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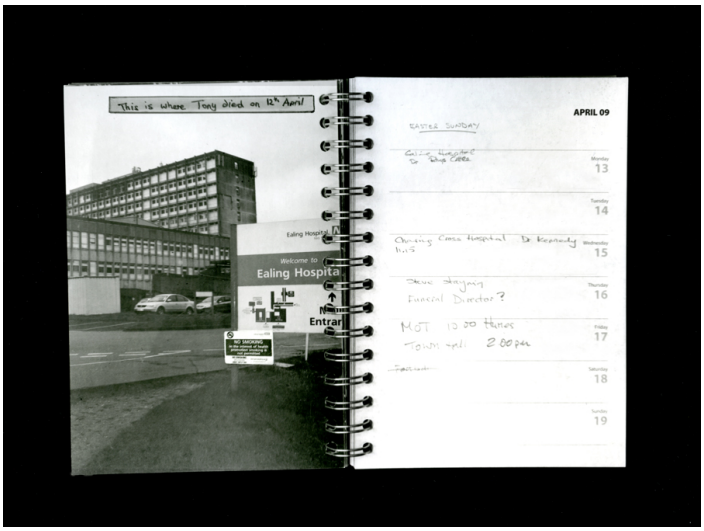
The Power of Possessions: an investigation into the ontology of personal possessions in the context of death and bereavement through the practice of still-life photography.



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the objects left behind when someone dies, this project examines, through photographic practice, the history of a life as evidenced in the wounds and scars distinguishing personal possessions from commodities. Although photographic practice constitutes the critical centre of the research, this thesis goes some way to providing a context in which the work can be understood.

Visual artists and literature relating to objects of the dead have not addressed the issue of materiality directly, but focused instead on the association of remembrance. I address this gap by producing a body of photographic work visually exploring the physical traces of possession. The accretions of wear and tear on material objects are an important motif that finds an analogy in the photographic process itself; the trace of touch on clothing made visible by the trace of light on film. This accompanying reflective discourse demonstrates how the iconic and indexical qualities of photographic representation make it the ideal medium for the creation of narratives that embody an emotional investment in everyday objects. The resulting photographic artefacts will add to our understanding of the ways in which a sense of touch is visually articulated; contribute to an understanding of the materiality of ordinary objects and, importantly, it will also shed light on the often-neglected power of possessions to shape a life.

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Chapter 1: Overview

1.1 Introduction

The Power of Possessions is a practice-based research project that explores the objects of the dead. The project aims to illuminate the rituals (or lack of them) associated with divestment of personal possessions after the loss of a loved one. *The Power of Possessions* has three themes: a photographic interrogation of the objects of the dead, a discourse on touch as evidenced in the genre of still life, and the representation of loss. The project interprets and contributes to trends in contemporary material culture through a series of photographic art works and through this exegesis.

The portfolio of prints submitted as part of this study illuminate the phenomenon of possession through a close scrutiny of the accidental marks left on personal items. The project focuses on the objects of the dead as a field of discourse in accordance with the research themes. By reference to what is lost in terms of embodiment and a sensuous relationship to objects, it will highlight those aspects of possession that differentiate individuality through surface descriptions which trace time and ownership. The objects of the dead are no longer subject to this on-going process and, therefore, provide forensic material for investigation. The photographic artefacts will examine these issues through attention to descriptive detail, careful framing and choice of materials and lighting to highlight the individuating characteristics that transform objects into

personal possessions.

These traces are the primary subject matter that is explored in relation to touch, ownership and transience. After the loss of my husband, my photographic practice provided a place where I could make, reflect and gradually work through a period of mourning. Although the resulting photographs, exhibition and website can be viewed as memorials to one person, my aim is to open a wider discourse relating to the divestment of the personal possessions of the dead.

1.2 Scope of project

Over recent decades scholarship dealing with the subject of death and grief has increased considerably, with the establishment of 'Death Studies' departments in Universities both internationally and in the United Kingdom. The growing academic discourse embraces interdisciplinary approaches between the humanities, the social and life sciences and medicine. The Centre for Death and Society, run from Bath University, was established in 2005 and reflects this growing interest in issues relating to mortality. My research will add to this area of scholarship through a photographic exploration of the personal possessions that the dead leave behind.

Visual art, literature and ethnographic studies relating to objects of the dead (e.g. Ruby, 1955; Batchen, 1999; Didion, 2005; Gibson, 2008) have,

for the most part, focused on the power of particular objects to act as custodians of memory or to evoke emotional responses during a process of grief and mourning. Attention is rarely paid to the physical materiality of these everyday objects. In this project I acknowledge the power of possessions and seek an understanding of that power by producing a body of photographic work visually exploring the appearance of objects for traces of touch. I use photographic practice to examine the private world of possessions for clues to the life of the person who was once defined through these possessions.

After a person dies, there are rituals and cultural conventions for dealing with the dead body and these have been explored in the literature. However, there is no ritual associated with the divestment of the personal possessions left behind. The social anthropologist, Margaret Gibson, notes, that 'we remember, hold on to or let go of the deceased through their material possessions.' (Gibson, 2008. p.3) Based largely on interviews with the bereaved, Gibson explores the fate of objects after death, pointing to the complex and often poignant nature of dealing with the objects left behind. She discovered that objects, such as photographs and clothing, were most likely to trigger feelings of attachment or bring specific memories. Her study focuses on associations of remembrance and how these objects are used by the bereaved for the purposes of coming to terms with loss. In this study I focus on the physical nature of the objects themselves, the phenomenon of possession and the haunting presence of embodiment in objects of the

dead. I explore how our relationship to possessions is laid down and given meaning, how embodiment and touch are accumulated on the surfaces of objects and fixed in space and time.

Peter Schwenger has argued that 'there is a melancholy associated with physical objects' (Schwenger, 2006, p.1) and that is generated by the act of perception. He points out that the familiar presence of things affords us comfort and reveals 'our investments in them' (ibid. p.3). This study takes as a premise the notion that investment in an object comes about, at least in part, through a process of touch. It explores the use to which objects were put, the manner in which they were handled and the scars that they bear as a consequence of possession. Working within a still life genre, the study focuses on quotidian objects, such as clothing, whose value lies not in monetary worth but in their power to evoke memory and the emotional frisson of touching something that once belonged. The resulting photographs do not purport to replicate the sense of touch but make enquiry into the links, the trails of history, stored in fragments of a life.

1.3 Background

I began this project during a period of grief and this experience inevitably influenced the work that forms the main part of this study. I cannot ignore my personal inner life and I bring my experience with death to *The Power*

of Possessions hoping to speak about an invisible, constant and silent sense of loss. I see this subjective positioning as an inescapable and valuable contribution to the outcome.

Although this work emerges from a particular death event, it can be seen as a development of earlier projects. It is perhaps true to say that my practice has always centred on the theme which, touching the core of human consciousness, acts as a reminder that every living creature must face death. There are many ambiguities woven into our discourse with death and within my photographic practice I have discovered powerful and contradictory emotions. What distinguishes this project, and moves it beyond an abstract reflection on transience, is that it is informed by the touch of death. The death of my husband is both a source of and on-going influence on the making of this work.

1.4 Practice Methodology

Following a distinction made by Christopher Frayling (1993) in his validation of Higher Degrees for studio based art practice within UK Higher Education institutions; this study can be considered as ‘research through art and design’ and ‘for art and design’. In other words, my photographic practice constitutes the primary research activity and the photographs included with this submission demonstrate design insights that may not be possible to communicate in words. Methodologies such as the development of personal/subjective imagery, the use of tacit (or intuitive) knowledge and documenting of information in a series of linked

work books have been adopted as appropriate practice-based research for this study. Whilst conceptualisation and analysis of the subject area will be articulated through language, it is essential that the practical component is viewed as fundamental to the study for it is through the creation of photographic artefacts that creative reflection will be made manifest.

Research through design is exploratory and does not set out to test an *a priori* hypothesis. The advantage to this less stringent approach is that potentially interesting relationships can be developed in ways that are not open in the hypothetico-deductive model of reasoning. In other words, I am answering 'what' and 'how' questions rather than a 'why' question. The practical research evidence intersects with discursive argument within the context of a literature review. A critical analysis of the practical outcomes will identify and explore resonances within contemporary still life photographic practice.

As with all practice-based research (or research through art practice) making the artefact is a methodological imperative. Understandably, this poses challenges within a traditional research culture and I am acutely aware of the need to explain the practice methodology. To this end, I have drawn upon the work of Michael Polanyi (1966) and Donald Schön (1983) to provide a conceptual framework for the chosen methodology. The photographic prints that form the major part of this research provide knowledge through picturing. The outcome so far results from a mixture

of observation, craft, subjective experience and what Schön refers to as ‘reflection in action’. For this study, I have employed traditional, craft based, monochrome photographic techniques and materials as tools of investigation.

1.5 Exegesis methodology

The written component follows a qualitative narrative approach and draws on a range of visual methodologies as identified by Gillian Rose in her book outlining contemporary methods of interpreting visual culture. I position the photographic element of the study within contemporary and historical readings. There is, within the broad context of art, a tradition of mourning through creative endeavour. The death of a parent, child or partner has no automatic response, the loss may be expected or unexpected, the emotional turbulence bearing lesser or greater relationship to the loss as to the temperament of the survivor. Poets, novelists and artists who have been touched by loss have sought to express feelings of grief and sorrow through creative practice. In recent years a number of photographers have begun to make work that seeks to explore issues relating to loss.

The research for this paper is documented in journals, notebooks and documentary photographs. The research included visits to galleries, contemporary exhibitions and specialist printing facilities. Conferences, photography festivals and portfolio reviews provided additional background information. The methodology also involved conducting

literature searches and reviews of relevant texts in photography, cultural theory, social history, and art, philosophy, poetry and material culture. In particular, I have found inspiration in the work of cultural historians such as Classen (2005), Howes (2005) and Miller (2010). Their work is opening up a discourse relating to the portrayal of the sensuous dimension of human experience through art and culture. I am also conscious of my own subjective place within this study and the resulting document can be considered as part thesis and part narrative. This is in line with the subject matter of the research.

1.6 Aims and objectives

The practical photographic framework through which the pictures for this project are created is not innovative in kind, nor does it use camera or printing techniques in new or revealing ways. Indeed the photographic artefacts produced bring nothing new in terms of process or technique and could rightly be described as using 'outmoded' methods of production. But it is not in the form of the artefact (use of film and silver bromide papers) that I hope to offer new insights but through sensitivity to the subject matter and technical skill. It is not innovation in the medium but rather innovation of content that I seek. This might seem, at first glance, an extravagant claim given the ubiquity of images in our lives. However, I wish to draw a distinction that will make this suggestion more feasible.

Recent photographic discourse is divided in its understanding of the connection between the photograph as concrete thing (an actual physical object that can be touched, measured and collected), and the virtual image which is a tantalisingly elusive in size and form; a gleaming and fleeting phenomenon which we can call, like a genie, to our screens. Consensus appears to be emerging that that this distinction is real and not illusory. In a recent article about photographic scholarship, the historian, Robin Kelsey argues that 'curiosity about the division between these spaces has displaced concern for older divisions, such as that between photography and painting.' (Kelsey, 2013) This division, between the terms 'image' (used to speak about representations on screens) and 'picture' (used for representations of a more physical nature) suggests an alignment of traditional analogue photography with painting, insofar as both are collectable and both trail provenance as a promise of financial gain. From the perspective of this project, it is not this alignment that is important but, rather, that the 'touch' inherent in the fact of possession should find reverberations in the making (the physicality of the process) with an outcome that can, in turn, be touched. This allows the work to be positioned within an ontological framework that can accommodate innovation of content rather than innovation of process.

1.7 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework employed is one of descriptive research. Descriptive techniques are connected to the project goal. Inevitably, the

recursive nature of the process involves a series of restatements and refinements throughout.

The still life genre provides the framework through which connections are made between the world of objects and the realm of the senses. By positioning this project within the genre of still life, I distance it from the therapeutic work with photography that employs photographs relating to the lost one as a means of working with memory. This is not to say that some of the objects of the photographs may not be imbued with memory but, rather, that the photographs themselves are not, insofar as they are viewed for their content. However, I acknowledge that as artefacts, bearing their own scars, photographic prints (that once belonged) can also be considered as personal possessions.

The distinction that I wish to draw here is that between the personal consumption of photographic content, images of loved ones as memento and the photograph as physical artefact. Photographic content, causally tied as it is to the lost object serves individual memory with great power, just as a lock of hair in a locket would have once served as evidence of existence and indicator of continued influence. Although not here now, the trace is proof that the loved one did once exist and that the loss is real. Nor do I deny that photographs have a second power attached to them in that their iconic status (the fact that they in some sense look like the lost object) makes them doubly valuable. When memories begin to fade, they can be reinvigorated by a dip into the family album. The

photographs we select to symbolise the lost person are not arbitrary. Few of us privilege the images made in old age, of a decaying body, as keepsakes. Just as we think of the sunflower with its radiant, golden face rather than as a seed or with brown, bedraggled, downcast head, we select an image on which we can hang fond memories and we allow ourselves to forget what does not suit us. When we choose a photograph to represent the lost person, a photograph to put on a bedside table or mantelpiece, a photograph to carry around with us, we select one that symbolised what the person means to us; that stands in for a period of years. For these photographs are no longer related to the dead person, their purpose is not to describe an individual but to demonstrate that we who carry the images are survivors of love. Such photographs, the cherished outward symbol of a continuing life in and through survivors, are not the focus of this study.

It is the use to which the objects were put, rather than the objects themselves, that provides a focus of the work. Issues of personal and social identity do arise, but with a certain shyness on my part to address them outright. I am aware that the intimacy with which I photograph some items of clothing may make uncomfortable viewing and I confess to being slightly disturbed by the thought that I have violated an unspoken right in relation to the dead, to a partner, to a family. This concern is mitigated to some degree by the knowledge that the work has no commercial value. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine anyone wanting to purchase a photograph of a shabby mass-produced item of clothing – unless, of course, the

artefact was distinguished through association with historical events or celebrity. So I make the work in a spirit of research curiosity and a desire to understand the powerful and contradictory emotions of attraction and repulsion engendered in me by these items. Just as Sigmund Freud (1953 p.334) posited that the 'residues of the day' are an important component in the formation of our dreams, I examine the residue of a life to serve memory and imagination. Both offer fragments with which to build narrative, neither speaks of truth.

Poets appear to have explored the inner recesses of dreams and stream of consciousness associations in a more considered fashion and Ramazani (1994) makes clear that modern elegy exploits and disrupts theories of mourning and melancholia derived from Freud. This study keeps in focus this method of interpretation as a framework for developing, the increased potential for photographic creativity in the light of this understanding. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's great homage to Arthur Henry Hallam was completed in 1849, seventeen years after the death of his friend. It is testimony to the long and most deeply felt grief with which Tennyson struggled to cope. Although Freud would, perhaps, have considered such prolonged grief to be pathological, melancholic and something requiring treatment, it must be acknowledged that out of this emerged a great work in which poetry lovers continue to find beauty and consolation.

Traditional ways of looking at still life painting bear some resemblance to the theoretical discourses relating to the genre of poetic elegy. Mythological, historical and temporal considerations have been carefully scrutinised and the representational and descriptive quality of works examined for accuracy and truthfulness by scholars such as Lessing (1776), Lee (1967) Gombrich (1963) and Bryson (2008). Contemporary critics, adopting psychoanalytical methodology, have offered fascinating and beguiling new ways of interpreting paintings. In his analysis of Cezanne's "apples" Meyer Schapiro (1968) argues that it is legitimate to interpret work from a psychoanalytical perspective, despite the fact that painters may not have been aware of such potential interpretations at the time of making the work. Drawing upon these themes, I examine a number of photographic texts in order to illuminate the claim that personal loss is transfigured through a process of making and that photography is a suitable medium for this transfiguration.

1.8 Summary and exclusions

In summary, each of the following chapters has a specific focus to discuss the themes outlined above. Chapter 2 elaborates in more detail the chosen methodologies and offers supporting evidence for their appropriateness in relation to the subject area. Chapter 3 situates the work within an historical and contemporary context. Chapter 4 discusses the making of the work and the installation of the exhibition *The Power of Possession*s. Chapter 5 analyses personal practice and discusses the emergence of the theme of touch as a relevant area of discourse in

relation to objects of the dead. Chapter 6 seeks a conclusion to the meaning of the other chapters and offers an intimation of closure for the project.

This investigation does not consider the literature relating to death studies that concentrates, for the most part, on the nineteenth century practice of post-mortem photography. In recent years, photographic practice relating to death and photography has been seen to emerge from Germany, most notably the work of Walter Schells and Beate Lakotta (2008), which explores through photography and text, the hopes and fears relating to dying and the photographic representation of life itself. This is a powerful and moving piece of creative work but it does not relate directly to the research topic. Whilst this area of research is not without interest in relation to bereavement and loss, it is not the focus of this study.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction to research approach

This chapter outlines the research approach, design and methods used to address the research topic outlined in the introduction. A range of methodologies have been identified as appropriate for practice-based research by contemporary practitioners and educators; methodologies such as the development of personal/subjective imagery, the use of tacit (or intuitive) knowledge and documenting of information in a series of linked work books. It is important to make clear that the criteria and methodology employed in this study differ fundamentally from those usually employed in other disciplines such as the social sciences.

Christopher Frayling has written one of the most influential essays on research in art and design in which he identified three categories of research that relate to what artists do. According to Frayling these 'three categories …grew out of what we actually do' (Frayling, 1993, p.5). They are:

- Research into art and design
- Research through art and design
- Research for art and design

Frayling acknowledges that he derived these categories from the work of Herbert Read who had made similar distinctions in reference to the education of children. Read's thesis is that art should be the true basis of education, that art is practice, it is play, and that it cannot be taught but

must be encouraged. Read advocated teaching through art (as opposed to teaching about art). He claimed that the skills are not taught but acquired and that they are associated with craft. (Read, 1953, p.205) I have found the distinction useful in relation to my own research in that the practical element is research through and for art and design, whereas the written component can be thought of as research into and for art and design.

Despite what he described as the 'thorny' nature of 'research for art and design, 'where the end product is an artefact- where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artefact, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication' (ibid. p.5). Frayling took the notion of 'education through art' and transformed it into 'research through art' in his validation of Higher Degrees for studio based art practice within a UK Higher education institution.

In 1997, the UK Council for Graduate Education report into Practice-based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design defined practice-based research in this way:

> [T]he practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice. An original/creative piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated

through the original creative work. (Frayling et al., 1997)

The debate has moved on considerably in recent years and many colleges and universities in the United Kingdom have now developed PhD programmes incorporating different forms of knowledge with correspondingly diverse methods of practice-based research. As I write this there are at least fifteen British practice-led research centres. Numerous conferences and articles continue to discuss the intellectual and creative infrastructures that support practice-based research. The University of Hertfordshire hosts a biennial international 'Research into Practice' conference with the aim of addressing the fundamental questions of research in this area and facilitating debate amongst academics, researchers and practitioners.

In 2004 EARN (European Artistic Research Network) was established to share and exchange knowledge in artistic research with 'particular reference to the development of postgraduate programmes' (EARN 2004). It uses the term 'artistic research' to describe research which incorporates actual practice within the research and aims to identify shared core concerns whilst respecting the diversity of models and cultures of art research. Nevertheless, despite all the scholarly articles on the subject, the intellectual and creative infrastructures that support practice-based or practice-led research are still at a stage of development and not universally accepted as legitimate forms of research. There are still clear challenges for the research practitioner to overcome. For

example, I have found it difficult to find research precedents to which I can appeal in framing my process. Furthermore, I am aware that there may be risks that I have not identified when I use concepts from other fields.

2.2 Practice Research Challenges

The art historian, James Elkins, has highlighted a number of problems and challenges that need to be considered in relation to practice-based research. In particular, he has suggested that normal scholarly protocols do not apply. “Why? Because the purpose of the candidate’s forays into different disciplines is to mine them in order to further her artwork” (Elkins, 2009, p.162). A research study on an art historical subject must include all the relevant literature, primary sources and the latest interpretive theories; the argument must be sound and the research impeccable but what matters for the practicing artist is that this material can be used in some way that is neither specified in advance nor necessarily acknowledged by the practitioner. Elkins also makes the point that the usual criteria for thoroughness, clarity, production of new knowledge and criteria for truth do not provide an appropriate model by which to assess the research.

Understandably this has necessitated a cautious approach in relation to the methodology chosen for this study. I am aware that I am not completely aligned with traditional academic quantitative or qualitative requirements. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the chosen methodology

is not irrational but based on a desire to use the most appropriate communication method. As with other art forms, photographic practice is an exacting and rigorous process that requires constant critical appraisal, reworking, reflection, editing, more critical appraisal and so on. This process of overlapping and interconnected phases of creative research is conveniently broken into phases by Robert Nelson' s distinction 'between four cs: (i) context, (ii) creation, (iii) correction and (iv) criticism'. (Nelson, 2009, p.105) Nelson does not suggest that the process is necessarily straightforward but makes the claim that all these elements play a part in the evolution of a created artefact. This process results in an iterative model of theory and practice that demonstrates the recursive nature of artistic endeavour and forms the basis for understanding.

Douglas Hofstadter coined the phrase 'tangled hierarchies and strange loops' (Hofstadter, 1979. p.10) to help illuminate the mystery of thought processes in music, art and mathematics. His wonderfully engaging exploration demonstrates that the 'rules' of any system often become entangled in fascinating ways. Artists such as Escher or Magritte have exploited these strange loops with enchanting and perplexing dexterity. Hofstadter's interrogation of 'Drawing Hands' by M.C. Escher reveals how the visible structure of tangled hierarchies depends on an invisible and inviolate level that cannot be easily comprehended. Although in Escher's work there is always a surprise element that makes the images so rewarding to look at, the concept of 'Strange Loop' provides a compelling

metaphor for looking at the way in which practice-based research is conducted. Hofstadter explains the phenomenon in this way:

> The “Strange Loop” phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started. ……. Sometimes I use the term Tangled Hierarchy to describe a system in which a Strange Loop occurs. As we go on, the theme of Strange Loops will recur again and again. Sometimes it will be hidden, other times it will be out in the open; sometimes it will be right side up, other times it will be upside down, or backwards. (Hofstadter, 1979, p.10)

Using this as a model opens up the possibility of practice and theory interacting with each other in a complex manner that defies traditional research approaches. This research approach also allows the practitioner to include any other methodology as part of the process. What is required is a specified area of interest as a starting point and an initial intention. This is the first ‘loop’ of the research. As the research progresses (photographing, printing, reading theory, writing, reflecting, examining images) the research loops will spiral towards an understanding of the topic in a series of restatements of the area of interest and refinement until the output is complete. This methodology is not only circular, it jumps levels of understanding and encourages moves that bring areas of practice, reflection, critical analysis together with a flexibility that enables practical and theoretical endeavours to stimulate each other. The subjective and the objective languages of discourse are not rendered irreconcilable on this view, but influence each other in

‘tangled hierarchies’. Although we may never be able to step back far enough to view from outside these systems, this does not mean that we should not be aware that a meta level exists which is inviolable. It is simply that we can never be in a position to know it. As Hofstadter asserts, ‘Implicit in the concept of Strange Loops is the concept of infinity, since what else is a loop but a way of representing an endless process in a finite way.’ (op.cit. p.15) This would suggest that as a mode of research, there is great potential for ideas to develop through and from the creative outcomes of the research and that it is not necessary for this to be conceived as linear progression.

2.3 Reflective Practice

One important consequence of practice-based research is that it may lead to insights that are not possible to communicate in words, even by the most experienced critical analysts. In his seminal work on reflective practice, Donald Schön argues that practitioners know more than they can say and ‘exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit.’ (Schön,1983 p.*ix*). Schön is here drawing upon the concept of tacit knowledge first articulated by the scientist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi. Assuming that practitioners know more than they can say, Polanyi pointed out that practitioners very often cannot describe the knowledge that they have, that they make judgements of quality without being able to state adequate criteria and display skills without being able to articulate the rules and procedures associated with the skills. In other

words, the practitioner is ‘dependent on tacit recognition, judgements and skilful performances’. (Polanyi, 1966, p.50)

This observation is further developed by Schön through his innovating insights into what critical practitioners actually do. Rejecting the positivistic view of science which has dominated academic and scientific research (and which sees science as a body of established propositions derived from research) Schön argues for an ‘epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive process which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict’. (ibid. p.49) Examining a range of professional practices, he demonstrates reflective practice across many fields from psychoanalysis to architecture and town planning pointing out similarities in relation to problem identification and problem solving. All deal with unique situations to which a repertoire of experience is brought to bear. The core of Schön’s study is an analysis of the distinctive structure of reflective practice, which, he argues, ‘is susceptible to the kind of rigor that is both like and unlike the rigor of scholarly research and controlled experiment’. (ibid. p.*ix*)

Schön argues that the spontaneous behaviour of skilful practice reveals a kind of knowing which cannot be described, pointing out that we cannot always give adequate criteria for judgements of quality or say what rules determine a display of skill. Whereas explicit knowledge can be stored, transferred and made available to all and in many locations, tacit

knowledge requires a close relationship and a single location for transfer to be possible. Schön describes this as ‘knowing how’ rather than ‘knowing that’. He says, ‘the know-how is in the action…. and that in much of the spontaneous behaviour of skilful practice we reveal a kind of knowing which does not stem from a prior intellectual operation.’ (op. cit. p.50) Reiterating this point, he quotes Gilbert Ryle’s observation that “intelligent” cannot be defined in terms of “intellectual” nor may “knowing how” be defined in terms of “knowing that”. (Ryle, 1945) Cognitive psychologists would describe this as the difference between procedural knowledge and declarative knowledge.

The characteristic mode of ordinary practical knowledge is, Schön argues, ‘knowing-in-action’. (op. cit. p.54) In other words, skilful practice, in whatever field, reveals a kind of knowing which is not systematically formulated and, indeed, requires the understanding of the whole body, rather than just the head, in order to perform well. I think here of such activities as riding a horse, playing the violin or throwing a pot. Schön expands his observations with the introduction of the concept of ‘reflection-in-action’. It is the experience of surprise that is often the starting point for reflection-in-action. An unexpected outcome gives rise to new thoughts and causes the practitioner to reflect and to think critically in order to restructure strategies of action. Schön analysed the distinctive structure of reflection-in-action arguing that ‘when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context.’ (op. cit. p.68)

In the first of three books on material culture, Richard Sennett also argues for an understanding of craftsmanship that recognises that the skill of making things well is more than a matter of mastering technique.

> Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding. The relations between hand and head appears in domains as seemingly different as bricklaying, cooking, designing a playground, or playing the cello. (Sennett, 2008, p.9)

The knowledge gained through touch and movement is enhanced through imaginative explorations, through trial and error and developing skills to repair and improvise. For Sennett, the craftsman [or woman] 'represents that special human condition of being engaged.' (ibid. p.20) Engagement with an activity (or problem to be resolved) requires both technical skill and imagination. The intelligence of the skill may be in the form of a physical response that often remains unarticulated. Sennett proposes, controversially, that nearly everyone can become a good craftsman. He points out that the 'rhythm of craftsmanship draws on childhood experience of play' and that 'almost all children can play well' (op. cit. p.269). Although the link between play and craft echoes the link between play and art made by Herbert Read (1953) and has been thoroughly explored by the paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott (1971) there is something new in Sennett's proposal. Drawing on the psychoanalytical work of Erik Erikson, rather than the school of thought associated with Winnicott, Sennett stresses the importance of

rule making for play. Not only must rules be consistent and apply to everyone (no matter their ability), they are founded on the concept of repetition, on the idea that activities can be repeated over and over again. Sennett argues that childhood play lays the groundwork for practice 'and practicing is a matter both of repetition and modulation.' (op. cit. p.272) There is a theory, made popular by Malcolm Gladwell (2008) in his book *Outliers,* proposing that 10,000 hours of practice is needed to master a skill. Whether or not this is true may be debatable but one thing is clear. It is not enough simply to devote time to repetition. What is important is the idea of 'modulation'. The repetition of an action is tempered and improved through small experience-driven changes. Sennett also recognises that the sequences of working and reflecting must, of necessity, be incomplete, 'because it's often not possible to reckon ethical or, indeed, material consequences.' (op. cit. p.296) This cycle of practice and reflection seems to echo the observations made by Schön in relation to all forms of practical knowledge. I find here a clear correspondence with my own photographic practice.

This study also adapts Schön's concept of 'reflection as action' as a relevant methodology to reflect on personal photographic practice. The suggestion here is that of being able to abstract from a particular, unique experience something that, when reflected upon, has validity to a wider audience. Thus we recognise or empathise with a given situation, moving from the concrete to the abstract, and finding in the particular, a general truth. Whilst the creation of practical artefacts relies on 'tacit' or

experiential knowledge from the intimate, subjective perspective of the reflective practitioner, it is the practice of reflecting upon this action that Schön identifies as essential. He calls this process ‘reflective conversation’ (op. cit. p.271) and it may take place through any media including, but not exclusively, language (e.g. music, photography) and will always be richer in information than any description of it. Furthermore, each production is unique in fusing relevant prior experience with the relevant peculiarities of a particular work. A complex mixture of objective research and subjective experience and reflections form the basis of tacit knowledge.

2.4 Process

Documentation plays a vitally important part in practice-led research. The evolving spiral of thought associated with the production of artefacts needs, for the purposes of research, to be transformed into evidence. Workbooks and journals will form the basis of my documentation and will serve as a database of tests, processes and contextualization. Conceptualization, the manipulation of materials and the execution of the artwork will be used to facilitate reflection. Preliminary photographic explorations into composition, technical testing and print trials will be archived as part of the evidence of the research.

The decision to employ traditional, craft-based, monochromatic photographic practice as a tool of photographic investigation has two roots. The straightforward desire to work with equipment and materials

that were familiar, and with which I had some expertise, provided the impetus for my decision. However, it soon became clear to me that this methodology offered the most appropriate tool for this enquiry. Reverberations of touch (as evidenced in the photographic exploration of personal possessions) thread through the process of making and become embodied into artefacts that can in turn be handled. By using a large format camera I am able to clearly describe the stresses of everyday usage and accretions of ownership that mark the subject of my investigation. Traditional silver bromide printing techniques render the finished artefacts equally vulnerable to touch. The distinguishing elements of a personal possession are inextricably linked to their materiality and to their history, to the visible marks that signify human interaction with the object. Similarly, the rituals of the slow, almost anachronistic, photographic processes employed; the complicity with chemical materials and the properties of light, serve to create photographic objects that display their evolutionary background. The arrangement of objects in front of the camera; upside down and back to front viewing through a ground glass screen; the moment of exposure marked on film by light; the chemical development of the latent image and the slow ritual of printing in the darkroom trace the history of the process. It will be shown that the act of seeing and the marks of touch transcribed by technology and technique are indelibly inscribed on the print through the blemishes and scars left by human interaction.

The traditional monochrome materials used throughout also promises to provide a memorial in precious metal. In a culture where virtual reincarnations of those who have been lost offer the opportunity for public mourning in ways impossible until the advent of digital technology and the development of 'The Cloud' (actually giant warehouses) this may seem to be an outmoded choice of commemoration. However, this is not a study that seeks to interrogate the nature of grief or mourning within contemporary culture. It is an exploration of the power that distinguishes a possession from a commodity, within a context of death and loss. Personal possessions, overlooked and everyday objects, share the narrative of the possessor. It follows that when a person dies the vital force that kept the objects together breaks asunder. What is left behind is simply debris, silent and without motion. In this study, I acknowledge, but do not explore, the photographic legacy that may be an unintentional consequence of this research.

2.5 Visual methodologies

The research philosophy adopted for the written component of this investigation follows a phenomenological paradigm rather that the positivist paradigm associated with scientific research and employs a narrative framework as a research method. By this I mean that the data acquired through a range of experimental and investigative avenues such as creative photographic practice or traditional literary research techniques cannot be used to verify or falsify an hypothesis but rather, that they are utilised to create meaning. Using the first person voice and

reflective analysis leads, necessarily, to a subjective positioning of the research data. I am aware that this approach to research may be subject to a number of criticisms, most notably that it might amount to no more than an assembly of personal impressions that are almost impossible to verify (or falsify). In other words, a different researcher exploring similar material might offer a very different interpretation to the one I put forward. This objection is met, not by trying to straightjacket this research into a positivistic framework, but rather by observing that the use of flexible, subjective and multiple methods can yield an outcome with a focus on meaning in relation to the phenomenon under examination, even when the laws of scientific method are not invoked.

The laws of physics, of hypothesis and prediction, do not apply to human predicaments. Although a person may follow the 'stages of grief' identified by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) after the death of a loved one, it is not the case that everyone who loses a partner will be equally affected or that they will experience all of the identified stages in the prescribed order. The persistently recursive pattern of emotional responses to loss echoes a Mobius loop with its own paradoxical structure. An explanation of grief in terms of electro-chemistry and connections between the billions of neurons and synapses in the brain may increase our understanding of the complexity of the brain but can offer no explanation of meaning.

I have drawn extensively on the work done by Gillian Rose (2001) for my choice of visual methodologies in relation to the artistic and historical contextualisation of this study. Rose identifies three sites at which the meanings of images are made 'the site(s) of production of the image, the site of the image itself, and the sites where various audiences see it.' (Rose, 2001, p.16) She further suggests that each of the sites have different aspects (or modalities). The modalities are defined as technical, compositional or social. However, there is no claim that these distinctions are always clear and distinct from one another and towards the end of the book Rose reminds us that 'these three sites and modalities are in practice often difficult to distinguish from one another.' (ibid. p.188) It would, therefore, seem important to have some contextual knowledge in order to decide which sites and modalities to focus upon when attempting an explanation of the effect of an image.

Rose identifies a range of qualitative methodologies associated with the visual including compositional interpretation, semiotics, psychoanalysis and discourse analysis. She carefully explains the benefits and drawbacks associated with these different methodologies pointing out that a single methodology could limit interpretation. Advocating an interdisciplinary approach where different methodologies can inform and complement one another to allow for richer inter-textual comparisons, she says:

> Using more than one method in this manner clearly has benefits. It allows a richly detailed picture of images' significance to be developed,

> and in particular it can shed interesting light on the contradictory meanings an image may articulate. The visualities articulated by producers, images and audiences may not coincide. (op.cit. p.202)

However, this is not a claim that all interpretations are equal. Some interpretations are more critically convincing than others and evidence is required to underpin the meanings attributed to visual works. I have found it useful to follow the advice about multiple approaches given by Rose and, therefore, I have not confined my approach to one particular methodology. This approach is in accordance with the 'magpie like' activity of creative research identified by Elkins, (op. cit. p.162). Whilst recognising that different methods offer differing interpretations, my strategy is to keep an open mind about the possible and potential meaning of the photographic works that I review. Some visual works have many meanings (deliberately or coincidentally) and it is not uncommon to miss an artist's intention or identify an unintended effect. A failure to grasp all meanings may not be a shortcoming on the part of the viewer of the image but an achievement by the producer of the work.

The strength of this approach is in providing meaning and understanding. It is a critical process in which the need for rigour, attention to evidence, precision and logical reasoning are essential, serving to engender a framework for reflective practice. In this study, I employ photographic practice as one of the elements of interrogation into the nature of personal possession and it is, therefore, essential that the written

component is not viewed as a separate piece of work but is seen as integral to an understanding of the practical element. Inevitably, there is an element of the autobiographical in all creative practice and it is difficult to equate this with academic values of objectivity. My aim is to be as transparent as possible with regard to my own processes and practice. By placing the work within a context that connects with past traditions and contemporary photographic practice and indicating ways in which it can be linked with other information presented in this thesis, I hope to demonstrate good faith and a modest approach, through the contribution of my photographic practice, to the genre of still life.

Chapter 3: Context

3.1 Introduction to historical context

In her distinguished book on seventeenth century Dutch Art, Svetlana Alpers argues that the northern tradition (Seventeenth Century Dutch Art) 'can best be understood as being an art of describing as distinguished from the narrative art of Italy' (Alpers, 1983, p.*xx*) She observes that the pictorial traditions of representation, which were already established by the seventeenth century, were reinforced by the new sciences of optics and technology. This resulted in an art that was not based on the model of Italian art in which 'imitative skills were bound to narrative ends' (ibid. p.*xxi*) but in an art 'whose meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in – however descriptive that may be.' (ibid. p.*xxiv*)

This contrast between north and south, echoed in empiricist and rationalist models of knowledge, began from differing interests and resulted in significantly different pictorial representations. The empiricist tradition, which stresses our dependence on sense experience to provide true belief, is closely aligned with the careful observation of the world around us. Rationalists argue that there are ways in which concepts and knowledge can be gained independently of sense experience and that (at least some of) our knowledge is innate. Rationalists argue, for example, that nothing that we observe through the senses, of how the world is, can explain moral knowledge, how we think that the world ought to be. Northern painting placed emphasis on daily life and the careful and

meticulous observation of domestic scenes and objects. On the other hand, the paintings of Italy celebrated the aristocracy and wealthy classes in society, including the Catholic Church. Portraits were made in elaborate settings often reflecting religious themes or classical mythology. They were the product of imagination and not observation.

It is within the northern tradition, with its delight in visual representation, that the early history of still life photography can be seen to be continuous with that of still life painting. Alpers notes in passing that:

> many characteristics of photography – those characteristics that make them so real – are common also to the northern descriptive mode; fragmentariness, arbitrary frames; the immediacy that the first practitioners expressed by claiming that the photograph gave Nature the power to reproduce herself directly unaided by man. If we want historical precedence for the photographic image it is in the rich mixture of seeing, knowing and picturing that manifested itself in Seventeenth Century images. (op.cit. p.43)

Photographs, long valued for their ability to describe in exquisite detail, to convey complex spatial relationships and to render perspective accurately, are heir to northern still life painting with its careful representation of the world of objects. Early photographic studies, such as those by Roger Fenton or Adolphe Braun with their celebration of abundance, adopt classical domestic tabletop arrangements of small-scale items, including ‘vanitas’ themes for their subject matter.

This can be seen, for example, in Fenton's 'Still Life with Ivory Tankard and Fruit' (c.1860) The art critic Jonathan Jones (2012) equated the void created by the fallen tankard at the centre of this photograph with the inclusion of a skull in a 'vanitas' painting; timely reminders that all must end. This interpretation by Jones adds a level of metaphorical meaning that enriches the image.

2. Fenton, R. (about 1860) *Still life with ivory tankard and fruit*

However, what is most striking about this photograph is the way it, wordlessly, conveys information through the careful inclusion of objects that evoke distinct sensations of touch, smell or taste. In particular, what interests me (and has been influential in my own practice) is the optical transmission of haptic information. By looking at the photograph, it is

possible to imagine how it might feel to actually touch the objects. The marble sensed as cool and hard; the solid, polished surface contrasting with the draped and fringed fabric that we imagine as soft and warm to the touch; the velvety smooth and rounded peach set against the ornate, metal lid of the fallen tankard, a spiky pineapple and the fleshy inside of the sliced gourd or melon (I cannot quite tell which) bring a range of tactile sensations to mind. Thus abundance is conveyed, not through vision but through the range of tactile values available only to the wealthy in the nineteenth century. If, in the words of the proverb, 'a cat may look at a King' (Heywood, 1563. p.70) he most certainly is not allowed to touch. For, as Jennifer Fisher has argued, whilst, 'the visual sense permits a transcendent, distant and arguably disconnected, point-of-view, the haptic sense functions by contiguity, contact and resonance'. (Fisher, 1997, pp. 4-11) Royalty and celebrities usually keep their distance and touch is distributed from above as absolution or gift and not taken from below. In other words, whilst distal perception may be permitted, proximal contact is forbidden.

Viewing Fenton's photograph from a twenty-first century Western perspective, the fruit may seem less exotic, but the combination of artefacts still renders the whole 'out of touch' for most people. In contrast to earlier traditions of still life where the inclusion of a moth or butterfly represents the soul freed from bodily constraint, the dark heart of Fenton's photograph offers no assurances of life after death. It should perhaps be remembered that Fenton made this image in 1855 shortly

after his return from the Crimean War where, according to his letters, he saw and witnessed many deaths. The intimations of mortality that Jones identified with the void at the centre of Fenton's image perhaps turn our attention from the pleasures of the feast with a small prick of recognition that death is inevitable.

3.2 The role of ritual

In some sense, death has always haunted the living. The philosopher Todd May makes the point in this way, 'with our advanced capacity for memory, reflection and projection into the future… we are attached at every moment to the fact of our death (May, 2009, p.8). The theologian and anthropologist Douglas Davies also argues that funeral rites are important rituals that allow human beings to adapt to the fact of death and that funeral rituals have the capacity to transform human beings in ways that make them better adapted for survival in the world. In the introduction to *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* Davies states:

> Human beings are animals and die. But they are, more importantly, also self-conscious. Adding these facts together we argue, from an evolutionary perspective, that death is part of the environment to which the human animal needed to adapt. Accordingly, mortuary ritual is viewed as the human adaptive response to death, with ritual language singled out as a crucial form of response. (Davies, 2002, p.1)

The major assumption that Davies makes is that death rites ‘are a means of encouraging a commitment to life despite the fact of death.’ (ibid. p.6) This is not to say that the meaning and language of death and the rituals that surround it have remained unchanged or are the same in every culture, but simply that funeral rituals have a purpose. They mark a rite of passage not just for the dead but also for the living whose identity is altered by the loss.

The slight shifts in allusions to death that we find within the still life genre echo the prevailing shifts in attitudes towards death as outlined by Wood and Williamson in their comprehensive survey of historical works on death and dying in the Western world. What becomes clear is that ‘from the seventeenth century onward, death was already receding from its more traditional religious and social roles.’ (Wood and Williamson, 2004, p.6) and by the nineteenth century we find ‘the physician, rather than the priest, at the bed of the dying.’ (ibid. p.10) By the ‘dawn of the twentieth century the epiphanies of the deathbed scene, as well as the anguishes of the Puritan struggle with salvation, had all but disappeared. The place of the confessor at the bedside was increasingly filled by the medical practitioner… Death was becoming … impersonal, managed increasingly through bureaucratic and professionalized institutions.’ (ibid. p.11) Wood and Williamson quote the classical study on death by the social historian, Philippe Aries, noting the ways in which ‘both the act and evidence of death have ‘been removed from public view’, closely followed by the dying themselves ‘being repositioned behind the opaque veneer of

hospitals, nursing homes, and mortuaries. According to Aries, by the middle of the twentieth century death had become invisible.' (ibid. p.6)

But as natural death became hidden behind closed doors, and was no longer spoken about, the fantasy of violent death grew (i.e. on screen) and opened up so that, by the mid twentieth century, the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer could convincingly argue that death had become pornographic. Like Wood and Williamson, Gorer traced changing attitudes towards death to improved public health measures and a shift in religious beliefs. Gorer remarked that in the twentieth century 'death has become more and more "unmentionable" as a natural process' whereas 'violent death increased in a manner unparalleled in human history.' (Gorer, 1955, pp.50-51) Drawing 'parallels between fantasises which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of sex and those which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of death' Gorer argues that both types of fantasy are completely unrealistic, 'since they ignore all physical, social, or legal limitations, and both types have complete hallucination of the reader or viewer as their object.' (ibid. p 52) The emotions (of love or grief) are held at arm's length and have no part to play. But as death became impersonal and the corpse invisible, it also became untouchable.

Christine Quigley takes a careful look at the corpse as object, successfully demonstrating that the movement of the corpse away from the home can be read as a move to distance ourselves from death; from the fear that haunts us in the presence of death. 'The wake is no longer

held in the parlour of the home; the parlour has become the living room and the funeral parlour has become the funeral home.' (Quigley, 1996, p.15) However, although fears may have changed in their specificity and the superstitions surrounding the corpse no longer taken literally, we still honour them in customs. Quoting a folklore injunction about the corpse, 'If we bury the body promptly, no harm will come to us. If we touch it, it will rest in peace', Quigley points out that even in 'their current diluted manifestations, or camouflaged as signs of respect, superstitions still betray a nervousness in the presence of the dead, a silent acknowledgement of their power over the living'. (ibid. p.19) If, by the beginning of the twentieth century, funeral rituals were being challenged, the devastating toll of death in the First World War marked a watershed. The rituals surrounding the corpse had to be abandoned.

Historically, there have been major epidemics, such as the Black Death, which presented massive problems for the authorities responsible for the disposal of bodies. Vanessa Harding has made a detailed study of the plague dead in London and notes that the 'way in which disposal of the victims was tackled was shaped by what was regarded as normal burial practice.' (Harding, 1993) Acknowledging the fact that parish records do show recourse to mass graves at the height of the epidemic, the main motive for this seems to have been in order to accommodate the maximum number of corpses in consecrated ground. The pressure on burial spaces in and around London was eventually alleviated by the creation of two new burial grounds. Interestingly, she notes that during

this period ‘there never seems to have been any official attempt to override traditional burial practices in favour of specific plague burial sites.’ (ibid. p.1)

The problem for the responsible authorities in the twentieth century was very different, marked by the lack of bodies rather than an abundance of them. Traditional rituals of death could no longer be carried out because, all too often, there was no body to bury. On the Western Front, the bodies of many of the soldiers who died in the muddy fields of war were left where they fell or were buried by their comrades on the battlefield. This mass destruction, more than any other event, ensured the separation of private, emotional, grief from public commemoration and acts of remembering. For the first time, to ordinary members of the public, death came not from natural causes but in acts of violence, too horrible to describe by most of those involved and so left to the imagination of the grieving.

The most potent symbol of the change brought about in terms of the rituals relating to the corpse is the ‘Tomb of the Unknown Warrior’. This national monument is dedicated to the memory of all the unidentified soldiers, sailors and airmen killed in war. Based on an idea first proposed by the First World War chaplain, David Railton and with the support of the Dean of Westminster, the Prime Minister of the time, David Lloyd George, and even King George V, Parliament agreed to the erection of a memorial to commemorate the thousands of unidentified men and boys who died

and whose bodies never came home for burial. The Unknown Warrior was buried in Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day, 11th November 1920. The grave is marked by a slab of black Belgian marble and carries an inscription composed by Herbert Ryle, Dean of Westminster. Carried out with dignity and great ceremony the memorial service to honour the fallen in war has, over the years, become a powerful symbol. This important and opportune gesture by the British Establishment resonated with the changing attitudes towards death that were already taking pace in society. Rituals of death, with their emphasis on the disposal of the body, were replaced by rituals of remembrance.

One consequence of this is that superstitions identified by Quigley found no footing when there was no corpse to bury and grief was focused on a monument. A distancing of death was also evidenced in the move away from the fashions of mourning associated with Victorian society. In her investigation into the rituals of death in twentieth century society, Kate Berridge observes that 'the magnitude of loss meant that the sheer numbers of people wearing mourning would have devastated national morale'. (Berridge, 2002, p.10) Furthermore, whilst the war continued there was no time for the elaborate and extended rituals of mourning. Women were needed for war work in the factories and hospitals. A public act of remembrance (a two minute silence) had replaced the extended period of weeks, months or (as in the case of Queen Victoria) years that had been deemed appropriate to honour the death of a loved one. After the trauma of the war and the loss of so many, people wanted to

remember but they also needed to move on; to look to the future, not dwell on the past. Berridge wryly and succinctly sums up this change of attitude as '*carpe diem*, not *memento mori'*. (ibid. p.5)

3.3 Photography and careful observation

The effects of the war reverberated through Europe and in the world of art new movements such as Dadaism and Futurism reacted to the cultural upheaval and economic losses by rejecting the ideals of beauty that had sustained it. Photographers and avant-garde artists looked for new ways to speak about this changed society, this modern world of machines. They sought out new subject matter, including the commodities that were appearing on the market for consumers. The new subject matter coincided with an increased respect for the medium of photography. Declaring a break with painterly models, photographers adopted new independent ways of seeing and examining the world.

The two terms that are most often related to this movement are Neues Sehen (New Vision) and Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) although sometimes the term 'direct photograph' is used. We associate the 'New Vision' movement with revolutionary struggle in Russia and the emergence of the Russian constructivist movement. After the revolution in 1917 many traditions were set aside. Artists abandoned composition in favour of construction. The photographer, Alexander Rodchenko embraced constructivist ideas, exploring ways of making and using photographs to communicate with, and contribute to all members of

society. The graphic, often abstract, geometric images that he made were utilised on posters, books and leaflets for the promotion of the Soviet Union and communism. New ways of photographic seeing also emerged from the experiments of the Bauhaus movement under the influence of artist, teacher and theorist, László Maholy-Nagy. Maholy-Nagy encouraged playful and experimental use of forms and techniques amongst his students. New, smaller cameras, which did not need to be attached to a tripod, allowed photographers to experiment with unexpected viewpoints and unconventional fragmentation of subject matter. Unusual lighting techniques and abstract printing processes also demonstrated ways of seeing that fitted the new industrial society. Creativity of vision was developed across disciplines. Graphic design brought typography and photography together to create exciting posters, advertising leaflets, book and magazine covers. Photographs became integral to all forms of communication. In his excellent history of photography, Michel Frizot puts it thus: 'At the end of the 1920's, the growth of the illustrated press and its increasing use of photographs meant that novelty of presentation was the only way to reach a new public.' (Frizot, 1998, p.440)

Some photographers were responding to the changing environment, not through experimentation of viewpoint, but through careful observation. The photographers that we associate with "New Objectivity', such as Karl Blossfeldt and Albert Renger-Patzsch favoured the close observation of detail and a straightforward rigorous approach to composition. Both

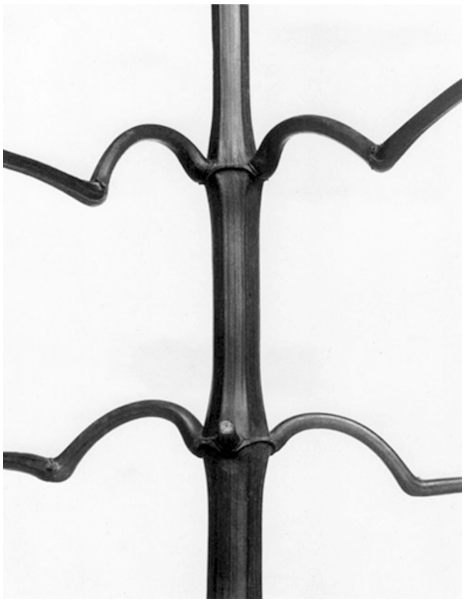
movements are associated to some extent with the theory of defamiliarisation, a term first introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, and identified with the revolutionary struggle in Russia but later adopted by the surrealist movement in Europe. In his influential essay on art as technique, Shklovsky says that the ‘purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.’ (Shklovsky, 1917, p.3)

Although primarily literary movement, the theory of defamiliarisation was attractive to photographers eager to distinguish themselves as artists who saw in it opportunities for evaluating the relationship between photography and objects. If the language of poetry sounds nothing like everyday language, the language of ‘photographic art’ could look nothing like everyday photography.

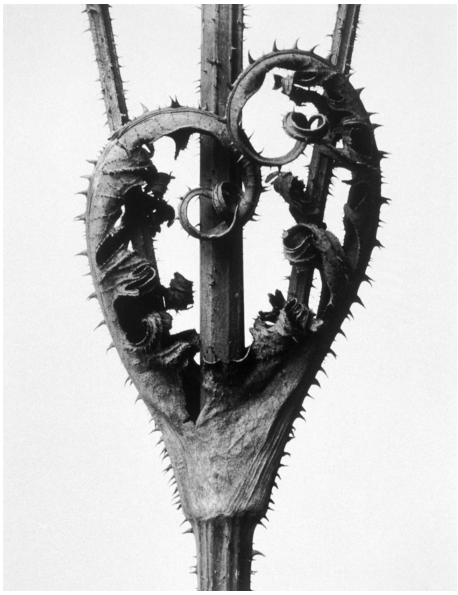
3.3.1 Karl Blossfeldt

The photographer, artist and teacher, Karl Blossfeldt made close-up images of botanical specimens, such as ferns and seed heads, in order to demonstrate an analogy between natural and industrial forms. Using diffused natural light to eliminate shadows and obtain a full range of tonal values, Blossfeldt framed the objects before the camera carefully and enlarged his photographs as much as possible. By isolating the specimen

from the context of its natural surroundings, placing it on a neutral background, and framing only a part of the specimen (in order to concentrate attention on texture and detail) he guides the viewer into an appreciation of the architectural structure of the plant. What is less commonly acknowledged in the literature is that the precise and careful rendering of the surface of the plant also creates a tactile relationship between the plant and the viewer.



3. Blossfeldt, C. (1920s)
Impatiens glandulifera



4. Blossfeldt, C. (1920s)
Dipsacus laciniatus

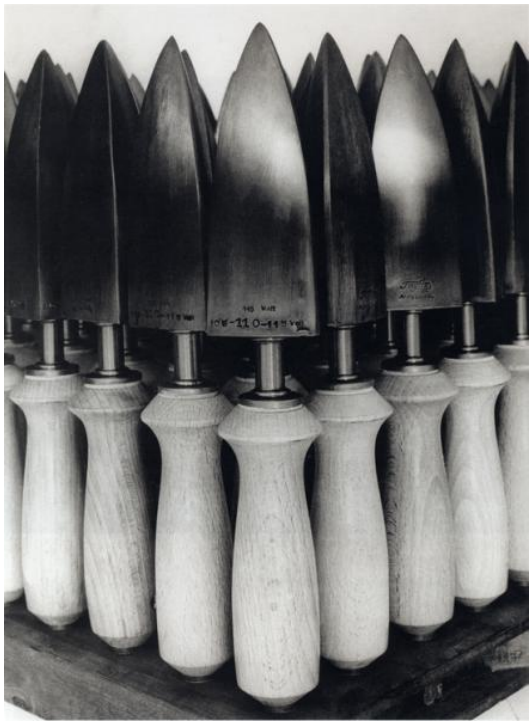
The intimate, close psychic proximity to objects whilst concentrating attention on material qualities such as shape, surface texture or pattern, at the same time removes all reference to size or function. This intimate inspection of surface, inevitably, becomes a visual metaphor for touch.

In 1966, the cultural anthropologist, Edward, T. Hall, who coined the term 'proxemics' to describe the use of space on interpersonal communication, developed a theory of personal space and territory which can usefully be applied in photographic theory to camera angle and distance from object. Analysis of camera proximity to the subject of the photograph relates to an equation of emotional distance with physical distance. Thus a still life photograph of fruit on a table might be photographed in long distance, full shot, medium or close-up. According to Hall's theory, the long shot (such as a room containing table with a bowl of fruit) would equate to a public proxemic, a full shot (say of the table with the bowl of fruit) to the social proxemic, the medium shot (bowl of fruit) to the personal proxemic and the close-up (part of a pineapple in the bowl of fruit) to the intimate proxemic.

Blossfeldt's photographs visually place the objects within our reach, in the space that neuropsychologists describe as peripersonal space. In other words, the space within arm's length, near enough to touch. Such close-ups offer an intimacy with the object, possession rather than documentation suggesting a tactile narrative between the object and the viewer. This tactile relationship with objects via photographic images is explored within my own practice to reveal the fine balance between attraction and repulsion that determines our interaction with the world.

3.3.2 Albert Renger-Patzsch

Albert Renger-Patzsch is also associated with the ‘New Objectivity’ movement. Although he photographed landscape, architecture, urban scenes and plants, Renger-Patzsch is best known for his images of industrial products and machines. He enthusiastically photographed mass-produced objects in a similar fashion to Blossfeldt, thus elevating cultural commodities in terms of design properties. Like Blossfeldt, he used close-up techniques, reminiscent of scientific photography, to isolate objects within the frame in a way that fails to convey their actual size to the viewer. His formal, frontal approach and rhythmic compositions demonstrate a distinct break with traditional tabletop arrangements inherited from still life painting.



5.

Renger-Patzsch, A. *Shoemaking Irons* (1926)

Renger-Patzsch showed us regimented rows of identical mass-produced objects in meticulous detail revealing their material qualities such as shine, solidity, opacity, reflective surface or sharpness. Whilst the repetition of forms celebrated the mass production of uniform industrial commodities that were available for a growing market eager for objects that were useful and reliable, it also suggested that these commodities were within reach. Enough objects were being produced for all to own, for all to touch. Like Blossfeldt, Renger-Patzsch also eliminated or minimised the background context, making images that were so formally and aesthetically pleasing that it was easy to overlook the actual content.

The photographic still life strategies used by Blossfeldt and Renger-Patzsch, such as isolation, close-up and low frontal viewpoint (giving a sense of possession and monumentality to the viewer) were eagerly adopted by the world of advertising to make their commodity products look beautiful, desirable and available. In a fascinating article about the artistic significance of still life photography the writer and artist, David Campany points out that ‘still life was ideal for a world of accelerated manufacture and exchange, mobilizing desires and expressing tastes’. (Campany, 2011) By making the objects appear to be located at a distance within reach they become potentially touchable. The suggestion that possession and intimacy are only an arm’s length away makes the perception of these objects different. The objects appear to be within our grasp. For many years, the lifestyle promises of many advertisements have often incorporated a close-up of the product (whether perfume or

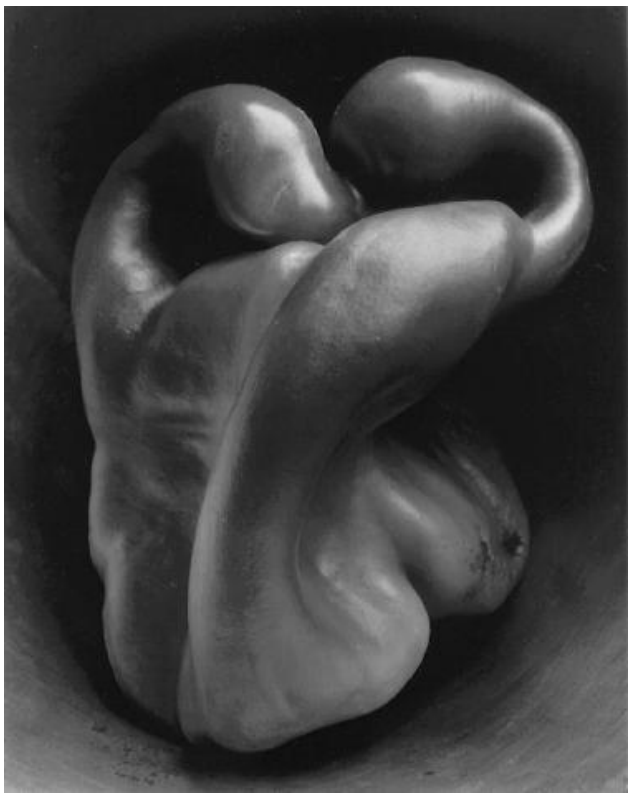
pancakes) that will open the door to the world depicted behind it. The empty background of the product provides the ideal canvas for a wide range of fantasy associations.

The 1920s also brought a changing awareness of the potential of photography to the American Modernist movement. Photographers were seeking to make a clear distinction between high and low art and to separate themselves from the burgeoning amateur photographic market. They were also distancing themselves from painting through an aesthetic of realism with its tendency to explore the inherent qualities of the photographic medium. The intention was to make good photographs and the 'art' would take care of itself. David Campany eloquently notes that the only thing required for this to happen is a simple change of context. 'Exhibiting or publishing a book of one's commissioned work might be enough to shift the emphasis from the things depicted to the depiction, from anonymity to named author, from paid work to Works, from applied to fine art. Context, as any photographer will tell you, is key.' (op. cit. p.1)

3.3.3. Edward Weston

On the West coast of the United States of America a group of photographers known as the f/64 Group, so named because of the preferred lens aperture (the smallest available at the time), were also using photography to celebrate the world as seen through the camera lens. Photography could be used to enhance human vision, to show us the object-ness of objects, the material qualities of the world and, in so

doing show us the essence of the thing photographed. In the often-quoted words of Edward Weston, "The camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh." (Weston, 2013) Weston believed that his task as a photographer was to see forms and record them objectively but crucially he also believed that through faithful, objective rendition of things, the essence of them would become available to perception.



6.

Weston, E. (1930) *Pepper No. 30*

This approach might be described as a form of naturalistic-Platonism, by which I mean to suggest that Weston understood that the essence of a thing was discoverable by the wise man, the seer. In brief, in the fourth

century BC Plato postulated a theory of forms in which all things, such as a chair, had an ideal form and that the ideal form was the essence of each and every instantiation of a chair. Plato believed that the objects that humans experience through their senses are crude imitations, that observable chairs are simply copies of the ideal. This theory, which is inferred in many of the Socratic dialogues, is most clearly articulated in *The Republic*. Towards the end of this very long dialogue in which Socrates navigates Glaucon to agreement, he says “The creator of the phantom, the imitator, we say, knows nothing of the reality but only the appearance.’ (The Republic, Book X, section 601)

Thus, in order to really understand observable phenomena it is necessary to seek out the underlying concept or ideal form. Weston aimed to see the quintessential form and then to document it objectively, to search for and reveal ideal forms through his photographs. However, what is actually expressed in Weston’s still life images appears to be far more subjective. The choice and photographic treatment of subject matter seem designed to elicit a metaphorical reading of inanimate objects suggestive of the human form. Almost all of Weston’s still life images can be interpreted as the creative outward expression of an internal obsession with human form. If, indeed, inner truth is equated with human form, perhaps it can be argued that Weston did reveal a universal truth through photographing particular objects.

3.4 Contemporary photographers dealing with grief

In a book exploring contemporary still life photography by women, Kate Newton and Christine Rolph note that 'women have always been intrinsically linked to the still life genre, with its focus placed often within the domestic.' (Newton & Rolph, 2006, p.5) but it also demonstrates much more. The photographers gathered together are actively engaged with the genre and clearly demonstrate that a simple arrangement of objects has much to offer. It has the potential to raise perplexing and important questions about society, history, memory and loss. Aligned with conceptual explorations relating to meaning, there is also a growing awareness of the materiality of the objects themselves. If the *Suspended Realities* of Sarah Lynch or Veronica Bailey's representation of books (taken from the library of Ernö Goldfinger and Ursula Blackwell) demonstrate latent animation, they also invoke the sensation of touch. It is here that I see clear affinities with what is often termed 'women's work' and with my own practice. I acknowledge that an exploration of touch in contemporary still life photography (especially by women) might yield interesting insights into gender roles and feminism, but I am also aware that the field of discourse would be too open for this particular project. Therefore, whilst I have tried to keep in mind this wider discourse, I have chosen to focus on still life photographers who deal explicitly with grief.

In this section I will discuss three contemporary photographers who have made still life photographs relating to objects of the dead. I will also look at photographers and photography works that have influenced my way of

working and been an inspiration for my own photographic engagement in this field of discourse. This will set a context for the practical element of this investigation. However, because perceptions of my practice are necessarily subjective, I recognise that this poses challenges for a systematic review of the field that includes my own outcomes. Nevertheless, I believe that it is important to understand my practice relative to an on-going tradition. Although there are some words (such as 'important', 'sad', 'beautiful', or even 'evil') that are, quite simply, impossible to apply to one's own work without seeming arbitrary and self-regarding, a privileged and unmediated subjectivity can offer insights not available to others; insights with the potential to make a contribution to scholarship in this field.

3.4.1 Joachim Froese

I came across Joachim Froese's work during my literature search and was surprised to find that my practice seemed motivated by similar concerns to those expressed by him, including the use of subject matter that Froese has called 'boring or even repellent'. (Froese, 2009, p.60) Although this would suggest identification with the tradition sometimes known as 'rhyparography', Froese chooses the term 'rhopography' to explain his practice. This appears to be a direct reference to a distinction utilised by Norman Bryson (1990) in his powerfully argued examination of the still life genre. Bryson draws upon a distinction, attributed to Charles Sterling, between 'megalography' (a depiction of those things in the world which are great) and 'rhopography' (those things in the world which lack

importance), successfully demonstrating that the two categories are intertwined and that the relationship is complex. He points out that the 'concept of importance can arise only by separating itself from what it declares to be trivial and insignificant; 'importance' generates 'waste, what is sometimes called the preterite, that which is excluded or passed over. Still life takes on the exploration of what 'importance' tramples underfoot'. (Bryson, 1990, p.61) If we accept the interdependence of the aspiration to greatness with the mundane and insignificant material necessities of life common to all individuals we can begin to see traces of the 'tangled hierarchies' that Hofstadter identified as being common to many spheres of human endeavour but often only revealed through an exploration of paradox.

7. Froese, J. (2006) *Portrait of my Mother* (detail) Image 3 of 9

Whilst caring for his mother after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Froese embarked on a project to photograph all of the books in

her library. He continued the series after her death 'until all the books were photographed in 'her' order.' (Froese, 2006) The images from this body of work are usually exhibited as one long series extending around a gallery wall, thus giving the impression of linear existence. On his website, Froese says of this work that it 'has become a manifestation of the woman she was, a metaphor for life and a diary of the time I spent with her - a portrait of my mother.' (Froese, 2006))

This is clearly not a documentary piece, nor is it equivalent to an installation of the original bookcase, though both would allow a viewer to browse titles for individual resonances. The transformation wrought by the single line extending through space symbolises the time span of a life, its individuality imagined through titles. The small objects and family photographs placed on the bookshelf by Froese serve a useful purpose for the viewer, giving clues to the woman who had read this archive. Such an inventory provides a multitude of 'punctum' opportunities for reminders of other times or places, but it is not so much the individual resonances of recognised book covers that make this work significant, but the archive as a whole. Looking at his 'Portrait of my mother', and the narrative it aspires to, we can begin to build a picture of the woman who accumulated these possessions. This fragmented series of images adds up to something that is more than the sum of its parts. The sense of an identity is only possible because Froese shows us all the books on his mother's bookshelves, and not a just a selection. This is a complete set. The necessity for completion is embedded within narrative.

This is not to say that all conclusions must be neat and cannot be open-ended, but that the potential of completion is integral to the concept of narrative. Death is not completion, it is simply an arbitrary and, usually unplanned, ending. However, there is a sense in which we, who are not dead, can give shape to a life through the telling of a story. The narrative in this case is evoked through the visual enumeration of a collection on a bookshelf. It is a story wrought by Froese, not as historical record, but as an act of commemoration. Meticulous placing of objects, time-consuming camera, lighting and printing techniques have been the hall-mark of Froese's still life practice from its inception and this body of work is no exception. Attention to craftsmanship seems almost reverential.

My own practice has a clear affinity with the quiet but determined aspirations of still life that I see in the work of Froese. Although his tableau sets depicting rotting fruit, fallen insects or visual storytelling using childhood toys seem to display more concentrated ambition for narrative than I see in my own practice, the material elements from which we draw inspiration are of a kind. It was strange, therefore, to discover that Froese had felt the need to photograph some of his mother's possessions after her death, even if his intention was not an exploration inhabited by the mysterious power of possessions.

By a chance coincidence, I too have shelves full of books that belonged to my late husband and am using them to make a portrait, though not in

photographs. My way of working with the books takes the form of a bibliography. Each book was signed and dated on completion of his reading and this date forms the basis of a very personal and idiosyncratic bibliography. In contrast to photographs of physical items this temporal sequence of dates and titles provide testimony to an inner life and the complexity inherent in the notion of identity. This laborious bibliography acts as an addendum to this research but is not part of it. I mention it simply to demonstrate different treatment of similar subject matter and to point out another aspect of the ritualised approach to this study that I have adopted.

3.4.2 Ishiuchi Miyako

Ishiuchi Miyako also photographed personal items belonging to her mother after her death. Published in book form in 2005, this work begins with a photograph of a photograph of her mother as a young woman standing next to the open door of an American style car and we imagine how her life might have been, how it might become.

8.

Ishiuchi Miyako, *Mother's 2000 - 2005 traces of the Future*

For Ishiuchi this image will involve imagination and, perhaps, memory. For as Barthes (1982) has eloquently demonstrated in his analysis of the 'Winter Garden' photograph of his mother, photographs that predate any possible experience of what is depicted can stir memory and imagination, sometimes in a mixture of projection and desire with the burden of evidence falling on a small, incidental, photograph.

This is, perhaps, too much for the photograph to bear and Margaret Olin's (2012) careful reading of Barthes' text seems to indicate more complex and tenuous links between photography and memory. Challenging Barthes' analysis of a family portrait by James Van Der Zee, Olin beautifully deconstructs the claim that the punctum 'be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it.' (Barthes, 1982, p.53) Barthes claims that he knows Van Der Zee's photograph better through memory than when he was looking at it, and realised when he no longer had the photograph in front of him that the 'real punctum was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family' (ibid. p.53). Olin's scrutiny of the photograph in question and of one showing the relative wearing 'a slender ribbon of braided gold' is incisive. "The reason that Barthes could only have recognised this punctum when he wasn't looking at it is that the detail he picks out, the "slender ribbon of braided gold," is not there. The

lady wears a string of pearls, as does her seated relative' (Olin, 2012, p 58). This example is used by Olin to illuminate the slippery and unreliable nature of memory, not just in relation to events that have happened and are remembered but also to photographs that we have seen. What we see in, what we remember from photographs is no guide to the lasting emotional effect a particular photograph may have. Nor does it offer evidence for a direct relationship between a detail of the image and the spectator. Misidentification is possible, always and at every level.

What becomes important and powerful is the fictional truth that can be generated despite details of even photographs themselves being displaced. The power of photographs or objects to generate emotions and feelings is not in question here, what is challenged is the direct links between a particular detail and a particular emotion. As Olin points out, Barthes' 'relation to the lady in her Sunday best is one-sided, misleading, and unknowable, but poignant and meaningful all the same.' (ibid. p.69) In his essay on the interpretation of dreams Freud suggested that a wishful element is always present. (Freud, 1953) Perhaps a wishful element is also evident in our reading of photographs and the truth that is evidenced by the photograph (the proof of existence guaranteed by the indexicality of the photograph) is less important than the potential for a detail (real or imagined) to stir unbidden, real emotional attachments, truths more abstract than can be stored in any ontology.

I return to the work of Ishiuchi with the understanding that the relationship between the photographic object and the viewer is unpredictable and suffused with unknown influences. Although we look at the photograph of Ishiuchi's mother as a young woman from a perspective unimagined at the time of making the image, the audience for the other images in Ishiuchi's book is less removed and we expect, as with all creative endeavour, that the author has fulfilled the obligation to make the intended meaning possible to extract.

The testimony of the past events that are explored in this work is realised mainly through images of the personal items photographed after her mother's death, alongside images of her mother's elderly body and in particular, on the flesh damaged by a fire accident. These images serve to link the life of her mother with that of the objects depicted. Both body and objects bear the scars of life. Ishiuchi has continued to be fascinated by scars and was later to comment: 'I cannot stop [taking photographs of scars] because they are so much like a photograph… They are visible events, recorded in the past. Both the scars and the photographs are the manifestation of sorrow for the many things which cannot be retrieved and for love of life as a remembered present.' (Ishiuchi, 2006. p.2)

This sorrow is evident in the photographed items of clothing and close personal possessions that were once owned by her mother; intimate items which record a relationship to objects through a sense of touch. The authority and authenticity of the work is not so much articulated

through the images as felt through the senses. The tactility of the descriptions offered in these photographs, the accidental scuffs and scars, the shape of the body that once inhabited the slip, the fineness of the hair caught in a brush, the saliva that moistened false teeth or the soft, smooth texture of lipstick are not so much imagined as felt. The textural qualities of the objects evoke the very real presence of a human being for whom these items provided a way of being in the world.

9.

Ishiuchi Miyako, *Mother's 2000 - 2005 traces of the Future*

However Ishiuchi admits to some uneasiness in the presence of the personal items left behind after the death of her mother, an uneasiness that I recognise from my own emotional response to handling intimate

objects of the dead. Speaking of the personal possessions of her mother she reflects on the uselessness of the objects that her mother had used in her daily life:

> Her old undergarments, which had lost the only value they had, as the familiar attire of their owner, seemed to me to be almost pieces of her skin. It was not a pleasant feeling to have them about the house after she was gone. Thus, just like her body, when they were no longer of any use, I thought I should burn them or put them in the trash, but I found myself unable to perform this simple act…. Feeling that it would be easier to dispose of them if I photographed them first, I began to do so. (ibid. p.123)

Looking at the images, we not only gain a sense of the woman to whom these possessions once belonged, but also recognise the cloak of melancholic loss that has been thrown across them in the act of photographing. Objects that were the everyday accompaniment to life, functional rather than aesthetic, are now transformed into images for contemplation. It is not so much Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) that comes to mind here as his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919). The defamiliarization of the everyday, the public display of what is usually kept hidden, can be interpreted as representing our own fear of non-being. Just as these objects have been rendered obsolete by death, so will we be. If a photographic representation may make our image live on, it is not we who are immortalised, but a momentary fragment of recorded light in which we bathed in an always-past time. Memories once, or even twice,

removed may be conjured in imagination by the images in Ishiuchi's book, but a reminder of mortality hovers on every page.

This sensitive and intimate homage to her mother is also a meditative and reflective comment upon the wear and tear of life, upon the scars accumulated over time. I cannot but mention another work by Ishiuchi, one that also acknowledges a scar. In 2007, Ishiuchi photographed the clothing and personal items that belonged to people killed by the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima on 6th August 1945 and that are now permanently housed in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Surprised by the beauty and bright colours of the clothing, she decided to focus on these and selected items that had been in direct contact with the victims' bodies. These items, photographed isolated against a light table, reveal to us the scars of this tragic day but they speak to me, not of survival so much as ghosts. In these, almost translucent, images Ishiuchi appears to have captured the haunting quality that this dreadful event left in its wake.

The works of both Froese and Ishiuchi raise questions about how we use the dead. The careful photographing of personal items can, perhaps, be thought of as equivalent to rituals associated with the cleansing of the corpse. That is to say that the act of photographing becomes a way of showing respect, a way of honouring the dead. However, this highly subjective approach, whilst holding onto the physical, material reality of intimate and personal objects, seeks to develop an imaginative link to

others. It is a strategy that runs the risk of being dismissed as melancholy or maudlin or even worse to the charge of irrelevance and poor taste. Both Froese and Ishiuchi tackle this issue head on. In both cases the work was made for gallery and museum spaces and the scale of the work (in the case of Ishiuchi, prints that measure upwards of a metre and for Froese the concept embodied a display of 30 metres around a gallery wall) confronts and challenges the viewer to take it seriously. This intent might suggest over-ambition for overlooked domestic artefacts but works instead to alert the viewer to the fact that this is something beyond mere record. The result is a work that expresses a very personal psychological condition in a way that can be described as 'poetic' and poignant but with no hint at sentimentality, exploitation or lack of propriety.

In this sense the works connect with elegy, moving from private grief to public consolation, a move that is not wrought through formal considerations so much as evocation of mood. Recognising the transformation that has occurred, Ishiuchi commented in a later work that her 'Mother' series 'had established itself as a distinct body of work and had lost its private connotations.' (Ishiuchi, 2008, p.76) Thus, it seems that the photographing of loss, having provided something of use to a wider public may also have served to distance the deceased. I will say more about the connection to elegy at a later stage but first I want to look at the work of another contemporary photographer who has sought to deal with personal loss through photographic practice.

3.4.3 Paul Hill

Through a series of found still life images, presented in book form, Paul Hill offers a very different approach to loss (Hill, 2010). Published four years after the death of his wife, Angela, the book is a reflection in images on the emotional place in which he found himself during a period of mourning. This carefully sequenced work contains fragments noted but not pursued, glimpses of objects seen obliquely, marks left behind. At first glance one might think that this is a nostalgic work, about noticing things that bring one up short; that stir forgotten memories and make the lost one again real (if only for a moment) but closer inspection reveals a very different underpinning concept. This book does not look backwards towards the lost person with a sense of melancholy but plunges forward with desire for a new love object and, in doing so, offers a raw and courageous insight into this particular stage of the mourning process. Although philosophers, psychoanalysts and critics have convincingly demonstrated that although we would be naïve to take Freud's writings literally, his insights offer a tantalizing opportunity for the interpretation of this work.

In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), Freud outlines the various stages associated with the loss of a loved one. He is particularly careful to make clear that finding a new object for libidinal energy is a normal part of the work of mourning. Hill explores, with disarming honesty, the work of desire that Freud sees as closely associated with the narcissistic impulse. We are shown the imaginings, the coldness, momentary violence but,

above all, the conflict between giving up the loved object and the desire for a new object of love. What is unusual is seeing this process laid bare in images that leave us in no doubt about the nature of this desire. The dream symbols, repeated self-references, amorphous liquids splattered onto surfaces and constrained colour palate yields to a reading of sex and violence in a surreal dream sequence. Thus the content may seem familiar to any filmgoer, but it is still surprising to find it in a book of photographs.

The book has a narrative thread and we are made aware from the beginning that this is a search. The first image is complex, a cold image; a photograph of Angela in the snow, her face half covered by 3 Polaroid images that ask about the colour of the sun. But no answer is offered. Instead we turn away from the sun into the world of shadows, into Plato's cave. There is veiling and shadows and our insights, if they come, will be indirect as in a dream. A small silhouette of a horse's head, itself a porcelain copy of a living creature (a shadow of a shadow of reality) immediately informs us not to expect a transparent window on the world. Freud has taught us to read the horse as an erotic symbol and Plato to doubt that shadows lead us to answers, to truth.

This is a book about the photographer rather than the world viewed through the camera lens. It is confessional played out in an unusual medium. Literal readings are denied the viewer and imagination is encouraged. Marks and textures offer opportunities of interpretation and

the sequencing of the work encourages particular readings. The thread of red that runs throughout the book drips thoughts of death and violence, of passion and desire. Grey offsets the violence with a coldness, an indifference to the bloody marks spattered throughout. Photography does not lend itself willingly to the communication of emotional and metaphorical content but many of the images in this book would yield interesting interpretations.

10. Hill, Paul. (2010) *Corridor of Uncertainty*, p.46

Perhaps the starkest message is to be found halfway through the book (op.cit. p.46). Until this point desires have been suggestive, even romanticised and tentative but now we are confronted with what appears to be a textbook example of Freud's symbolism. Set in a rural landscape, a wooden post thrusts up from the bottom of the image, a phallic symbol

carved with the letter “P”. Straddled on top of the post is a dead bird facing left (away from the wooden sign that has been attached to the signpost showing a man striding away -into the forest). Assuming autobiography, and it is difficult not to given the clues throughout the book, then the erect thrust of the post topped by the limp, prostrate body of the dead bird lends this image a very powerful, yet extremely uncomfortable, reading. Turning away from the dead bird that can no longer satisfy the libidinal impulse, is the author heading off in a new direction, into a forest full of live birds? If so, we are confronted with an amazingly courageous and honest statement of longing, of letting go and of the search for a new object of love; the very work of mourning about which Freud (op.cit.) spoke.

Other self-references can be found throughout the book. We see the past buried, the rage explored and desire spelt out in hands clenched inwards in anger, in fear, in prayer, towards the self, towards the satisfaction of the ego. As red gives way to gold, in attempts to communicate with the outside world, we sense that the dream is coming to an end but the future is still just a simulacrum as the shadow gives way to the screen.
This is a book filled with apprehension, with yearning and with passion and it is a book that lays bare a troubled emotional landscape in a manner rarely encountered. However, unlike the works of Froese or Ishiuchi, we can learn nothing of the lost person through this work.

Chapter 4: Reflective Personal Practice

4.1 Introduction to reflective personal practice

This chapter will examine the photographic element of this study from the standpoint of reflective personal practice and outline the key stages in the process. In the following chapter I will support the investigatory visual work by locating it within a theoretical field. It is not my purpose to argue here for a feminist interpretation of creativity, but I should make clear that I have embraced the paradigm shift, encouraged by theorists such as Griselda Pollock (1988), that occurred in and around the discourse of art during the latter half of the last century. Pollock demonstrated that the dominant mode of nineteenth and twentieth century art ideologically constrained discussions about art. Embracing categories of analysis derived from the writings of Karl Marx, Pollock argued against 'the typical art historical narrative of a gifted individual creating out of his (sic) personal necessity a discrete work of art which then goes out from its private place of creation into a world where it will be admired and cherished by art lovers expressing a human capacity for valuing beautiful objects.'(Pollock, 1988 p.6) Attempting to see art 'as a social practice, as a totality of many relations and determinations' (ibid. p.7) Pollock argued for a feminist art history and artistic practice that challenges the universalization of a positivist, masculine subject position and acknowledge cultural context and social complexity. I see my project as part of this feminist argument, insofar as it engages with contemporary culture and embraces a desire for difference and different self-knowledge.

My artistic practice becomes the relevant field of discourse for the interrogation of social issues. The relationship between the making of the work, the work itself and the viewing of it are all part of its cultural context. In line with this, I will consider the ways in which my working method and research process engage with the subject matter and the viewer.

The methodology used for the practice-based part of this research relies on a physical investigation. It is documented in reflective journals and technical workbooks and I have drawn upon these extensively in order to describe my working process. My working method is based on the sensual experience of observing, touching and photographing. The project began with a curiosity about previously overlooked 'stuff'', stuff that was in one sense familiar to me from years of co-habitation, but in another sense, full of mystery. My late husband's personal possessions provided the material for this study, but it is the loss of owner that left the objects vulnerable to my interrogation. As I examined and photographed each item, I was unsure what I hoped to discover. Was this ritual simply a way of slowly and systematically controlling my letting go by discharging each possession before it too was laid to rest? Or was it more malign, an act of voyeuristic vengeance for being left alone. I had to consider this possibility, though to think this filled me with shame.

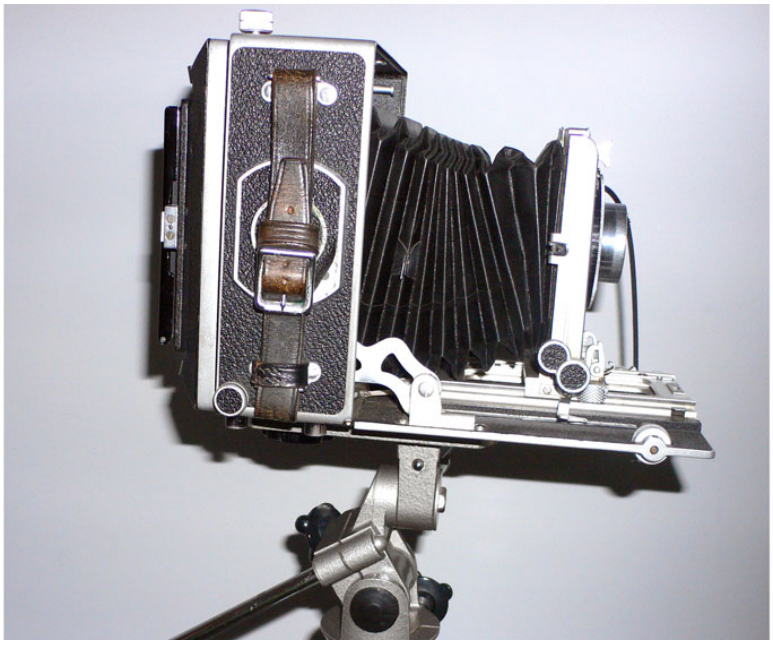
In retrospect, my initial photographic response, though impulsive, was part of a process of divestment. If I could understand the emotional charge that the items of clothing and personal possessions still seemed

to possess, they might lose their hold on me. I could not let go of them until they let go of me and this could not happen until I understood their relationship with my late husband. Peter Schwenger, commenting on the material things with which we surround ourselves, observes that physical objects are invested with memories. He says ‘’absorbing the psychic investment of their owners, things paradoxically possess something of their possessors’. (Schwenger, 2006, p.75) The distance required for a possession to divest itself of this ‘something’ is not subject to the laws of logic or mathematics. Perhaps I hoped that the objects would succumb to the interrogation of the photographic gaze. Perhaps they did or maybe it is simply that the ‘something’ just slowly discharged over time. In either case, the photographic journey I began fulfilled an important step in the grieving process.

Touch is an important element in this project. All the stages of this photographic investigation required haptic involvement (from the loading of the film in complete darkness, setting up the camera and developing the negatives through to the production of individual prints in trays of chemicals). The choice of a large format camera to make the photographs also meant that focusing, film loading and lens adjustments were all manual, Thus, I was able to visually describe the stresses of everyday usage and the accretions of ownership that have become the subject of my investigation, through what are, essentially, tactile processes.

4.2 Photographic tools

The choice of equipment (lights, camera, format etc.) was a continuation of previous photographic projects. Thus the decision to work with an old 5 x 4 camera was partly pragmatic but I also wanted to integrate into this project an acknowledgement of shared equipment and methods of communication. To this end I utilised lighting equipment, a light meter and tripods that had belonged to my late husband. In the past, these items had been shared over a range of photographic projects. To make the images, I used an ancient Micro Press camera (MPP) that had been a gift from my late husband whilst I was a student at, what is now, Derby University.



11.

The camera used for the project (2013)

I chose a neutral background against which to place the objects in order to emphasise the process of fragmentation that is inherent in all

photographic practice. By depriving the object of its original context and choosing to make close-up images, I sought to concentrate attention on material qualities of the objects themselves in order to reveal details of surface and texture. Aware that these photographic procedures had affinities with photographic strategies traditionally associated with commercial practice, or the forensic study of objects, I wanted to differentiate my approach in order to suggest that the objects of my attention were not simply industrial artefacts. They were possessions, trailing intimations of a passage through time and space. Choosing the background tonality was crucial to this.

The commercial and portrait photographer Richard Avedon was acutely sensitive to the role that the tonality of the background played in his own photographic practice, preferring a plain white background which would force the viewer to engage with the subject. In an article for *Grand Street*, Avedon explains his rationale for this:

> as one who is addicted to white backgrounds, it seems odd to me that a gray or tonal background is never described as an empty background. But in a sense, that's correct. A dark background fills. A white background empties. A gray background does seem to refer to something – a sky, a wall, some atmosphere of comfort and reassurance – that a white background doesn't permit. With the tonal background you are allowed the romance of a face coming out of the dark. (Avedon, 1987, p.58)

The photographer Irving Penn made a series of photographs of cigarette butts in the early 1970's that exemplify this approach. The platinum palladium prints that he made for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1975, are reminiscent of Blossfeldt's specimens. The cigarettes are transformed to such an extent that the art critic Francis Hodgson was led to ask whether 'they represent fallen columns of some lost civilisation?' (Hodgson, 2012) If it is possible to read metaphorical meaning into this work by Penn, this has to do with Penn's choices (tacit or otherwise). One of these choices was the background. White space plays with scale seeming to make objects monumental. It also allows shadow to suggest three-dimensional form whereas black space diminishes scale, absorbs shadow and reduces the dimensions of the object photographed. In my own work I knew that I was not seeking 'romance'. I knew that emptiness of blank white space, with its potential to elevate the objects into items of wonder and admiration, was not appropriate.

I made several tests on different backdrops to assess suitability, finally settling on black silk velvet. This fabric has light absorbing properties that are far superior to any paper base or to man-made and cotton velvets. The complete lack of reflection or shadow detail creates the illusion that the objects are floating in dark space. This is the reverse of the void at the centre of Fenton's Still life with ivory tankard and fruit, discussed in an earlier chapter. What we see is not an earthly delight with a warning of the empty hollow that will devour us. Rather, the effect is of possessions floating away from the gravitational force that kept them locked to the

possessor and to each other. No longer held in place by the magnetic attraction of an owner the objects drift slowly away; the power of their possessor dissipated by time. Only through the marks of impact can we ever know that these items have been in contact with a person; that they once belonged but are now cast adrift in the space left behind at death. This, at least, is what I hoped to see in the darkness.

All the photographs were made in a small shed (that I choose to call my studio workshop) at the bottom of my garden. The process was performative from beginning to end. I began each shoot by loading the film into a dark-slide, a process that is carried out in complete darkness and relies on touch. Then the backdrop and lights were set up. Next, I placed the object to be photographed against the backdrop and positioned lights and reflectors. The camera and tripod were placed at an appropriate distance, set up and focused. Exposure readings were taken and lights and reflectors adjusted. Aperture and shutter speed were then set. I used the smallest aperture on the camera lens (f32) in order to have a maximum depth of field. Finally, the dark-slide was inserted into the camera and an exposure made. I used Ilford HP5 sheet film, rated at 200 ISO, and Kodak D76 developer diluted one plus one. The negatives were dish-developed in my tiny darkroom. Each set-up was left in place whilst the exposed film was processed in complete darkness (another tactile and ritualistic process that involved control of temperature, time and agitation). The resulting negative was then inspected for composition and

exposure. If necessary, an adjustment was made to camera, lights or set and the whole process repeated.

12 *Setting up the photograph* (2013)

13 *Dark-slides* (2013)

14 *The enlarger* (2013)

15 *Darkroom sink* (2013)

This ritual was performed for every item that I photographed. It also served as a link to the rituals of my late husband, echoing his own meticulous ordering and storing of clothes and possessions. There was a precision in his careful rituals, whether in the ironing and folding of handkerchiefs, the neat stacks of shirts or the paired and tucked in socks. My rituals are both necessary and comforting.

In 2014 researchers Michael Norton and Francesca Gino conducted a study for The Harvard Business School into the ways in which people cope with extreme loss. They found that the people who dealt with grief most effectively had one thing in common; they all followed private rituals of mourning that connected them to the memory of the lost person. Personal rituals are a way of trying to take back some control amidst the chaos of grief and, according to Norton and Gina, ritualistic performances can alleviate all kinds of loss. They note that 'engaging in rituals mitigates grief by restoring the feelings of control that are impaired by both life-changing (the death of loved ones) and more mundane (losing lotteries) losses.' (Norton and Gina, 2014, p.271) Furthermore, the effectiveness of rituals is not a result of specific actions but is 'driven primarily by the act of engaging in a ritual.' Ibid. p.272) Froese, Ishiuchi and Hill all engaged in photographic rituals of mourning. The rituals I perform as part of my practice spring from a similar impulse to engage in the familiar photographic routines in order to help restore a feeling of control in my life.

4.3 The reflective cycle

When I had approximately 20 negatives, a set of 8 x 10 inch work prints were made and initial observations noted. These prints were hung on a white background and viewed frequently over the next few weeks. Sometimes they were moved around to observe the subtleties of interaction between them, but at this stage it was much more a matter of

getting to know them. Here are a few observations that I made at the time, transcribed as they appeared in my reflective journal:

Listening to Radio 4
"Start the week" speaking of creativity
I listen whilst I look at the photographs now
hanging from tiny clothes pegs
slightly askew but, for the first time
I can see them as a whole.

As I stare, patterns appear
The mystery of close up
The sexual, the erotic, connotations.

Still, silent objects, everyday items
waiting forever, suspended, patient
Displaying for me the myth of inductive logic
Expectation based on past experience
ended abruptly
possession now dispossessed
Their use, once integral, as dead as he who owned

A few things escape my classification
Should I modify or abandon
Sandals neither in nor out
Looking now, it seems that the fasteners are what fascinates.
Boots, waisted like a corset
the shape distracts from laces touched, tugged,
and tied a hundred, a thousand times.

Stacked summer shirts lean for support
settling into folds as they jostle for comfort.
In uniform on store hangers
winter shirts march across the frame, heads turned
away from me

A mountain of underpants
Geology of years laid down in layers
unfathomable
Crushed rivulets compressed in trousers
of disturbed design.

The tiny pegs catch my attention
yellow, blue, red – holding suspended
the source of my imaginings
and I try to level my photographic washing.

Tidiness becomes essential, an echo
There is an understanding that I cannot be sloppy
though I can be wrong
Colours disappear, a peg is just a peg
no longer visible
But although the images seems strong
there is fragility in this display
Curled white tails of string
Unassuming, hold all together.

A stack of jumpers
populated by suckered lips
like strange sea creatures, patient and watchful
Socks huddle together for comfort
a demented Freudian dream of penis loss

A heart, central to the composition
I have made
A seductive, empty void wearing protective sleeve
drawing me closer, deeper.
darker than the density of black

Below a vortex of belts, coiled
A snake like Catherine wheel with shining buckles
burns a circle
hollowed from ritual and desire

The rhythm of the folding
handkerchiefs
stacked higher than the habits of a lifetime
in honour

And the satchel, isolated, iconic
to which I pay homage
worn, handled, repaired, its skin
polished and curled into a shape that fitted.
Purposefully, I stare
but it reveals nothing
secrets closed for ever
a shoulder strap bowed in prayer.

These thoughts were jotted down whilst viewing all the prints (to date) for the first time and the rawness of this initial impact was an important step. It provided an essential mind-mapping of what the images might mean for

me, and perhaps, an indication of the way another person might read them. The fact that the observations were made in the form of a verse did not seem strange at the time and a number of early entries in my journal are, similarly, in verse form. Looking back at my journal I can see that this form allowed me to link personal connotations with a perceptual reaction to the prints. I have viewed the images many times since these first observations, but never with quite the same emotional involvement. As with loss itself, familiarity and intellectual distance tends to numb sensation and time transmutes memory into narrative. Looking at the photographs today, I do not believe that I could ever have another response similar to that first one. Rather I include these musings to illustrate a step in my reflective practice, a stage that was recorded in my artistic journal and that allowed for development of the photographic project.

In a continuous process of familiarisation with subject matter and exploration of techniques I slowly began a journey of discovery. Thus, the project has evolved, not in a linear way, but through a series of making and assessing, remaking and reassessing, or to borrow Hofstadter's beautiful phrase, through a series of 'strange loops' or 'tangled hierarchies' (Hofstadter, 1979 p.684). In accordance with the recursive nature of creative practice, in what is sometimes referred to as Hofstadter's Law, it was not possible to accurately estimate the time it would take to reach a satisfactory outcome, if that is, such an outcome is ever reached. Nevertheless, the focus of the project became tighter and

the concept clearer with each spiral of trial, error and occasional recognition of direction. In practice, it is constraints of time and the necessity of meeting a deadline that will bring the project to an end. This particular study will end with the completion of this document.

During the course of the project I sought opinion from a peer group audience, showing the work to colleagues and respected figures in the field of photography at Photography festivals and Portfolio Reviews. Opinions on the direction and value of the work varied but one message that came across very clearly was that this very personal project had little or no commercial value. Although I was not seeking a market for my work (certainly at this stage) I was interested in this response. Perhaps, it is the structure of portfolio reviews, together with the expectations of many participants that leads critics to comment upon possible commercial opportunities in relation to the work that they view.

The book publisher and editor, Caroline Warhurst, commented that that 'the work is far too personal to be universalised in any way' (Warhurst, personal communication, 4th July, 2013) and the publisher, Barbara Kampft, also highlighted the personal nature of the work by quietly asking 'how could you give a book of this work to someone? ' (Kampft, personal communication, 5th July 2013) Whilst most reviewers 'liked' the work, and could see its significance for me, they also felt that they could not suggest direction because of its very personal nature. The one exception was the curator and critic, Bridget Coaker, who encouraged me to consider the

impact of my choices in regard to framing the objects (i.e. whole object against dark background, or fragmented close up). I took her comments on board as I continued to make more images and perhaps it was the very negativity of the comments that actually stimulated me to make more work. I began to consider whether the fact that the images were difficult to look might indicate that I was creating something of significance. I was delineating a human experience that we rarely speak of, even to ourselves. This may just be worth attention.

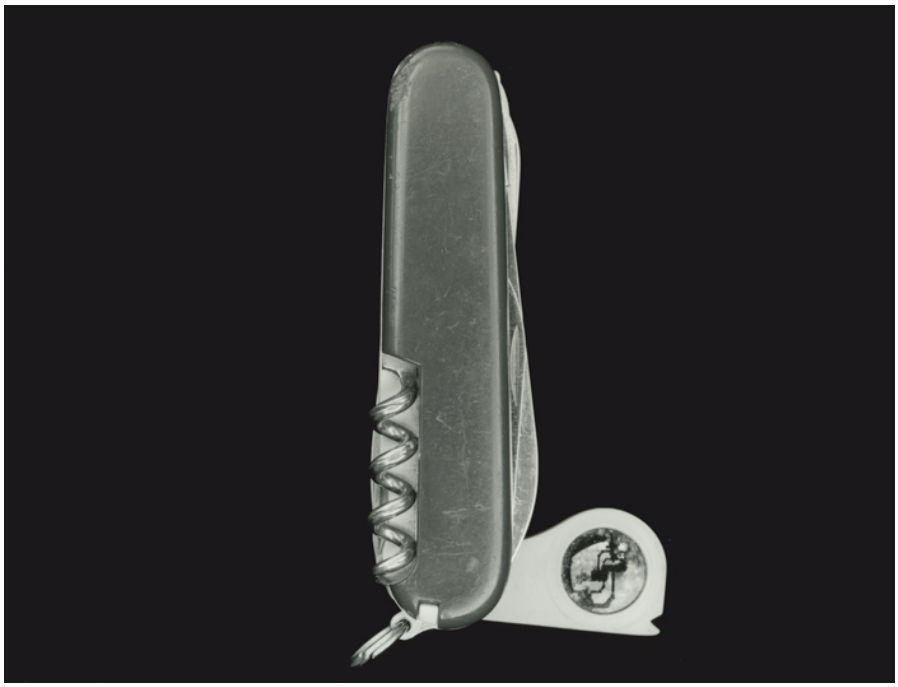
As the emotional confusion that had fuelled my initial explorations slowly began to evaporate, I began to see the work more clearly. It was at this stage I fully recognised that my focus on the issue of materiality was a visual exploration of the physical traces made on objects by constant use. The accretions of wear and tear and the marks of use on material objects emerged as the subject of the images. Although photography is strongly associated with the visual sense it was, in fact, tactility that I was exploring. This recognition helped move the practice forward insofar as it helped in the selection of negatives for printing. You could say that 'touch' became my touchstone, the criterion by which I recognised and tested each image. For example, I chose the image of the boots because of the criss-cross grooves in the leather tongues of the boots.

16.

From the series: *BE-Longing* (2014)

My late husband had very weak ankles from a childhood incident and he would twist or sprain them easily. He always tied his laces extra tight for protection. I had never noticed these indentations before because I had never really looked at his boots. The photograph reveals this very particular idiosyncrasy of touch.

As I continued to photograph the objects I also realised that I was occasionally incorporating oblique references to a shared fascination with photographic illusions. Tony had a particular interest in optics (to the extent that he wrote, but never published, a book about camera lenses). Reflective surfaces, such as a mirror, glasses or the magnifying lens of a Swiss army knife became opportunities for playful nods to this shared fascination.



17.

From the series: *BE-Longing* (2014)

The small magnifying glass on a knife presents a disorienting and unfamiliar space that is difficult to decipher. The face of a mirror does not reflect light to produce a reversed image of camera or photographer but instead, offers unfocused confusion. I would not expect an audience to notice my play with the optical qualities of surfaces, and I hope that it is not necessary for an appreciation of my overall intent. However, it pleases me to incorporate small, secret riddles. There is also a small possibility that I was actually trying to eliminate a self-reflection, to not see myself as part of these objects.

Perhaps significantly, I also sense a tentative movement towards a different way of looking in one of the last images I made - the pyramid of shredded negatives and contact sheets. This is the only image where I

have used a shallow depth of field. The piled ribbons of film and paper are sharply focused along one plane only, the rest of the image is soft and there is a blurring of edges. It was only after I had made a test print that I realised that I had taken the photograph in this way. This was a photograph about letting go and I had allowed the lens to begin the process of forgetting. Intuitively, I must have known that my usual forensic, examination would be completely inappropriate. Perhaps it was also an indication that the rituals of my photographic performance were beginning to change, were no longer as necessary.

4.4 Towards an exhibition

Although my photographic practice has purpose and meaning without an audience, it was always my intention to make the work available to a wider public. I kept this intention in mind as I crafted the work, carefully considering the elements that were under my control and making decisions that, where possible, ensured the desired audience response. I aimed to express my message about the power of possessions with simplicity and clarity. Always keeping in mind the space between the artefact and the audience, I also wanted to leave room for individual members of the public to bring their own experiences to the work. As the process of photographing and making work prints neared completion, I turned my attention to finding a gallery space in which to exhibit the work.

18.

The Power of Possessions, (2014) PM Gallery

Photographic work from this project was exhibited at Pitzhanger Manor Gallery, London W5 from 10th to 28th September 2014. The title of the exhibition was 'The Power of Possessions'.

I submitted a proposal for the exhibition to the gallery in July 2014 hoping to be offered a space early in the following year. In the second week of August, I was offered an exhibition in September 2014. This was short notice but it was also a great opportunity to get some feedback on my project so I accepted the offer gratefully and began studying the floor plan of the gallery, putting together a timetable and making lists of things to do. The following week I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I mention this only because the timing and nature of the treatment affected my decision making in a crucial, but I believe, ultimately beneficial, way. I had one month to prepare for the exhibition. I decided that it would be impossible for me to give the exhibition my full attention in the circumstances and that I needed to get some assistance with curation if the exhibition was to go ahead. I sought advice from the respected artist and academic, Dave Shadwell. He agreed to curate the exhibition and we worked together towards the eventual outcome. Combining curatorial power and artistic authorship, decisions relating to selection and sequencing, to scale and presentation were discussed. Dave made no attempt to change or deviate from my concept but provided a much-needed sounding board that helped steer the project through a hundred possibilities to realize the final outcome. I fully acknowledge a debt of gratitude to him at a time that was, for me, very difficult both physically and emotionally.

4.4.1 Selection and sequencing

Selection and sequencing was painstaking and slow, even with a limited number of images to choose from. I had made approximately seventy images over three years. The methodology of large format requires that most of the ‘thinking time’, relating to the compositional and technical aspects of the image, takes place before the shutter is pressed. Conversely, the more fluent snapshot aesthetic that we associate with digital image-making encourages quick responses to what is front of the camera, thus delaying much of the decision-making for a later stage on

the computer. In his definitive books on photographic theory and techniques, Ansel Adams was describing a process associated with large format cameras when he claimed that the final print is pre-visualized in detail before the shutter of the camera is pressed. He maintained that the photographer should have 'the ability to anticipate a finished image before making the exposure, so that the procedures employed will contribute to achieving the desired result'. (Adams, 1980, p.1) Without subscribing fully to the theory proposed by Adams, I work with large format precisely because the mechanical nature of the camera encourages a kind of pre-visualization. It is in the decisions made before the shutter is pressed that we find the trial and error of making it 'look right'. In other words, the physical embodiment of an intention, although not fully articulated, begins at an early stage in the photographic process.

It was at this stage that I fully acknowledged the two constants within the work. The first was that I had, from the very beginning and without always being fully cognisant of the fact, been exploring marks of touch. So, although I had a fairly clear idea of how the prints should look, it had been less clear to me what they were about. Secondly, that I was already sub-dividing this exploration through compositional decisions. For example, there was the touch associated with embodiment that is evidenced in the close scrutiny of a section of clothing (such as the bath robe) or an examination of the marks made in the handling of an object (such as a wallet). This realisation offered a way of thinking about display, scale and presentation, identifying key images that would stand

alone, editing and sequencing other images into a cohesive unity and excluding some for the sake of conceptual or visual cohesiveness. The exhibition strategy slowly took form. Four distinct pieces of work emerged from this process but, given the constraints of gallery space, it was decided to exhibit only three pieces. These were *BE-Longing*, *To Him: From Him* and *The Right to be Forgotten*. In terms of visual representation I still had to consider the viewing process.

A single image encourages the contemplation of space. We gaze at the image from one viewpoint, the perspective set by the single one-eyed vision of the camera. This was exactly what was required for *The Right to be Forgotten*. In this piece the small shredded pile of negatives and contact prints is scaled up until, metaphorically, it becomes a mountain. The viewer is invited to consider the ethics of remembrance and our obligations to, and rights over, the dead. This is an issue that I struggle with and one that is also addressed in another piece of work *To Him: From Him*. With this piece, I not only wanted to question whether the repurposing of personal possessions is an appropriate behaviour (private and public) for dealing with the objects of the dead, but also to encourage an audience to consider the propriety of the whole project. This may seem self-defeating, but it seems to me to be an important indicator of attitudes towards our dealings with the dead.

For the *BE-Longing* sequence I was keen to find a mode of viewing that suggested narrative and that would engage the viewer in the temporal

dimension of the work. Single images require the viewer to stand still and the mode of viewing is the gaze. In order to engage with the work temporally, the viewer must physically move. By making small scale images for the *BE-Longing* sequence and hanging them in one long, connected sequence, the viewer is encourage to inspect each frame by moving closer to the work. The experience of movement from one image to another gives the work a temporal dimension that encourages a building of narrative. Thus the concept of time becomes physically incorporated into the experience. Additionally, this sequence was hung so that it spread outwards from a corner of the gallery, coaxing the viewer, at some point in their viewing, into a corner where they are surrounded by objects of the dead. I saw this as a place of grief.

The series *BE-Longing* was printed in my darkroom using traditional silver bromide materials. This was appropriate to this set of work and in keeping with the tactility that I felt to be an important element of the work. I wanted the other two pieces of work to be on a much larger scale so these were printed at Genesis Imaging, chosen for their high professional standards. The resulting giclée fine art prints had no border and were framed in dark oak. The silver bromide prints that I had produced were framed in the same dark oak wood.

It is only at this stage, as the images are hung, that one can begin to see whether or not choices made in the abstract have any sense in reality. Many questions crossed my mind as the work went onto the wall. Is the

chosen scale appropriate for the space? How does this image sit next to other images? Is the height right? If not, what will a change here mean for the work that is already hung. An example of this anxiety can be illustrated by way of the *BE-Longing* images that had been printed with an aim to display them around one corner of the gallery. Sixteen images were chosen and the plan was to arrange them so that they 'folded' around one corner of the gallery (7 on one wall and 9 on the other). Nevertheless, I had 20 images framed and delivered to the gallery, as I suspected that when it came to the final sequencing around that corner, the visual effect might be such as to require the substitution of one image for another. I was allowing for options. In the event this was fortuitous.

The frames were hung as close to each other as possible, thus making a continuous line of darkness in which the photographed objects could float. In order to enhance the effect of a line and containment, a coloured box was painted on the wall to contain all the frames. After some debate a vibrant red was chosen. The sixteen selected prints were placed in sequence ready to hang. But stepping back for a final check I sensed, perhaps intuitively, that the visual sequence did not flow and that the hanging plan did not successfully translate to the actual space. The prints were rearranged but this changed the dynamic of the sequence. The process of looking and moving went on for about an hour and things were not going well. Unsure of what to try next, all 20 images were placed in a line against the walls and, quite suddenly, the space made sense. The length of the line had been too short. Although 16 looked fine on paper,

the physical properties of the actual space (the height of the walls and the distances from the other pieces of work in the exhibition) had the effect of diminishing the scale of this particular piece of work. I was so pleased that I had had the foresight to frame 20 prints. The sequence fell into place almost immediately once the decision was made to use all twenty photographs (eleven images on the left hand side of the corner and nine on the right hand side). The gallery technicians were left to paint the walls and hang the work. I returned the following morning with some trepidation. In the event, I was delighted. The chosen corner was diagonally opposite the entrance to the gallery and the bright red wall had the desired effect of drawing the audience towards it.

19.

BE-Longing (2014) PM Gallery

It also had another, quite unexpected, effect on me. The bright red gash on the gallery wall seemed to hold the echo of an open wound - a wound that was not yet healed. I saw in that moment that my own emotional scars were not yet formed and that until I found closure the wound would remain open, as if rubbed with salt.

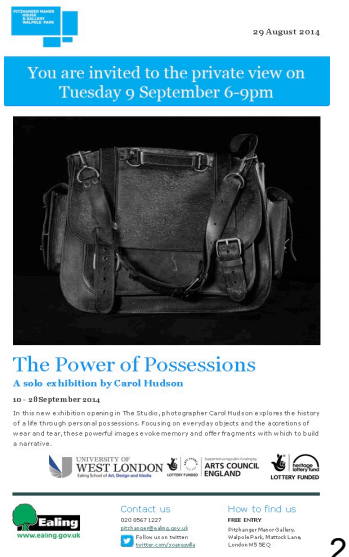
Quite apart from the important decisions about what work is selected and how it is displayed within a gallery context, there were many other things to consider. Statements for the wall had to be drafted, a press release written and a mailing list drawn up. Publicity materials needed to be designed and distributed, a private view organised and invitations sent out - and all to tight deadlines. Pitzhanger Gallery was generous and helpful throughout the process, and in particular with the design and distribution of the press release.

4.4.2 Signature image

It was not difficult to choose the 'signature' image. The signature image is considered to be an important element of all contemporary exhibitions. It is the images used to promote the exhibition and used on all publicity and press materials. Dave and I chose to use *The Right to be Forgotten*, (the pyramid of shredded negatives and contact sheets). This image seemed to go to the heart of the exhibition, not just because it highlights the dilemma facing those who grieve and discover things about their lost ones that they did not know, but also in raising questions about the paradoxical desire to be remembered. Although titled *The Right to be Forgotten* this piece is about really about the ownership of the objects of the dead and the moral dilemma associated with the disposal, utilisation and exploitation of the objects of the dead. There is also a new form of personal assets associated with our online affairs. In February 2015, the online social networking website, Facebook, began letting users select a

‘legacy contact’ to manage their profile after their death. Other online providers are introducing services to help individuals protect their digital legacy and plan memorial websites. However, making your funeral wishes known (in relation to tangible assets or digital ones) is not a guarantee for having them fulfilled. Ultimately, the legacy of the dead is in the hands of the living. My chosen signature image was intended to illustrate this balancing act.

20. *The Right to be Forgotten* (2014)



21. *Private View Invitation* (2014)

However, the Pitzhanger Gallery press office had a very different idea about the most suitable image for promotional material. Of course I bowed to their decision, primarily for pragmatic reasons in that they were funding press and publicity. However, it was also in acknowledgement that this was their field of expertise. In retrospect, it now seems clear why an image from the *BE-Longing* series was selected for promotional materials above the one I had chosen. Not only must the exhibition be

accessible and meaningful to the public, so must the press and publicity materials that promote it. Audiences for exhibitions have a huge range of options from which to choose so they must be able to connect with the subject matter if they are to make the journey to see the work in a gallery space. Although I still believe that the pyramid of shredded negatives has something important to say and was a pivotal piece in the evolution of my project, I acknowledge that it does not have the emotional frisson associated with the process of grieving that is more directly perceived in some of the other images. It can, perhaps be said to be an intellectual piece based on feelings, rather than an emotional piece mediated by rationality. Of course, on a more pragmatic level, it may just be that a horizontal, rather than a vertical, format was necessary for the design.

4.4.3 Audience response

The Private View was well attended. Recalling comments made by the critics who had seen the work at a developmental stage, I was slightly nervous about possible audience responses to the exhibition. However, as I circulated amongst the guests, my apprehension slowly dissipated to be replaced by something that I can only describe as a mixture of relief and gratification. Overhearing small snippets of conversation that turned on questions of loss, grief and the possessions of the dead I felt, in some sense, vindicated in my pursuit of this very personal project. I had opened up a much-needed conversation about death and the rituals associated with the dead.

The comments book indicated that some members of the public were sufficiently engaged to write about the experience of seeing the work. Eighteen people took the trouble to make comments. The comments were all along similar lines. Typical is Jeremy Myerson's which read "A really moving and powerfully executed exhibition, Memorable.' Although this is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an unbiased piece of data that could be used to support my project, I was, nevertheless, moved by the comments. Out of sorrow I seem to have created something to which other individuals could relate.

By attempting to express experience in a familiar and accessible way, in a way that an audience could respond to, I had sought to engage the viewer at observational, emotional and conceptual levels. Objects were photographed, not because they were interwoven with fond personal memories but documented, quite simply, because they were there, in drawers, on shelves and in cupboards. The tension between empirical observation and nostalgic idealization is both inevitable and desirable from a maker's point of view. Insofar as the work elicits an emotional response in a viewer, it becomes a reflective and considered nostalgia (that draws not just from personal experience but from other remembered works).

I was asked to talk about the work on 'The Robert Elms Show' for BBC Radio London. The interview process was straightforward with questions focused on my reasons for undertaking the project. Robert Elms said that

he found my subject rather morbid and I had to agree that this response might also be true for some of his listeners. Not everyone wants to think about death or anything remotely related to it. I was also contacted by a journalist from *The Guardian* who was interested in writing something about the project. However, she thought that it would be necessary for me to have a website so that readers could follow up her article if they wished. I was at the time planning a website and told her that I would be in touch once it was up and running. In the event, my health deteriorated rapidly and I was unable to do any work on the research or the website.

As the months passed, photography seemed to mean less and less to me and a project, perhaps based too much on keeping alive memories, seemed doomed as my brain sank into a fog of chemotherapy. I lost all appetite for photography and, whether because of this or simply because enough time had passed to move me out of the shadow of loss, I began to let go. The lingering power of possession had finally eluded my grasp. Perhaps this was because I found it easy to dispose of my own possessions thinking that they no longer held value for me or, perhaps it was simply that I now had substitute photographic possessions in which I could weave memories. I like to think it might be the latter but suspect that the frailty of my own body prevented me from keeping a dwelling place for more than what was necessary. If we live as long as we are remembered, and at this stage I believed that I was not going to be around to do the remembering, the possessions would finally be free.

A year later, I found myself in a redundancy situation but my health was slowly returning to something approaching normal. I now had time to put together a simple website, based on my research and the 2014 exhibition. The website www.power-of-possessions.com is dedicated to my late husband. This platform also gave me the opportunity to think about another dimension to possession and a type of touch that I strongly associate with my late husband, but that is much harder to pin down. This involves the 'touch of his eyes and his mind' and this was, for me, most clearly evidenced in the thousands of carefully organised books lining his bookshelves, each signed and dated on the day he finished reading it. Uncertain as to how I might, somehow, hint at the influences and interests that helped mould his identity and express his personality with far more insight and clarity than any of my photographs could, I made a bibliography. In chronological order of reading, the list is comprised of every dated book found on the bookshelves of my late husband. This list accompanies the project but is not part of it. I see it as a kind of biography of my late husband, but a melancholy one. Was all that reading wasted? What was it for? These questions, which go beyond the scope of this project, seem to testify to an innate optimism, and perhaps a subconscious belief in immortality.

As a matter of courtesy, I contacted the journalist who had been in touch with me a year earlier. I had not forgotten my promise to let her know if I published a website. To my surprise, she was still interested in the project and after a lengthy interview her article about the work appeared

in the Family Section of ‘The Guardian’ on Saturday 21st August 2015. The article, together with the website, has generated a number of comments. Most are along similar lines to those written in the visitors’ book at the exhibition. However, some responses were from people who had faced similar misgivings when it came to the divestment of personal possessions after the death of a close relative. If this latest manifestation of the work indicates that the project is incomplete, I see this in a positive light. It may be that it still has the potential to stimulate further knowledge and understanding.

Chapter 5: Critical analysis of the work

5.1 Critical distance

If I began making this work with some trepidation about a possible audience reaction, it is with even more unease that I am attempting to reflect upon it. The difficulties encountered by the necessity to produce new knowledge are as nothing compared to the self-conscious embarrassment of acquiring critical distance and positioning the work within a tradition. Nevertheless, I see these tasks as necessary not just from the position of reflective practice but also within a practice-based research framework.

An illustration from Michael Polanyi can, perhaps, throw some light on the issue of originality within a practice-based context. Polanyi (1966) highlights an inherent difficulty in any research problem, revealing an apparent self-contradiction that, he claims, was first identified by Plato in the Meno dialogue. The paradox is this. If you know what you are looking for, the problem doesn't really exist (because you already know it) so the research cannot be original but, if you don't know what you are looking for, you cannot expect to find anything. Polanyi's answer to this paradox is by reference to tacit knowledge. We can, he says "know more than we can tell'. (op.cit. p.4) He uses the example of face recognition to illustrate this, pointing out that we can recognise a face even though we cannot be precise about which features of the face allow us to do this.

In my own photographic practice, the skills required have become largely internalised and judgments about content and form are often made without any conscious awareness of the decision being made. In other words I rely on tacit knowledge. The photographic prints that form the major part of this research show more than I can tell. It is through reflective practice, through the exploration of the images that I find fresh insights that lead, in turn, to new images. The final outcome emerges from a mixture of object research, subjective experience and what Schön refers to as 'reflection in action (op.cit. p.102) This kind of reflection can also occur when a problem is encountered during a process and solved without any conscious reflection. It calls on already established skill and subjective knowledge.

In his *Black and White Photography Workshop*, John Blakemore urges us to think of this process as a journey. Speaking of his own work he says 'my parameters for a visual journey are simple but precise: there should be no map and no known destination. The traveller should be open to the vagaries of chance.' (Blakemore, 2005, p. 20) Blakemore describes how, as the work progresses, his relationship to both the subject matter and the process of picture making also developed through a process of making and assessing.

22.

Blakemore, John (2005) *The Journey 3*

This photograph was made in a very familiar domestic space of the kitchen and is one of the earliest images in what Blakemore described as his ‘tulip journey’. It is a space that he photographed continuously for a period of over five years in his exploration of the tulip. In this image the kitchen table and chair are transformed by light. The deep shadow creates an ethereal space; the floating light of the table becomes a window through which we see tulips transformed into butterflies. It is a moment of realisation and transformation, the petals of the tulip fully unfolded in a dying gesture that reveals the shadow of a butterfly. The tulip speaks to us of mortality through this fleeting shadow, a shadow that perhaps appeared for only a few moments and from a single viewpoint. As Blakemore eloquently observes:

> the moment of exposure, of affirmation, of the recognition of a potential image… is a moment when the juxtaposition of light, motif and viewpoint combine to produce the desired image. To look with intensity is to

> appreciate the previously unnoticed, to allow the possibility of discovery and of visual pleasure.' (Blakemore, 2005, p.21)

The significance that we find in this image is more that the mere descriptive qualities of a kitchen table with tulips and shadows. It resonates with a response to the natural world, to the flower, cut and captured, to life and death, and the giving up of a ghost. The photograph is a souvenir of a moment in Blakemore's journey and a treasure that he brought to share with us. It is a rare example of the photographer's inward life being projected onto a photographic artefact.

Interestingly, Blakemore made this and a number of other observational studies early in the tulip journey. As it progressed the work became more composed and forensic. The initial fascination with light and viewpoint gave way to a sustained looking at form and texture. Later in the book he admonishes readers who wish to follow in his footsteps to be 'prepared to photograph and re-photograph and to constantly question the images you have made to discover what you might do next.' (Op. cit. p.108) This advice is an acknowledgement of the iterative process that is the basis of creative practice and understanding. It has led me to my current research position.

It is not a strategy that keeps things tidy and for this I make no apology. This is a subjective, phenomenological study made through things that have a tangible presence; that are known to the senses and grounded in

experience. Too often research deals with figures and facts, with dates and numbers and fails to recognise or acknowledge emotional impact. I would simply point out that an emphasis on sensation does not imply a loss of critical awareness.

Perhaps it is appropriate to say something about the evolution of my personal photographic practice up to the point of this research. Two things have guided my methodological approach to image making; firstly, a conceptual (rather than a vision-led) interest in the subject matter and secondly, an interest in the way that the choice of photographic tools affects the articulation of that interest. Working within the genre of still life photography I have continued to explore transience and absence through a number of bodies of work that seem, inexorably, to have led to this research project. *The Power of Possessions* continues a discourse with death begun many years ago. It has become at one level, what Peter Schwenger reminds us is true of all vanitas, 'a melancholy reminder of the futility of amassing material things'. (Schwenger, 2006, p.76) Where it differs from earlier projects is in the intimacy of the work. I have learned that it is not the depictions of the material things amassed over a lifetime that I find melancholy, but the intimate everyday possessions that were used and overlooked. These are the things that touch me.

Unlike the traditional vanitas, there is little sentimental, heritage or economic value to any of the objects of my investigation. The personal effects of my husband were unremarkable and taken for granted, an

unnoticed, constant yet continually flowing circulation of things, made invisible by their very ordinariness. Indeed, precisely because of the mundane ordinariness of the subject matter, the work that I am producing fails completely as a metaphor for vanity. The objects depicted were not precious; they were not garnered against misfortune, nor do they serve to celebrate good fortune. What is represented in the photographs is of far less worth than the paper on which it is printed, simply in terms of the silver content in the photographic print itself. If there is irony in this it is that I seem to be amassing photographic representations of worthless objects with equal futility. This is not to devalue the photographic artefacts themselves as potential instruments of knowledge or objects of beauty, but simply a comment upon their ultimate value to me.

5.2 Creative practice and the grieving process

In her seminal work on the process of grieving the psychologist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) introduced and explored the, now famous, five stages of the grieving process that an individual must pass through in order to reach the final stage of acceptance. According to Kübler-Ross, individuals go through these five stages in order to come to terms with their own death, as well as the death of another. In fact Kübler-Ross originally proposed these stages in relation to the experience of facing one's own death. Since then they have been repurposed to cover many kinds of loss and have become a standard approach to bereavement in the grief-related professions that replaced religious faith and ritual in supporting the bereaved. These five stages in order are: denial, anger, bargaining,

depression, and lastly, acceptance. These stages are sometimes plotted in what is termed a change curve in which performance is plotted against time. There are many versions of this curve, as it has been adapted over the years not just in reference to death and bereavement but as a model for other emotional upsets such as the breakup of a relationship, redundancy or injury. Most versions follow similar transitional stages although the stages do not necessarily occur in order and do not all last for equal amounts of time.

Recently there have been challenges to this model; most notably Ruth Davis Konigsburg (2011) questioned the efficacy of it for the bereaved. Konigsburg sets out to expose the misconceptions that have grown up around the grief model arguing forcefully that the model has been applied inappropriately and, furthermore, that it is not supported by any scientific or psychological studies. Nevertheless, the Kübler-Ross model provides a useful perspective for viewing the photographs made (or not made) as an emotional reaction to loss. I have used this model as a heuristic device to describe one way in which my photographic practice over the past four years can be understood when plotted against this grief model. It suggests how the photographic practice could be connected to the grief model. However, I do not want to imply that there is a rigorous causal connection or that the relationship is other than one of analogy.

Denial is the first stage and my workbooks demonstrate a handful of very ordinary landscape photographs taken on the day my husband died with

the observation that ‘nothing has changed’. The world is still the same and so very ordinary. I made no more photographs during the next few days concentrating instead, on redecorating the house for his return. Family and friends, who not only steered me towards arranging a funeral, but also quietly redecorated over the violent yellow paint that now carelessly covered my kitchen walls, curtailed this aspect of my denial. Anger was already beginning to make itself manifest through this frantic painting. It found less energetic release in a complete obsession with photographing yellow. Undiagnosed liver disease and jaundice became manifest in the week before my husband died. Yellow, a colour I associated with life, with the sun, was now the harbinger of death. In the weeks that followed I took hundreds, perhaps thousands, of yellow photographs - until the yellow grew too loud. My rage was processed into a photographic book with the title *Seeing Yellow*. Was I, during this period of rage, still in denial? I certainly cleaned the house from top to bottom and laundered his clothes ready for his return (an act that I later regretted as it rendered the items more precarious as holders of smell and touch).

My first photographic forays into what, following Blakemore’s lead, I might call my ‘grief journey’ cannot be said to follow a clearly defined route. They were not even markers on a journey that I had begun. Rather these initial images represent a spinning out of control and attempt through photography to hold on to something. It was only in retrospect that I could acknowledge a link between my emotional state and those early

images. I did not find the butterfly in the dying flowers that filled my kitchen table, I found bitterness in a moulding lemon. This lemon stands in here for what (employing once again the concept of the photographic journey) is best described as my ‘yellow journey’. It was not light that obsessed me; it was the colour of my late husband’s jaundiced body.

23. *Lemon* (2009)

Yellow jumped out at me from everywhere – it lined the streets, confronted me in signs, and lurked in shadows. Yellow pursued me. My reflective journal records a period of intense rage that I now acknowledge as the first stage of my grief journey. What my journal does not record, but what I cannot help but see in retrospect, is a prophetic view of my own health problems in the image of the lemon. I cannot look at this image now without seeing it as a metaphor for the necessity of surgery on a diseased breast.

I don’t recall exactly why I made the first large scale monochrome photographs but, looking back it seems that I was trying to reinvigorate things that no longer had a function, and by so doing, make believe that this skein of things was not completely worthless, maybe even that it still had a purpose. It was, and to some extent still is, unclear to me what I should do with these objects that had outlived my husband. What was the appropriate behaviour in relation to a wardrobe full of unneeded clothes? Photography may not be the most obvious and appropriate behaviour but like Froese, Ishiuchi and Hill the compulsion to understand through the photographic process was irresistible.

The anthropologist, Daniel Miller, highlights the difference between the loss of the body and the loss of the objects associated with it. He points out that although we cannot control our separation from the living person, we do have some control over the objects that were associated with that person and we use these objects, in our own different ways, to cope with death. ‘People use their divestment of things to maintain a control over the process of separation which is less violent and sudden than death itself. Since this is not socially recognised as a ritual of separation, they find their own routes to this process, and there are various ways in which it is accomplished.’ (Miller, 2010, p.148) Although my thinking around this project has, inevitably, evolved and changed as a result of reflective practice, the kernel of the exploration has remained constant. The desire to understand the power of possessions and the rituals of separation

relating to the dispossessed objects of the dead and to explore what, on the one hand, represents the waste or residue of life, but on the other still seems to possess a power, a trace of the agency that is lost. As Daniel Miller points out there is 'literature on stuff in relation to death, but it is almost all concerned with memorialisation of various kinds. What has been ignored is the very gradual process of divestment that takes place over several years.' (ibid. p.146) This project explores this process through a photographic practice that, in in turn, becomes a ritual of separation.

The act of extracting an everyday object from its familiar surroundings and photographing it can, perhaps, be considered as a process that elevates an ordinary object into a desirable thing. Previously overlooked objects that were part of my home environment now seem out of place. They have lost their meaning. Through the creative process the objects are given new meaning and thus elevated into desirable things. The resulting photographic prints became, what the paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott (1971) termed 'transitional objects'.

Winnicott introduced the term 'transitional object' to describe the way an infant uses an object as a substitute in the process of separation (e.g. from the mother's breast). The substitution is, however, recognized by the infant as being just that. It becomes an object of play. Winnicott goes on to expand the theory to the realm of 'artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling, and of dreaming, and also of fetishism, lying and

stealing, the origin of loss of affectionate feeling, drug addiction, the talisman of obsessional rituals, etc.' (Winnicott, 1971, p.40) He thought that play was essential for human beings throughout their lives and believed that play was essential ' work' in the development of childhood. The play that takes part in the creative process can, similarly, be seen as 'work'. In my practice I have found it useful to consider my project in this light, as an in-between stage where photography is a form of play, a transitional stage in the separation and distancing from a lost person. Thus the creative play provided me with some sense of control at a time of separation. It was my work of mourning.

Five years after his death, my husband's personal possessions and clothing still surround me, but their sullen, obdurate, lack of movement and loss of agency is slowly reducing them to piles of things. Although they no longer act as the vibrant living frame spun around a life, they retain the vestiges of something. I cannot say that this is memory or a secret belief that he will return and need these things, though I certainly felt that in the beginning and only recognised the illusion for what it was in its cessation. However, my reconciliation to the empty frame, to the worthless state of these objects, has not made it easier to part with even a fragment of this debris. I acknowledge that this may seem irrational and perhaps, in the language of Freudian analysis, could be construed as an unhealthy melancholia. However, this secret, selfish desire not to let go completely is, as models of grief such as that of Kübler-Ross suggest, being transformed by time and creative practice.

As is evidenced in my reflective journal, although a number of photographic responses to the death of my husband are documented, my response to the personal possessions and items of clothing was made in terms of large format, monochrome negatives. The larger, less mobile, camera format forced me to work slowly and facilitated a careful scrutiny of the objects for clues about their relationship to my late husband. The method of materialisation of, what was at the time, a still invisible intention played a vital role in the manifestation of the visual artefacts. It is important to note that, although it was my inability to divest (everyday overlooked items of clothing, books etc.) that provided the impetus for a photographic exploration of the materiality of his possessions, the element of intentionality with regard to making the photographs should not be considered as a set of already pre-existent ideal images that I am trying to conjure up with a camera. The logic of what I was doing emerged through the rhythm of making and reflecting that is integral to the process. This can, perhaps, be understood in terms of an extended perceptual consciousness whereby the mind is extended through the physical operation of acquired psychomotor skills; skills that are embedded in repetitive hands-on learning. If understanding comes about, it is through doing and thinking at the same time. In this project, it is the discipline of photographic practice that underpins my investigation.

There was a period of approximately one year when my photographic activity seemed almost frenetic. I photographed the same objects over

and over again (a row of shirts) and made print after print in my search for the ‘perfect’ composition, tonality and contrast. I now see this excessive activity as another form of denial. I needed these possessions as photographic subjects so that they still served some purpose. But if I was using them to bargain it was unclear to me why. Lacking any tangible belief system about an after-life I struggled to understand my need to engage in this process or what I was hoping for. Nevertheless, it seemed possible that the act of photographing the possessions would keep something alive in a form more tangible than fickle memory. Perhaps this is a form of bargaining and, I acknowledge, one that does not fall within the realms of reason. It forms part of a secret, selfish desire not to let go – just yet. The photographic process of examination and investigation is an on-going process and it is, perhaps, only with time and persistence that I will learn what I am searching for.

5.3 Elegy as a form of mourning

Although, as already indicated in the discussion of Hill’s work, it may be unwise to take Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” literally; it is generally acknowledged that this essay has been very influential in the theoretical discourses that surround aesthetic and literary artefacts. An inherited terminology has ensured the continued influence of Freud’s essay on readings of literary texts and objects of art. Taking a lead from critics of poetic elegy, this essay adopts Freud’s text as a useful framework for the examination of my photographic practice as an expression of personal

loss. It is, perhaps, only through art that consolation, rage and sadness can find expressive form. In particular, the public face of personal grief is most often encountered through poetry. The elegiac poem can be traced back to ancient Greek literature and although attitudes to death and the literary form in which the grief is expressed may have changed over time, elegy continues to be a consolatory, sometimes angry, sometimes melancholic outlet for feelings of loss.

In a comprehensive study of the modern elegy Jahan Ramazani adopts a psychoanalytic framework for looking at the poetry of mourning. He acknowledges that Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" has become the basis for most theoretical approaches but points out that Freud's essay gathers together past wisdom 'restating it as synoptic form'. (Ramazani, 1994, p.29) The past wisdom located in lament and elegy speaks of consolation, memory and acceptance and offers insights into a richer expression of reaction to personal loss. Freud's essay privileges mourning over melancholia. Mourning is cast in heroic, masculine terms whereas melancholy is made to seem a more trivial, feminine response to loss. Identifying the work of mourning with detachment, Freud believed that mourning should be orderly. It should have a beginning, middle and end. 'The ego is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object. The work of mourning is, therefore, synonymous with the work of severance'. (Freud, 1917/1984 p.265)

In his overview of the history of elegy, David Kennedy acknowledges the interpretive power of Freud's essay before surveying more recent critical approaches and the changing meaning of elegy within a contemporary world. He compares pastoral elegy as found in nineteenth century works (which allows an interpretation very much in line with Freud's work of mourning) with the elegy of the twentieth century (which focuses on the rejection of consolation and an acceptance of melancholy). Kennedy makes the observation that modern elegists have tended to attack convention and often leave their readers and themselves inconsolable. In particular, he examines the ways in which feminist poets and critics have offered new perspectives, aligning themselves with melancholia and displaying an unwillingness to keep elegy tidy. This allows for a response that is more concerned with attachment than detachment and one very much in tune with my own practice. I have an unwillingness to give up my dead.

Depression is considered to be the fourth stage of the grieving process, and one with which I can find resonances within my photographic practice and, perhaps, even in the research process itself. I do feel disconnected from the project and the anger that initially drove me to pursue the research has completely dissipated. Maybe this is to be expected but without the motivational rage that fuelled the first images and writing I felt detached from the project. It became halting and slow and seemed to have little purpose. By way of comparison, the poet eloquently shapes language to explore feelings such as what is it like to feel alone but not

lonely; to miss someone; to feel lost in a familiar environment or to pursue an elusive thought. It seemed to me at the time impossible for the photographer to deal in such emotions. This inward life of human beings often resists projection into photographic artefacts.

Although the descriptive qualities of the medium have been well exploited and it has served to provide evidence for almost two hundred years, no one would claim that photography is an entirely objective medium. The use of photography by the advertising industry is testament to the persuasive power of the photographic image and its ability to carry convincing messages. Nevertheless, photographic artists have often struggled with, or rejected, the quest to get beyond the purely descriptive. Photographic histories demonstrate the ways that photographers have responded to the ontological qualities of the medium. There have been trends that stress pictorial style (pictorialism), faithfulness to reality (modernism), tools of scientific discovery (constructivism) and mechanisms for revealing the subconscious (surrealism). This emphasis on either the objective or subjective elements of photographic practice continued up until new technical developments in the field of telecommunications ushered in the era of digital image making. The debate around objectivity and subjectivity seems meaningless when the digital image doesn't have to have any ontological relation to reality. However, in my practice I continue to value the qualities of mechanical documentation. The ontological link with the objects in front of the camera is paramount for this study. Through the causal link, I am attempting to

suggest bonds that go beyond the visual. This might be likened to Plato's analogy of the cave or even, as Susan Sontag (1987) suggests, the process of photography itself. Seeing only shadows, the material world of sensations, but trying to perceive the underlying reality of life itself, a knowledge that is beyond language.

There was a period of about twelve months when I took very few photographs of any kind. The prints that were already made and spread out for viewing were gathered up and placed in a box. I now identify this period with feelings of lethargy and depression. Plotting my project against the five stages of grief, I am able to map denial, anger and bargaining with some degree of conviction but the stage of depression eludes photographic expression. Feelings of intense sadness and hopelessness are not conducive to creative work of any kind. Everything seemed pointless. If there was anything positive about this period of the project it was that the passing of time gave me some emotional distance. When I did returned to looking at the images it was with a degree of acceptance.

Most theorists and psychologists argue that healthy mourning rituals involve accepting that the deceased is gone and with that comes removing the attachment that mourners had for the dead when they were alive. I seemed to be echoing the process of disposal of the body with a disposal of the images (and yet the objects themselves still held power over me). Freud has observed that the slow and 'painful' process of

mourning has two stages. He says that although ‘reality-testing has shown that the loved one no longer exists’ a ‘turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis’ (Freud, 1917, p.253) The process of mourning is piecemeal and protracted, only finally being complete when ‘each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment from the libido is accomplished in respect of it.’ (ibid. p.252) Freud uses the concept of ‘cathexis’ to refer to the investment of emotional energy in objects, (or ideas or people) at a preconscious level. The term ‘hypercathexis’ is used to refer to an intensification of an existing cathexis that becomes conscious and through intellectual effort can be brought under some kind of control and accepted. It is this second letting go that allows the work of mourning to be completed.

Joan Didion (2005) coined the wonderful phrase ‘magical thinking’ for the emotional space between the loss and the letting go. My magical thinking led me to believe that I could keep my husband ‘alive’ through our shared love of photography. The slow realization, through this process, that this was not possible halted the practical research for some months and, consequently, has also caused a re-evaluation of the problem I was trying to resolve. The power of possessions does not, as I once believed, maybe even hoped, lie in their ability to evoke my memories, but in the descriptive framework they provide for the interpretation of the unique presence in space and time of an individual. Thus the history of my late

husband is made manifest by the existence of personal possessions and it is authenticated through the marks of ordinary, everyday usage associated with belonging.

5.4 Compositional strategies

In my practice I utilise two strategies found in the work of the photographers discussed earlier, in order to intensify seeing and bring attention to particular descriptive details. The first is that of isolating the object and framing it close-up in order to examine the accretions of touch revealed through texture and wear. The second is that of repetition of similar forms, often cropped and suggesting fragments. Despite the very important questions raised about modernist photographic practice by 'post-modern' critics such as Victor Burgin (1982) and Susan Sontag (1987) to name but two, I have found the techniques of fragmentation and close scrutiny appropriate to an exploration of touch within my own practice. I am not, however, making a claim about truth or essences but rather attempting to describe a haptic relationship to objects possessed, whether through embodiment, use or caress.

24 From the series: *BE-Longing*

25 From the series: *To have and to hold*

I have borrowed from past traditions, not in order to critique or appropriate, but to offer a framework in which to explore and highlight the trajectory of common commodities. My intention is to use some of the tools of modernism to reintroduce intimations of mortality through the inclusion of evidence of use and possession. Thus the objects of observation do not trace the perfect, identical creations of a modern industrial system or seek ideal form. Nor do they contain signifiers of aspiration to an unblemished future; they trail remnants of a past in folds and creases, in etched abrasions or small stains, in hair, in tiny flakes of skin; and in the visibility of touch. The inclusion of the scar, like the insect on the flower or the fallen cup, is a reminder of accident and of survival but, ultimately, of death. Choices relating to background tonality and direction of light evolved through reflective practice. I deliberately chose to move away from the white background, often used by advertisers who utilise the space to juxtapose a product with lifestyle images through montage and the inclusion of textual messages. For the series of personal possessions, it seemed important to have a vast depth of space within which the object would float. I perceived these objects as breaking free from the 'gravity' that once held and ordered their relationship to their owner. Like the debris circling a planet that ceases to exist, they become flotsam and jetsam and, bearing the scars of their encounter, float slowly into dark space.

As already stated, it now seems clear that I was not simply documenting the objects in themselves, but exploring evidence of touch. It was through the marks of wear and tear that I could trace, and thus remember, the way that my husband used to be amongst the living. His agency was evident, not so much in the choice of objects, but in the way that he had ordered and handled things, the way he embodied clothes or marked items through accident or constant use. The mystery of possession that seemed to linger in his personal possessions was, quite literally, brought to light through the process of photography. The marks of touch were made manifest through the close and careful scrutiny of the camera lens.

5.5 Photographic materiality

As the work has evolved, encounters of touch, the marks and abrasions that transform ordinary commodities into personal possessions, became the focus of this research. Thus the physical activity of making the photographic prints and the accidents of process, as manifested in chemical markings or small scratches or creases from the processing and printing (my own mark-making) echo the marks on the depicted objects. This is not to deny the necessity of commercial commodities as a starting point in my photographic practice. The camera, the enlarger and photographic materials are necessary tools that have also been transformed from commodity into possession. A tool is special; it is a transformative possession whose potential lies locked within and is only revealed through the skill of the user. It is an object in its own right but

also an object that can be used in the creation of new objects. Each print retains traces of touch in its material manifestation, traces that are revealed by close inspection, and that echo the marks of use that can be seen on the objects depicted. In other words, the prints have their own scars.

I should here acknowledge that I have taken some poetic licence by using the word ‘scar’ in the context of possessions. Perhaps, strictly speaking, it can be argued that a scar is a mark left on skin or body tissue after a wound. However, even conventional dictionary definitions recognise uses of the word in other contexts. For example, the lasting effect of grief might leave an emotional scar on a person or the word ‘scar’ may be used to refer to a mark left on an object following damage of some kind. It is in the latter context that I use the word ‘scar’ but the resonances of emotional scarring and the fact that death leaves no scars (for there is no healing) have reverberations that are important for an appreciation of the practical element of this study, not least in light of the interest scholars have begun to take in the material tactility of photographic prints themselves.

Elizabeth Edwards (2002) has claimed that it is not just the visual aspect of a photograph that is important. We must also consider their physical presence in the world. She acknowledges in her paper on the significance of the materiality of ethnographic photographs, that the material and presentational forms of photographs are central to their meaning as

images. Photographs are both images and physical objects and visual properties always, to some extent, depend upon the material properties. Photographs ‘have exceeded the direct indexical visual use, and created, literally and metaphorically, another dimension to the image’. (Edwards, 2002, p.68) Photographs have meaning both as images and as objects and the choice of process and presentation cannot be separated from the content of the image. The claim is that the image on its own does not carry meaning but rather it is the fusion of its material manifestation to the content depicted is the site of meaning. The presentation of photographic images, the scale, substrate and framing create very different opportunities for consumption resulting in quite different subjective experiences.

The relevance of this to my practice is evident. The significance of the silver bromide print (a process that is rapidly vanishing in a digital age) is its material, tactile properties. My choice of method and materials is intended to place the viewer in similar proximity to the photographic artefact as might be experienced in relation to personal possessions. By drawing attention to objects that are often considered of no importance, through the making of objects wrought in silver and paper, I hope to show the transformative possibilities inherent in artistic endeavour. Perhaps trivial, but essential, possessions can offer a powerful insight into the link between the physical and mental world of an individual and throw light onto the cultural space in which an individual existed.

It might have been simpler to claim that I knew the focus of this project from the outset and that the primary consideration was an exploration of the sense of touch. But this was not the case. To reiterate, I began this research project impulsively, attempting to photograph everything (in the hopes of retaining something). I was not discriminating or careful. Books, music albums, pens, old lighting and filming equipment, piles of paper, board games and items of clothing were all made subject to the camera's gaze. Work prints were pinned around the house for many weeks. They provided the raw material from which I was attempting to weave a narrative. It was from the process of looking, sequencing, reflecting, looking again and rearranging that the focus of the project emerged. The importance of the items being 'embodied' or handled at some point in their history, and therefore being shaped by this particular living body, was significant. No object, any more than any person, can be understood by looking at a photographic description captured in a single moment. However, by referencing the impact of touch through marks made from prolonged contact with personal items I seek to acknowledge a tactile history via a visual medium. But this is just one possible narrative; it is not and cannot ever be, the whole story.

5.6 A touchstone

But it is not just the history of the object that finds visual form; I am also linked back through time in making the photographs. The shirt he wore is impressed with the memory of an absent body and when I touch the shirt, the gap is bridged. The shirt has a materiality that photographs lack.

Amongst the informal rituals associated with the dead, identified by Margaret Gibson, friends and family often choose a significant object from the personal items of the dead as a souvenir, as a touchstone of a shared narrative history and generator of authentic memory. It is 'through the evocation of smell as well as image, [that] clothing may be more effective in momentarily (although never entirely) bridging the space-time separation that distances the living from the dead. The sight, touch and smell of a loved one's old hat, favourite shoes or coat can trigger a body image and thus a memory of the body.' (Gibson, 2008, p.111)

The photographs that I make do not trigger memories in the same way. They express something about the body memory. Both the artefact and the photograph embody time but in very different ways. The clothes and personal artefacts are marked by their use, by being touched and worn over a period of time, the photographs record and embalm a moment in time. The deterioration of the objects from constant, everyday usage ceases when a person dies. My photographs mark this point and embalm the moment forever in the past. Time is stopped for the deceased, it is echoed in the photographic record of the dispossessed clothes.

I am visually exploring objects that were, until recently, subject to touch as much as sight. As early as 350BC Aristotle, in his classic study of the five senses, *De Anima*, observed that touch is the characteristic that distinguishes plant from animal life (though as has been pointed out to me he was not familiar with carnivorous plants). He linked touch with

biological processes such as aging and dying. Making a similar point but in a very different cultural context, Constance Classen makes the observation that touch is the 'deepest sense' but one that 'lies at the heart of our experience of ourselves and the world' (Classen, 2012, p.*xi*). Aristotle pointed out the centrality of touch to life itself and Classen demonstrates its crucial role in cultural activity. In her extended study on the role of touch she demonstrates the social and religious centrality of touch from medieval times to the present day. During the Middle Ages the cult of relics was particularly popular and Classen notes that their power is accessed by touch. Clothing and parts of saints' bodies were thought to be particularly powerful and effective in protecting from harm. One striking feature that Classen points out in relation to the cult of relics is the 'apparent lack of any sense of disgust or feeling of reticence in the people who touched, wore on their persons, and at times even put into their mouths, parts of corpses.' (ibid. p.40) This observation is pertinent to my project in an unexpected way but one that highlights the distinction between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary; between quotidian, dispossessed possessions emptied of purpose and those, which might seem at first glance, similar items whose value lies in their provenance and historical significance. In Christianity, relics have associations with the power to heal, the touch of Christ, the blessing of the Pope. The 'laying on of hands' is sought, and accepted, as beneficial to emotional as well as physical well-being. But the unsought 'laying on of hands' is considered to by an infringement of our personal space and, thus, unacceptable. Touch is permitted only within the constraints of society

and in a culture that is now, primarily, visual we have become wary of knowing through touch and surround all tactile encounters with codes and conventions. In western society, the handshake is an acceptable form of touch associated with greeting people, as is the embrace, though not always in all circumstances. Different societies have other forms of touch associated with greetings.

The touching of objects, of property, is even more circumscribed by codes and legal sanctions. Classen has observed the changing attitude to the touching of objects in the Museum. Museums are the secular counterparts to churches and shrines and touching the objects encountered in the latter spaces was thought to bestow some special power, to link through time. Museum visitors 'often imagined that they might receive an infusion of supernatural power by touching such objects of wonder as an Egyptian mummy.' (op. cit. 2012, p.278) However, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, curators did not always approve of touch, though perhaps this was more from fear that the items would be stolen than because of preservation concerns. The obsession with preservation was ushered in with the Age of Heritage in the twentieth century.

One of the few museums in the UK today that caters to the sense of touch is The Children's Museum. As Classen observes, this 'is in keeping with the common nineteenth-century association of touch with non-rational and infantile behaviour.' (op. cit. p.284) Children are taught

to forgo the sense of touch in everyday encounters in the world and to reserve it for the intimate and private realm of the domestic. Touch traditionally resides in the intimacy of the home, in the work of women and in the bringing up of children and caring for the elderly and, of course, in the healing professions. In recent years initiatives relating to disability issues (particularly the visually impaired) have encouraged museums to programme audio and touch exhibitions and tours, but this is not the norm.

Having noted that the marks of making play a part in my practice, I should make it clear that I have taken care in the making of the prints, seeking to produce photographic artefacts that, perhaps paradoxically, draw attention to the overlooked by becoming objects of observation. It is photography's inherent tendency to aestheticize all before its lens that I find attractive insofar as it dignifies what is, in essence, the waste product of a life. In a manner reminiscent of that used by Irving Penn for his series of 'Cigarette Butts' I am using the close-up, sharply defined tradition of Blossfeldt, Renger-Patzsch and Edward Weston to over-emphasise fragments of disposed items of clothing and personal trivia. But, unlike Penn, I am not attempting to transfigure the litter of urban life into monumental sculpture in order to reveal beauty in detail (as is common in many advertising pack shots), but rather to reveal the unattractiveness of the scar and to demonstrate our repulsion for personal possessions that have become the excrement of a life. The left over scraps of ordinary lives are no longer commodities with monetary value. They are not relics,

not even vaguely interesting to anyone but the immediately bereaved. To show them to others in enlarged and close-up visual proximity is, perhaps, unseemly. The invited visual touch may incur rejection, if not repulsion.

When making the photographs of the personal items and clothing I was very aware that some items are more intimate than others. Photographing the clothing was emotionally easy for me but I confess to feeling very uncomfortable about making some of the images public. Considering carefully my feelings it seems clear that the strong social taboos associated with certain parts of the body played a decisive role in my thinking. It is not the response of others to my photographic output that I am analysing here but by own inhibition in terms of what I am prepared to show others. My initial reluctance to make public certain of the photographs seems to be akin to the act of tearing into shreds the pile of love letters that my husband had kept for many years. There was a desire to keep the intimate, intimate. But more than this, the moral and social regulation of private spaces that governs the covering of parts of the body also has some bearing on my practice. As Gibson points out 'when we consider what we do with … clothing we are also drawn into considering the moral and social status of the body.' (op.cit. p.113) In other words, it is unseemly in terms of social and moral taboos to display certain personal items of clothing. When an individual dies, the divestment of their possessions rarely extends to include their intimate apparel. Such items, according to Gibson, are 'unlikely to be kept and rarely worn.'

(op.cit. p.114) This fact was brought home to me forcibly after the recent death of my father. Although we had a close relationship this was not manifested through physical contact and when it came to disposing of my father's possessions, I felt compelled to dispose of everything immediately and, without any thought, clothing and personal items were quickly placed into recycling systems. Clothes mark the border between the inside and outside of the body; they are a boundary between the private and the public, a threshold that can hold the gaze or, alternately, turn it away. Clothes (as possessions) seem to fall into that realm of objects that Freud called the 'uncanny' (unheimlich). "We are reminded that the word 'heimlich' is not unambiguous but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand 'heimlich' means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight." (Freud, 1919/1965, p.224)

In order to elucidate this point a little more clearly, it is worth introducing the notion of the abject as understood in the works of Julia Kristeva. Abjection in the works of Julia Kristeva refers to a human reaction to something loathsome, itself as a horror and a breakdown of meaning, resulting from the loss of separation between self and other or subject and object. The primary example for this would be 'the corpse, the most sickening of wastes'. It 'is a border that has encroached upon everything'. (Kristeva, 1982, p.3) Again she states that the 'corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.' (ibid. p.4) Other items of bodily residue can elicit the same

traumatic feeling. When there is no body, the clothes become waste, residue and by association and implication serve to traumatically remind us of our own mortality. The photograph is, of course, twice removed from the body but, precisely because it shows that the clothing depicted was once in contact with the body, there is an unease that comes from not respecting borders or traditions. Eliminating this sense of unease is impossible but by tracing, arranging and organising the items of impurity, by bringing them into being a second time, into physical objects of a different kind, a space is opened for the transposition from feelings of fear into those of sadness or of longing.

Clothes bear, in numerous small marks and creases, the personality of the owner. Traces of ownership linger serving, in turns, both memory and rejection. The literary and cultural theorist, Peter Stallybrass writes poignantly about being emotionally overcome whilst wearing a jacket that had once belonged to a dead friend. His friend was, he writes 'there in the wrinkles of the elbows...he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits.' (Stallybrass, 1993, p.36) This jacket, which had outlived its wearer, was still permeated by his human imprint. It had been shaped by touch, a touch that could still be perceived in what Stallybrass, borrowing the jargon of the tailor and the seamstress, refers to as the 'memory' of cloth. If, as Stallybrass suggests, individuals live on through the clothing and objects they once lived through, it beholds us as survivors, not to dismiss as abject, but to wonder at, the human presence that pervades every surface.

5.7 Nostalgia and Longing

If the objects the dead leave behind hold the potential to be comforting, we must also acknowledge that they may also be terrifying. Haunting is often associated with ghosts and ghosts with stories about spectral beings wreaking havoc upon the living. But as Gibson notes, 'Grief is a relationship to and experience of haunting that is contrary to these fearful, even negative, constructions of it.' (op.cit. p.185) Through a series of interviews with the grieving she demonstrates that the 'sense of being haunted both internally and externally can be comforting, even sought after. Indeed, the grieving actively keep the dead alive to thought and feeling by holding on to those things and visiting those places that continue a relationship. Objects can have a spectral life, a haunting power through the psychic life of the grieving'. (op. cit. p.188) It is this type of haunting, this presence that speaks of the past, that possessions hold. This is not to say that every possession will elicit a nostalgic response but that it has the potential to do so.

The personal items of the dead can be said to provoke nostalgic longing, through their capacity to trace authentic experience. However, this approach is not an accidental and unthinking personal nostalgia. It is a self-conscious attempt to engage with strategies and themes that have a genesis in elegy and literature. It is not an actual madeleine being dipped in tea, but the narrative of description that we experience when we read Proust's novel. It is not the emotional response to an individual memory

of past desire that evokes longing so much as longing for the sake of longing itself. The nostalgic emotion that is induced in the reader is a literary creation and does not relate to lived experience. Similarly, although this project may partake of the nostalgic, I want to claim that it does so with the intention of using nostalgic strategies in a knowing manner. We can and do have aesthetic appreciation for objects that also have other value though it may require a kind of psychic distance, a special attitude that is not a matter of what we relate to but how we relate to it.

In her essay *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart explores the nature of longing and nostalgia through the examination of the souvenir and the collection. Speaking of the photograph, she says that it:

> is the logical extension of the pressed flower, the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of that narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing us penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narration of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia. (Stewart, 1993, p.138)

My understanding of this passage is in terms of the placing of the photographic image within the hierarchy of our memories and

understanding of the past. The photograph can be an aid to memory but it can also replace memory. We look to the photograph not just for descriptive evidence of existence but also as originator and arbiter of the stories that we tell about and to ourselves and to others.

Stewart describes the souvenir as ‘an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia’ (ibid. p.135) that relates to specific personal past experience and a cherishing of memories associated with the object. It is the coming together of memories of a past experience with the idealization of that past that creates nostalgia. After considering the ways in which narratives are generated by objects, she goes on to examine the way in which the souvenir and the collection generate objects by means of narrative as part of an exchange economy. The distinction that she makes in relation to the relationship of narrative to object powerfully reflects the difference between the objects that I photograph and the objects that I create, a relationship which echoes and reverses the move from commodity object to personal possession. Objects of consumption (with an exchange value) become personal possessions (with a use value) that in death become otiose, are photographed as part of an individual attempt to express emotion and generate narrative (a use value) which is, in turn, exhibited in a gallery, and thus (in theory) given an exchange value.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Closure

I feel that there should be some kind of closure at the end of this journey but I cannot envisage absolute resolution. This was both a research journey and a personal journey through grief and although the research will end, scatterings of grief will, no doubt, lie silently in the recesses of memory for moments of unexpected vulnerability. Grief is a matter of endurance and though daunting at times, the space offered for reflection and consolation by absorbed creative practice made my journey bearable. I had no control over death. It just happened. However, I did have some control over the objects left behind. We are framed by accumulation, by stuff that is for the most part invisible. I now see these items as a gift, a final silent gift that offered me time, time to let go at my pace and in my own way. It commanded no reciprocation. The destruction of these objects will be my final gesture of closure once this project is complete. I will relinquish them as they relinquish me.

I offer *The Power of Possessions* as a fragment of discourse, about the objects of the dead, between self and the world. It is also an endeavour to find meaning in absence. I did not carefully and descriptively photograph in order to preserve, but to discover and to honour the person who was as much a part of the objects as they were a part of him. By immersing myself in minutiae of description, by touching and handling each possession, I said my goodbye. It is only very recently that I have come to

appreciate the true significance of the phrase ‘to have and to hold’. To be able to touch, to be able to hold, is at once the most primitive and the most precious of the senses.

6.2 Final words

Throughout the study, I have tried to keep in mind the place where I began this journey and to comment upon the discoveries that I have made. The photographic prints and the words that I have written may, at times, have failed me but my intention has remained constant. In seeking an end to this journey I have made the following, tentative, conclusions.

The Power of Possessions explored the materiality of the ordinary, everyday objects left behind after death in order to raise questions about the agency that transforms physical objects into personal possessions. In so doing, it also pointed to something essentially unfixed and mobile that is inherent in the frame of possessions that we build as shelter and achievement. The marks found on these objects testify not only to endurance through time but act as evidence of unique individual existence.

The Power of Possessions followed a ritualistic process of making and reflecting that led me to discover (or perhaps rediscover) the fundamental nature of touch. The sensual nature of possessions was echoed through the tactile pleasures of making. This, in turn, brought me into a discourse

on the role of touch as evidenced in still life and to the recognition of its centrality to our relation to others and to possessions.

The Power of Possessions sought ways to represent loss and absence. Links between the past and the present were made through photographing the objects left after death, initially in order to demystify the power that seemed to linger on in personal possessions. This led to the meaning of the objects being re-contextualised through visual arrangement in an exhibition to become both memorial and bearer of narrative.

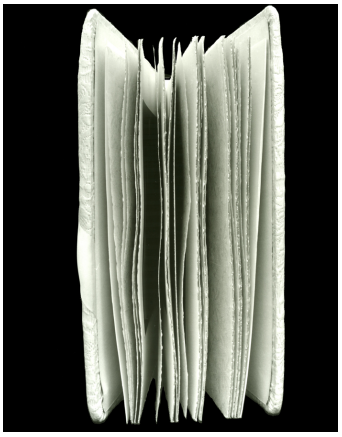
Now that the *Power of Possessions* journey is nearly over, I can look back and see that the work has allowed me to move towards a place where the divestment of possessions is possible. This discourse and my photographic practice provided the space for observation and discovery allowing other significant themes emerge.

I discovered that the loss of a loved one affects subjectivity and identity. The dislocation of self that I encountered with the loss of my husband required a renegotiation of my identity. I found myself in a strange and unfamiliar space with the attachment of the label ‘widow’, a space that I chose to negotiate within the familiar territory of my photographic practice.

Furthermore, I recognise that the constant revision of memory (that is part of reflective practice) is a way of forgetting the pain of the loss. The burden of memory is transformed through creative engagement and its load grows lighter with the passing of time.

The photographic part of this study offers a model for transforming objects associated with personal loss into celebrations of life. In other words, a valorisation of the domestic, a giving of new meaning to the mundane and a reminder that ‘looking at the overlooked’ (Bryson, 2008) has artistic as well as therapeutic value. I hope that I have demonstrated that the transitional objects which are an essential component of coming to terms with personal loss, but which often have no intrinsic worth can, through the transformative power of creative attention, be transfigured into artefacts with resonances for a wider audience.

The conclusions that I have arrived at may be subjective but, I believe, offer the possibility for future research. Hopefully, this project will serve as both artwork and memorial, until it too is forgotten.

 26.

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