

Unvanishing Traces, Xspace Cultural Centre, Toronto

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Ayo Tsalithaba

← Installation view, *Unvanishing Traces*, Xpace Cultural Center, Toronto, 2018.

Photo : Polina Teif

Ashley M. Freeby

† *Remnant no. 1*, 2018–ongoing, installation view, Xpace Cultural Center, Toronto, 2018.

Photo : Polina Teif

Aaron Moore

→ Installation view, *Unvanishing Traces*, Xpace Cultural Center, Toronto, 2018.

Photo : Polina Teif

Unvanishing Traces

Mainstream and social media offer us an endless stream of images of marginalized bodies that are subjected to brutal forms of violence. Responding to the monstrous photographs that emerged out of Abu Ghraib, Jean Baudrillard referred to these as “war porn.” He suggested that their dissemination “becomes a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate abjection which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality show, in a desperate simulacrum of power.” In the midst of such an overwhelming mediation of violence inflicted upon the marginalized, what are the possibilities for remembering the dead, for commemorating the disappeared, or for even the more difficult task of mourning them? Can being subjected to aesthetic abstraction in the work of art render memory or remembering possible?

These are some of the questions that governed the direction of curators Sanjit Dhillon and Vince Rozario, who organized the group show *Unvanishing Traces* at Toronto’s Xpace Cultural Centre this past fall. Unlike the images that Baudrillard critiqued, there are no bodies—undone or violated, to be seen or witnessed—in this thoughtfully assembled exhibition. Instead, we are offered objects, part objects as such, reminders and remainders, mementos left behind and used to commemorate—dried leaves, phials, glass pipes, beads, hide lacing, abalone shell buttons, deer hide scrolls, hopeful messages inscribed on these scrolls in Cree, gravel imprints made with thick black paint on a large plastic tarp, archival photographs. The near-sculptural quietude of these objects signals an altogether different approach to memory and mourning. They attend to the fact that wars are not fought on battlefields alone; rather, the objects that are left behind by the marginalized, and that may be used to commemorate them, showcase the profoundly quotidian nature of the violence they have experienced.

As an example, Ashley M. Freeby’s work, *Remnant no. 1* (2018–ongoing) features a 20-foot by 8-foot plastic tarp that occupies a significant amount of space on a gallery wall. The tarp bears the rough trace of black paint imprinted on its surface, its textured appearance signifying contact between it and a gravel road. Here, Freeby gingerly reckons with the painful memory of Michael Brown’s killing in 2014 by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The Brown family had petitioned that a section of Canfield Drive, where their son’s body had laid unattended for very nearly four hours after he was killed, be removed and paved over. Unlike Kenneth Goldsmith’s disturbing remix of Michael Brown’s autopsy report in a controversial poem titled “The Body of Michael Brown,” Freeby’s poetic gesture commemorates the loss by contending with what was left over—the remnants of blood-soaked pavement.

Megan Feheley’s *Bundles for Hard Times* (2018), a series of deer hide bundles containing statements inscribed in Cree intended as affirmations, reconstitutes the work of mourning as simultaneously imbued with pain and hope. These messages, such as “I cherish you” and “I believe you,” are meant for the “dispossessed past/present/future” and furthermore to serve as a response to a desire for care in those members of Indigenous communities who may visit the exhibition and read these affirmations. Twelve additional rolled bundles are suspended from the ceiling at varying heights, trailing toward the floor. They weigh nothing, and thus the slightest disturbance of the air around them causes them to move when a visitor passes by. Pain and hope, here, feel as fragile as these bundles carrying their affirmations like secrets held within them.

Similarly, Ayo Tsalithaba’s installation considers a tender fragility implicit in the work of mourning marginalized bodies. The installation begins with an invitation



for visitors to recall the names of persons they know who have been impacted by violence; visitors can choose (if they wish) to write these names in a notebook that the artist has provided. They then view the first of two videos, *What is Left Behind* (2018), which asks a series of questions pertaining to collective memory—the on-screen appearance of these questions, one by one, feel subtly meditative. The final words that appear are “we keep going (through it),” which leads the viewer to the next film. *Going Through* (2018) is a personal reflection of how the artist, as a Black trans person, lives on as members of their communities continue to be targets of state violence. Here, Tsalithaba engages in activities such as painting their nails, tying their durag, and donning their binder—activities offering them, in some instances, pleasure, while in others pain. The final part of the installation encourages the audience to reflect and leave behind comments.

Maanii Oakes and Mikayla de Bruyn carry their mourning rituals beyond the sanctity of the gallery space. Collectively, they lost several members of their respective communities in the past year from diverse causes, such as mental illness, economic precarity, and substance use. In approximately fifteen designated sites, the artists forge temporary memorials using posters and assemblages of found objects to commemorate those they have lost. They also invite people who knew their lost friends and family members to contribute to these growing archives. The transient nature of these memorials reminds us that any site can be a placeholder for grieving. Similarly, Aaron Moore, in repurposing archival images of The Ward, a former working-class immigrant neighbourhood in Toronto, considers the ephemeral nature of photographs. While Moore’s images are the only works in the exhibition that do not directly address death, they critically reflect on the capacity of photography to tell stories

“otherwise,” deconstructing dominant narratives of how the state imagines itself.

Walter Benjamin once suggested that, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” In its curation, this exhibition successfully and compellingly addresses the delicate task of documenting loss, a task made more difficult when the subjects being mourned have been excluded and marginalized by history. History has already been unfair to them. Perhaps art, as work that attempts to trace their vanishing memories, serves to reconfigure how we might ultimately mourn them.

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