Erika DeFreitas’ Deaths/Memorials/Births began as an installation of pages taken from that section of The Toronto Star. DeFreitas cut out all but the page headings and the black borders that outlined the original images and texts. She then chose and reattached sections of the announcements she found resonant. The result was a “metaphoric narrative” that moved vertically through the spaces left by DeFreitas’ expunging of all specific biographical information. DeFreitas began this project on November 7, 2006 and continued it until September 7, 2007. The outcome of her labours was an installation in which the fragility of newsprint echoed the fact of human mortality, and in which the need for people to give public notice of loss or new life, to present a final portrait of a loved one or to assure the dead that they are still missed was both undercut and honoured. As a graduate student at the University of Toronto, DeFreitas has exhibited projects in artist-run centres in Canada and the United States.

Text by Heidi Eigenkind

Erika DeFreitas

Deaths/Memorials/Births

Erika DeFreitas is a Toronto-based emerging artist whose practice is primarily conceptual. Through performance, public interventions, relational exchanges, and photographic documentation, she explores the influence of language, loss, and culture on the formation of identity. A recent graduate from the MFA program in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto, DeFreitas has exhibited projects in artist-run centres in Canada and the United States.

Heidi Eigenkind

Heidi Eigenkind is a visual artist living in Winnipeg who uses handwork techniques involving materials such as beads, yarn, faux fur, horsehair and dental floss. Her previous work involved the restructuring and embellishing of second hand women’s shoes and was included in group exhibitions at Gallery 1C03 (University of Winnipeg) and The New Gallery (Calgary). Eigenkind is currently working on a textile installation based on the children’s game, Snakes and Ladders, that incorporates her research into serpent imagery from various historical, religious, mythic and cultural sources. An honours graduate from the University of Manitoba English Department, Eigenkind has extended her education through mentorship programmes and volunteer opportunities at Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA). She is member and co-founder of the Wendy Wersch Memorial Committee, which presents an annual free public lecture on Women, Autonomy and Art.
of Toronto, DeFreitas installed the work in a student studio/gallery space. It has not been shown since.

Defacement, expunging, obliteration, removal: these terms can apply both to DeFreitas' initial re-working of the announcements from The Toronto Star and to the effects of death or loss. An artist wielding scissors or blade to remove names, faces and life stories does carry an echo of the Grim Reaper swinging a scythe through aeons of human existence. Cutting out and cutting down are not that far apart. In a sense, DeFreitas' cutting away of all but the headings, dates and announcement borders is analogous to the reduction of flesh to bone that, barring cremation, is the fate of any body returned to air, water or earth.

How tense or difficult was it for DeFreitas to engage in such a process?

At first I wasn’t comfortable with cutting out the details of someone’s existence. It was very important for me to read every single ‘entry’ not just because I was choosing words but because reading each entry was my small way of paying respect to each individual. I had to come to terms with the fact that the final outcome of the work itself isn’t about the individual information/ the individual person. I’ve also kept all of the ‘cut-outs’. I couldn’t find it within myself to discard them.

DeFreitas’ discomfort addresses the need to keep safe and intact the memory of those we cherish, to respect the words of those who attest to the importance of another being’s existence. And she has done just that: Kept safe the original announcements after reading every one. In doing so, DeFreitas has created a personal archive of all her acts of omission, a private reliquary of edited texts and missing images that attest to her understanding of the importance of individual existence and the respect due to the dead, their mourners and the newly born.

Death is often considered the final democracy. All mortal beings die. Plant, animal, insect, human, old, young, wealthy, or not, death takes all. Obituaries are not usually as inclusive. First, there is the considerable cost of an announcement. Second, there has to be someone who is willing to follow the deceased’s instructions or in the absence of any such instructions, who cares enough to announce the event and has the emotional and intellectual means to complete the task. In the most fundamental sense, DeFreitas has democratized a social convention rooted in the specific and the personal. She has created a faceless, nameless, classless memorial in which the absence of detail democratizes a social form and renders it truly open to all. Any viewer can fill in the gaps with any loss or celebration. There is no fee except that of the viewer’s attention.

In place of biography DeFreitas offers viewers found poetry fashioned out of words and phrases taken from the original newspaper announcements. This process, which she describes as “a strategy of read, write, arrange” allowed DeFreitas to engage in “reproductive imagination”. The words weren’t entirely chosen by chance. Although, each day, chance brought her a certain body of words, DeFreitas set two restrictions to her process: “the words must be used in the order that they are given and in the same space that they are presented”. It was these strictures that gave DeFreitas the opportunity for an “informal collaboration” with the writer of the original words to create “a third space” where “anyone reading these words can appropriate the narrative to conform to personal experience, memory or thought”.

A navigator for Melody, and Gold and the family times spent picking strawberries and Honey, treasure in her, imagination unwavering ripples announce the winters thereafter to fulfill his dream He provided a multitude of weeping large photographs.

The PLATFORM presentation of Deaths/Memorials/ Births is a memorial in itself. Instead of the original installation, DeFreitas presents fifty 26.5” x 24” digitized inkjet prints of the announcements she has altered. Her decision to use digitized images is in one sense pragmatic. The realities of transporting and reassembling skeletal sections of newspaper include the possibility that the work will be irrevocably damaged. The digitization of the work allows for easier, safer dissemination. In another sense, this movement from actual pieces of aging, gaping newspaper columns to smooth, consistent digital documentation mimics the making of a death mask. It is an attempt to avoid/evade the death of her work, to present images that capture the beauty and pathos of a fragility made mostly of loss, to offer images
that evoke the affects of time, light and handling on a material more fragile than human skin. In writing of architectural ruins, Robert Pogue Harrison, remarks that “they literally embody the dissolution of meaning into matter”. What DeFreitas offers in the PLATFORM version of Deaths/Memorials/Births is meaning created out of the dissolution of matter, meaning linked to the passing of time and life, meaning that offers the same solace as conventional obituaries: the irreplaceable has been lost but something of value remains.

[ Heidi Eigenkind ]
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EXHIBITION
Friday, 31 October – Saturday, 13 December 2008

RECEPTION
7 PM, Friday, 31 October 2008

ARTIST TALK
3 PM, Saturday, 1 November 2008

WORKS EXHIBITED

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