

**Impermanence Of Life: My Relationship With Death**

by

Ashley Allen

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Sponsor: Matthew Bollinger

Second Reader: Cynthia Lin

My paintings, drawings, and digital works examine the feelings I have about mortality while exploring death as an unknowable concept. My use of color, mark-making, and other abstract approaches comes from my attempt to describe something I've never experienced. This body of work has helped me cope with the inevitability of dying.

My curiosity stemmed from a loss I experienced in my childhood, when my paternal grandmother suffered a fatal heart attack in my old home in Kingston, Jamaica. Being so young I wasn't able to properly digest and mourn the fact that my grandmother was taken from me so abruptly and so quickly. My painting, *Origin of Madness*, comes from my interest in death and its interpretation. It never occurred to me at the time how easily life could just leave us. As I got older I became more aware and more terrified, not only for myself but for my loved ones. And due to this terror, I created a monster out of death.

### Death Personified

A dark, treelike figure stands rooted in the middle of the turquoise canvas. Its torso resembles a tree stump with its roots extending downward and a network of branches up above. These limbs also appear to be in motion, which makes me think of the tentacles of an octopus. The color of these branches vary from bright neon green to a reddish orange that form stripes that wrap around these treelike limbs. Above the figure, a limb arches above its head, resembling a hissing snake. Within this limb there are striking orange patterns that extend down to the shoulders of the figure. These stripes evoke the coats of animals like zebras and tigers. The lungs at the bright blue core of the figure glow. To the left of the figure, a pink sticky-looking substance falls from its limbs like sap from a tree.

The painting's surface is shiny, which makes me walk around it to see the full image. I used strokes of thick paint to form the stripes within its branches. These lines get thinner the

further I move down the body of the figure, becoming less clustered and more spread out from each other. To the right of the figure there are six thick black beams that shoot out from its back. The black objects are not colored flat and have a lot of texture on them. Their texture resembles rough tree bark despite its industrial implications. There also are hints of white peeking out from between the thick lines of black paint on these protrusions. Finally the head of the figure resembles more of a spherical blob. In the middle of the head is a round black shape. Beneath that there is what looks to be a mouth that has a row of disorganized bluish teeth. Its mouth is turned down into a frown. This is a description of a painting, *Origin of Madness*, that I've been working on periodically for a couple of months now. I learn so much more about my work by writing from an objective viewpoint rather than planning the meaning of my work directly. I start to notice the little things and its importance to my pieces.

Death is everywhere; it's even more apparent now because COVID-19 has been terrorizing the world this past year. Because young and old succumb so easily to this disease, I feel an urgent need to create order in my artwork. In mainstream media I often see death characterized as the grim reaper, wielding a menacing scythe used to gather unfortunate souls. In my current project, I decided that I wanted to make my own personification. The goal is to diminish my own fear by turning death's image into something more passive. I wanted to create an image of contemplation rather than simply a description of my anxiety. In my narrative series, *Wolf and Death*, death resembled an amorphous being with a pitch black hole in the center of its head. In this first attempt at personifying death, I used thin washes of desaturated paint and light pen markings to convey the impermanence of life.

At the conclusion of this series of drawings, Death encounters a wolf on its last breath. To convey a sense of peace and acceptance in the animal's final moments, I had Death shapeshift

into the form of a wolf while retaining its trademark black hole. A flower sprouting from its belly, celebrates the beauty of its life. I chose a black hole to be the core signifier of what death represents because, just as anything that is too close to the black hole (like the one in the center of our galaxy) has an inescapable fate, I see death the same way. As something that I cannot flee from.

Now departing from my wolf/amorphous being rendition of death, I wanted to try something new. In the last couple of months I've taken to watching some live streams of various birds, more specifically barn owls. Curious, I started to do more about them and how I could fit these owls (and possibly other species) into this project. Some Native American Tribes, such as the Lakota, Omaha, Cheyenne, Fox, Ojibwa, Menominee, Cherokee, and Creek, consider owls to be either an embodied spirit of the dead or associated with a spirit in some way (Hay, Anne. "Owls In the Native American Culture"). In some cases, the appearance of an owl, especially during the day, may be a harbinger of death. In other cultures such as the Aztecs, Mayans, or the Kikuyu tribe in Africa, owls are also seen as messengers and companions of the gods of death. I also took a look at Goya's set of 80 prints called "Los Caprichos" more specifically No. 43, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." What I found most fascinating with this particular print would be the otherworldliness of the owls hovering over the sleeping figure. As they begin to fade into the backgrounds shrouded in darkness, they seem to transform from owls to huge nightmarish bats. With this in mind I combined the image of the owl with that of the black hole.

My first project featuring the owl was a 36 x 48 inch monotone mixed media drawing. It depicted a large looming figure of an owl with a large black void in the center of its head that appeared to be attacking or flying in the direction of something. I used a mixture of wet (watercolor paint) and dry media (charcoal and soft pastels) in order to create a captivating

atmosphere for the drawing. I began using this new owl version of death in a couple more of my pieces (I made a short animation for example) before I eventually abandoned it. This feeling began when I created another monotone collage work called *Metamorphosis*, where I attempted to make a fusion between an owl and a human figure, creating an abomination. I felt as if I was restricting the different ways I could explore death by trapping it in the vessel of an owl; it felt almost *too* simple. It needed to be more. This process led me to create the tree-like figure I described above, where I used the flexibility of oil paint to my advantage. I work best when I work directly, without planning or sketching. This forces me to experiment and push my subject further in ways I couldn't have imagined planning out beforehand. Death is a mysterious concept, so I think incorporating the unknown into my process helps to draw out what I'm trying to convey.

I love to mess around with all types of media, from oil paint to watercolor and gouache. Recently I've taken to collaging, using both digital and traditional means. This usually involves creating a piece traditionally by drawing, then dropping those pieces into the iPad program Procreate. I first made two dense and detailed ink drawings that depicted a figure made out of an entanglement of tree roots, it's eyes gazing out into a black circular void in the sky. After photographing these drawings, I played around with using different layers in Procreate. By adding more textures and having the freedom to play around with different colors, these pieces went through a complete transformation. What I originally started as a black and white drawing, now had mixtures of different colors almost engraved into the artwork. By using this process, I also got into the habit of reusing my previous works to develop my future pieces.

Two artists that inspire the way I shape the subjects in my pieces are Leonara Carrington for her narrative approaches and Dorothea Tanning for how she creates atmosphere in her

paintings. Both also have an apparent interest in death and how it's depicted in their work. Dorothea Tanning's quote from her *Bomb Magazine* interview directly correlates with my thoughts regarding death. She said "You don't have to be old and wise to be aware of our dilemma. The shadow of mortality" (McCormick, "Dorothea Tanning").

Leonora Carrington has similar views. In an interview in *The Believer Magazine* she said:

"The Believer: What do you think about?"

Leonora Carrington: Well, you become closer to death, so that really tends to dominate everything else.

BLVR: Have you reached an acceptance?

LC: No, I have not. How can one accept the totally unknown? [*Agitated*] We know nothing whatever about it, even if it happens to everyone, to everybody! Animals, vegetables, minerals—everything dies. How can you reconcile with something you know nothing about?" (Sopinka, "*An Interview with Leonora Carrington*")

This particular interview goes deep into Carrington's views on death. Going back to both artists' work, they both have a distinct use of color that I want to incorporate in my palette. They limit their use of saturated colors in order to set the mood for the painting. When they do have those one or two moments of intense color it creates a strong focal point. I tried to display this by using some moments of bright saturated colors that lined the limb of the tree figure in *Untitled*.

I want to be able to use Tanning's method of rendering the figure(or figures) with soft touches of color and Carrington's narrative and selective color decisions in order to better convey the emotion in my work. I have hope that my pieces will be able to effectively convey my complex feelings towards mortality and most importantly pull an emotional response from viewers of my work.

I hope that with the conclusion work, *Origin of Madness*, I can find peace with this method of creating death. While the looming concept of mortality constantly clouds my thoughts, I feel as if I have finally found a way to process these feelings in a healthy way. My image of Death is constantly evolving from my initial response of fear and dread. Now I see death as something to explore and accept, something that I have to face. Whether it be in my work or reality, death is no longer as terrifying as it used to be.

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