

Vanishing (Portraits)

If you wander into a cemetery in Provence you will see rows of tombs, heavy stone slabs on the ground with a headstone at one end. Mostly they are graves of families, not just individuals. On many of them are small porcelain medallions, usually oval in shape like sentimental lockets, that have photographic portraits of the deceased. From the first moment I saw them, I became fascinated by the faces themselves, by the record of history they embodied, and by the changes that time and process had wrought on them.

This exhibit is the result of a series of impulses that came from different people at different times. First was the decision to take someone's picture, not usually with the idea of using it in a cemetery. The earlier photos are mostly studio portraits; the recent ones are almost all snapshots.

After the subject's death, the family, or sometimes a friend, chose to memorialize the person by mounting the image on the gravestone in a form more durable than paper. This is an impulse firmly embedded in ritual; when a loved one dies we wish to preserve a sense of their existence.

Finally, there was my own act of photographing the photo along with its setting, the mounting frame, the stone behind, and bits of moss and lichen growing around it. I was moved by two desires: first, to record the effects of time, showing the alterations due to years of exposure, and second, to preserve the portrait before further damage made it unrecognizable. I felt connected to the person in the picture, and to whoever placed the original photograph there. I also felt as though I were channeling the effort of the original photographer.

I have taken hundreds of these photos of photos, yielding to an instinct to catalogue their variety. In a parallel project, I have been documenting wildflowers in Provence. Both subjects allow me to work at a scale I love, that of small things, with details that often go unnoticed. And both subjects are vanishing. Beyond their individual erosion, the cemetery portraits are part of a disappearing culture; the wildflowers are part of a disappearing landscape. Culture and landscape are visibly bound together in Haute-Provence. Family farms are clustered around small villages, and between settled areas are large expanses of wilder country where logging, hunting and mushroom collecting are the biggest human impacts. Under pressure from the

global market these organic relations are breaking down: the farms are threatened, tracts of new houses are surrounding the villages, roads are invading new territory, and habitat for wild things is shrinking.

An old portrait photograph is like a window through which we peer into a vanished world. We look "through" the photographic surface, and in our minds we form a virtual image of the person in the frame. The original photo is a vehicle for transmitting information—personal, historical and emotional—but in the cemeteries we see that vehicle breaking down. The information degrades into noise from the physical processes that work through time, and the face that magically seems to be inside the photo become less and less recognizable until it ceases to be a face at all. To be surrounded by hundreds of these eroding portraits makes it clear that an entire community of memory is disappearing.

In a few of my photographs, most of which come from digital originals, I retouched enough of the dust and scratches so that the face (the ideal one in my mind) showed through with greater clarity. I did it with a light hand because I did not want to erase the tracks of time on the surface of the original. Sometimes as I deleted the most distracting bits the image itself would suddenly snap forward as a unity; this is the point when I considered it finished.

I thank Suzanne Guerlac for her assistance in helping me explore the meanings of this exhibit and for her direct contributions to its design and presentation.

Photographing small things has been an abiding interest of mine, first as a botanical photographer and more recently exploring other themes. I did much of the photographic work for *Lichens of North America*, published in 2001 by Yale University Press, and for many smaller publications on lichens. A field guide to the wildflowers of the Sierra Nevada is in progress, to be published by University of California Press. I have three websites, at

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