

# DAYS OF THE DEAD

Jack Burman's fascination with mortality takes him to South America in search of subjects

John Bentley Mays explains why

...and I am re-begot  
Of absence, darkness, death—things which are not.  
—*John Donne*  
(cited by Jack Burman as  
an epigraph for an exhibition)

Jack Burman's photographs of the dead take us to the very edge of the thinkable, and beyond it. His art's topics are extreme, and beggar ordinary language: they include physical extinction, being dead, not being at all, Donne's "things which are not." But though we can scarcely imagine such matters, and recoil from considering them, we are drawn to think of them by the odd turn that death has taken in the 500 years of the modern era.

For most civilians in pre-modern times and places, the inevitable end of individual existence came via disease, accident, ordinary thuggery. But for uncountable millions of people from the time of the colonization of the Americas until the present moment, death has come as a result of industrial-scale operations of violence motivated by malice. Dying, for these multitudes, was and is an obscene episode in the narrative of imperialism, or an experience of the desolating power that kills the soul (by torture, exclusion from the human community, stripping of dignity) before it murders the body. Or it has been the crushing of consciousness in some war against an idea or race deemed hateful, worthy of utter extinction (Native Americans, Jews); or it was the conclusion of the death-in-life of the slave-labour or concentration camp, the gulag or some other instrument of



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annihilation mobilized by terror, the ruling party or the military.

Because its urgency arises from this novel evil, Burman's art can be read usefully as a commentary on the attempted destruction of the European Jews within living memory, and indeed on all holocausts and genocides of past centuries. But it is not simply about topics in the past. It is most profoundly about the metaphysics of modern death.

An image from Burman's recent work: a dead woman, naked and partially dissected, prostrate on a steel table in a South American medical school.

Like other corpses routinely acquired by this academy, the woman was, in life, a citizen of the miserable urban slums in which many of her countrymen languish. In death, she became available for research when her body went unclaimed by kin or friends.

Her dark skin colour suggests aboriginal and African origins. She belongs, that is, to one or both populations in the Americas that have known the anguish of slavery and genocide, and, more recently, the depravity of life in huge shantytowns. As a destitute person of colour in a country where such persons endure discrimination and exclusion, she was a likely candidate from birth for the abject life she lived. Her death—unmourned, unretrieved—completed the process by which she became a suitable subject (at least from the modern scientific point of view) for dissection, medical study and disposal: a person of no account, the off-scouring of the earth, a non-existence.

In photographing her, Burman has not added to her degradation by using her as a prop. Instead, he has extended to this woman compassion of a kind she probably never knew in her painful life and lonely death. A black backdrop gives the composition gravity and solemnity, and Burman's sensitive lighting casts a pall of dignity

PREVIOUS PAGES: *Sicily* #12 2006  
C-print 60 cm x 1.27 m

RIGHT: *Untitled* #13 1999 C-print  
55 cm x 1.27 m IMAGES COURTESY CLINT  
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and repose over the outstretched body. For at least this moment, she is transformed by art—in what may be art's most important gift to the dead—from a slum statistic and nameless medical cadaver into a poignant icon of modern dying.

Burman's image resonates like a bell with the post-medieval Western art of the dead. We have seen such inert bodies many times before: in Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, in Caravaggio's great *Deposition from the Cross* at the Vatican and, supremely, in the innumerable realistic depictions of Jesus hanging pierced, nearly naked and lifeless on the Cross. But no pictures from the past are brought more urgently to mind by Burman's art than the prints in Francisco Goya's disillusioned *Los desastres de la guerra*. Executed in response to the horrors the artist witnessed during Spain's war of national liberation (1808–1814) against revolutionary France, this harrowing work is art's first great indictment of radical Enlightenment, of ideological idealism twisted by power and unleashed against innocent civilians in a storm of withering terror.

Viewed against the background of such imagery, Burman's picture takes its latter-day place (as both a variation on old themes and a critique of them) in the complex field of iconography that precedes it. Burman's perfectly balanced and composed photograph of the dead woman does not, of course, carry the freight of traditional theology and piety borne by older depictions of the dead Jesus. In his *Deposition*, Caravaggio softens the horror of Christ's death by portraying his dead body as muscular and robust, being received into the arms of loving friends. But the old imagery haunts Burman's photograph. The woman is the dead Christ updated, destroyed by society, pinioned on a steel Cross—an afflicted body suspended between life and utter dissolution, between vitality and the destruction that awaits her body. She is one of Goya's hapless victims of war (the modern war of everyone against everyone else), her representation (like Goya's and all other depictions of the dead that matter) stripped of sentimentality and false profundity, devoid of idealizing. In common with its tradition in art, Burman's picture portrays the fate of one person among the countless others in history who have died terrible deaths before their time.

But was not the woman's passing a gift to the living? As an object of medical study and research, she is being "useful," at least to students in the gross-anatomy theatre. We are surely inclined to believe she is. Influenced by the materialistic theories of the body



current in contemporary culture, most modern people in the liberal democracies have become accustomed to the belief that the body is to be honoured while living. Once it dies, however, its existential significance disappears. It becomes the property of a family; and, finally, when the family itself dies off, it becomes the property of no one: dust to dust, and nothing more.

Yet there is another possible, though more rare, attitude toward the dead. Among certain Catholics, this idea is expressed most vividly in the veneration of bodily relics of a saint, a practice springing from the conviction that even a fragment of a corpse can communicate, with no time limit, the graces and virtues that were embodied by the living person. Burman, who is not a Christian, shares the belief that the bodies of the dead are as precious as the bodies of the living, deserving of the most serious care and pity, both in death, during the process of dissolution, and forever. His art is an application of such pity to bodies that are usually viewed as waste products of living—a way to confer eternity, insofar as art is able, on what has become, in the modern scheme of values, worthless.

In the work of a less subtle and sophisticated artist, such fervent *pietàs* for the dead could slip into anti-modern crankiness, or the eccentricity we find in the art of Joel-Peter Witkin. As it happens, nothing in Burman's art casts doubt on modernity's benign accomplishments in medicine and science. Though both are incarnations of modern industrial technology, the extermination camp and the hospital operating room belong to different orders of reality, which must be carefully distinguished. The common sense of our civilization urges us to make this distinction; and we are surely right to do so.

But Burman's stunning photographs invite us to go deeper into the foundations and intrinsic contradictions of modern culture

than common sense can carry us. Thinking down to the roots, we find that the happiness and the desolation of the modern condition are twin aspects of a single revolutionary phenomenon of the mind and will that first emerged in the Enlightenment and was then carried to the world by the furious forces of industrialization and empire and war. This hidden, fearful unity—radically secularizing and dehumanizing, opposed to everything that stands in the way of absolute domination and the instrumental will to power—becomes most luridly visible in the death camps and killing fields.

Yet it is always with us, as menace and temptation. (No one is immune to the lure of absolute power). Burman finds its traces in the corpse of a Latin American woman, and records them with exquisite care. The woman in his dissecting-room picture thus becomes every victim of the modern era: the worker destroyed by industrial exploitation, the artist murdered by a totalitarian state, the child or man or woman annihilated in the name of racial or ideological purity. She is the emblematic sufferer of every outrage committed in the spirit of the radical innovations of modern humankind's social imaginary.

Like its precedents in the history of art, Burman's image of the woman inexorably draws our attention away from the bright ideological flux of everyday happy consciousness and toward the source of modern extinction and loss that always lies close at hand, just under the quaking surface of normality. Beholding that abyss in art can rend the veil of illusion, restore us to sanity, inoculate us against the deadly nonsense that too often passes itself off as merely the wisdom of the age. Though Burman's photograph is very beautiful, its success lies beyond aesthetics, in its will to truth-telling about death. ■

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