



PUNCTUM (Future Nostalgia): A project about individual agency

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*Preparation*

Someone I know died in 2020. His family wished to have his ashes, but his specific request was that the ashes be thrown away after his cremation, which he had himself organized prior to his death: a form of self-obliteration.

Due to the Coronavirus lockdown, there was also no memorial or service to mark his death. He left no note, no personal effects to anyone, no sign of affection or interest in anyone who knew him. The person had to all intents and purposes disappeared from the face of the earth.

This form of self-obliteration made me consider the finite nature of our time on this earth. Our own mortality made me want to appreciate and make the most of life. This is what I hope to convey through the work PUNCTUM (Future Nostalgia). I decided to use my month in the Meteora mountains in Greece to follow in the ancient tradition of preparing my own tomb. As a student of Chinese at university I studied with great interest the burial rites and beliefs about death associated with the art and culture I loved. Then, when I was invited to create the contemporary response to the Golden Treasure of Tutankhamun, I came to admire the great culture of ancient Egypt. With the help of Professor Richard Bruce Parkinson at the University of Oxford and PhD student Ellen Jones, I learned about Egyptian language, culture and beliefs for an entire year. The gods, Heaven, the Underworld, the Afterlife, myths, magic, art, religious beliefs.

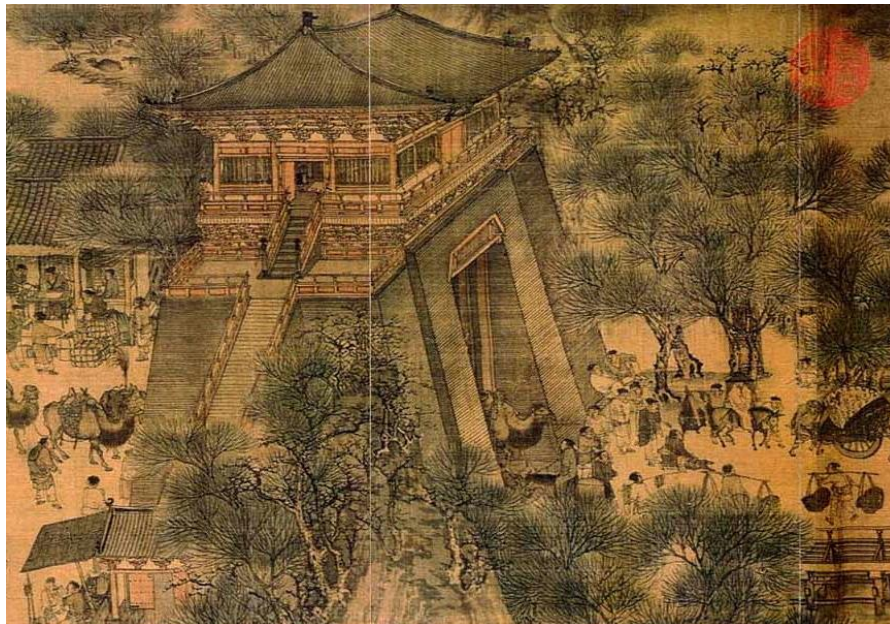


Figure 1: Byzantine figure of the Dormition of the Virgin, her spirit represented by a small baby



As part of my research for that project I was invited to the Hammersmith Hospital by Dr Philippa Borra, Jon Anderson and their remarkable team of heart surgeons. Standing in my scrubs, I witnessed the circular saw descend upon the chest of patients. The retractor would gently draw open the chest cavity to expose the internal organs, leaving me dazzled by the great beauty of the human body and the wonderful team spirit that allows a group of skilled individuals to navigate that liminal space between life and death. The parallels with ancient Egypt were interesting: the priests and shamans embalming and mummifying the dead in that culture also believed that they were preparing the individual for a new life – although in their case this new life was in the underworld.

Embracing the inevitability of death reflects an ancient appreciation of the transient nature of life itself. In China and Egypt, young members of the elite would start to prepare for their own death as soon as they reached adolescence. The death of Tutankhamun at a young age disrupted the regal pattern of burial. He was buried in what would have been a shockingly small tomb, perhaps that of a female relative, and had very few funerary objects compared to others of his rank in previous and later generations. However, he had already started to gather material for his tomb, including the mummified bodies of his two infant daughters.



**Figure 2:** Detail from Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (1085-1145). The handscroll painting depicts the ceremonial aspects of the Qingming Festival. Ink and colour on silk, 25.5 x 525 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.



The dead were celebrated yearly in ancient Egypt's "Beautiful Banquet of the Desert Valley". In China the Qingming festival continues to this day, and in England we have All Saint's Day. In contemporary Greece, families clean the graves of their loved ones daily, lighting a candle and placing fresh flowers. Through conversations with locals in the village of Kalabaka – where Paloma Proudfoot, Rowena Hughes and I lived for one month, thanks to Ainalaiyn Space – I realized that thinking about death and our own attitude towards death is a core part of existence. It struck me as healthy to think this way, to encourage the living to respect the omnipresence of Death and the great privilege of still being alive. Remembering also the great African wish of good will "When Death finds you, may it find you alive."



**Figure 3:** *Separation of the soul from the body, 12th century, fresco, Refectory of the Patmos monastery, Greece. Photo: The Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, Patmos, Greece*

### *Creation*

Thirty days is not a long time to make an artwork. I settled in the ceramic studio of Maro Theodorou: a place of peace and possibility. I resolved to make myself a painted wooden panel 3m x 2m, in the style of American sculptor Louise Nevelson, spread out to embrace the viewer like a page or a drawing or an idea. I like the idea of whiteness spread out restfully: a quiet dream in which no voices or sounds can be heard, or a thick sheet of frozen sea.

For some time I wore only white clothes. It was peaceful to be dressed in white. Many cultures see the colour white as freedom. Similarly, we can see death as a freedom, an opportunity to rest. Freed from the constraints of time, identity, circumstance, the afterlife is an opportunity to put things into perspective and enjoy the present.

I decided to pattern the white wall – my white shield – with shelves on which I would place found objects from my walks to the various monasteries, shrines and hill tops, as well as the series of icons I would make, each representing a joy of my experience on this earth. Everything will be white, I decided, not because it is the Chinese colour for





mourning, but because it is a colour like the world, a colour of potential and forgiveness, of gentleness and strength. Like the snow in James Joyce's essay, *The Dead*:

*A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.*

Death; the great armistice bringing all struggles to an end.

A perfect storm of ideal circumstances presented itself. I had the time to reflect upon how I might like to envision my own departure from this world in a way that could be peaceful and useful to my children. Greece provided an inspiring landscape for these reflections, with its history and beautiful arts. Visiting the Byzantine museum in Thessaloniki was a profound experience for me, and the burial chambers on display there reminded me of the power of immersing the viewer in an entire environment. I have often created immersive installations – or mini-worlds – with my work, from “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” 2016, a work about home and identity, to “Autorretrato con Piedras, Sudario y Una Semilla” 2022, currently setting off to tour Spain from its first exhibition in Granada at the beautiful CajaGranada Fundación built by Alberto Campo Baeza.

We live in many worlds at once. The virtual world of the internet and metaverse. The paper world of our citizen selves - what Rom Harré calls our “file-selves”. The inner world of our imagination, our secret fears and hopes. The image we present to others as in Wisława Szymborska’s poem, *Writing a résumé*: ‘Landscapes are replaced by addresses, / shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.’

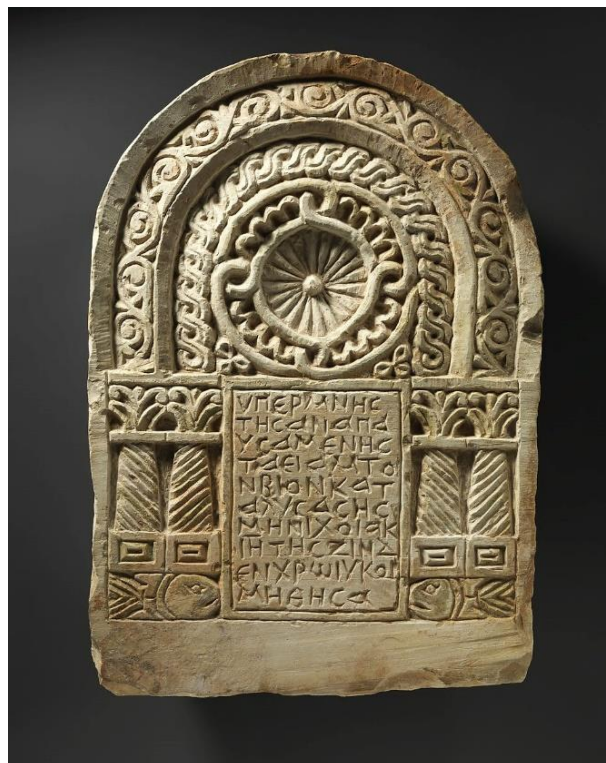
I wanted this project to combine different worlds – these worlds, which I stitch together through the performance embedded within its creation. I went every day in the Meteora mountains, wearing my shroud, to gather found objects for my piece, and to reflect on what exactly I intended to convey by it. I created a sound piece by interviewing locals about their experience of living in the timeless mountainscape of Meteora, and how it informs their existence. I swam in the source of the river Asclepius, climbed a 900m mountain, and gathered herbs and flowers from ancient sites believed to have healing properties, later to dry them in my bedroom with prayers. I visited an ancient graveyard from c.800BC as yet unresearched by archeologists, and gathered information about local myths and history – for example, learning that Alexander the Great is believed to have recruited his special force of siege-breakers from the Meteora mountain rock-climbers. These climbers could shimmy up city walls and open the gates to Alexander



and his men. It was an exciting and inspiring way to get to know my local environment. Preparing for my own death was, from the very start, a life-enhancer.

Clay is an ideal material to give form to these worlds. Many creation myths include God making man out of clay. The Egyptians believed that the first incarnation of the world was mud. The first written creation myth has the god Ra masturbating into the ground, taking the clay and moulding it into the shape of a human being, then bringing it to life by giving the clay a spirit. Following this the clay-formed humans began to reproduce and grow.

Clay also lent itself well to my idea of creating icons, in the Greek style, to symbolise each of my many pleasures. Creating them in the form of bas reliefs resonates with the first principles of my work which have always been exploring the liminal spaces between materials and forms, playing with the difficulty of defining or explaining exactly what it is that I am doing. Clare Lilley (Director of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park) described me as a sculptor of ideas, and I believe this project to be an unintentional manifestation of this approach. The forms I created out of clay are expressions of myself through images that trace back to transcendent, religious and folkloric aesthetic. I also chose words because the language of tombstone inscriptions is so immediate, bringing us directly into the time and space of the defunct. I include the thirty or so individual ceramic icons made by myself, alongside other significant objects I collected during the residency – stones and flowers, little cakes given to me by an old lady whose garden I admired, honey and health-giving waters.



**Figure 4:** Funerary Stele with Architectural Frame (6th – 7th century).



## *Relevance*

We are supposed to be spiritually unprepared for death in the West. Yet, death is a burning topic in the news. Recently, nearly four billion viewers watched the funeral ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II. In Japan there are public protests about the planned State Funeral of former political leader Shinzo Abe, where more than 60% of the population do not think that spending money on funeral rites is worthwhile. Whilst some wars and their deaths are reported in the news, such as in Ukraine, some other wars slip past the daily reports, such as the ongoing war in Syria.

At heart, *Punctum (Future Nostalgia)* is an invitation to consider the nature of life and death. In the opening of his sermon of death, Archbishop Symeon of Thessaloniki (d. 1429) explained how: “We are unendingly and ceaselessly in every moment obliged to care for the things concerning the fearsome and inexorable end of our lives.” Mindfulness of death coupled with the personal obligation to pious behavior and good works has been pervasive throughout history, and through *PUNCTUM (Future Nostalgia)* I hope to express the relevancy of this passion and purity of intent.

In my own experience, the vulnerability of my explaining to complete strangers that I was preparing my own shroud made people laugh, then get curious, then talk openly with me about their own feelings about death. The carpenter who worked with me explained how his fear of death has meant that he has never seen a dead person – not even his own grandmother – and that he does not intend to change this. A paragliding instructor told me about how flying is his heaven. By making myself open to ridicule, people felt safe to tell me their own perhaps-ridiculous thoughts and feelings about this difficult subject.

In this spirit, through learning to live well in reflection of death, I invite the spirit of viewers to connect with others and learn from the past. Learning about the past in order to better live our present is the primary function of a museum. Through this artwork, I ask, what does it mean to be alive? Who gets to make the decisions about another person’s mortality? Is euthanasia something that we can legalise? If so, how should it be managed by society? Is this a global decision or a decision for each nation-state? When is a life worth living? What are we here for? Is there an afterlife? Are there other worlds? Will we survive the damage we are doing to our planet? In what form? How will we evolve if we cannot learn from our shared common experience as human beings?

After all, who wants an answer when you can have a question?

## *Proposal for the Byzantine Museum, Athens*

It is my intention to create a funerary monument – an arcosolium – in the style of medieval Byzantium. Such a tomb is like a niche, framing a sarcophagus below, and painted from floor to ceiling with large scale wall paintings or relief carvings, wrapped around and watching over the sarcophagus, like a home. My intention is also that there be comfortable chairs and furniture, as well as the possibility to sit down and chat, with a cup of tea, a water fountain, small snacks and a series of talks and lectures from



theologians, historians, social anthropologists, medical professionals and art historians. Here through the open invitation of an art work that crosses many mediums, we can raise questions about who would we like to be, and how?

The monument can be accompanied by a podcast exploring the central questions listed above, and a website which acts as a platform to explore these issues, containing interviews with people about their philosophy of life. It will be a space to discuss and debate. Workshops with children will explore these issues through artistic practice.



**Figure 5:** Separation of the Soul from the Body, fol. 63v, Heavenly Ladder of John Klimax, 1081. Princeton, University Library.



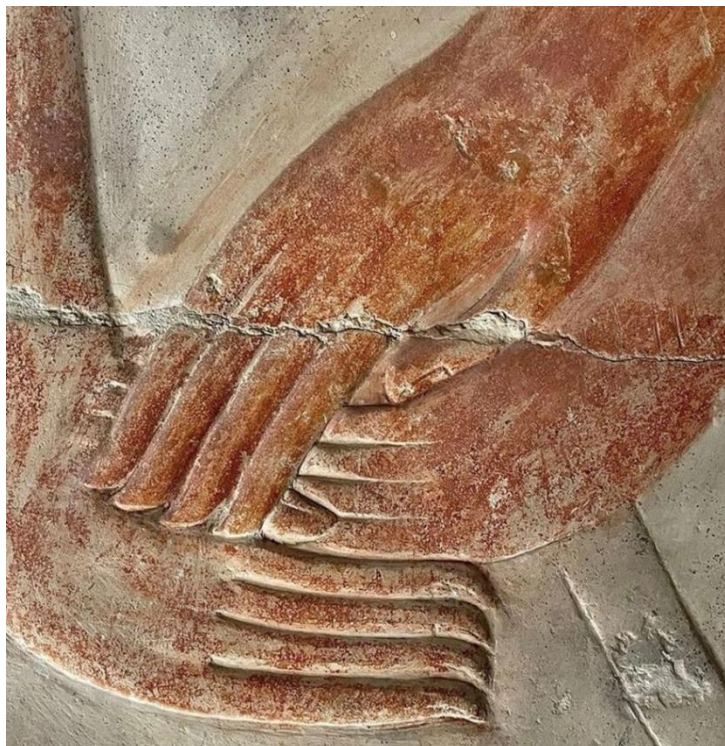


**Figure 6:** *Madonna of Royaumont* at Royaumont Abbey, near Asnières-sur-Oise, France.

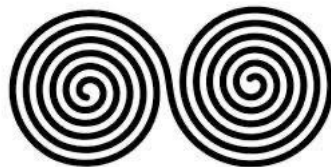




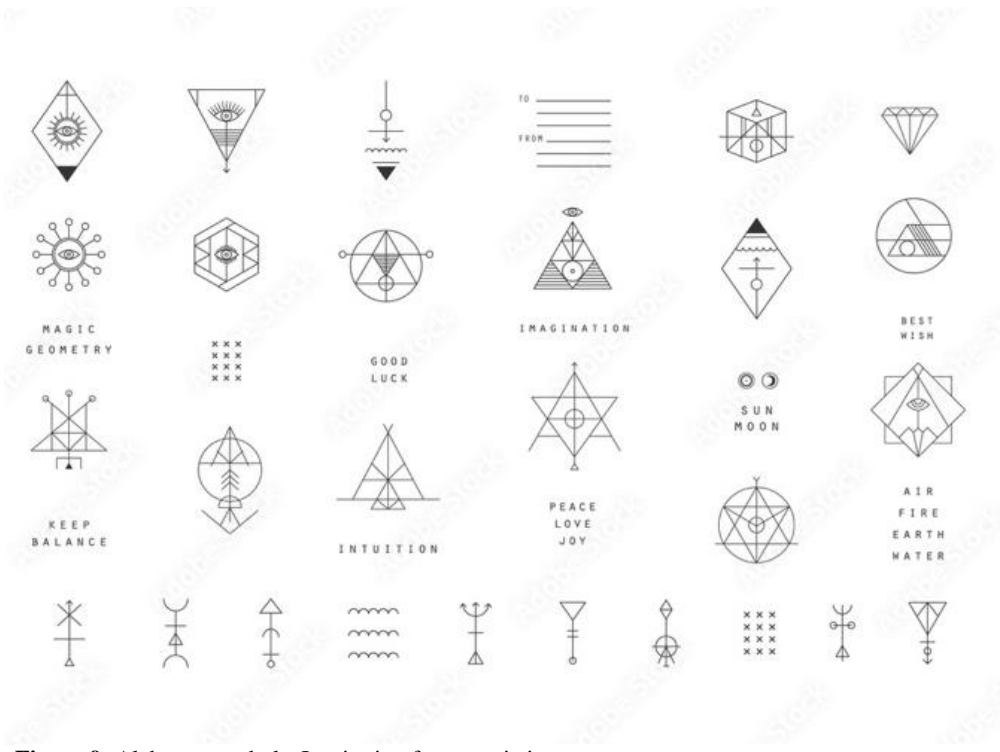
**Figure 7:** Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Tilly Losch)* (1935). Private collection.



**Figure 8:** Egyptian bas relief inspiration for ceramic icons







**Figure 9:** Alchemy symbols. Inspiration for ceramic icons.



**Figure 10:** Christ in Glory from St-Sernin Cathedral, Toulouse, France.