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Characters from celebrated paintings and sculptures abound in this oeuvre, as do portraits of illustrious artists and writers. When O'Reilly places his own image alongside a historical figure in one of his photomontages, he is building a community or family. Whether they are creative idols or ordinary people, he joins with individuals whose thoughts, experiences, and humanity sustain him.

And the list is a long one: an angel, Caligula, poet John Keats, dancer Váslav Nijinsky and even writer Siegfried Sassoon make an appearance. But more important than the length of the list is O'Reilly's affection for the people on it. There is nothing casual in his choices and one senses the list is micromanaged and tightly held. It is intrinsic to who O'Reilly is as an artist and as a man. It is a deliberate compilation of heroes and like-minded artists and writers, flaws and all.

BIG DEATH, LITTLE DEATH

Strictly Death: Selected Works from the Richard Harris Collection

Slought Foundation
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
January 23–March 8, 2010

There's a certain slant of light

Slought Foundation
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
February 11–March 13, 2010

My name is Richard Harris. I'm 72 years old and I'm afraid to die. These opening words elicited a few chuckles from the audience. Over the past two decades, Harris, a Chicago-based collector, has amassed over one thousand objects and artworks about death. His encyclopedic collection, which focuses on the skull and skeleton, is divided into the following categories: religion, social/political protest and war, fine arts and decoration, and science and the human body. On exhibit in the large gallery at the Slought Foundation through March 8, 2010, "Strictly Death: Selected Works from the Richard Harris Collection" featured forty works from Harris's collection, spanning centuries, genres, and media.

Harris's twinkling eyes and outgoing manner belie the stereotype surrounding obsessive collectors. When speaking about his objects and the subject of death, he becomes quite animated. For Harris, the act of collecting is akin to the act of translating. Harris renders his vision as a means of decoding culture. Equating his collection to a *kunstkammer*, "a collection of curiosities and wonders, where

O'Reilly's "pose" for Picasso in a Polaroid montage from 1984 reminds us that O'Reilly never settles for simple whimsy, but instead collects and assembles visual lightning bolts. His sometimes childlike sensibilities are firmly grounded in the tumult one would expect to find in a difficult place like Picasso's studio. It isn't simply ecstasy, but rather the pain that often accompanies ecstasy that informs the work. What is vibrant here exists under the surface, a subtextual imaginary world, as rich and complex as any lived moment. O'Reilly's nakedness is a potent match for any ideas Picasso might have in rendering and distorting it. He arrives as an admirer; the work is an act of homage, and yet the equation slowly tilts in O'Reilly's favor. "What will Picasso do with me?" As it turns out, it is the right sort of question to ask.

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NOTE 1. All quotations are from the exhibition's didactics.

Renaissance and Baroque art meet science,¹¹ Harris's vision is to archive and house his collection within an institution to enable research and education. In the meantime, he is busy collaborating with several art institutions to organize exhibitions of the collection.

For the Slought exhibition, curator Aaron Levy chose both historical and contemporary works. A first edition of Goya's seminal *Disasters of War* (1863) is encased beside Jake and Dino Chapman's *Disasters of War* (1999). Albrecht Durer's *Coat of Arms with Skull* (1503) and a tiny Rembrandt etching/drypoint *Death Appearing to a Wedded Couple from an Open Grave* (1639) contrasted contemporary portraits of skulls by renowned photographers Irving Penn, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Keith Carter. Miniature bone carvings by Napoleonic prisoners resided near two skulls—a sixteenth-century skull with gesso (anonymous) and Kiki Smith's bronze skull cast from her own head. Jasper Johns's silkscreen print, *Untitled Skull* (1973), positions the skull as a pop culture icon. Magnum photojournalists' color photographs document the genocides of Rwanda and Cambodia while Andres Serrano's photography aestheticizes a burnt corpse. In *My Portrait 1960* (1988)—a humorous and prophetic work—painter James Ensor depicts himself as a skeleton.

Our fascination with death throughout the centuries has led to these curious but meaningful juxtapositions. Humans have long attempted to understand and conquer death. It's a subject that makes us uncomfortable, and although we want to look away, we instead look closer. Perhaps through our attempts to grasp death, we gain a better understanding of life. *If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life—and only then will I be free to become myself.*² Harris's collection challenges us to examine how we identify with our own mortality.

At the opening reception, I watched people's reactions to various works. Predictably, emotions varied from horror and disgust to curiosity and awe. I hovered next to an image from Sally Mann's "Body Farm" series (2000) and interjected into two women's conversation.



They did not understand what they were looking at or why anyone would want to photograph a dead body. In their defense, the image is simultaneously horrific and beautiful (I am not sure they saw the beauty). A skull with a gaping mouth, frozen in a scream, ethereally sinks into the earth. I explained that a body farm is a site for forensic anthropology research—the University of Tennessee at Knoxville runs one of four body farms in the U.S.³—and emphasized that Mann is the only artist/photographer to be granted photography privileges. The ladies stared at me for a moment, murmured thanks, and quickly moved on.

In keeping with the Slought Foundation's mission to engage the public in dialogue about cultural and socio-political issues, the curators' statement highlights major philosophers' ideas surrounding death. Citing Maurice Blanchot, Thomas De Quincey, G.W.F. Hegel, and Immanuel Kant, the statement addresses correlations among death, aesthetics, and art. Although some art patrons may resist an intellectualization of the art experience, the curators prove that the subject of death has been a preoccupation of not only artists, but one of philosophers and writers as well.

I confess to a strong bias toward the subject of death. I, too, am a collector of sorts and most of my artistic practice examines death. Given that my most prized possession is a mummified bat, I immediately related to Harris as a kindred spirit. His collection reveals more than an individual's obsession with a subject or with collecting. What drives the dialogue surrounding the theme of death is the coexistence of both dichotomy and symbiosis. As a viewer, I am engaging with historic masterpieces typically either omitted from the history books or not shown in museums. Who knew that Rembrandt had a macabre sense of humor? What would Goya say about the Chapman Brothers' work? The binary relationships of historic and contemporary, serious and ironic, reverence and irreverence, and documentary and decorative prove to mystify as much as clarify our preconceptions of death. The symbiotic thread throughout is the tenuous connection to life. As John Oxenham stated, "For death begins with life's first breath. And life begins at the touch of death."⁴

A couple of weeks after the "Strictly Death" opening reception, Elizabeth Pedinotti's photographic exhibition, "There's a certain

slant of light," opened. Located in a smaller gallery, Pedinotti's series features unframed, unframed, large color photographs. At first glance, the two exhibitions at Slought could not be more disparate. "Strictly Death" provokes its viewers while Pedinotti's work offers a quiet respite. Ethereal cascades of light permeate each of the images, evoking the romantic style of the Hudson River School painters. Pedinotti's exhibit is the first in a new Slought initiative to support young artists. The formal photographs seem a strange choice for Slought, a gallery that normally exhibits highly conceptual work, sometimes at the expense of the aesthetic. Pedinotti's work is unabashedly beautiful.

The exhibition title is taken from the title of an Emily Dickinson poem, the last stanza of which reads:

*When it comes, the landscape listens,
Shadows hold their breath;
When it goes, 't is like the distance
On the look of death.*

Reinterpreting Pedinotti's photographs through Dickinson's poem, I notice the tension that lies beneath the surface of each image. The photographs impart a cinematic moment of aftermath, but aftermath of what? Orange construction cones rupture the bucolic landscape of a golf course. A lone, naked man stands below an underpass, shrouded by twilight. Suspended in time, an intertwined strand of dental floss dangles from a hand laden with prominent veins. Engulfed by a desolate brown field, a small dog appears frozen in time. The series elicits a sense of loss and the interruption of moments in time.

Exhibit curator Eduardo Cadava writes about the photographs as a type of death—a fleeting moment arrested by the camera: "Everything in her photographs is destined to death, and not only to what we elsewhere have called 'strictly death.'"⁵ Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin have written extensively about the connection between photography and death. While it is important to acknowledge their great contributions to philosophy, and more specifically the critical discourse surrounding photography, I'm a bit tired of this argument.

Pedinotti's performative video, *Plates* (2009), playfully references Benjamin's ideas about photography and the "plates of remembrance." The video opens with a stark white background. A china plate, reminiscent of a grandmother's china patterns, hangs from a string and undulates back and forth. Another plate crashes into the first, followed by another, and then another. The delightful crashing sound reverberates throughout the gallery, creating a sort of cacophonous symphony. The students who accompanied me were hesitant, not sure whether to laugh or not. Pedinotti's visual linguistic metaphor pays homage to Benjamin while allowing us to move beyond debates regarding photography's memory and death.

Above

Video still from *Plates* (2009) by Elizabeth Pedinotti

While I can make connections between “Strictly Death” and “A certain slant of light,” I am not sure such relations matter in the end. I heartily applaud Slought for bringing in outside curators, taking risks, and supporting young artists. The critical dialogue surrounding all of their programming dares viewers to emerge out of their passive viewing roles and to consider alternative modes of thinking and analysis.

ART AS REDEMPTION

Mexico in your Senses

By Willy Souza

Mexico City

March 4–April 23, 2010

Mexico has recently suffered from negative media attention due to its social and criminal problems. With a major new touring exhibition of his work, “Mexico in your Senses,” Mexican filmmaker and photographer Willy Souza aims to counteract these stereotypes and encourage Mexicans to regain pride in the myriad strengths and strong cultural heritage of their country.

This extensive exhibition, sponsored by the federal government of Mexico and offering free admission, was recently on display in the Zócalo (the main plaza) of Mexico City. It incorporates nearly one thousand photographs in the form of prints and video (culled from the 1.5 million photographs Souza has taken across the country in the last eight years) housed in a specially built traveling venue intended through form and hue to look like a Mayan temple. Designed by noted architect Javier Sordo Madaleno, the 13,000-square-foot exhibition space includes a snaking main gallery and an exhibition and video room, representing the traditional pyramids of the sun and the moon found at such archeological sites as Teotihuacan.

The first room in the exhibition is floor to (20-foot) ceiling close-up color photographs (20 x 24 inches) of eyes of Mexican citizens, interspersed with mirrors of the same size. This opening is a statement suggesting that visitors immediately engage in a process of self-reflection. Souza is asking us to consider what we “have stopped seeing,” to “stop accepting preconceived notions and interpreting without seeing.”¹ The next four rooms of the first building house images of “things representing the human condition,” as Souza notes.

The vast halls and ceilings of the main rooms are covered with images: still, color, glossy photographs, unmatte and unframed, printed large; a few are backlit or printed on scrims hanging from the ceiling. Photographs from across the country are arranged thematically in such categories as masks, landscapes, markets, and tradespeople. Interpretive panels at the

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NOTES 1. Knutshammer Georg Luce: www.knutshammer.com, accessed 4/5/10. 2. Quote by Martin Heidegger in T.Z. Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest* (New York: Bantam, 1985), 332. 3. *University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences: web.utk.edu/~fac*, accessed 4/5/10. 4. “John Ozenbam quotes” ThinkExist Quotations Online. 1 Jan. 2010. Web. accessed 14 Feb. 2010. 5. *From the scroll statement written by Eduardo Cadava of Princeton University, author of Words of Light* (1999).

beginning of each theme offer background on the subject and smaller keys at the end offer a few identifying details and in all cases in which Mexican state each image was created. Plasma screens throughout the exhibition hall show series of still images, often offering brief visual narratives.

In “Fiestas” there are colorful costumes, gold jewelry and a stunning ground-view, close-up of a pair of aged, brown, cracked feet. “Architecture” displays structures ranging from Mayan ruins to colonial



buildings. “Religious iconography” focuses on details of lit candles, crucifixes, figurines of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and bleeding Jesus statues. “Children” work and play across the country. The “Cycle of Life” begins with a Madonna figure of a young mother bathing a baby in a river as if in baptism and concludes with celebrations of the Day of the Dead, in a series of images teeming with the vibrant orange of the *compastichil* flower, which is traditional for this celebration.

Visitors are led from the “Cycle of Life” down a hallway (the “Path of the Dead” that connects the pyramids of the sun and the moon) to the large open final room where a seven-minute video showcases the moving image work of Souza, replicating many of the same scenes and faces of the still photography. There are thematic and aesthetic ties in the video, as well as visual connections such as flowers cascading from an apron transitioning to beans falling from a spoon and the twirling lasso of a charro seguing into the flapping circle of a tortilla. It is a dramatic effort with an overtly