

Chapter 14

To Have and to Hold: Touch and the Objects of the Dead

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the objects left behind when a person dies, this chapter reflects upon the history of a life as evidenced in the wounds and scars distinguishing personal possessions from commodities. Using photographic practice as a ritual of mourning, it charts a personal journey following the loss of a loved one. The iconic and indexical qualities of photographic representation make it the ideal medium for the creation of narratives that embody an emotional investment in everyday objects. The accretions of wear and tear on material objects becomes an important motif that finds analogy in the photographic process itself. The traces of touch on possessions are made visible by the traces of light on film.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this chapter is a personal journey through a period of grief, a journey given meaning through photographic practice. It is based on the events and feelings associated with the sudden death of my partner and the invisible, constant, and silent sense of loss.

Working within the still life genre and focusing on the objects left behind when a person dies, the chapter examines the history of a life as evidenced in the wounds and scars that distinguish personal possessions from commodities. By reference to what is lost in terms of embodiment and a sensuous relationship to objects, it will highlight those aspects of possession that differentiate individuality through surface descriptions that trace time and ownership.

Two themes emerge from the photographic interrogation of personal possessions: the role of creative practice as a place to make, reflect and gradually work through a period of mourning and the theme of touch as evidenced in the genre of still life photography. Still life provides a framework through which connections can be made between the world of objects and the realm of the senses. Evidence of interaction with objects is embedded in surfaces. Still life photographs, often associated with the celebration

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of visual appearance, can be shown to trace this evidence. What we perceive optically bears witness to sensations of touch that are woven into memory.

As the investigation progresses, through a process of overlapping and interconnected phases of creative photographic practice and critical reflection, my understanding begins to take shape. This process follows an iterative model of theory and practice that demonstrates the recursive nature of artistic endeavor. For the sake of clarity, the chapter has been divided into two parts. The theoretical positioning and discourse on touch will follow the personal reflections relating to the photographic journey. However, in accordance with the nature of my practice, there will be some overlapping areas of exploration.

Part 1

My husband died unexpectedly. It was Easter Sunday. Three years earlier, also Easter Sunday, his mother had died at age 97. My husband was 67 when he died. We had been married for 37 years.

I left the hospital at 5:00 a.m., taking a route home along the canal towpath and through the park. It was a grey day. My journal demonstrates a handful of ordinary snapshots taken on the walk home, with the observation that nothing has changed. The world is still the same and so very ordinary. But everything had changed.

In her seminal work on the process of grieving, the psychologist Kübler-Ross (1969) introduced and explored the now famous five stages of the grieving process that an individual must pass through to reach the final stage of acceptance. Kübler-Ross (1969) originally proposed these stages in relation to the experience of facing one's own death. Since then, the stages have been repurposed to cover different kinds of loss, becoming a standard approach to bereavement in the grief-related professions that replaced religious faith and ritual in supporting the bereaved.

These five stages, in order, are: (1) denial; (2) anger; (3) bargaining; (4) depression; and (5) acceptance. The stages are sometimes plotted in what is termed a "change curve," in which performance is plotted against time. There are many versions of this curve, as it has been adapted over the years in reference to death and bereavement, as well as a model for other emotional upsets like the break-up of a relationship, redundancy, or injury.

There have been several challenges to this model. Most notably, Konigsburg (2011) questioned its efficacy for the bereaved. Konigsburg (2011) set out to expose the misconceptions that have grown up around the grief model, arguing that the model has been applied inappropriately and, furthermore, that it is not supported by any scientific or psychological studies. Nevertheless, the Kübler-Ross (1969) model provides a useful perspective for viewing my work as an emotional reaction to loss. I have used this model as a heuristic device to describe one way in which my photographic response can be understood when plotted against this grief model. However, I do not want to imply that there is a rigorous causal connection or that the relationship is other than one of analogy.

I made no more photographs in the days following my husband's death, concentrating instead on redecorating the house for his return. Family and friends curtailed this aspect of my denial by not only steering me toward arranging a funeral, but quietly redecorating over the violent yellow paint that now carelessly covered my kitchen walls. Already, anger was beginning to manifest through this frantic painting. It found less energetic release in a complete obsession with photographing yellow. Undiagnosed liver disease and jaundice became manifest in the week before my husband died. Yellow, a colour that I associated with life, with the sun, was now the harbinger of death.

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