessness that I felt; the news being oversaturated with content about how many people were falling ill. I couldn't help but think of the losses I had faced so far in life – my grandparents who died prematurely, when one would have expected for them to live decades longer. I combed through my family's archive, searching for birth and death records. I then calculated the age my grandparents were when they passed, down to the minute, with all the information I had. Using my maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather, with my parents' ages taken into effect, I analyzed how much time they have left if they died when their parents did. This created two countdown clocks, relentlessly ticking. The clocks showcase a struggle of mortality limited by the past and a present that is ever moving forward. Through this process, I contemplate my own vulnerability as I face the future and my own eventual expiration. The piece also becomes a record of my parents' time together, as they've been married for thirty-plus years now. The merging of my parents' timelines within these clocks encapsulates their shared journey and the resilient nature of their relationship, adding layers of personal significance to the work. Because the clocks start and end with a death date, eventually two clocks will become one, and I will be forced to make clocks for myself counting down to when my parents pass.

This work confronts time as a whole. Unlike a photograph, it is forever changing, reminding us that time continues on. We cannot escape our mortality; we cannot avoid death. It

looks at our impulse to ignore it and confronts viewers with a changing landscape, urging us to acknowledge and embrace our mortality rather than shying away from its inevitable reality.

Figure 2.3: Rachel Warren. Aging. Two time clocks for artist's parents in sync to age their parent (artist's grandparent) died, matted and encased in an 8" x 10" frame. 2021.

In the summer of 2022, I found myself revisiting the death sites of my family. I went to the cemeteries, which laid markers and indicators of my relatives, but also found myself in the obscure, secret 'necroscapes', a term used to refer to spaces that relate to death, dying, and the dead, that would only be apparent to me or my family members. These hidden sites don't have markers but are ash scatter sites – where members have been spread. *In Death We Return to the Sea* [Fig 2.4] comprises of three sites that manifest into individual installations. The works are created with three layers: the real, the representational, and the spiritual. These three themes ultimately become the base of how I approach my artmaking and research. It begins with a

large-format photograph of the water source closest to the scatter site, often mere feet away. This is the representation, the photograph that depicts the scene as it were. The spiritual comes from film that is dipped and exposed in the water, creating unique hues and chemical changes as it reacts to the water and light of the area. The film embeds a type of aura, almost like an indicator of presence. The 'real' comes from the water I've harvested from the site itself. All three converge into one – the spiritual film being transferred onto a mirror with the water from the site lying on the gallery floor. The representational photo stands above it, like a headstone. The piece's size is eight feet long by three and a half feet wide, which is the standard size of a grave plot. As the viewer looks at this death site, they also look down at themselves in the reflection of the mirror, contemplating their own eventual necroscape. The work began the convergence of abstract and representational photography, serving as a dynamic means of exploring the interplay between the tangible and the abstract within a specific site. By melding these two photographic approaches, I aim to capture the essence of a location while allowing room for interpretive abstraction. The use of representational elements ensures a connection to the identifiable aspects of the site, grounding the artwork in the familiar. Simultaneously, the abstract elements introduce a layer of ambiguity, inviting viewers to delve into a subjective, emotional response to the space. Moreover, my commitment to site specificity involves a deliberate gathering of materials from the chosen location, incorporating them into the artistic process. This approach allows the environment to become an integral part of the artwork, establishing a dynamic interplay between the art and its surroundings. These materials not only serve as tangible connections to the site but also contribute to the visual language of the artwork. The utilization of site specificity, therefore, becomes a multifaceted approach, integrating the physicality of the site, the synthesis of abstract

and representational imagery, and the incorporation of gathered materials to create a rich and immersive artistic experience.

Figure 2.4: Rachel Warren. In Death We Return to the Sea: Bighorn National Forest Creek, Sheridan, WY. Installation created with site-specific photograph of an ash scatter site in Bighorn Mountains, WY, film transfer to mirror that was exposed to water at site mixed with ashes of grandparents and size indicative of standard grave plot. 8 ft x 3.5 ft x 8 ft. 2022.

2.1 Ana Mendieta

Mendieta's work is notable for her melding of performance, photography, and sculpture. Her *Silueta Series* from 1973 – 1980 are works that combine photography and performance with land art, exploring the materiality and conceptualization of traces through the body, land, and time [Fig. 2.5] 'Silueta' means 'silhouette' in Spanish – an ode to Ana Mendieta's Cuban American roots and reference to her bodily presence as she navigates the land. The *Silueta Series* showcases repeated gestures of Mendieta creating impressions of her body in the earth that highlight an absence of her actual form. This in turn references the impermanence of both self and of her performance with the earth. Over two hundred Siluetas were made in total, and all are bound by the same form of handmade impressions and perishability. Mendieta herself said, "The earth/body sculptures come to the viewers by way of photos, because the work necessarily always stays in situ. Because of this and due to the impermanence of the sculptures the photographs become a very vital part of my work."[1] Unlike a physical sculptural work that stays in permanence, Mendieta's work is a temporary reformation of the land and its ties to photography aren't just a document of an event that happened – they are separate artworks in their own right. Through the photographic lens, these temporal moments from over 50 years ago continue to reflect in their permanence. The moment exists where we can only bare witness, never enter the scene. The images sit in a reflection of past, present, and future legacy of a singular moment. This also bears weight when thinking about how her use of her body referenced her own death even before she was gone, a way of creating her own grave and presence in the land. Mendieta operates in an otherness, where she, depicted as the female figure is ghostlike – is not present nor absent, neither dead nor alive – her essence is preserved by her

[1] Patrizia DiBello, *Sculptural Photographs from the Calotype to Digital Technologies* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 97

marking the land. By refiguring her body into the land, she lets go of the idea of preservation. She prompts the viewer to question the act of themselves looking at the work, but also destroys her own witnessing of herself. The photograph exists as an art object meant to be seen, but because of how they are created and experienced in nature, the weather and elements slowly erode her sculptures and performances. They exist as a private performance for herself in a fleeting moment where her body is eventually reclaimed by the earth.[2] Land art had already embraced more informal means of documentation through which they became known, such as photographs, maps, and drawings, in which the photograph wasn't an art object, but rather the documentation of the art object. Mendieta, however, created something entirely different – the sculptural and photographic acts are intrinsically linked even while maintaining their own distinct identities. Her work is "site-specific" in its making, but we only see the work as a photograph in its absence of the sculpture. Photography allowed Mendieta to control how the viewer would look at them from her own chosen viewpoint, so no one could access them or photograph them differently. By working with impermanence, she ensures that she would be the only one able to perform her series. The photograph constitutes her controlled staging and fixes it forever in its photographic gaze, while the sculpture is left to be reabsorbed in nature.[3] Through her use of grave symbols and juxtaposition of revealing and obscuring, she enacts a recognition of the earth as a place of both beginning and end. The performances themselves ask for a temporary consideration of this liminal space before one returns to the land in which we began.[4] Since performance itself is a temporal gesture, Mendieta takes control of her performance and

[2] Hatty Nestor, "Tracing Mendieta, Mendieta's Trace: The Silueta Series (1973-1980)." MAI, June 14, 2021. https://maifeminism.com/tracing-mendieta-mendietas-trace-the-silueta-series/.
[3] DiBello, *Sculptural Photographs*, 105-06
[4] Sigurd Bergmann and Forrest Clingerman, *Arts, Religion, and the Environment: Exploring Nature's Texture*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 175.

spectatorship by moving to nature in which she can work as a solo artist without aide. Through this, she ensures the performance as a private communication between her goddess body and the land, ensuing that through the camera is the only way in which viewers can see her work. Even with Mendieta absenting her body form, the spectator can see her presence through footprints around the forms and traces of disturbed earth that situates her temporarily in the moment before being reclaimed by the earth. This idea is pushed further by the fact that her sites are specifically set in actively changing and unstable locations in which there are wind erosions, shorelines, muddy islands etc. and will be eventually reclaimed by the land.[5] She doesn't just exist in the land but takes a viewpoint towards her surroundings that permits our engagement with the environment, thus allowing us to superimpose our own ideas upon it. "This emergence and entwining of self and landscape is not just an object or medium of analysis − but this evolving co-presence assumes an enlarged ontological role, as exemplary of the very process of being (or becoming) in-the-world through which existence and meaning are themselves vouchsafed."[6] Through her repeated motions, she achieves a merging of body and land in an animated gesture that comes forth through her entire body of work. Rather than looking at the landscape as a background on which to project her desires, she imprints her energies and material presence into the land itself, bringing forth human life into the landscape. As the silhouette is broken down, it merges the materiality of the body and the land. Each element of nature is harnessed by Mendieta as part of her process of making, but these temporary framings actually make visible the living matters and forces of nature. Rather than make the environment the background of her body, her body is registered as an accentuated surface on which to display nature. Her repetitive,

[5] Harriet Hawkins, For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds. New York: Routledge, 2015. 247.
[6] Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies*, 250

ritualistic actions claim an equality of both her body and the forces of nature. Each is a surface upon which to reflect the other.

Figure 2.5: Ana Mendieta. Silueta Works in Mexico, 1973–77. Pigmented inkjet prints, four parts, 13 1/4 x 20 inches; eight parts, 20 x 13 1/4 inches. 1991. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Boston, MA.

2.2 T.R. Ericcson

Reflecting on photography as memory, I am drawn to TR Ericsson's work. In the years following his mother's suicide in 2003, TR Ericsson amassed an archive that would lay the groundwork for his ongoing series *Crackle & Drag*. The title comes from the song *Crackle and Drag* by Paul Westerberg of the alt-rock band The Replacements and pays homage to the poet Sylvia Plath and her poem *Edge*: "The woman is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment…Her blacks crackle and drag." For nearly 20 years, Ericsson has been working on his series *Crackle and Drag* that reflects his love for his mom, his complicated family history, and their relationship. *Sue 63* [Fig. 2.4] is a contemplation of how memory is embedded into a photograph. It is also a physical embedding as Ericsson has created the portrait using his mother's funerary ashes. Engrossed in grieving rituals, Ericsson has talked about his process saying:

> "Bone fragments scratch the screen and leave empty marks on the substrate… Death is just death, it's pure absence. But our lives are an extraordinary [sic] energetic mess. To bury the remains in the left-over images and artifacts was a sudden and intuitive thought… These picture/objects feel like a true sanctuary, they're mobile, they move like life moves, they're less inert, the energy and complexity of being alive is again hinted at, there's a presence, an influence again, a relationship with others even strangers, a continuance, the story is alive, unburied, unburned. It's the perfect way to confront the total annihilation I describe death to be above. It's a small victory but a victory nonetheless."[7]

[7] Brad Feuerhelm, "A Family Reduced to Ash: TR Ericsson and the Image of Lamentation." AMERICAN SUBURB X, June 7, 2015. https://americansuburbx.com/2015/05/tr-ericsson-interview-crackle-and-drag.html.

He regards his work not as a tomb or stagnant monument, but rather a dynamic and subversive method of scattering. There is an openness to the grief and longing of Ericsson's work and an acceptance in the loss. The process itself lends to the idea that photographs are a way to look back into our memories, even as time passes and the image of our loved one is hazy, so is Sue. There is an insistence in Ericsson's work that the materials reflect some reality of the content represented, and that the copy of the memento carries something of its origin. He also makes use of "other materials associated with Sue, like nicotine and long island [sic] iced tea cocktails, among other things. This is the stuff of which family is made: ashes, bones, objects, and smells. All the graves of everyone that has ever been loved and the boxes of paper and keepsakes left behind."[8] By working with ash, his work does not simply represent his mother but also questions what loss does to representation. Memorializing a person in a photograph still doesn't represent them in their entirety. As much as we want it to, the photographic archive cannot hold someone's entire life force or being. By using the physical representation of his mother in ash, Ericsson combines the 'real' object of a person along with their photographic representation, perhaps in an attempt to bring the image a step closer to the real thing. Ericsson has occasionally remarked that he wonders when he'll be done with this series and yet he continues making work. I would argue that like grief, the work itself never truly ends.

[8] Nicholas Heskes, "TR Ericsson's Letters from Home," The Brooklyn Rail, October 3, 2023, https://brooklynrail.org/2023/10/artseen/TR-Ericsson2-Letters-from-Home.

Figure 2.6: T.R. Ericsson. Sue 63 (Amethyst). 2021. Silkscreen ink and funerary ashes on raw muslin. 24 x 18 inches.

2.3 Felix Gonzalez Torres

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) was a Cuban American artist known for his conceptual and minimalist artworks, often exploring themes of love, loss, and memory. His exploration of mortality is notably encapsulated in several works that not only address the personal losses he experienced, particularly during the AIDS epidemic, but also engage with broader human experiences of grief, memory, and the transience of life. In regard to his relationship with his art, he says:

> "This work is mostly personal. It is about those very early hours in the morning, while still half asleep, when I tend to visualize information, to see panoramas in which the fictional, the important, the banal, and the historical are collapsed into a single caption. Leaving me anxious and responsible to anchor a logical accompanying image—scanning the TV channels trying to sort out and match sound and sight. This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order."[9]

In *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) [Fig. 2.7], Gonzalez-Torres created a visceral and emotionally charged installation in memory of his partner, Ross Laycock, who succumbed to AIDS-related complications. Gonzalez-Torres' partner died of AIDS the same year the work was created, and it serves as an allegorical portrait of Laycock's life. The physical form and dimensions of the work change depending on the way it is installed; however, it ideally weighs 175 pounds, which corresponds to Laycock's healthy bodyweight. The artwork consists of an ever-diminishing pile of individually wrapped candies, inviting viewers to take a piece. The act of consumption becomes a metaphor for the inevitable loss of a life and the gradual

[9] Jan Avgikos, "This Is My Body: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," Artforum, September 26, 2023, https://www.artforum.com/features/this-is-my-body-felix-gonzalez-torres-204385/.

disintegration of the person's physical presence. The replenishing of the candy pile, however, suggests the prevailing nature of memory and the idea that, despite the physical absence, the essence of a person persists through shared experiences and recollections. Another work, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991) [Fig. 2.8], features two identical, synchronized clocks hanging side by side. Initially perfectly aligned, the clocks gradually fall out of sync, illustrating the passage of time and the inevitability of separation. The artist recognized that the clocks would fall out of synch and that one would eventually stop first. "'Time is something that scares me … or used to. This piece I made with the two clocks was the scariest thing I have ever done. I wanted to face it. I wanted those two clocks right in front of me, ticking' Although the clocks obviously reflect Gonzalez-Torres' own relationship, the work is emblematic of the artist's desire to create works with multiple possible meanings; the abstract nature of the clocks' substitution for bodies allows it to be read generally as a metaphor for love. Gonzalez-Torres often produced multiple versions of his installations, and his detailed instructions for their display became an important element of the piece itself. For "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), the instructions require the commercial clocks to be of exact dimensions and design and that they touch; before the exhibition opens the hands are set to the same time; an essential part of the work is that the clocks can be perpetually reset and, therefore, the work is infinite. A rule around the work is that the clocks can fall out of sync but if one of the clocks stop, they are fixed or replaced, as the case may be."[10] The work poetically encapsulates the universal experience of losing loved ones and the relentless march of time that ultimately separates us from those we cherish. The choice of identical clocks also implies the universal nature of mortality, underscoring the idea that death is an inescapable part of the human condition.

[10] Benjamin Weaver, "Perfect Lovers," THE LONDON LIST, April 24, 2021, https://www.thelondonlist.com/culture/felix-gonzalez-torres.

Gonzalez-Torres' engagement with death goes beyond personal narratives; it embraces a collective consciousness, inviting viewers to confront their own mortality and consider the broader implications of loss. His works not only reflect the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic on the LGBTQ+ community but also resonate with a universal human experience of mourning and the passage of time. In employing everyday materials and participatory elements, Gonzalez-Torres transformed the experience of contemplating death into a shared, communal act. His work challenges traditional notions of art, engaging viewers in a dialogue about the ephemeral nature of life, the imperishable power of memory, and the complex emotions tied to mortality. By addressing death with profound empathy and intellectual rigor, Gonzalez-Torres created a body of work that continues to inspire contemplation and reflection on the human condition.

Figure 2.7: Feliz Gonzales-Torres. Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.). Candies in variously colored wrappers, endless supply. Dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 175 lbs. 1991. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

Figure 2.8: Felix Gonzales-Torres. Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. 31 Jan. 2015 – 24 Oct. 2018.

3 THESIS RESEARCH

3.1 The Real

Looking to the cemetery, I reflect upon the funerary rituals that surround it. In my personal experience, the cemetery is almost always quiet and devoid of people. The groundskeepers are often the only people I will see. The rare exception is a procession – cars upon cars following each other around the winding roads to the place of interment. To me, it seems that the cemetery is a place of performance and rituals, inactivated unless a group comes together to grieve. In that regard, it exists as a liminal space, an in-between between living and dead, above earth and

below. People come forth only for this passing and leave funerary markers that decay and waste as they go unattended themselves.

The American cemetery as we know it today emerged in the 1830s as a rural cemetery movement. Prior to this, churchyards, town commons, and municipal burial grounds were the main burial spaces, but these grounds were close to town and began to face an overcrowding issue due to the small plot sizes. Cemeteries were seen as sites of disease as well as inadequate, dangerous, crowded, and expensive to maintain. To change these negative connotations, cities moved cemeteries out to the suburbs, shifting our cultural perspective of death, as it physically distanced the dead from the living. The more open grounds allowed them to become social spaces, with gardening and landscaping[11]. The larger spaces allowed for fairs, picnics, social events and even grazing land. This change didn't last long however, as 19th century developments of botanical gardens and parks within the cities caused rural cemeteries to be isolated and neglected in the public consciousness. The cemetery was no longer needed as a social landscape when other parks were available in the city. This context is important to highlight as a shift in the cultural perspective[12]. We see death and the cemetery as taboo and morbid, as if talking about it will bring about our own demise faster, but death is inevitable. If we look at our mortality through a different lens, we can renegotiate any preconceived negativity and find solace, embracing a new cultural way of mourning.

In the realm of contemporary photographic theory, the exploration of the American cemetery aligns with the evolving discourse on the relationship between photography and memory, as well as the intersection of the visual arts and cultural narratives. Within this

[11] Rebecca Greenfield, "Our First Public Parks: The Forgotten History of Cemeteries." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 18 Nov. 2011,
[12] Keith Eggener, "The Fascinating History of Cemeteries - Keith Eggener." YouTube, TED-Ed, 30 Oct. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HegwRtbDSU.

framework, the documentation of cemeteries can be seen as a form of visual anthropology, capturing the evolution of cultural perspectives on death and memorialization. Drawing on my own work, the process becomes a metaphorical journey through time and impermanence. The photographic medium, with its ability to freeze moments and preserve fleeting impressions, serves as a potent tool for challenging the societal reluctance to engage with mortality openly. My repeated imagery of varied cemeteries [Fig. 3.1], all spaces in which active burial happens, evoke a contemplative space where life and death intersect, challenging preconceptions about the morbid nature of cemeteries.

Figure 3.1: Rachel Warren. Untitled (Lincoln Memorial Park, Atlanta, GA). Large format print. 30 x 40 inches. 2023

The historical context of the rural cemetery movement and its subsequent decline within the public consciousness adds depth to contemporary photographic exploration. Just as 19th-century botanical gardens and parks overshadowed rural cemeteries, my photographic work reflects on the shifting cultural perspectives towards death. The visual narrative becomes a commentary on the cyclical nature of societal values and how, through art, we can rediscover and recontextualize overlooked spaces [Fig. 3.2].

In seeking to embrace a new cultural way of mourning, the contemporary photographic theory employed in this context contributes to the broader discourse on death positivity and memorialization practices. The images become a visual dialogue with viewers, encouraging them to confront their discomfort with mortality and perceive cemeteries not merely as spaces of remembrance but as dynamic landscapes embodying the intricate relationship between life, death, and the persistant power of artistic expression.

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* provides profound insights into the nature of photography, and its concepts can be extended to shed light on the relationship between photography and performance. While Barthes primarily focuses on still images in his book, the essence of his reflections can be applied to the temporal and performative aspects of photography, particularly in the realm of performance art.

Figure 3.2. Rachel Warren. Untitled (Fresh Grave and Rolled Up Turf). Large format print. 30 x 40 inches. 2023.

Barthes discusses the concept of the ‘that-has-been,’ emphasizing the photograph's ability to capture a moment that existed in the past. Similarly, in performance art, each moment on stage is ephemeral, existing only in the present. The audience experiences a continuous flow of moments that collectively create the performance. This temporality, coupled with the unique emotional response of each spectator, mirrors the ‘that-has-been’ essence found in photography. The air of ‘unreality’ that Barthes attributes to photographs can also be applied to performance art.[13] Performances often create alternate realities or imaginative spaces that challenge conventional perceptions. The constructed nature of a performance, like a photograph, holds an inherent tension between reality and fiction, engaging the audience in an exploration of the boundaries between the two. When considering Barthes’ ideas in the context of photography, the performative act of creating an image becomes evident. Photographers, much like performers, select moments, frame compositions, and engage with their subjects. The photograph is a result of a performative act that captures a singular perspective, freezing a moment in time. Both mediums involve a temporal dimension, a constructed reality, and an interaction between creator and audience that contributes to the rich tapestry of visual and experiential storytelling.

In my immersive video performance, *Elegy of the Digging Hand*, [Fig.3.3] I embark on a visceral exploration of labor, time, and the delicate intricacies of grief. The focal point of this evocative piece is the act of digging my own grave − a physically demanding task that unfolds in real-time, unassisted, and without the aid of machinery. This laborious endeavor serves as a symbolic journey, metaphorically excavating the layers of existence and confronting the inevitable passage of time. It is an intimate, unassisted struggle that unfolds in real-time, resonating with the echoes of my breath and digging, transformed into an immersive soundscape.

[13] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. London, England: Vintage Classics. 1993. 115.

As the video unfolds, its duration mirroring the time it takes to dig a standard grave plot, the gallery becomes a vessel for an introspective journey. The laborious act of digging, captured in its entirety, serves as a symbolic excavation of emotions, an unearthing of my own ways to grieve and mourn. Rooted in my own history, where coping mechanisms were absent, this performance is a raw, unfiltered expression of personal catharsis. I am fully and actually confronting my own death, with all the painful, exhaustive labor that accompanies it.

As I dig, the video captures the evolution of my breath, gradually intensifying with the physical exertion. Simultaneously, the video captures the physical strain and the ambient noise from my shovel scraping against the earth repeatedly. This dual sensory experience immerses the audience in the raw, embodied reality of the artistic process, emphasizing the connection between physical effort, breath, and the landscape − a tangible manifestation of life and labor. This auditory accompaniment immerses the audience in the physicality of the performance, creating a shared space that echoes the intimate nature of the grieving process. Other than my breath and my shovel, I am silent and don't ever speak intentionally.

At the culmination of the video, I lie in the freshly dug grave, merging with the very earth I have excavated. This act of surrender and vulnerability marks a moment of unity with the inevitable cycle of life and death.

My deep connection to the landscape, particularly the cemetery, threads throughout the performance. A caretaker of quietude, I spend my time in the cemetery looking after the resting places of others − spaces often neglected. As a custodian of these often-neglected grounds, my time spent nurturing the resting places of others becomes a labor of love. The performance of digging my own grave extends this care, a symbolic act that intertwines with the stillness of the cemetery − a sacred terrain that holds the stories of countless lives.

Elegy of the Digging Hand is an invitation to witness the convergence of labor, time, and the profound act of contending with mortality. Through the performance of excavating my own grave, I bridge the gap between personal and shared grief. Here, the physical, temporal, and metaphysical aspects of my practice converge, inviting viewers to reflect on their own mortality, challenging preconceived notions of permanence and encouraging a deeper connection with the transient beauty inherent in the human experience.

Figure 3.3: Rachel Warren. Elegy of the Digging Hand. Durational video performance, 6 hours and 16 minutes. 2024.

From the gravesite, I created a final photogram on large-format film [Fig.3.4] from the soil that witnessed the entire process. I transform the experience of digging my own grave into a layered and evocative installation piece that bridges the realms of the physical, representational, and spiritual. The photogram created on large-format film from the soil of the gravesite

encapsulates the essence of the entire performance − a fleeting imprint that captures the impermanence of life and the profound nature of the labor endured. The use of large-format film emphasizes the scale and detail of the photogram, inviting viewers to engage with the textures, tones, and subtleties captured in the soil's imprint.

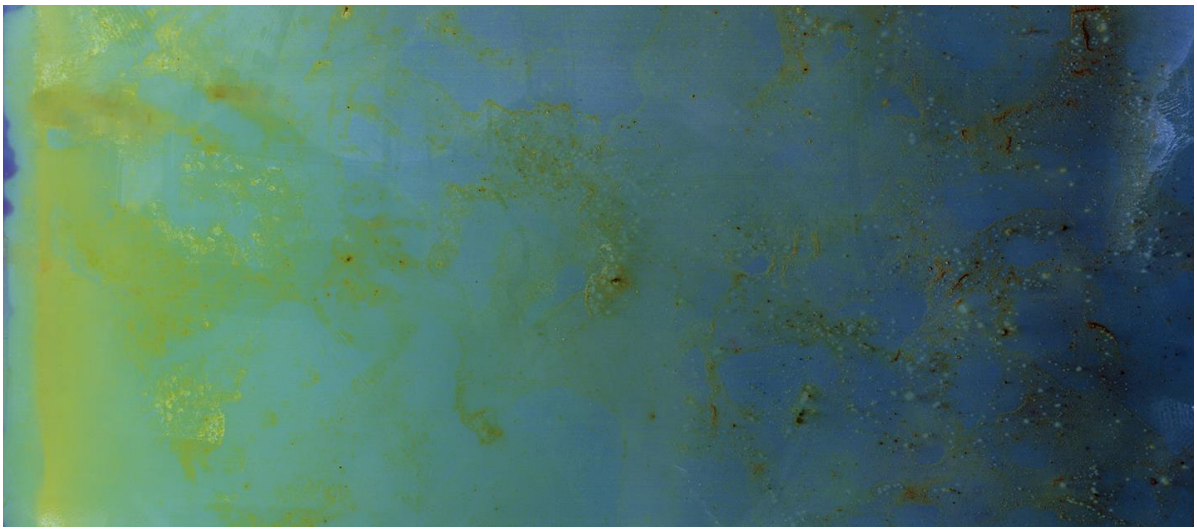

Figure 3.4: Rachel Warren. Untitled (The Last Photogram). Scan of large format film exposed in graveplot. 42 x 96 inches. 2024.

In *The Final Toil* [Fig. 3.5] I merge the grave plot-sized mirror with the film photogram exposure, creating a convergence of realities within the installation. The mirror, reflecting both the physical world and the captured image of the soil, serves as a symbolic portal to contemplation. The inclusion of my shovel atop the mirrored print adds a tangible element, signifying the labor and physical exertion embedded in the performance. Surrounding the mirror with earth sourced from the gravesite blurs the boundaries between the material ‘real’ and the spiritual, bringing the two in direct contact with each other and enhancing the installation's immersive quality. The soil carefully placed around the installation creates a tangible boundary, urging viewers to engage with the labor's material essence and ponder the weight of our mortality carried within each granule.

Figure 3.5: Rachel Warren. The Final Toil. Mirror, film photogram, grave dirt, shovel. Approximately 46 x 100 inches. 2024.

3.2 The Representational

The American perspective on death reflects a desire for comfort through the avoidance of confronting the physicality of a loved one's corpse. The solace is found in remembering the departed "as they were." To mourn authentically, one must confront the reality of death, challenging the societal inclination toward denial. “To mourn, we need to accept what has happened, and in order to truly know what that is, we must look at what has happened. To contemplate death is to contemplate our own denial of it.”[14] Death is an emotional process for the bereaved; funerals and cemeteries bear more witness to the concerns of the living than of the dead.[15] Despite some of the negative associations, burial grounds are still acknowledged as crucial cultural heritage sites and sacred spaces, reflecting a deep-rooted desire in the United States to preserve and protect cemeteries of historical significance. This preservationist impulse,

[14] Sallie Tisdale, “Why Embalming My Mother Made It Harder to Mourn Her Death.” Time, Time, 4 Mar. 2019, https://time.com/5542117/death-embalming-preservation-cremation-mourning/.
[15] Tim Flohr Sørensen, “The Presence of the Dead.” Journal of Social Archaeology, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009, pp. 110–135., https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605308099373., 111.

rooted in anthropological concerns, underscores the emotional process of death as more pertinent to the living than the departed. There is a tendency to romanticize the past and those who have died, rather than being aware of the living present, which is the primary purpose of cemeteries − to honor and remember the deceased while acknowledging the ongoing life of those who are still living. These preservationist tendencies can cause us to be more focused on memorializing the past and those who have passed away, rather than considering the importance of the present and living in the context of these spaces.

If our society has a shift in the cultural understanding of the permanence of death, we can make peace with the idea of our impermanence. This idea of a permanent state of being or location creates a predisposition against the desecration or disturbance of a body – even after no human remains subsist. Gravesites are often neglected after a couple generations, and many families do not reside in the same areas as their familial plots. Because grave rights in the United States are purchased in perpetuity, this requires more and more land to be taken up to build more cemeteries. This requires a shift of understanding to a temporal grieving space rather than a permanent status. As I delve into the temporality inherent in my durational photographic work within cemetery landscapes, I find a resonance with the shift from a perception of death as a permanent state to one that embraces a more temporal role. In my creative process, I contemplate the notion of neglect and the eventual abandonment of gravesites, offering a reflection on the changing cultural attitudes toward permanence, mirrored in my exploration of the shifting landscapes within these burial spaces. The durational aspect of my photography, capturing the transitory states of flowers and imprints, becomes a visual metaphor for the temporal grieving space that challenges the notion of a permanent status. In my artistic journey, I navigate the nuanced exploration of cemeteries and the cultural shifts surrounding death and mourning,

contributing to the ongoing conversation about the impermanence of our relationship with the deceased. By looking at these final moments in time and highlighting the transitory nature of life, my work becomes a personal catalyst for contemplating the evolving cultural landscape of cemeteries and mourning practices in the United States.

In the realm of photography, the medium has been a longstanding vessel for capturing and preserving moments in time. However, the impermanence of physical prints and the vulnerability of digital files to technological failures raise questions about the everlasting nature of these memory objects. Jacques Derrida's exploration in *The Work of Mourning* looks at the mourning process and how it relates to the loss of tangible objects and imagery associated with a departed loved one.[16] Applying this to photography, the potential death or deterioration of a photograph becomes a symbolic loss, challenging the permanence traditionally attributed to captured memories. Additionally, the transition from film to digital formats has been labeled the "death of photography," as traditional techniques give way to evolving technologies, as examined by Susan Sontag in *On Photography.* Sontag contemplates the transformative nature of photography and how it evolves with technological advancements. The shift to digital formats alters the tactile and chemical processes associated with traditional photography, prompting discussions about the loss of the medium's original essence[17]. Derrida introduces the concept of the 'trace', emphasizing the elusive nature of meaning and existence. In relation to photography, the photograph becomes a trace of a moment, a vestige of the past. The death of a memory object, whether a physical photograph or a digital file, resonates with Derrida's exploration of absence. The photograph serves as a trace of a moment that is no longer present, highlighting the

[16] Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas. *The Work of Mourning*. University of Chicago Press, 2003. 148-49.
[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* / Susan Sontag. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. 52-55.

inherent tension between the image's permanence and the transitory nature of the captured moment. In the context of death and photography, mourning becomes a complex interplay of presence and absence. The photograph, as a memory object, is simultaneously a reminder of the lived experience and a representation of what is no longer.

Walter Benjamin's influential essay, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Representation,” from 1931, critically examines how the advent of photography and film alters the perception of art. The camera apparatus, according to Benjamin, diminishes the aura and uniqueness of an art object, shifting art's value from traditional and ritualistic contexts to political ones. It is so interesting that Benjamin considers an aura and a medium to be equivalent: they both indicate the specific density of the ‘magic’ around an artwork. Each term refers to the atmosphere that surrounds the materiality of the twentieth century as it is represented through photography and the conditions of the viewer and who is allowed access to it.[18] The mechanical reproduction of art, with its exactness and indexical nature, results in a detachment from the historical context in which it was created. Art has always been reproducible, but it is the mechanical reproduction that has the intensity of being so exact, so indexical, that it loses art’s ability to hold itself in time and space. Art and hand reproduction’s unique ability before the camera apparatus was that it was held in the history of when it was created. With reproduction, it becomes lost in space, and the technique of reproduction detaches the object from the domain of tradition. However, Benjamin says that this detachment is the objective of the modern crisis and renewal of mankind; it is intimately connected with the cultural mass movements of the time.[19]

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[18] Antonio Somaini, “Walter Benjamin's Media Theory and the Tradition of the Media Diaphana,” *Zeitschrift Für Medien- Und Kulturforschung* 7, no. 1 (2016): pp. 9-26, https://doi.org/10.28937/1000106452, 17.
[19] Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction - MIT,” ed. Hannah Arendt, Illuminations (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf, 3-4.

Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction emancipates art from ritualistic dependence, making the 'authentic' print an irrelevant concept. "For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual…From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."[20] Benjamin argues that once authenticity isn't a question in art, that its inherent function changes. In this context, photography's unique magic lies in its ability to precisely display the finished product. Photography, Benjamin asserts, is never an inert object but exists in a context of signs and signifiers. However, when photography becomes abstract, losing its connection to reality and its function as a perfectly rendered object, it achieves a creative aura − an intrinsic magic that transcends the limitations of painted or drawn images. [21]

Blood, Sweat, and Tears is a triptych of prints created through microscopic photography, representing an exploration of the intersection between spirituality and corporality in the context of mortality. These prints are composed of my own blood, sweat, and tears, collected and captured at the performance site, emphasizing the tangible and primeval aspects of the human experience of death. Through this work, I seek to convey the dual nature of death as both a spiritual and physical experience. The abstract forms and patterns depicted in the prints evoke a sense of beauty and transcendence, inviting viewers to contemplate the spiritual dimensions of our life essence. At the same time, these prints serve as representational images of my own bodily fluids − real and tangible manifestations of the physical processes intertwined with mortality. The phrase 'blood, sweat, and tears' signifies the physical and emotional challenges

[20] Benjamin, "Work of Art", 6.
[21] Heinz W Puppe, "Walter Benjamin on Photography." Colloquia Germanica 12, no. 3 (1979): 273–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23982301, 287.

one undergoes in facing difficult circumstances. The phrase originated from the idea of exerting oneself to the point of physical strain or emotional stress, often involving literal sweat from physical exertion, tears from emotional strain or hardship, and even blood from injury or intense effort. The task of digging my own grave forced me to confront my own bodily limitations and eventual decay. By presenting these prints, I aim to challenge conventional perceptions of death and the human body, highlighting the intricate and multifaceted nature of our existence.

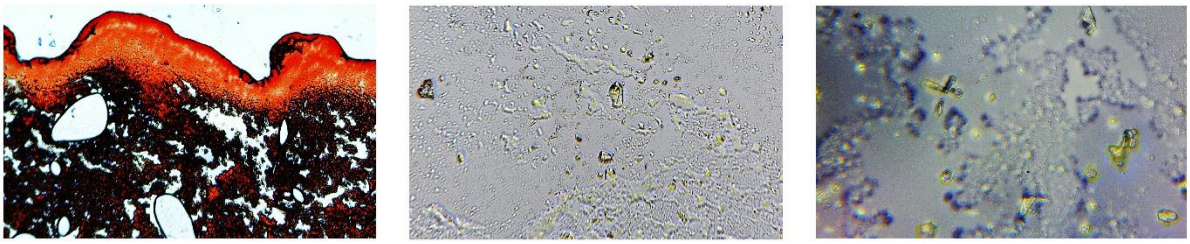

Figure 3.6: Rachel Warren. Blood, Sweat, and Tears. Micrographic photography triptych. Each 20 x 32 inches. 2024.

In my piece *Dust to Dust*, [Fig. 3.6] I embark on a profound exploration of mortality, decay, and the nature of existence. At the heart of this piece is the transformation of self into sculpture − a process that mirrors the inevitable journey of every living being back to the earth. I use a full-body mold to cast a version of myself in the soil I excavated from the gravesite during my performance in an attempt to capture some essence of my being. This sculpture, however, is not a static representation; it is a testament to the ephemeral quality of life, echoing the transitory nature of both body and earth. As the fragile sculpture lies on the gallery floor, composed entirely of soil from the gravesite, it becomes a temporal artifact, collapsing as a preview of my own ultimate decay. The earthly material, susceptible to crumbling and change, mirrors the delicate balance between the tangible and the ephemeral. The gallery space transforms into a symbolic gravesite, inviting viewers to confront the impermanence of life. This act of returning

myself to the earth becomes both a metaphorical and literal gesture − an acknowledgment of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

In the parallels between lifecasting and photography, the two artistic processes emerge as complementary facets of the same coin, each offering a distinct perspective on the ephemeral nature of existence. Lifecasting, with its tactile approach, captures the tangible contours of the human form, freezing a moment in time within a physical mold. On the other side, photography encapsulates fleeting moments in a visual narrative, preserving the essence of life through a different medium. Both lifecasting and photography share the fundamental goal of memorializing the transient and preserving the imprints of human experience. While lifecasting engages the viewer in a tangible, tactile encounter with the artist's physicality, photography provides a visual voyage into the subtleties of emotion and atmosphere. Together, they weave a narrative that transcends the boundaries of their respective mediums, offering a comprehensive exploration of the impermanence that defines the human journey.

Figure 3.7: Rachel Warren. Dust to Dust. Sculpture of artist's body from grave dirt. 2024.

Dust to Dust transcends the confines of individual mortality, offering a meditation on the energy that permeates all living things. As the sculpture crumbles, my energy mingles with the soil, taking root in other beings. This cyclical process underscores the interconnected web of existence, where life persists even as individual forms undergo transformation. In essence, the work is an ode to decay − a poetic exploration of the profound beauty inherent in the impermanence of life. It encourages reflection on the profound impact of decay, the interconnectedness of all life forms, and the legacy ingrained in the very earth beneath us.

Figure 3.8: Rachel Warren. Dust to Dust (head detail). 2024.

3.3 The Spiritual and Ephemeral

"During the decades long period of unfixed photography, the aspirations of the inventors to fix the image became materialized – the goal became the definition. Photographs would be permanent, stable objects, no matter how difficult it was to pin them down in that way and to still the sensitivities of silvers. But what if one of the inventors of photography had wanted something different? What if one of them had decided that fleetingness was the very definition of the thing they were after and, instead of seeking permanence, set about seeking a range of temporal parameters for photographs? Perhaps some photographs would last a week. Others would last for a few months, or a year. But even those calibrated to a shortened timeframe such as a few hours or days, would be understood to have a different sort of value than those calibrated for duration.

A shift in the history of photographic expectation might well have altered the development of photography as a medium and the development of cultural and practical understandings of what photography "is." It is a simple truth that photographs do exist in a durational range. It is just our understanding that is limited."[22] To negotiate with an unfixed image would be to recognize that the images are fragile and deeply susceptible to even the faintest traces of light. The images are made to be seen, but only by a few and very temporarily. Viewers would know that the very act of viewing is predicated by the loss of an image. The Journal of the Photographic Society, launched in 1855, a full sixteen years after the emergence of public discourse on photography, published notes of the April 5th meeting records the Photographic Society's chairman's statement on the crucial role of photography in culture:

> The varied objects to which Photography can address itself, its power of rendering permanent that which appears to be as fleeting as the shadows that go across the dial, the power that it possesses of giving fixedness to instantaneous objects, are for purposes of history (not only the history of one particular branch of human industry, but the history of everything that belongs to man and the whole globe that he inhabits) a matter of the deepest importance. It is not too much to say that no individual not merely individual man, but no individual substance, no individual matter, nothing that is extraordinary in art, that is celebrated in architecture, that is calculated to excite the admiration of those who behold it, need now perish; but may be rendered immortal by the assistance of Photography.

[22] Kate Palmer Albers, *The Night Albums: Visibility and the Ephemeral Photograph* (University of California Press, 2021), 5.

Because of photography, "nothing that is extraordinary in art... need now perish; but be rendered immortal”.[23] This insistence on a fixed image as its main principle became the root of photographic practice. In a way, photography has always been seen as the escape from death, a way in which we never truly die or be lost to memory.

In 1892, members of the Photographic Society of London discussed best exhibition practices, whilst planning a six-week run of a show, considered whether photographs that would be known to fade ought to be automatically disqualified from exhibition. One member, a Mr. Debenham, argued against the proposal, saying, "If a man[sic] thinks he can get the most beauty, even though it be a fleeting beauty, by a certain process, let him do it. If necessary, let the process be mentioned, so that those inclined to undervalue the work because it is not what they consider permanent may do so if they please."[24] Debenham recognized not only a place for ephemeral beauty in photography, but the connection between permanence and subjective perceptions of value. The idea of losing or fading images shouldn't be seen as a failure but as a chance to rethink photography. Despite the widespread belief in the permanence of photography, there's no inherent or set state for it as a medium of fixed imagery. The long time it took to consistently produce fixed images shows that this extended period of uncertainty, marked by years of discussion and disagreement, is not separate from the overall history of photography; it's actually foundational. Nothing is more fundamental to photography than its ability to fade, disappear, and be short-lived. How we interpret this aspect is up to us.[25]

In a way, disappearing photographs emphasize the notion that cameras capture not only the moment they photograph but also the subsequent absence of that moment. The act of

[23] Albers, *The Night Albums*, 19
[24] Albers, *The Night Albums*, 25
[25] Albers, *The Night Albums*, 26

photographing something marks its simultaneous existence and eventual disappearance, mirroring the transient nature of human experiences and memories. A photograph that actively and visibly fades, within its own lifespan, can be either be blissfully or painfully overlooked in a more typical photographic viewing experience. Usually, the event is what's captured on the image itself, something that has happened within the world. However, in a temporal photograph, the event is the photograph itself.

Ephemeral photography serves as a lens through which to explore the intricate dance between life, death, and the in-between spaces that define our existence. In the fleeting moments captured by this art form, the impermanence of life is laid bare. Each image becomes a visual metaphor, echoing the transient nature of our journey from birth to eventual departure. It captures the whispers of the in-between moments, where memories linger, and emotions unfold, frozen in time before dissolving into the continuum of life and death. Through this visual poetry, ephemeral photography becomes a powerful medium to explore the essence of our transient journey and the enduring legacy of what remains when the ephemeral yields to the eternal.

I reflect upon the experience of having spent much of 2023 in Atlanta cemeteries. As I described previously, the solitary nature of the cemetery interluded by funerary processions led me to begin examining the nature of these ritualistic spaces. I begin searching for the evidence of these rituals, whether having just happened, or about to. This landscape is my studio, finding freshly upturned dirt, with decaying flowers casually strewn on top, the standing sprays knocked over. I pull a sheet of light-sensitive paper from my bag and compose my composition on top of the dirt, placing the funerary flowers onto my paper. I wait. Just as these flowers began dying as soon as they were cut, I am creating my durational photo, with its temporal lifespan. Lumen prints, exposed by the sun, initially create vivid hues of reds, oranges, pinks, purples and blues

amongst a grey-blue background as the imprint of the object laid upon it. This gesture mimics how one is laid to rest in the earth. The imprint's exposure is determined by the sunlight's penetrating rays along with the reaction to the chemicals imbedded in the paper itself, capturing a transient moment frozen in time. The interplay of light and decay becomes a metaphor for the fragility of life, emphasizing the ephemeral nature of existence. As the lumen print develops, the colors shift and evolve, mirroring the cycle of life and death. The earthy textures and organic elements merge with the ethereal hues, creating a visual narrative that transcends the physical act of capturing an image. In this symbiotic relationship between nature, time, and photographic chemistry, my artwork becomes a meditation on the inevitable passage of time and the traces left behind. The ritualistic process of finding, composing, and waiting parallels the ritual of mourning and remembrance, turning the act of creation into a contemplative journey. Through these durational photos, I aim to evoke a sense of reverence for the impermanence that surrounds us, inviting viewers to reflect on the beauty found in transience and the profound connections between life, death, and the ever-changing landscapes we inhabit.

Figure 3.9: Rachel Warren. Fresh Graves I. Lumen print overlaid on large format print. 30 x 40 inches. 2023.

The creation of two grave-sized lumen prints [Fig. 3.9] from the site of *Elegy of the Digging Hand* represents a exploration of mortality and presence within the burial context. The first print captures the essence of the empty grave, devoid of a physical body − a stark representation of absence and the lingering imprint of human existence. In contrast, the second lumen print incorporates my physical presence, as I lay atop the photographic paper within the grave during the exposure. This print embodies a profound connection between body and earth, symbolizing the intimate relationship between life and death. This notes a stark contrast between the two prints, but also draws a comparison of how similarly body and earth can be intertwined.

Both lumen prints are intentionally left unfixed, allowing them to evolve and change over the course of time and throughout the exhibition. This dynamic transformation mirrors the progression of life and echoes the continuous process of decay and renewal. As the prints react to light and environmental conditions, they serve as living artworks that reflect the impermanence of existence. There is a tension of not being able to see the change in chemistry as it happens before your eyes, or even the possibility of not noticing it at all from day to day. Throughout the exhibition, I received several remarks at how drastic the change was, but that they only noticed the aging of the print through their own documentation of its change and symbolic death. Through these prints, I invite viewers to contemplate the interplay between absence and presence, mortality and decay. The evolving nature of the lumen prints underscores the journey of life and death, encouraging reflection on the profound mysteries of human existence and our interconnectedness with the natural world.

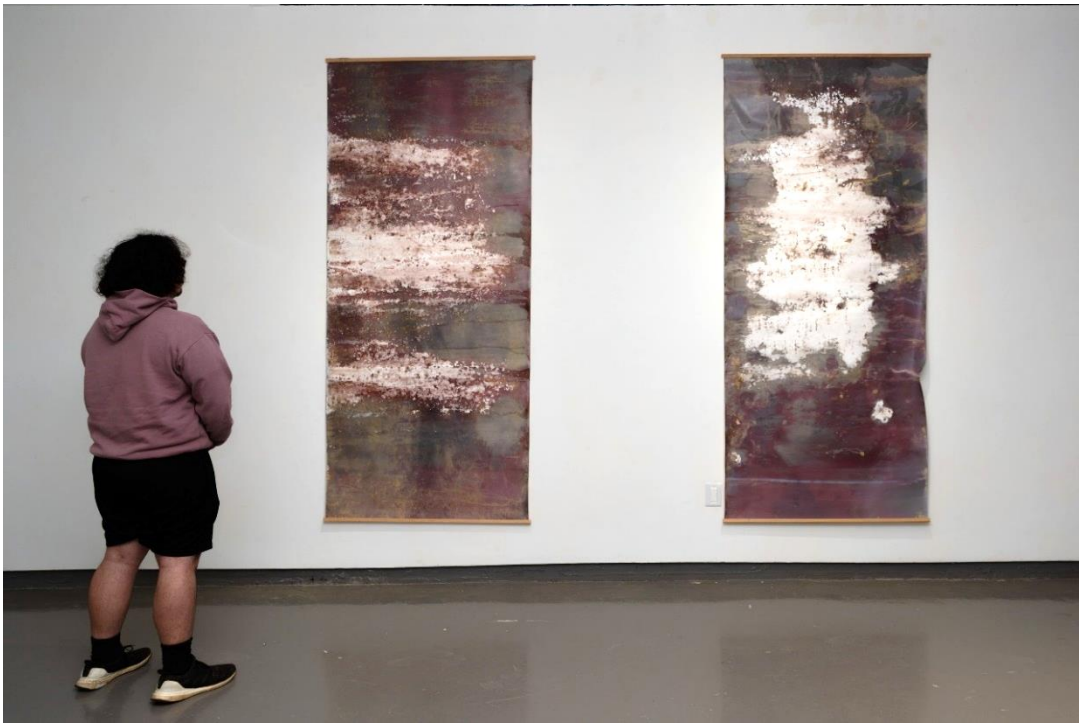

Figure 3.10: Rachel Warren. Untitled (Grave Absent of Body) (Grave Holding My Body). Two unfixed, light sensitive lumen prints made from exposures of my gravesite. Each is 3.5 x 8 feet. 2024.

Figure 3.11: Rachel Warren. Untitled (Grave Absent of Body) (detail). 2024.

4 PREEMPTIVE MOURNING

I am not afraid of dying. That is a bold statement when left alone, but the sentence that often follows is ‘but I *am* afraid of everyone around me dying’. *Preemptive Mourning*’s title comes from the obsessive way I am fixated on death. My work is a way for me to process and navigate the grief I’ve experienced. When I started pulling away from making familial work, there were several reasons. One was the issue of family and familial land being incredibly far from Atlanta. The first year and a half of the master’s program revolved around me traveling to make work during any sort of extended time off from academia and then continuing to develop the work throughout the semester until the next break. However, that has its own pitfalls, where I felt stuck in my processes if I didn’t have the right material. It often left me dreaming for time away, planning out the days when I could shoot more somewhere else. The largest issue came when I realized the concept for *Elegy of the Digging Hand* in the winter of 2022. I became obsessed and yet, the problem of distance and land access, became my biggest opponent. It took an entire year to just find the access to a space to be able to dig. This desire and denial led me to seek out the cemeteries around Atlanta that still were active and accepted interments. I had this deep yearning to see how the land became disturbed, ripped out and flung about, how the Georgian clay could become a behemoth of an object, rising from the earth because of the body that occupied it below. This allowed a different kind of obsession, where I would scour obituaries and funerary notices, to enter the spaces either before or after the ritual. Eventually, looking for others’ resting places wasn’t enough for me. I knew I needed to dig my own. I see this work as a contemplative inquiry into my own demise and the grieving rituals that surround it. How do I want to mourn? How do I want to process my own eventual expiration? I knew the video of my solitary digging was the focus of this thesis, and that the rest of the works would

come from it. I view this series as a performance and a documentation of this inquiry through various mediums. I didn't set out to just document straight photos of the site [Fig 4.1] but to also make work reflecting on the site of my first grave, knowing that this performance site is unlikely to be my final resting place. The works would build upon each other, creating a meditative reflection as each piece would inform and influence one another.

Figure 4.1: Rachel Warren. Large format documentation of the performance site. 2024.

I began planning out how I would install the gallery, knowing that I wanted the small space to feel balanced and uncrowded. The video performance was always planned to be against the back wall, and I constructed a third of the gallery space to be dedicated to the performance itself. I included a bench so that people would be inclined to stay and watch the video longer. I knew that the likelihood of someone watching the entire performance was slim to none, but I was actively engaged with the idea of people coming and going throughout the week and always hearing me tirelessly dig, and see different parts of the performance throughout the show.

Figure 4.2: Rachel Warren. Elegy of the Digging Hand, installation detail. 2024.

I utilized the open window concept through the gallery, knowing that people could have access to the video without even stepping in the room. I placed *Dust to Dust* on the opposite wall, against the glass windows, so that people would automatically see my crumbling body. I

kept both doors to the gallery open, so that visitors could easily flow through the gallery, creating their own sequence of life and death moving throughout the space.

The sculptural body was placed to face and mirror the video to create two contrasting pieces that are in conversation with one another. Furthermore, I laid *The Final Toll* in the middle of the room, so that you could see the scale of the site that I continue to reference. Not only was there an allusion to the body and the gravesite without the body, but the piece also allowed viewers to recognize and acknowledge the labor that was so intrinsic to the performance.

Figure 4.3: Rachel Warren. Preemptive Mourning installation view 1. 2024.

Figure 4.4: Rachel Warren. Preemptive Mourning installation view 2. 2024.

Scale became an incredibly important facet of this show. I wanted viewers to actively engage with the work as they would if encountering a real gravesite. The video is portrayed nearly life-sized in relationship to my body, which is also referenced in the life-sized cast of my body. The grave, which you can't see fully, is indicated through the mass of the lumen prints and the mirror. The lumen prints magnify this, as they are hung onto the wall and tower over the viewers. The large-scale abstract prints also work in conjunction with the triptych of images shot with a photographic microscope, titled *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*. The two works are created through different mediums entirely – the microscopic prints being digital and capturing a small-scale of my representational body while the lumen prints are analog, of an ephemeral nature. Yet,

the two works face each other, and the texture and pattern of both feel remarkably similar, inviting the viewer to draw correlations between the two processes. As the viewer goes through the show, they are presented with real, representational, and spiritually attuned objects that work together to portray the life and death cycle and are invited to come to an acceptance of their own mortal decay.

Figure 4.5, Rachel Warren. Dust to Dust, installation detail. 2024.

Figure 4.6: Rachel Warren. Blood, Sweat, and Tears installation detail. 2024.

5 CONCLUSION

Preemptive Mourning became a body of work that coalesced the myriad forms of art making I've pursued over the years, all while reflecting on my own understanding of the ways I choose to mourn. Through the creation of my own performative death, I navigate my own eventual expiration and the rituals that surround it. In this work, I seek to find my own way of processing grief and use myself to allow the viewer access to the discomforts of death and the temporality inherent in life and photography. My work ultimately challenges conventional notions of photography's permanence by utilizing ephemeral and unconventional photographic techniques. Central to my approach is the juxtaposition of the real, representational, ephemeral and spiritual elements. This multifaceted approach allows me to create a layered narrative that invites viewers

to contemplate the complexities of existence, often playing between the tangible and the abstract. The representational elements ground the work in the familiar, which allows for the ephemeral aspects to open a dialogue of the spiritual nature of grief and loss. By exploring the intersection of art, mortality, and grieving rituals, I aim to foster a deeper understanding and acceptance of the inevitability of decay and the interconnectedness of all living things. The exhibition encourages viewers to interact with the space as they would a real gravesite, prompting them to confront the scale and material of death. Through this artistic inquiry, I invite viewers to embrace their own mortality and engage in a contemplative dialogue on the transient nature of life and memory.

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