

SMALL DEATHS

KATE BREAKKEY



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

AUGUST 21 - SEPTEMBER 27, 1997
AUSTIN, TEXAS

SMALL DEATHS

In our way, we conform as best we can to the rest of nature...There are 3 billion of us on the earth, and all 3 billion must be dead, on a schedule, within this lifetime. The vast mortality, involving something over 50 million of us each year, takes place in relative secrecy....

Less than a half century from now, our replacements will have more than doubled the numbers. It is hard to see how we can continue to keep the secret, with such multitudes doing the dying. We will have to give up the notion that death is catastrophe, or detestable, or avoidable, or even strange. We will need to learn more about the cycling of life in the rest of the system, and about our connection to the process. Everything that comes alive seems to be in trade for something that dies, cell for cell. There might be some comfort in the recognition of synchrony, in the formation that we all go down together, in the best of company.

—Lewis Thomas. “Death in the Open.”

Let's get the necessary information out of the way first: no creature has been hurt or killed for the purpose of this exhibition. But, their method of final transition—be it disease or age, predator or happenstance—has been only the next step in the natural transit from “birth to earth” that each of Kate Breakey's subjects (not to mention all us remaining beings) must follow.

For Kate's reverence is towards nature in general and, therefore, towards life in particular. The dead things that she finds or has been given by friends—be they plant, fowl, reptile or mammal—possess a fundamental spirit beyond the shell that is left behind. Her practice may be to collect and examine these “small deaths” but her desire is that of any other passionate naturalist and artist: to attempt to under-

stand, interpret and emphasize life itself.

Look! Look! If you look really hard at things you'll forget you're going to die.

—Montgomery Clift

Throughout its history photography has never shied away from death. Whether through early daguerrean funerary portraits, the pictorialist acceptance of classic subjects like cemeteries, or the often graphic documentation of war, the evidence and impact of life's end has continued to contribute to our visual heritage. In one sense Kate Breakey's “small deaths” have their roots going all the way back to the *natura morte* traditions in classical art—those “still lifes” of dead animals, birds and plants arranged in aesthetic manners and offered up in memorial and/or celebratory fashion. The transition from

murals and paintings of previous eras into nineteenth century photography was seemingly effortless, and the medium was easily adapted by such early masters as William Lake Price and Adolphe Braun among many others. Indeed, the depiction and interpretation of death's presence—whether for documentary, expressive or aesthetic purpose—will continue to survive present and future generations. Something there is in the face of our final fate which impels us to aim the eye and the camera directly towards the evidence of our end.

All of which is not necessarily an easy effort for us viewers: to be able to see into and beyond the gore and decay and smells that await us all when that ultimate spark has been extinguished. It is not difficult to see how many of us would



Hemida turcicus, Mediterranean Gecko. Silver Gelatin Photograph handcolored with oils & pencils 32"x32" 1996

embrace the old Woody Allen wish—"I'm not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens." Mortality remains a rather severe companion for us all—ever-present, never entirely welcome, and as inevitable as the fall of each sparrow and the dessication of each flower.

I brought home the bleached bones as my symbols of the desert. To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around—hair, eyes, and all with their tails switching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty.

—Georgia O'Keeffe. "About Myself."

The "Small Deaths" are not Kate's first foray into beginnings and endings. Starting from her childhood in rural Australia—a frontier one suspects that is little different from its Texas counterpart—she was no stranger to Nature's continual balancing act between creation and finality. While death and mortality may exist equally in city or wilderness, they are certainly more focussed and unremitting in the countryside.

In addition, they have continued to be active components of her artistic growth and influence. For nearly a decade now she has explored these fragile borderlands through at least three other series—"Death," "Remains" and "Vital Organs"—which, in true artistic fashion, still continue. Indeed, one might find one more certain example of her own affirmation to life in the simple fact that none of these series have been permitted to die.

Perhaps the strong heart of Kate's "Small Deaths" is the seemingly endless contradictions which abound throughout them. As they have grown equally from both her desire and her reverence this may not seem so surprising to us. However,

since they have evolved from that most fundamental of contrasts—life and death—they deserve the benefit of both our considerations and our feelings.

Some of the opposites are obvious. Plants vs. animals. Insects vs. vertebrates. Mammals vs. birds. Even their physical states and bodily conditions are not uniform. Some prints have a dark, moody cast while others are lively and bright. Or, some of the subjects appear wholly lifelike while others have corrupted down to bone and baser substance.

There is also the contrast of the artist's execution. The prints before you are very large, their scale in dramatic opposition to the natural size and seeming "small" unimportance of their subjects. Or, consider the range of Kate's colorings—the gray sparrow or the pale rose lack the vibrant hues of other birds or bulbs, yet each possesses, through her hand-applied oils, an approximation of nature's own hues which further adds to our appreciation of the transitory beauty of each of these passed lives.

Even the fundamentalism of the written title on each print lies in contrast to the artist's passion. The taxonomy of scientific and popular names, which Kate the scientist has researched and written, is a component part of nature. However, if the naming process somehow reinforces the illustrative or factual reference of each creature, it also enhances the poetry—indeed, the majesty—which Kate the artist has brought to her subjects. Perhaps this is the great contradiction which lies within the soul of each true naturalist.

Cumulatively, of course, there is the essential contrast within each image itself—that between object and symbol, between what is recorded and what may be seen. Some of these birds are of parts and fragments, with skulls that remind us of dinosaurs or alien fantasies. Others, however, possess a presence that makes

of them living entities, holding a bearing and pose referential to such figures as generals, grand dames and Indian chiefs from a forgotten era. Or, consider the childlike torsos or genteel hands of the tiny lizards. Even certain flowers possess the aged textures of our grandparents' cheeks and the bent of heads and shoulder stooped with an accumulation of years and experience. Has life truly transpired with such small deaths, or has it only been replaced by another that is far more mysterious and wondrous?

One final contradiction: the French have a phrase for that climactic moment of sexual orgasm. It is called *la petite morte*—"the little death"—and it celebrates that human instance of life-affirmation and life-creation in which body and soul feel both the highest ecstasy and also the closest to the physiological instance of death. Are life and death so intertwined? And can even the smallest passing of the smallest organism contain within itself the ceaseless affirmation to life?

I have never asked Kate if she herself fears death. It is sufficient for me to know that she respects it and sees through it. That she can share this power with us is the true beauty of her art. And that we possess within our intellect and emotions the potential to respond to the eloquence, mystery and romance of her art is the measure of the humanity in us all.

Kate's art is fundamentally an encouragement: "Look. Do not look away. See that therein lies beauty. See that there is life."

Therein also lies the grace, dignity and passion. And just a whisper of our eternity.

ROY FLUKINGER

Senior Curator of Photography and Film
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center
The University of Texas at Austin ©Roy Flukinger, 1997

KATE BREakey

1957 Born Adelaide, South Australia

EDUCATION

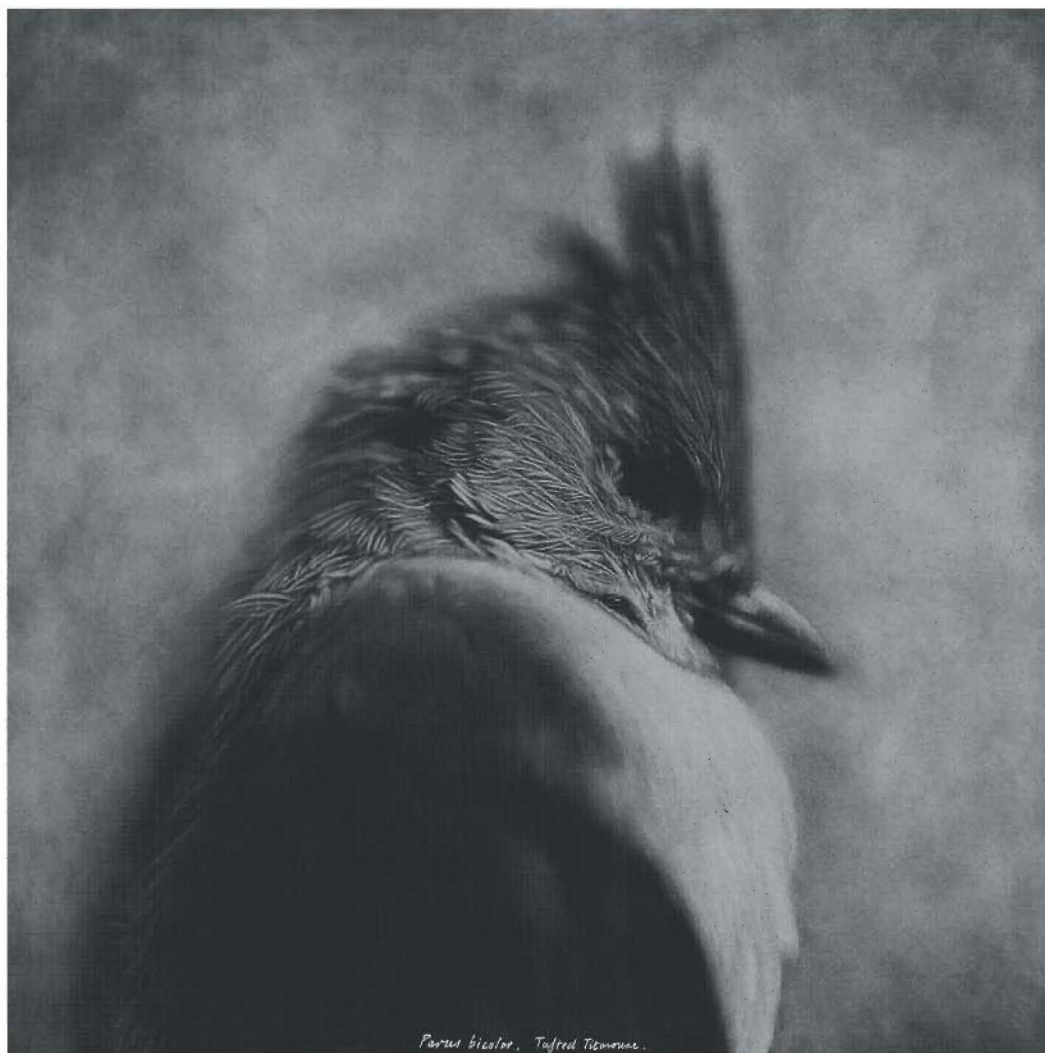
- 1989-91 MFA, University of Texas at Austin
1979-82 BFA, School of Art, University of South Australia
1975-78 Dip.Graphic Design, South Australia School of Art

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 'Small Deaths,' Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas
1994 'Laws of Physics—Principles of Mathematics,' New Zealand International Festival of Arts, Wellington, N.Z., Adelaide Festival Center Artspace, Adelaide, South Australia
Center for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, Victoria
1992 'Rules and Speculations,' Kate Breakey, Steve Brudniak, Fox Fine Art Center, University of Texas at El Paso
1992 'Kate Breakey, Paul Z. Rotterdam, Sergei Cherentsov,' Martin-Rathburn Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
1992 'Laws of Physics,' American Association for the Advancement of Science, Atrium Gallery AAAS, Washington DC
1988 'Encounters 1,' South Australian School of Art Gallery, Adelaide, and SA Touring Exhibition Program 1989
1987 'Portraits of South Australian Aborigines Life-sized portraits, Festival Theatre Foyer, Adelaide, South Australia, 1987 South Australian Touring Exhibition Program 1988
Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, SA, 1989
'Time Spirit Place,' (Collaborative) Kensington Gallery, Adelaide, SA.
1987 'Marne River Project,' (Collaborative) Contemporary Art Centre, Adelaide, SA.
1986 'Scientists, Life-sized portraits,' Festival Theatre Gallery, Adelaide, SA.
1983 'Painted Photos,' The Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide, SA
The Photographers Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria, 1984
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, NSW 1984

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1996 'Darkness & Silence,' South West Texas University Gallery, San Marcos, Texas
1996 'Reductive Vision,' Helm Fine Arts Center, Austin, Texas.
1995 'Laws of Physics—Principles of Mathematics,' Physics Institute, Washington DC
1993 'Undercurrents,' Lynn Goode Gallery, Houston, Texas.
1992 'New Works,' Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas
1991 'The Perfect World in Contemporary Texas Art,' San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas



Parus bicolor, Tufted Titmouse. Silver Gelatin Photograph handcolored with oils & pencils 32"x32" 1996

- 1988 'Botanica,' Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France
'Death Series,' Jam Factory Gallery, Adelaide, South Australia.
'Australian Photography: The 1980's,' Australian National Gallery, Canberra, ACT
1986 'Beyond the Portrait,' Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, SA
'Australian Landscape Photographed,' National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1983 'Portrait of Elizabeth,' Commissioned by the Corporation of the City of Elizabeth, Elizabeth City Council Chambers, Elizabeth, SA, 1992; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, NSW
1983; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria 1984
1982 'Ten South Australian Photographers' Royal Society of Art, Adelaide, SA
1981 'Colourworks,' The Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide, SA
'Reconstructed Vision,' Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW

COLLECTIONS

University of Tx. at Austin (School of Law) Austin, Tx.
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Photography Collection, The University of Texas at Austin, USA
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Australian National Gallery, Canberra, ACT, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT, Australia
South Australian Law Courts, Adelaide, Australia
Corporation of the City of Elizabeth, South Australia
University of South Australia, Magill Campus and Underdale Campus
Albury Regional Arts Centre, NSW, Australia
City of Toowoomba Art Gallery, NSW, Australia
Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide, Australia
Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, Australia
Riddock Gallery, Mt Gambier, Australia
Osaka Museum, Osaka, Japan



This page: Cyanocitta cristata, Blue Jay, (Fledgling). Silver Gelatin Photograph handcolored with oils & pencils 32"x32" 1996

Middle Panel: Hibiscus syriacus, Rose of Sharon, Althaea. Silver Gelatin Photograph handcolored with oils & pencils 32"x32" 1996

Cover Panel: Passerina cyanea, Indigo Bunting, (Juvenile Male). Silver Gelatin Photograph handcolored with oils & pencils 32"x32" 1997

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Small Deaths is an ongoing series of large toned and handcolored photographs of the heads and torsos of dead birds and lizards, and also of moths and withering flowers. I began this series late in 1995, when having attempted to rescue a bird from a more violent death, it died quietly in the palm of my hand. I am always effected by the power of this moment—witnessing the last breath, the final heart beat, my own quiet dismay. But then I am fascinated by what is left a tiny body to scrutinize in all its beautiful detail.

It seems also as if in this examination of the remains, I might comprehend what that life was, and therefore also what death is.

My work contains this desire to understand but it also becomes my attempt to memorialize these individual creatures as little representatives of all the lives and deaths that we disregard. I tenderly record the beautiful bodies now in transition towards decomposition and disintegration. Soon they will be gone and there will be nothing left to see.

I wish to give these creatures dignity and I hope their images, much 'larger than life,' give them a power and a presence they never had. Because of their scale the bird portraits take on an eerie resemblance to people, the skulls look like dinosaurs, the lizards become like human figures, and the tiny moths' wings, like sails. In a room full of giant corpses, the images of withered flowers become like flowers at a funeral—the sensual beauty of wrinkled, faded petals a gentler reminder of our own mortality.

Kate Breakey



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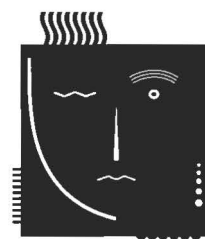
Jill Wood, *Volunteer*

Coordinator/Preparator

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Now celebrating its 19th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1473 artists in 166 visual art exhibitions, 80 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 11 film festivals, and 114 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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