Examining Our Relationship with Death: A Participatory Art Project

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EXAMINING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH DEATH: A PARTICIPATORY ART PROJECT

By

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B.S. Southern Connecticut State University, 2020
M.F.A. University of Maine, 2023

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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(in Intermedia)

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The University of Maine
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Advisory Committee:

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Death is a fact of life, yet researchers such as Caitlin Doughty, Todd Harra, Ernest Becker, and others, have found that people deem death a taboo topic of conversation. Doughty herself started a social movement, death positivity, to encourage this taboo to be broken, and to normalize talking about death. However these researchers published their findings in the early to mid 2010’s, before a major pandemic made death a more common occurrence for people.

Inspired by previous researchers' experiences, this project asks the question: How do people feel about death now, and can socially engaged art create a space where people feel comfortable sharing these feelings?

My research and participatory art projects aim to allow a space where conversations can happen by foregrounding the project in artmaking as a vehicle for sharing thoughts and fears. Through the creation of art participants will have the chance to create something that represents their feelings on death and give them a chance to process those feelings while they create. This will serve as a pathway for them to visualize their feelings as well as offering an outlet that may not be available elsewhere. I also created an opportunity for them to have conversations with the people around them about their feelings. Socially engaged art relies on audience members...
participating and sharing their thoughts to create a conversation that can lead to social change. By creating an environment where people will be comfortable with having conversations with others and exchanging ideas, people can walk away with new perspectives on issues they may not have considered before. This project created that space for people to come together and form a community where people can create art together about death while also feeling comfortable talking with the people around them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to thank everyone who participated in my thesis project, as well as my thesis committee members that guided me along the way. Participatory art requires the participation of other people, and this project wouldn’t have been possible without it! I’d also like to thank my friends and family who supported me, no matter what strange place my research took me to.
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CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Section 1: Why Death?

I have had a lifelong fascination with death and the macabre. However it wasn’t until the covid pandemic that I’d seen death on such a large scale, and neither had many others. At a time where hundreds of people were dying by the day, it became evident that America’s death infrastructure was flawed. “Funeral homes and morgues couldn’t keep up. Assistance in the form of refrigerated trailers for storing the deceased were requested, as well as incarcerated individuals being paid to help move the bodies.” (Rocha, 2020). As I entered graduate school the world around me was changing, and death was becoming the elephant in the room. As someone who was fairly comfortable with the idea of death, I wondered how other people felt about it.

According to an article released in 2022, two years after covid “(50%) of Americans say that during the last two years they’ve thought about death more often. Nearly half (45%) think about death at least monthly and 23% think about death on a daily basis. More Gen Z'ers (35%) think about death every day than any other generation, compared to 29% of Millennials, 21% of Gen X and 14% of Boomers.”(Release, 2022). compared to “54 percent -- say they don't spend much, or any, time thinking about their own death. Fourteen percent say they spend a lot of time thinking about it, while another 31 percent say they spend some time thinking about it.”(CBS News poll: Americans’ views on death 2014) in 2014. However just because people think of something more often, doesn’t necessarily mean they’re more comfortable talking about it, or even thinking about it.

My first semester I was asked to create a textile piece and consider its role, and the relationship it had to the environment. With death at the forefront of my mind I started researching textiles that had a relationship with death, and came across burial shrouds. I created
three small burial shrouds out on linen and dyed them with natural indigo dye. This project led me to further explore burial traditions in the United States, and the effects it has on the environment, which were almost entirely negative. According to the website The Order of the Good Death, “A modern funeral starts with formaldehyde embalming, a preservative process that can be unnecessary. Bodies are then placed in caskets, produced using 20 million board feet of hardwood and 64,500 tons of steel each year. Cremation is a less expensive alternative, but still consumes as much energy as a 500 mile car trip and emits pollutants like mercury, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide into our air. (Everything you need to get started: The order of the good death 2011). This was a pivotal moment in my research. Not only did this project open my eyes to how dysfunctional modern funerary practices are, but it also introduced me to the Death Positive movement.

Fig. 1 Set of three indigo burial shrouds 2020
Section 2: The Death Positive Movement, and the Push to Change the American Death Culture

The more research I did, the more people I found who were interested in this topic. As I did more research on American funeral practices, I discovered a social movement that talked about the terrible effects of these practices on our planet, and other negative aspects of death rituals in the United States, such as the predatory financial practices of funeral directors, and the loss of mourning rituals due to funerals and burial being done with little to no familial involvement.

The Death Positive Movement, an international movement founded by Caitlin Doughty that is focused on changing the culture around death, and de-stigmatizing conversations about death and end of life plans, like creating a will, or how someone would like their body treated after they die. Their website, The Order of the Good Death, serves as a nexus of information for people who are interested in learning more about death positivity and the movement, as well as listing out their main concerns, beliefs, and general information in what is happening in the world of death research.

Their concerns can be broken down into four main focuses; environmental, financial, ritual, and issues of access. The environmental section focuses on all the negative environmental effects of modern funerals in the United States. The financial aspect focuses on the cost of funerals, from the coffin to the burial, or the cremation to the urn, it covers the exorbitantly high costs created by the funeral industrial complex, and how grief is taken advantage of to make people pay more for these things. The ritual section focuses on how many aspects of ritual in the grieving process have been taken away as funeral directors and morticians take over body and funeral preparations. Doughty says it best, writing “The early 20th century saw the rise of the
death industry, replacing family funerals with companies and professional technicians. Turning
death into a financial transaction leads to ‘care’ that is profit-centered rather than human-
centered, with the corpse itself becoming a commodity. The funeral industrial complex leaves
little room for direct meaningful involvement and has robbed the family of valuable hands-on
engagement and ritual.”(Everything you need to get started: The order of the good death 2011).
The fourth section, issues of access, focuses on the fact that not everyone has equal access to
what they would need to have a good death. In the words of the order, “we need to acknowledge
that some deaths are bad. Gender, race, sexuality, disability, religion, and socioeconomic status
affect how we die—from the availability of quality and culturally competent end of life care, to
consumer education around funerals, to how we inter and memorialize our dead.”(Everything
you need to get started: The order of the good death 2011). This section emphasizes the fact that
though many believe everyone is equal in death, this isn’t necessarily the case, and that the fight
for equality is still a constant, even in death.

Section 3: Socially Engaged Art, and the Role it Can Play in Cultural Movements

Socially engaged art is art that“ functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that
normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is
this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights
to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. For this
reason, I believe that the best term for this kind of practice is what I have thus far been using as a
generic descriptor- that is, “socially engaged art” (or SEA), a term that emerged in the mid-
1970s, as it unambiguously acknowledges a connection to the practice of art.” (Helguera pg.5). It
invites people to participate in making art, and often covers topics such as politics, sustainability,
environmentalism, and many more. The art, is the process of bringing people together to create
something and have conversations, not the object that may result from these interactions. The resulting art object or objects would serve as documentation, not the art piece itself.

Many art pieces have been used as a way for artists to raise awareness about a social issue, act as activists, or protest and critique a social institution such as *Women on waves*, an art organization that was founded in 2001 by Rebbeca Gomperts. *Women on waves* is focused on providing resources about abortion to women who may not have them available in their home country, and has been known to provide abortions as well. On their website the group says they “aim to prevent unsafe abortions and empower women to exercise their human rights to physical and mental autonomy. We trust that women can do a medical abortion themselves and make sure that women have access to medical abortion and information through innovative strategies. But ultimately it is about giving women the tools to resist repressive cultures and laws.” (Who are we?) One way they do this is by sailing a ship to different countries that are known to oppress women’s rights to abortion and docking in their ports to educate women and provide them resources.

Fig 3 Women on waves ship 2003 source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3024746.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3024746.stm)

Art is a way for people to talk about complex topics in a way that can be more accessible to the general public and encourage conversations about subjects like gun violence. A
conversation about topics like death or the environment can create an exchange of ideas between people who are interested in having that conversation, but what about those who don’t? If someone doesn’t want to talk about a certain topic can you get them to join in if you talk to them, or would that situation need a different approach? Art can offer a different avenue than a verbal conversation or sharing and reading articles. It can be confrontational or it can be subtle. Using a subtle approach, a larger audience may be reached and interacted with who are averse to having conversations.

Artist Felix Gonzalez Torres created his piece *Untitled (A Portrait of Ross)* in 1991 as a commentary on the AIDS epidemic. A pile of candy was created in a Gallery in a Los Angeles gallery that was the same weight as his partner Ryan Laycock before Ryan started to rapidly lose weight due to AIDS. Gallery viewers were encouraged to take some candy with them and eat it either in the gallery or after they leave. (Graf, 2021) This piece was a subtle approach to bringing attention to a social issue that many were ignoring, or were outright saying wouldn’t affect them. The subtlety of this piece is enhanced when compared to the Guerilla Girls piece *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the MET. Museum?* Originally a poster created by the group to critique the minimal representation of women artists in the MET museum, there is a clear critique on the sexism and misogyny that is found in art. The Guerilla girls intended for this poster to be turned into a billboard, but after being rejected by the Public Art Fund in New York they paid for advertising space on New York buses instead. Eventually the bus companies closed the contract because they believed the image was “too Suggestive” (Tate, 1989).
Fig 3.1 *Untitled (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* 1991


Fig 3.2 *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the MET. Museum?* 2003 source:

Socially engaged art does not have to be subtle or overly confrontational; there can be a middle ground. I find that the work I create fits in that space, subtle enough to make people comfortable, but confrontational in a way that makes people think without being overtly uncomfortable. One project consisted of creating a set of family recipe boxes for my family to encourage people to reach out to their families and have a conversation with them and ask for a recipe to submit to a group box. This project was to encourage people to reach out and connect with their loved ones before they pass away. Another participatory project I created was a set of game boards that would help people plan funerals, or at least decide on what they may not want for their own. Each board had a set of outcomes, like being cremated or being buried that a player could get. They would follow a randomized set of lines and then go search out their results on the other side of the room. The act of moving and playing made it much easier for people to talk about funerals, death, and what they may or may not want to happen after they die.
Fig 3.3 Detail of recipe box 2022

Fig 3.4 Detail of game boards 2022
Section 4: The Victorian Language of Flowers and Mourning

The people of the Victorian era were no strangers to death. In fact they had a whole area of their economy that was built upon selling people all the things they would need to give a loved one a funeral that followed the proper social rules of the time period. The Victorians adhered to a strong social code with a set etiquette that highlighted proper behavior for different social situations, and it was considered incredibly embarrassing or shameful if people didn’t adhere to those strict social norms. One of these societal expectations was to not show emotions despite the circumstances. Of course the Victorians found their way to subtly share these feelings, with specified clothes, accessories. An excellent example of this is the standard for clothing worn during the three stages of mourning, deep mourning, second mourning, and half mourning. For deep mourning everyone was expected to wear only black clothing and women were to wear a black crepe veil that would hide their faces. Women were also not allowed to wear jewelry at this time. For secondary mourning black was still the prominent color choice, but gray and mauve were also acceptable colors, and women could wear mourning jewelry, or jewelry that was inlaid with jet, a black stone. At half mourning the color white was permitted to be worn and most jewelry was acceptable. Mourning periods would vary person to person but women were often expected to mourn longer than men.(Brett pg.86-87). Queen Victoria herself spent the rest of her life wearing black, the color of deep mourning after her mother and husband Albert died(Queen Victoria) in the same year. This tradition of mourning and the symbolism of wearing specific colors while in mourning inspired my own work, and Victorian mourning rituals found their way into my practice through projects such as Mourn Safely. Mourn Safely is a black lace veil that also doubled as a mask to protect the wearer during covid. This project took
inspiration from the aesthetic and purpose of the Victorian mourning veil and modernized it to something that could be used during the pandemic for a similar reason.

Fig 4 One piece brooch made of polished and unpolished jet 1880’s source: Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs Mary Brett
Fig 4.1 Parlor card showing widow with mourning veil and gloves 1890’s  source: Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs Mary Brett
Fig 4.2 Ring with woven hair from George Washington 1799 source: Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs by Mary Brett

Fig 4.3 *Mourn Safely*
Another way that the Victorians found to express themselves was through the language of flowers. Jessica Roux summarizes the purpose of the language of flowers, also called floriography, as “a clandestine method of communication at a time when proper etiquette discouraged open and flagrant displays of emotion.” (Roux pg, ix) People would create special bouquets called nosegays that carried specific meaning based on the flowers picked for it. This created a new form of communication that was used by men and women alike, but was more commonly used by women. An example of a nosegay specifically for mourning could include Chrysanthemums for mourning, Marigolds for grief, Mint for consolation, Dahlias for eternal love, Azalea for fragility in a difficult time, Rue for regret, Rosemary for remembrance, and more. Some of the flowers used by the English to represent death and mourning were also used by other cultures. Marigold flowers are used by a variety of other cultures in death rituals, but in countries, like Mexico, they have a more positive meaning. In Mexico Marigold flowers are used to decorate altars, also called ofrenda, for Dia de los Muertos. An ofrenda built in a person's home would have the deceased's favorite food and drink, as well as images of the person who has passed on. Marigolds would also be brought to the grave of the deceased where they would be left with more food and drinks. Inspired by the international significance of Marigolds in mourning rituals found throughout my research, I created a burial shroud that was dyed with marigold dye that also had marigold flowers painted onto the shroud as a visual representation of the research that was being done.
Fig 4.4 Marigold Burial Shroud detail 2021
Section 5: A Short History of American Death Culture, from the Puritans to Modern Day Practices.

In this section the term death culture will pertain to the customs and rituals formed around death and mourning in America. This includes treatment of the deceased, their burial and preparations, the actual interment ceremony, depending on if they are buried, cremated, aquamated, or any of the newer ways the deceased are being handled, such as having their cremated ashes added to cement to make reef balls. I will also be focusing on the development of white anglo saxon traditions. The Native Americans, the people who lived in America long before Europeans came over to colonize it, have a rich death culture of their own that I cannot speak to through my research.

When the Pilgrims sailed to America, they brought many puritan funerary traditions with them that would continue into the modern era. Early puritan funerals were simple and devoid of most of the traditions we follow today. “There was no viewing of the body, no food for the mourners, and there were no graveside prayers. The puritans considered these things to be similar to catholic funeral rituals, something they were very much against” (Slaughter, Taylor pg 14) However in the 1740’s this began to change, when it came to funerals

“Funerals and burials became increasingly ritualized, turning into drawn out social occasions with their own sets of etiquette. There were rules for invitations to the service, clothes, events, home decorations, and even gifts to be given to mourners. A family could be considerably set back financially by a funeral and burial…Puritan families spent substantial amounts of money on the trappings, food, and liquor for funeral events…Feasting and drinking much like an Irish wake would take place before the processions to the burying ground. Corpses were laid out at home in coffins, and prior to burial. Guests arrived to view the corpse and then
proceeded to the food and well stocked bar… The women prepared the food and decorated houses with black crepe and ribbons. Windows were shuttered” (Slaughter, Taylor pg 15-17)

Many of the rituals and superstitions mentioned above inspired future funeral rituals for the Victorian era, and are still present in funeral traditions to this day. As time went on and technology evolved, so did how we enact these rituals. The popularization of embalming in 1865 after the assassination of President Lincoln extended the amount of time a corpse could be left out for viewing, and industrialization made it possible for more people to purchase ornate coffins and other funerary products that may have been reserved for the wealthy back in the 1700’s. This includes mourning clothes and large amounts of food for funeral attendees.

However as time moved on funerary rituals in the United States changed. The first cremation was performed in 1876(Harris pg55) in Pennsylvania, and was met with mixed reception by the people there. Though as the population increased, cremation would become more common, as land for burials was starting to become scarce. Soon the funerary process would become more industrialized, and things like burial and preparing the deceased’s body fell on morticians and funeral directors, and family and loved ones were removed from the process. For some this was more convenient, but for others, distancing themselves from this process of preparing the dead felt like leaving behind an important ritual that helped people mourn. This distance from death started to create a disconnect.

People are seeing and thinking about death less, and therefore fear death itself, and deny its inevitability, instead of viewing it as the natural next step after life. Ernest Becker writes “If fear of life is one aspect of transference, its companion fear is right at hand. As the growing child becomes aware of death, he has a twofold reason for taking shelter in the powers of the transference object. The castration complex makes the body an object of horror, and it is now the
transference object who carries the weight of the abandoned casua-sui project. The child uses him to assure his immortality. What is more natural?” (Becker pg 148). Becker then goes on to talk about group psychology of when someone people interpret as being immortal dies, like a world leader or celebrity. “In one way only: it shows a profound state of shock at losing one’s bulwark against death. The people apprehend, at some dumb level of their personality: “our locus of power to control life and death can himself die; therefore our own immortality is in doubt.” All the tears and all the tearing is after all for oneself, not for the passing of a great soul but for one’s own imminent passing. Immediately men begin to rename city streets, squares, airports, with the name of the dead man: it is as though to declare that he will be immortalized physically in society, in spite of his own physical death. “(Becker pg149”. In a way people’s desires to leave behind a mark on the world and create their own legacy can be attributed to this denial of death. Their fear of dying leads them to doing what they can to make sure their names are in the history book, because if they’re remembered then they won’t truly be dead. This way of thinking prevents people from living in the moment however, and can stop them from living a life fully in the present. All is not lost forever, for as Caitlin Doughty says “Death avoidance is not an individual failing; it’s a cultural one. Facing death is not for the faint-hearted. It is far too challenging to expect each citizen will do so on his or her own. Death acceptance is the responsibility of all death professionals-funeral directors, cemetery managers, hospital workers. It is the responsibility of those who have been tasked with creating physical and emotional environments where safe, open interaction with death and dead bodies is possible” (Doughty pg 232). In my work I create this safe space for all who participate, and by encouraging conversation, I urge people to consider death and their feelings on it, whether that be denial or slow acceptance. As Helguera says “Conversation is the center of sociality, of collective
understanding and organization. Organized talks allow people to engage with others, create community, learn together, or simply share experiences without going any farther.” (Helguera pg 40). It is this conversation that will start to shift people’s perception of death, and if done by enough people, create a cultural shift in people’s feelings of death as well.

**METHODOLOGY**

An important part of my research is engaging with the traditions through practice-based creative production. Many funerary traditions were originally done in the home by the family, and that connection of creating an object or partaking in a ritual is something explored throughout this research, by creating art objects or including people in rituals. When conducting arts based research, I weave different aspects of past traditions into the art. Whether that be by including work of the hand like sewing by hand or dyeing natural fabrics, or having people sit down together over food and sharing stories of those who have passed away, creating a communal moment of sharing grief and outwardly expressing feelings about death.

Through the use of ethnography and historical research, I investigate multiple cultural traditions, and how best to implement elements of them in my practice. For example when researching the significance of burial shrouds culturally, environmentally, and historically, creating a handmade burial shroud and using environmentally friendly ways of producing it is the next step in the artistic research process. This requires delving further into the historical and social context of different materials and concepts, which informs what is used to create the project. When creating the memento mori engraving series for example, there was a need to research the materials used, oil paint on panels, but also the concept behind the paintings. Memento mori roughly translates to “remember you must die”, and the paintings that came about
to represent this focused on reminding people that life ended, with imagery that focused on skulls, fruit, plants, and symbols like hour glasses that represented time. This phrase is still popular today, and reminds people of human mortality. While the concept was to remind people life ends, they were painted with materials that were made to last for an extended period of time, hundreds of years if stored correctly. Knowing the inherent meaning of this art theme the decision was made to engrave imagery of skeleton and vines onto wood, keeping the concept of memento mori, but adapting the symbolism to more modern imagery.

Fig 5 Begging 2022

The material aspect of my research is another important element. When I create art I use different materials to explore how they affect the meaning of the art and their properties. For example using real versus fake flowers for a project. Real flowers wilt and decay and eventually they’ll be gone, this can represent ideas like death, loss, and passage of time. Whereas fake
flowers take much longer to disintegrate, and that’s if they do. Using fake flowers would say something far different than real ones. By using different materials I can explore these meanings, and choose which material would fit what I’m trying to portray. It is important that the concept and historical/theoretical research inform or dictate what the materials will be for the work. Experimentation and flexibility in material choice is a critical part of my research, as it gives me the chance to innovate and try new approaches to older traditions. Research into subjects like funerary food customs consists of a recreation of the food that would’ve been served being set out on a table for people to eat, or a modern recipe based on that food. One project I created focused on Victorian mourning foods and funeral favors. Instead of only recreating the cookies and serving them on a platter, the delivery of how people received the cookies was modernized. Instead of wrapping them in wax paper with a wax seal, they were wrapped and placed in an envelope with a label adhered to it that people could write on. This encouraged people to memorialize someone by writing their name on the envelope the cookie came in, offering them a chance to openly talk about their deceased friend or family. The chance to memorialize someone and then with other people at the table opened people up to talking about death and mourning.
Socially engaged and participatory art are new art practices that are “rooted in the late 1960s, in the seminal influence of Alan Kaprow, the incorporation of feminist education theory in art practice, the exploration of performance and pedagogy by Charles Garoian, and the work of Suzanne Lacy on the West Coast and elsewhere, among many other examples. The practice of socially engaged art today, often referred to as “social practice,” has been lately formalized and integrated into art schools, more or less along with academic literature that addresses the phenomenon.” (Helguera ix). SEA focuses on taking issues from other fields such as anthropology and sociology, and using art as a way to engage people in conversations about tough social issues, like death and mourning.
When doing research on cultural beliefs, movements, and traditions, it’s important to engage with people and get their perspective on those topics. Participatory art gives people the opportunity to process their own feelings while also learning about how others feel, creating a chance for cultural exchanges through conversation. As Helguera says “All art invites social interaction; yet in the case of SEA is it the process itself- the fabrication of the work- that is social. Furthermore, SEA is often characterized by the activation of members of the public in roles beyond that of passive receptor. While many artworks made over the last four decades have encouraged the participation of the viewer.” (Helguera pg11). While conducting my research I take advantage of the activation of the audience as a way to create a dialogue that could lead to active social change. The process of creating art with other people focused around one topic leads to a conversation among all participants that allows them to share their ideas on that subject.

In the world of SEA there are two areas that most research projects fall into. Symbolic art and actual, actual referring to projects that create actual change like building houses for the homeless and providing free birth control to those without access, and symbolic referring to projects that promote conversation and “address social or political issues only in an allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolic level” (Helguera pg6). My research tends to lean more toward the symbolic area of SEA, but since a major part of it is encouraging people to talk about death to change how death is perceived, there is an aspect of actual change. In the Recipe Box project people were encouraged to reach out to their loved ones while they’re still alive and connect and have conversations with them. The catalyst for this was collecting family recipes from a group of people that would lead them to reminisce about times they had with those family members. This project would be considered symbolic but also creates actual change for those who participated.
Some people re-connected with family members they hadn’t spoken to in years, and planned to continue talking to them after the completion of the project as well. This example of symbolic and actual change is where the research situated itself.

Fig 5.2 Detail of *Before They’re Gone* family recipe boxes 2022
THESIS PROJECT

Preparing for the Workshops

A key aspect of art that requires audience participation is having materials readily available for the audience to work with. The crux of this project was giving the people who participated the chance to make art that represented what they felt about death, with an opportunity to share it with those around them and talk about it. After deciding the concept behind this project, the next big question was the how. Drawing inspiration from multiple places, such as socially engaged art and the Victorian era art of the language of flowers, I started working on the actual materials for this project. Historically the language of flowers was used as a way for people to communicate complex thoughts and emotions without verbalizing them.(Roux). Using that as a template, I gathered flowers that had a variety of meanings that people could choose from. From using dried pansies to represent thoughts, to using green chrysanthemums to represent rebirth, each flower used in this project had very specific associations that were available to participants via labels on the outside of the jars they were stored in. Before these flowers were used, they had to be pressed and dried in preparation for the workshops. There were also certain aesthetic features to consider, like using black cotton fabric as the backing for flowers to be glued onto. There were also two types of frames people could work with, circular and rectangular. There were also two different sizes of the frames. The different sizes allowed people to choose which one they worked with and how many of the materials they wanted to use.

Since it was important that people were able to represent their thoughts and feelings, I also included tags tied onto the forms, and embroidery floss. The tags gave people to write down their thoughts, two people used them to write down poems that they thought represented their
feelings best. They could draw, write, or leave the tags blank if that is what they thought worked best. The embroidery floss was another way for people to add extra layers of meaning. They could embroider patterns, images, or do simple stitches. They also had the option not to if they didn’t think it would help them share. Having so many different ways that people could represent their thoughts was integral to this project. Someone may have been able to include everything they felt using flowers, but some people needed more than flowers to represent their feelings. I wanted people to be able to share as much or as little as they wanted, and making sure they had multiple options was important.

**IMRC Center Workshop**

The first workshop for this project was held at the IMRC Center, and was open for anyone to attend. The focus of this project was an inquiry into individuals' feelings concerning death and the death culture in the United States, and encouraging them to create art that represented those feelings. Inspired by the death positive movement and the myriad of researchers, such as Todd Harra and Caitlyn Doughty who believe people will continue to refuse to talk about death without a culture shift, this was a chance to see if people responded more positively to talking about death after a worldwide pandemic. At this point everyone had experienced death at some level, whether it be a close family member or an acquaintance; the Covid pandemic exposed people to death on an unprecedented scale.

People were wary of participating at first, but as more people started to come by the station and make something, it encouraged some of those who weren’t as comfortable joining in
the beginning. Some people were comfortable talking with others about their thoughts and the symbolism behind the art they were creating, others were quiet and preferred to work away from the group of people at the main station. One participant decided they would take their materials and work at a nearby table. They were far enough away to work on their response and contemplate by themselves, but also still close enough that if they wanted to they could talk to people, I found that distance fascinating. They’d essentially taken physical space away from other participants to contemplate their feelings on their own.

Many people said that having the opportunity to create art while having this kind of conversation made it easier to talk, and a few called the process cathartic. Some pieces were dedicated to recently deceased family members, others were visual representations of people’s beliefs. Two sisters used flowers to create mushroom imagery because they and their family believed in the body decomposing and returning back into the earth through decomposition. One participant took the chance to make a piece that represented her belief in reincarnation, but included through the flowers they picked that they were still fearful of death, even though they believed they would be reincarnated after.

This was the first of three workshops for this research project, however it drove home the idea that for there to be a change in how people approached the subject of death, there needed to be conversation, a key component in socially engaged art. “Conversation is the center of sociality, of collective understanding and organization. Organized talks allow people to engage with others, create community, learn together, or simply share experiences without going any farther.” (Helguera pg 40). By creating a space and providing a structure that encouraged people to talk about death, change could slowly be achieved. Each workshop in this section is a part of the overall socially engaged project, and the combined experiences of them together create the whole of the research, with art objects that act as a survey of people's feelings, as well as an archive of the response to the project as well.
Fig 6. Response made to look like mushrooms 2023

I like the thought of
my body being
consumed by a
Mushroom

B+G
Fig 6.1 Anna Martin participating in the workshop at the IMRC Center
The second workshop took place in IMD 530 Performative Thread, a textile class specifically for graduate students and therefore my peers. Holding a workshop for this class was a unique opportunity to see how artists would respond to this project, and how they would interact with the materials presented to them. If there were any major issues with how the workshop was set up or the materials, this would be the time for them to present. Helguera mentions, “What must be recognized, first, is the value that individuals bring to a collaboration. Each individual has his or her own expertise and interests, and when these are put to service in
the collaboration, the collective motivation can be contagious. Second, we need to create frameworks that are not completely predetermined in theme or structure, as an overly predetermined plan will likely not allow for the input of potential collaborators; they may feel that they can't put their own expertise and interests to use.” (Helguera pg 55-56). In terms of collaboration, doing a workshop that allowed artists to participate and create their own response offered two key pieces of feedback before the student symposium. The first was their opinions on the project itself and the concept behind the art, and the practicality of embroidery and creating the art.

People who were enrolled in this class had an interest in textiles, and more specifically embroidery. As most people avoided embroidering their pieces in the first workshop there wasn’t a chance to see how well the frames stood up to people who may have been more heavy handed with the needle and thread. Halfway through the workshop some people had problems with the inner frames popping out when they embroidered, but by gluing the frames together to close them the problem was quickly remedied. Other participants attempted to sew on flowers instead of gluing them, but learned that for some of the flowers that wasn’t going to work. Though there were conversations about death, at this workshop the topic would often wander into other areas since everyone knew each other. The familiarity made it easy for people to talk with each other, but it also made it more of a challenge for people to stay on topic. This workshop was crucial in preparing for the student symposium, where I expected much of the participation in this project would take place.
Fig 6.3 Detail image of a participant holding their piece
Fig 6.4 Image of Walter Greenleaf embroidering

**University of Maine Student Symposium Workshop**

“One factor of SEA that must be considered is its expansion to include participants from outside the regular circles of art and the art world. Most historical participatory art (thinking from the avant-gardes to the present) has been staged within the confines of an art environment, be it a gallery, museum, or event to which visitors arrive predisposed to have an art experience or already belonging to a set of values and interests that connect them to art. While many SEA projects still follow the more conservative or traditional approach, the more ambitious and risk-
taking projects directly engage with the public realm—with the street, the open social space, the non-art community—a task that presents so many variables that only few artists can undertake is successfully” (Helguera pg 12). The University of Maine Student Symposium is an event held the second Friday of April, and is an opportunity for students to share their research with students from outside their major and the larger university community. Here people from different academic backgrounds could participate in this art project. The reception was overwhelmingly positive. From Biology majors to computer science, a wide variety of majors participated that day, and brought their own experiences to the table.

At first people were slow to approach, similar to the first workshop. Most presenters had posters and didn’t ask people to participate with their research, but as Helguera says “All art invites social interaction; yet in the case of SEA is it the process itself—the fabrication of the work—that is social. Furthermore, SEA is often characterized by the activation of members of the public in roles beyond that of passive receptor.” (Helguera pg11). As more people started to participate, others felt more comfortable coming up and asking questions about the art and what it was about.

Many people loved the project, and appreciated having something to do with their hands while talking about a heavier topic such as death. One participant whose grandmother had just passed recently, said that she liked that she could embroider, something her grandmother taught her to do, while talking about her and death; and that having something to do made it easier for her to talk about it.

The conversations I had with people and the ones they had with others around them while participating was the real art. The act of having conversations about death, mourning, and how society treats death with people from across so many research disciplines was made
possible by this participatory project. From English majors to Mathematics, people felt comfortable sharing their perspectives while they created. People said they felt more comfortable specifically because they were creating something while they were talking. At one point a group of seven friends came up and started making their own art pieces. One member of the group shared that though she is actually very scared of death, that the project helped her talk about it and that she greatly enjoyed the concept. The group of friends shared their thoughts amongst each other, and bonded over their similarities and differences. Similar to the first workshop, many participants described the project as cathartic. One person used the project as a way to process the grief of not being able to return to her home country. Originally from Iran, she would not be able to return due to how women were being treated in the country. Though it’s not about the death of a person, it was still about the concept of death itself, the death of a country and society they once knew. Some people contemplated physical death, and others created memorials to loved ones who had passed away. This workshop had the most cross disciplinary participation, and was well received by all who chose to participate.
Fig 6.5 Workshop at the Student Symposium
Fig 6.6 Image of participant working on their response
Fig 6.7 Multiple participants choosing flowers and thread
Thesis Show

By the time the work reached the thesis show the piece itself was completed. The objects that came out of process of meeting and talking with so many different people served as a record of the project itself, along with prints from various workshops that were hung on the wall and two display tables that showed how the various material aspects of the project, including embroidery floss, dried flowers, and embroidery forms with fabric stretched over them. As this was a participatory and socially engaged research project, the art itself was the workshops, the people creating things together and sharing their thoughts and feelings about death. The objects and photos in the gallery are the documentation of this process, and a glimpse into the process of making. Each frame adorned with flowers is a record of someone who participated, their choice in flowers and embroidery a symbol of their beliefs, the tags tied onto the wooden frames with their signatures and thoughts. Documentation is an essential part of socially engaged art, as the process itself is the actual art. As stated by Helguera “Similarly, documentation should be regarded as an inextricable component of an action, one which, ideally, becomes a quotidian and evolving component of the event, not an element of post production but a coproduction of viewers, interpreters, and narrators. Multiple witness accounts, different modes of documentation, and, most importantly, a public record of the evolution of the project in real time are ways to present an event in its multiple angles and allow for multiple interpretations.” (Helguera pg 75-76). The documentation presented at the thesis exhibition includes everything mentioned in the quote above. The photos of the workshops in real time allowed people to see different ways that people participated, the flower pieces on the wall are an archive of people’s response, shown through writing on tags and the symbolism of chosen flowers. The display tables are a snapshot of what it looked like when people were actively choosing which
components they wanted to include to represent their thoughts and feelings on death. That layout gives those who may not have been at a workshop but did attend the gallery exhibition a chance to see the various aspects of the project, and not just art objects hanging on a wall with no background of the processes that went into creating them and the interaction between artist and the public.

Fig 7. Gallery attendee standing in front of a display table
Fig 7.1 Gallery attendees talking about display table
Fig 7.2 Image of prints hanging in the wall at the gallery

Fig 7.3 Image of thesis project gallery space
CONCLUSION

This thesis project sought to answer how people felt about death, and create a space where they could share those thoughts with other people. By using socially engaged art and providing a safe space for open communication, people were able to create art that represented those feelings, and have conversations with those around them, or reflect by themselves while they created. This gave them a chance to process their thoughts and feelings on death, mourning, and death culture itself. As I led the workshops that led up to the thesis show, I began to realize that death and talking about it, have become much more common today than it was several years ago. People who participated in the project were open about sharing their thoughts, and thanks to the community atmosphere created when making art together, participants had open honest conversations with myself and others at the workshop about death.

However statistically a large number of people are still uncomfortable talking about death. “When asked to rank their willingness to talk about traditionally taboo topics, 81% of Americans chose money, followed by mental health (58%), sex (46%), politics (42%) and religion (41%) — death came in dead last (32%). Even among those who believe it's important to discuss end-of-life planning with loved ones, just five percent were most willing to talk about death” (Release, 2022) With covid and the ever increasing number of world events where hundreds of thousands of people are dying, like the current war happening in Ukraine, death has become a much more prominent part of people’s lives, yet a good amount are still uncomfortable having conversations about it. This is one of the reasons socially engaged art and this project are so important. Death has become something people think about more often, but they’re still reticent to talk about it. To create change the topic has to be confronted, and finding ways for
people to confront it, like making art and sharing with others in a comfortable space, are the first step in creating that change.

When I started working on this project, I was reluctant to talk about death too openly. I’d done so much research in the two years leading up to my thesis, but I was still unsure how to talk about death in a way that would be deemed socially acceptable. As I interacted with more people however, and heard their stories about loved ones who had passed, or what they thought happened to us after we die, I discovered that there is no right way to talk about death, and that the best way was to be open, and support the people I was interacting with. Whether that meant giving them the space to process their thoughts by themselves, or talking to them and creating a conversation amongst the other participants. Death is an uncomfortable topic for people to talk about. To talk about death and consider it, is to consider the fact that one day you will die as well. For some people that is a terrifying thought, that one day they will cease to exist, and move on to the next stage that comes after life. Others may find the idea comforting, and take solace in the fact that eventually their life will end. There is no right or wrong way to feel about death, but it isn’t something that should be so terrifying that people do everything in their power to avoid it. If given the opportunity to reflect on death more often, people may become less fearful, and start to look at how they are living their life, instead of putting things off and living to prevent their end. The more people have these tough conversations and confront their feelings, the more likely it is people will find it easier to accept death as a part of the natural cycle of life. People fear the unknown, and death is one of the biggest unknowns that there is. But if given the time and space to reflect on it, people can come to terms with their impermanence, and live lives that aren’t influenced by that fear.
Mourn Safely

Fig 8. *Mourn Safely* 2020

Mourn safely is a piece that finds its inspiration from equal parts modern and historical beliefs. This mask was created in 2020, during the height of covid. At a time when so many people were dying, while others refused to take the proper safety precaution of wearing a mask. This piece highlights the deaths that were happening and the grief that came with them. After taking a deep dive into the history of Victorian death culture and the four stages of mourning, I quickly realized that having something to show someone is in active mourning, while also being fashionable, is something that would also be appreciated in our modern day. I focused on using the least reflective material available, and made the mask so that it could resemble the veil of someone going through grief, or could be a fashionable covid mask that would encourage others to wear masks as well. This project was my first foray into making art about death and death culture, and kicked off my next three years of research.
Fig 8.1 Set of three indigo burial shrouds 2020

Following *Mourn Safely*, I started doing more research into the current death culture in the United States. This project was focused on the creation of multiple forms while researching the carbon footprints of the traditional American Funeral. Caskets made of metal or rare wood use precious non-renewable resources, and cemeteries themselves are acres of land that leak toxic chemicals into the surrounding soil and groundwater, that will be distributed throughout nearby areas. Some of these chemicals come from embalming, while others come from the caskets themselves. *(Grave Matters, Harris)* This information shocked me, and encouraged me to look into more environmentally friendly funeral options, this led me to green burial. Cemeteries that implemented this style of interment ask that the deceased be wrapped in a shroud made of eco-friendly materials or a simple wood coffin. Drawing inspiration from these requirements, I created three small maquette linen burial shrouds dyed with indigo dye.
3D Printed Urn

On the heels of learning more about current American death cultures, the topic of cremations came up quiet often. This piece is part experimentation and part hopeful solution. Many people who see this project ask “what’s wrong with ceramic urns, aren’t they environmentally friendly?” Yes they are depending on how they’re made and glazes used, but they’re also made out of a non-renewable material. As I did more research I realized that cremation also leaves a sizable carbon footprint, even if it is less than a traditional burial with a vault and metal or wooden coffin. (Harris) The urn however is made of PLA, a corn based plastic.
that comes from a renewable resource that is also one of the top crops produced in America. Merging the technical aspects of 3D printing, modeling and rapid prototyping with the creation of a functional art piece, people are introduced to other innovative creative processes that they can attempt to replicate themselves. Using a base form of the urn itself, people could add or subtract from it as they wish.

**Funeral Foods**

![Fig 8.3 Walter Greenleaf holding an Amish funeral cookie](image_url)
While doing more research on what is included in a funeral I came across a fascinating article about how Irish funerals are transitioning to catering instead of homemade food for wakes and receptions. This led me to start looking at funeral foods traditions from a bunch of different countries and cultures, and took me away from focusing so much on burial and the environmental impacts associated with funerals and burial. The main theme I noticed was that
funeral foods were often hearty, and made in large batches. They were made to be shared, and alleviate some of the burden from families of having to cook for themselves, such as casseroles. After learning these things and taking a look at different recipes I started cooking these foods and looking for ways to share them with people and have conversations about funerals and death. The conversations themselves were an act of breaking the taboo of talking about death, a topic that many people shy away from, preferring not to confront the fact that they will die someday. Through cooking these meals and snacks, I explored different cultural food traditions, and had the chance to share food with people and have conversations with them about death and their thoughts on America’s current death culture. This was one of the first projects I worked on that directly involved the audience in the project, and brought people together through sharing something and prompting conversation.

**Marigold Burial Shroud**

![Fig 8.5 Marigold Burial Shroud](image)
As I delved more into the world of death culture I learned that conversations about death made most people uncomfortable, according to writers like Caitlin Doughty and Todd Harra, who are well known in this field. While I was making this burial shroud I started to work on designs that would be impactful, but also light. I followed the vein of environmentally friendly materials, and used cotton and natural dye. Marigolds have a positive association with death in Hindu, South American culture, and Victorian England. Therefore I used Marigold dye and imagery for their positive associations, and yellow color that would come from the dye. Yellow is a positive color that many people associate with happiness and would lighten up the tone of the shroud. There was a conflict of ideals however when I decided to use a child safe acrylic paint to create the abstracted marigold design. Most people thought that the addition of the acrylic paint made the piece less effective and the shroud less environmentally friendly. Though this piece that created a conversation, it required some prompting and didn’t create conversations in the way that I wanted to. I would say my next project was much more effective in creating conversations and prompting people to share.
Victorian Mourning Cookies

This project followed on the heels of my independent study and Marigold burial shroud. It was greatly influenced by funeral food and Victorian mourning traditions. Victorian England had set customs when it came to funerals and what was involved. They didn’t shy away from talking about and preparing for death, in fact there was a whole industry around it. While looking into their traditions I learned of Victorian mourning cookies. These cookies would be served at a funeral wrapped in paper with an image on it or a poem. They would be distributed at the funeral and mailed to those who couldn’t attend. Using these cookies as inspiration I created a project that allowed people to share food with each other and honor those who have passed away. By adding a blank label so people could write the name of the deceased, I created an opportunity for open honest communication among people to talk about death and share stories about people they know who’ve died. People were encouraged to share, and having food in their hands created
a friendly environment that people were comfortable talking in. This experience would have a large impact on my future thesis project. It was the second time I’d gotten people to have conversations about death, in this case sharing memories about loved ones who had passed.
Fig 8.7 *Lovers* 2022
These pieces are a modern twist on a classic style of art, the memento mori. Memento Mori roughly translates to “remember you must die” in Latin. While researching this style of painting I noticed that there were several visual themes in the compositions. These included plants, skulls, symbols of time, and luxury items. In creating these laser engraved images I opted
to use imagery of plants, and illustrated a skeleton instead of only using a skull. These thematic image choices combined with engraving on a material that would decay itself created a type of memento mori unique to my outlook on what happens when you die. The skeletons are being enveloped by the vines, symbolizing the return of the human body to the earth, and the life that grows out of the nutrients provided by the body of someone who has passed. These engravings were a departure from the more participatory art that I’d been working on and focused more on representational visuals.

SKULL A DAY

Fig 8.9 collage of select images from the skull a day project 2022
January first 2022 I started a project where I created one skull a day. This project had two goals. One, to have a ritual where I sit down everyday and take time to work on some kind of creative project, and two, to push my creativity by creating a new image or object everyday. Through this process I’ve had a chance to learn new skills and refine others, while struggling through constantly putting out work. For accountability I’ve been recording this journey on Instagram. While it has been helpful, it’s also tainted the project since I’m not really only creating art for myself anymore, even if I design the pieces for me in a style I like, people are open to commenting on what I’m doing and how they feel about it. At times due to regularly posting, this project has felt less meditative and more forced. In the future if I were to embark on another daily project for a year and share it, I would space out the days I posted so there was less pressure and more joy in making the art itself. I didn’t know it at the time, but this project helped me prepare for the marathon of work that came with my thesis project. There was a certain level of perseverance that this project taught me that I would grow to appreciate later.
Before They’re Gone

Fig 8.10 Top view of family recipe boxes with recipes inside them 2022
Before They’re Gone was a project that looks at the importance of connecting with loved ones before they die. Using my family as an example I encouraged people to have conversations with their loved ones about their lives and family histories. In my family, food is an important part of our family history, and through the use of personalized boxes and recipe cards I ask people to consider what’s important to them and theirs. The addition of a clear box that people can contribute to doubles down on the concept of reaching out to family members before they die and connecting with them, whether a recipe comes out of it or not. This project marked my foray back into the genre of socially engaged and participatory art. I was reminded that making art that
other people could contribute to created a community with that art piece, and created an atmosphere for people to share stories. At the time I wasn’t fully aware of it, but that was something that I wanted to integrate into my thesis project, the ability to create conversations and a space where people felt comfortable talking to each other and sharing different views.
Make a Choice (Kind Of)

Fig 8.12 Wall with games boards 2022

Fig 8.13 Wall with symbols that correspond to the game boards 2022
Make a Choice (Kind of) is a piece centered around the concept of planning a funeral but not having true choice in the outcome. The game boards with decision ladders on them have symbols that lead people to choices that are spaced out on the other side of the room from the boards. I used the layout of the room to force people to move around the area and search out the choices they’ve “made”. In truth there is no decision being made, as the audience is being guided to the answers by the game. The audience interacting with this piece will be encouraged to start thinking about what they want out of a funeral, and consider how to make these desires concrete and known. This project actually inspired the first draft idea of my thesis project. These game boards got people to have fun and talk to each other about death and their funerals. I knew I wanted my thesis project to get people to talk about death, but I wasn’t sure how to initiate that conversation or how I’d get people to participate. I wrestled for a month trying to figure out how to make a game as my thesis project, but I realized that a game wouldn’t be able to cover the ground I wanted to cover. I wanted to see how people felt about death, and prompt them to share those feelings. After that realization, I knew that even though this project was effective in getting people to talk about funerals, I would need a different approach when it came to the thesis project.
Death as a Part of Life

Fig 8.14 Coffee Shop 2022
Death as a Part of Life is a digital drawing project inspired by the concept of memento mori, which translates to “remember you must die”. The original memento moris were a style of paintings created in the seventeenth century. These paintings were created to remind people that life is not eternal and that death was inevitable. By creating scenes where people were living their everyday lives with a specter of death following them (a skeleton), I remind viewers that though life can end at any point, it shouldn’t prevent people from living, hence the scenes of people actively living their lives while death waits. The images themselves are drawn in the digital drawing software procreate, and printed on a clear paper using a canon large format printer. This was the last project I worked on before I had to buckle down and focus on the thesis project. It was inspired by my previous memento mori project, but I wanted it to focus on living
life though death is inevitable, and not the inevitability of death and decay like the previous memento mori series. After this project was done it was full speed ahead on the thesis project, and all the little things that went with it. From pressing the flowers to acquiring the supplies I’d need so people could participate.
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I don't understand death, but I know it's the end. We were made to live forever with the One who created us— who loves us & desires to be with us forever. On this earth, death is separation, sadness, a void, grief. But I have...
World above,
Say below
Dear Daddy,

I miss you so much. Death took you away from me physically but not from my heart. You live in my heart, my big heart, in my dreams, laughter, guidance, and love.

I am older than you were when you died. You left your footprint on my heart forever.

Building and courage.
Slow is messy, it is
messy, it is
muddled, it is a
journey.
It is part of each other.
I'm curious about what happens after I die.
CaCophony of emotions
I believe in an afterlife as well as reincarnation, but I am still afraid of death.
For Sam, but mostly for my sister.

—Haley Hampton
I like the thought of my body being consumed by a mushroom.

BIG
Good Bye
Beauty in transition
Just like how those the beauty of these flowers are preserved, death is about preserving the memory of those you love for as long as you can.

Pansy: thoughts
Yellow Rose: Optimism, positivity
Carnation: Gratitude, never forgetting
Chrysanthemum: Positivity
Baby's Breath: New beginnings.

R.D. 

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I don't understand death, but I know it's not the end. We were made to live forever with the One who created us - who loves us and desires to be with us forever. On this earth, death is separation, sadness, a void, grief. But I have
Hope. Hope that death is not the end but the beginning of eternity with the One who loves each one of us. The one who conquered death by his death: Jesus.

Rebecca Reynolds
Death - a tangled mess of feelings
I feel like people often think of death as this dark looming monster but I find death a bit helpful and fascinating. Maybe that's in part because I'm so tired of this life and so I'm holding onto the idea that there has to be something better on the other side.
I don’t like to think about death, but I acknowledge its importance in nature and the cycle of life.
Your absence has gone
through me
like thread through a needler.
Everything I do is stitched
with its color. W.S. Merwin
I can't write anything about death.
To Grandma & Papa,
where belonging was never questioned,
and love was undoubted,
toily completely.
gentleness, enthusiasm,
opimism, good luck,
deep love

just be.
Do not go gently into the night.
I have lost you so many times and fail in both of it.
Thinking about death makes me uncomfortable.
Compost
Nourishing
All of us
As we will nourish others.
Everything that falls to the ground...
Amelia M.
Some things take time

[Floral decoration]
web of life.
What keeps us together.
My thoughts that arise is sadness, unstable and just something that's impacted my life a lot. I've lost many family members.
I am terrified of death itself, the question of what happens
after we exist and then we don’t. I’m torn between fear and
hope. The snapdragons divide this... what I wish to feel us.
The hope I have (shewn breath)
leaves holes
in your life
Death is something I have increasingly comforted with, but I also have a deep respect for. I do still have a fear of those around me dying.
In Remember of 2 women who taught me in life + in their Death Respect Dignity
it's all so

FRAGILE

in the end
For Toni.
Love Amy
With Death...
there is sorrow. Not for what is, but for what once was. Yet, there is immortality in Death. For these feelings and memories of you will remain. May all find peace.
there is no hot glue holding these flowers on. it is important that threads hold up these thoughts.
Flower connections:

- camomile = gentle, rose = love
- Chrysanthemum = thoughtfulness, carnation = good luck, sunflower = intellect, baby's breath = new beginnings, purple statice = remembrance

In response to my uncle's death, 3 yrs before I was born. He was my namesake, but all I learned from him was through flowers.
Green Chrysanthemums
- Rebirth / Renewal
Purple Statice
- Remembrance
Babys Breath
- Innocence, Hope, Begin
Red Roses
- Deep Love, Faith
White Roses
- Purity, Youthfulness
Death through Flowers

~ Vanessa Schaeffer
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Lia Davido is a Maine based artist working with themes from death and the macabre, to magic and folklore. An object maker at heart she explores various materials in her practice, but has a fondness for digital art and sculpture. Interested in the darker and unseen parts of life since she was young, much of Lia’s current artwork revolves around critiquing the current death culture in the United States, and the negative effects it has on people and the planet. A death positive artist, she encourages people to de-stigmatize having conversations about death, and creating a more positive death culture.

When not creating art that focuses on death culture, Lia creates art that explores folk beliefs and magick. Drawing inspiration from folk stories, beliefs, and modern magickal practices, she creates ritualistic artworks that feature various magick elements. From creating wards and tinctures, to folk imagery and sigils, Lia uses art to interact with a more fantastical part of the world. A practicing pagan herself, Lia uses this art as a spiritual outlet, and a way to interact with the world around her. She has a Bachelors of Science in sculpture from Southern Connecticut State University and is currently working towards a Master of Fine Arts from The University of Maine. Lia is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Intermedia from the University of Maine in August 2023.