



Memento Mori

Lisa MacLean

Time's fingers bend us slowly
With dubious craftsmanship,
That at last spoils all it forms. (Krates)

Memento Mori is a Latin phrase warning each of us to remember that we are mortal and we too will die. This injunction appears visually in the genre of western art known as Vanitas Still Life, as well as in Medieval and Renaissance Christian art. That we should remember the brevity of earthly existence and meditate on the eternity of an afterlife in which we will receive our just reward is a staple of religious thought; it's also the idea behind a series of artworks I recently completed while an Artist in Residence in Turkey.



In March 2009 I was fortunate enough to be an Artist in Residence at the Babayan Culture House in the inspirational setting of Ibrahimpasa, Cappadocia, Turkey, a closed village of about 800 souls in which the people live much as they have done for hundreds, even thousands, of years. Ibrahimpasa is sleepier than Sleepy Hollow – it is definitely the town that time forgot. Babayan Culture House is perched on the edge of town, overlooking a narrow valley full of poplar trees. At this edge of town, and all along the lower reaches of the village, are abandoned and ruined stone cave houses from the time of the Greek-Turkish population exchange of the early 1920s.



I was amazed that people had simply left these houses empty and moved away; once abandoned, the structures fell apart fast. The climate here is quite harsh; as a result the landscape changes and things erode and disintegrate very quickly. In spots the ground is quite thin and has caved in around the houses' foundations. Because of the softness of the tufa stone and the quickness of the erosion process, structures such as houses, churches

and monasteries in the valleys here sometimes disappear entirely from view, having been covered by rocks or falling dirt or shifting sand dunes.



While out walking in the village and valley, I saw many, many animal skulls and bones lying randomly on the ground. In some spots, a single skull sits by the path; in others, several skulls and assorted bits and bones were simply some, and fascinating objects and the materials of the skulls and bones, and others smaller, the beginning of my of installations in of the ruined cave man – Shah Dede meaning one who has gone to Mecca) was his name – who had made a pilgrimage to Mecca during the last years of his life. As a result, he was allowed to paint his house blue; bits and pieces of this blue paint remain on the ruined walls of the building.



pieces of bone, particularly leg bones, together. At first, I had no idea why these left lying; it was mysterious, a bit grueing. Since I wanted to work with found materials on hand, I picked up several of some very large – probably of cows – likely goats and sheep. These formed Turkish Memento Mori project, a series Ibrahimpaşa's ruined cave houses. One houses next to BCH was owned by a (King Grandad) or Hadj Ibrahim (Hadj





After Shah Dede died about four years ago, the family simply abandoned the house, leaving everything in it as it was. It has quite a few rooms; one has enormous clay urns, one has enormous baskets, one has multitudes of glass bottles, one has tools and equipment for animals, including camel saddles and feed bags; others have assorted rusty furniture, clothes and boxes. It's a fascinating material relic and museum to this man's life. This building, and others close by, were home to several of my installations and photographic projections. See pictures of Ibrahimpaşa here, here and here.





Memento Mori I

My first project was installed in a cave room in the abandoned house right across the way from the Babayan Culture House; this room still contained pieces from a previous artist in residence, Stefan Chinov, in the form of cast concrete doors. My project, an intervention into his intervention, combined one version of my “Names” piece and a Memento Mori still life using found objects, including the animal skulls I had collected.

“Names”: I wrote the names of eight Turkish women and girls that I had met since staying in Ibrahimpaşa on separate pieces of coloured 81/2 x 11 construction paper. Along with the stenciled names were rubbings, made with graphite and old patterned wooden blocks originally used to stamp floral designs onto headscarves. Each person’s sheet was a different colour, selected to represent some aspect of her character, and each rubbed pattern was configured differently, using two separate wood blocks.



For example, headscarf of her hair; woolen socks with metal wall to the life setting, hood: several clay urns, pottery bowl trievied from



Hanim's piece was white, the colour of the she wears; Dilek's was yellow, the colour and Mediha's was purple, the colour of the she knitted. These sheets were attached clips to a green line running from one cave other. Below this line of names I built a still using objects collected from the neighbour-skulls and bones, three wooden boxes, three three metal objects, including a chain, and a full of empty roasted walnut shells, all re-ruined cave houses.



I later expanded this piece to include a large photographic image entitled *Two Sisters* hanging from a line stretched across the cave room in front of two of Stefan's wall-mounted doors.





Excursus on "Memento Mori"

To both Christian and Muslim, the prospect of death serves to emphasize the emptiness and fleetingness of earthly pleasures, luxuries, and achievements. In the west, the art historical genre of Vanitas paintings, part of the larger European still life tradition, was most fully developed in 17th century Holland. Those images, of flowers, fruit, tiny insects, sometimes butterflies, smoking candles and



occasionally skulls, were meant to be evocations of the transience of human existence. Such paintings are complex moral allegories which depict the vanity of all earthly desires. The flowers and the fruit are symbols of earthly beauty and its ephemerality, reminders that all material life disappears while the kingdom of heaven alone remains: "He comes forth like a flower, and is cut down" (Job 14:2). In a single image, painters would combine a universe of floral birth and death: buds, flowers in full bloom and flowers with drooping or fallen petals or being consumed by insects are all included in the composition to indicate the inevitable passage of time and the approach of

death. The viewer of these paintings was thus meant to meditate on the transitory nature of human life and the power of God and History.

David Bailly, *Self-Portrait with Vanitas Symbols* 1651

Excursus on the genre of Still Life

While in the 17th century still life painting had been a major genre of artistic expression, by the 19th century, the status of such work had declined. By this time an understanding of the complex iconography of still life painting had been lost and flower painting, in particular, was seen then primarily as a genre of expression particularly suited to women because floral images were presumed to be apt metaphors for the grace and fragility of the female artist. In an interesting trans-valuation of these values, however, early 20th century feminist suffragettes used the iris as a symbol for female sexuality and strength.



Historically, the hierarchy of artistic subjects and forms also worked to exclude women from the canon of great art because the most important works of art, the large-scale painting and the heroic male nude, were subjects which women couldn't produce without training in drawing the male nude. Women

practiced the genres with lesser importance and smaller scale, such as portraiture and still life. A 19th century rationale for this division is nicely articulated by the French critic Leon Lagrange: "Male genius has nothing to fear from female taste. Let men of genius conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculpture, and elevated forms of painting.



Rachel Ruysch, *Flowers, Fruits, and Insects* 1716 and *Still-Life with Bouque of Flowers and Plums* 18th c

In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of art they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits or miniatures. Or the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves. To women above all falls the practice of the graphic art,



those painstaking arts which correspond so well to the role of abnegation and devotion which the honest woman happily fills here on earth, and which is her religion”.

Lisa MacLean, Taste II 2008

I later discovered the reasons for the presence of so many bones and skulls in Ibrahimpaşa. First, the four village butchers dispose of unusable material by simply throwing the bones and skulls of butchered animals over the cliff and down into the valley below; these are then redistributed by village dogs. One spot in particular has the aspect of a killing field, so numerous are the skeletal remains. Second, Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice is celebrated here. This event is the most important



feast of the Muslim calendar, and lasts for three days, commemorating Ibrahim's willingness to obey God by sacrificing his son Ishmael, considered the forefather of the Arabs. According to the Koran, Ibrahim was about to sacrifice his son when a voice from heaven

intervened and allowed him to sacrifice a ram instead. The feast allows people to re-enact Ibrahim's obedience by sacrificing a bull, cow or sheep, from which about a third of the meal is eaten and the rest donated to the poor. In Ibrahimpaşa, the inedible remainders of this feast lie in the valley.



*“For years I pulled my own existence out of emptiness.
Then one swoop, one swing of the arm,
that work is over.”* Mevlana Rumi

Memento Mori II

Upstairs in Shah Dede's museum/house a large dark room previously used for sleeping provided the setting for my second Memento Mori Installation. Here, next to the partially-boarded-up window replete with spiders' webs and dust, I arranged several skulls, bones, urns, small cologne bottles,

thorn sticks and two green vine remnants, symbols of eternal life, on a concrete ledge. Hanging from the ceiling I had found a strange wooden structure which I used as a skeleton on which to



hang a second "Names" work, eight pieces of white cotton "pamuk", headscarf material, adorned on the top and bottom edges with patterned woodblock rubbings in various colours. Since the wooden slats hammered over the window only partially blocked the opening, wind

blew into the room with a sigh, causing the scarves to flutter gently in the breeze. The sighs of the wind and gentle sways of the fabric made it seem as if the room itself were breathing quietly.



Memento Mori III

This piece consisted simply of two animal skulls placed at various angles, a rope, and a bridle, in one of the many beautiful niches carved into ruined cave house walls.



Excursus on Names

While in Ibrahimpasa, I decided to create an ongoing piece dedicated to the Turkish people I met and interacted with over the course of my month there. To do this I used various materials found and scavenged around the village: apricot tree branches and twigs, gold spray paint, dried apricots, and broken stone house tiles and wall bits. The names were then positioned in and around the ruined cave houses and fields of the town.





Memento Mori IV

Ibrahimpasha was fertile ground for found objects. For my fourth installation, a further evolution on the theme, I decided to position the elements against the ruined cave house wall, lit by candles each evening.

Having found a full can of silver spray paint, I adorned each of the pieces's elements with silver and created a shrine of sorts using bones, an urn, broken stone tiles, a wooden stool and a lovely patterned fabric cushion on which I placed a single silver skull.





Memento Mori V

Having enjoyed lighting and photographing MMIV at sunset in the waning light, for MMV I created a small shrine in an upper cave house room consisting of a skull resting upon a pamuk placed atop one of Shah Dede's wooden boxes. In front of this I placed two rows of small stones and bones from the house's sod roof in a circular configuration around a pyramid of apricot tree twigs. Apricots are

one of the few cash crops remaining here and the trees, with their gnarled branches, can be seen everywhere, their curious outlines stark

against the sky. Hanging from a line I had strung across the room in front of the shrine were three rope bridles drawn

from Shah Dede's vast collection of camel paraphernalia; on a line strung behind were two banners made from garbage plastic sheets hanging from apricot tree branches, painted with a cruciform design in red and pink inspired by the rock-cut church frescos in this area.





Excursus on Rock-cut Churches in Cappadocia

There are over 4,000 rock-cut churches in Cappadocia. People have lived in this area since Hittite times, and the Christians that arrived 2,000 years ago moved into and expanded the Hittite underground cities already established here. The soft tufa rock generated by the volcanoes in this area is very easy to carve, allowing people to hollow out areas of the hills in which to live and worship. All the churches are very small, most designed to hold no more than 20 people. When monastic communities were split up periodically, those leaving simply set up shop 50, 100 or 200 meters down the road and built another church and monastic complex in the next "fairy chimney", as these are known by the locals. Many of the churches are painted inside with beautiful and historically important Byzantine murals dating from 900-1200 ce. A few, as in the Goreme Open Air Museum, are in remarkably good condition, although nearly all the eyes of the painted figures have been gouged out by superstitious locals afraid of the Evil Eye. Most of the frescoes in the churches have been badly damaged, though, by wind, water, weather, earthquake, and shepherd boys seeking refuge in the caves who used the faces of the figures as targets for pebble attacks, having been taught that images were sinful. See pictures of the Goreme Open Air Museum [here](#) and [here](#).





Nevruz Burning

In honour of the Spring Equinox, I decided to burn *Memento Mori V*. It had been installed in the room for several days and was perfectly constructed to be set ablaze. In Turkey the Spring Equinox has special significance and I decided that this moment was absolutely the right time for the conflagration. In setting the fire I was helped by Yunus Wegner, artist Almut Wegner's son, Fire Maestro extraordinaire. Although the plastic banners went up in flames quickly, with liquid melting fire dropping in globs to the ground, the little pyramid of twigs stubbornly refused to light. I had given up on it but Yunus got it going and, from there, the flames spread easily to the cotton cloth. Myself, Willemijn Bouman, my hostess at the BCH, Almut and her two sons watched as the installation burned with purgatorial fire.



Excursus on Nevruz

Few days of the year have more historical significance than the current turning point on Earth's orbit: spring equinox. For many people in Turkey and its near abroad, the day is celebrated as a new year holiday and is recognized as the official birth of spring. Turks call the Spring Equinox Nevruz, which in 2009 fell on Monday, March 23, but it is also known as Newruz to the Kurds and Nawruz to the many people across the Middle East who celebrate it. The ancient Persians believed that this day was



the first day of the New Year, hence NawRuz (naw, new; ruz, year) and this belief continues today. Nawruz is celebrated in Greater Iran, Caucasus, Central Asia and by Iranians worldwide. Additionally, Nawruz is also celebrated by Kurds in Iraq and Turkey and among some of the Alevi groups.

The Turks believe Nevruz originated at the time when their ancestors finally escaped from the mountains of Central Asia where the Turkic peoples were first gathered. The Kurds consider Nevruz their day of liberation from oppression as expressed in a legend about an evil king Dehaq being overcome



by the Blacksmith Kawa who subsequently led the people through Ergenekon Mountain to freedom.

One of the main concepts of Nevruz is the importance of light. This day celebrates the victory of a god of light over the powers of darkness, a basic tenet in Zoroastrianism, a religion practiced in ancient times in this area. Zoroaster is supposed to have preached in the royal court of Bactria that there were two forces

in the world, good and evil, which were in constant combat with each other. Out of this battle came the origins of life and when the cycle of life began it was termed the new day or Nevruz. The ceremonial rituals and traditions surrounding this cosmology form the roots of today's Nevruz celebrations.



How the celebrations were held in the first days is unknown with the exception of lighting bonfires. Leaping across them would be part of a purification ritual in which everyone would be rid of their illnesses or bad luck, and demonstrate their bravery and agility. (Today lighting bonfires is usually done outside urban areas to prevent any serious fires from breaking out.)

Nevruz festivities might continue over several days starting

from the time of the equinox but usually occur between the 20th and 24th of March. Since Nevruz was related to purification, people would also bathe and then put on new clothes; over time bathing as part of the tradition was eliminated but the donning of new clothes continues as it represents freshness and the new. (Source: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11256941.asp?gid=244>)

See complete set of images here.

Four Elements

The medieval character of Ibrahimpaşa inspired me to create an installation based on the four elements of the ancient Greek and medieval worlds using found objects from around the neighbourhood. The most frequently occurring theory of classical elements, held by the Hindu, Japanese, and Greek systems of thought, is that there are four “earthly” elements, namely Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and a fifth “heavenly” element known variously as space, Idea, Void “quintessence” or Aether (the term “quintessence” derives from “quint” meaning “fifth”). In western thought the four fundamental elements were correlated with seasons, personalities, bodily fluids and body parts:

Season	Element	Humour	Body fluid	Location
Spring	air	sanguine	blood	heart
Summer	fire	choleric	yellow bile	liver
Autumn	earth	melancholic	black bile	spleen
Winter	water	phlegmatic	phlegm	various





[See more pictures here.](#)

Cave Projection I (After Holbein's Ambassadors)

Inspired by Holbein's masterful 1533 painting of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, this piece consisted of six images of myself and my sister projected on the cave wall in sequence in front of a small still life assemblage.





See complete set of images [here](#).



Cave Projection II: Self Portrait with Vanitas

This piece was a photographic projection of 13 self portrait images on the cave house wall in front of a more complex still life assemblage of found objects.





[See complete set of images here.](#)

Domesticity

Installed in a cave with Stefan's doors, *Domesticity* included eight headscarves with differently coloured wood block patterns, several pairs of knitted woolen socks I had accumulated from the women in the villages here, a tea house table and chair, and several found objects: pottery bowls and urns, empty walnut shells, oil lamps, a skull and bones.





Early in the month, while walking from Ibrahimpaşa to Ortahisar along the top of the valley, on the lookout for a pack of forty wild dogs that were said to be somewhere in the area, I had met a local woman picking greens in a field. In sign-language she asked me to come with her to her Ortahisar home for a cup of tea. Obedient as ever, I walked with her down into the village and into her cave home. After I had consumed two cups of tea and some homemade bread, Granny brought out a pink and purple knitted shawl,



and purple knitted shawl,

which I admired but made clear I did not want. Next came a pair of cro-



cheted brown wool socks with knitted flowers and, tipped off by an earlier encounter with another local woman, I realised that she wanted me to buy

them (and I did). After purchasing several other pairs of socks from locals, I was a bit worried that I would have to have to figure out a way to gracefully decline cups of tea from old Turkish women or I would be broke and come home with hundreds of pairs of knitted socks.

Self Portrait with Six Skulls



Self Portrait with Six Skulls was one of the last works I completed at the Babayan Culture House before I left. The piece consists of 24 photographs to represent 24 hours in a day (signifying a life time). The series of 24 is divided into thirds, the separation between each section indicated by a photograph including an empty chair.

Each of the three sections represents a third of a lifetime, youth, middle age, and old age. Since the photographs represent a passage of time, and were taken over a period of time, the position of the sunlight and the parts of the objects illuminated change throughout the piece. Just as the various objects emerge into the light, we, too, when born, emerge from darkness and nonexistence, and, when dying, descend into darkness and oblivion. In the third segment I am holding an oil lamp; as the cliché says, with age comes wisdom and in this piece, wisdom is illustrated by the illuminated oil lamp.





See complete set of images [here](#).



Alchemy: Performance Piece for an Audience of One

For my final installation at BCH, I gathered up all the materials that I'd worked with over the past month there. Over the final few days, I retrieved and installed the various bits and pieces in the upper cave house room. I wanted to create a kind of contemporary Sacra Conversazione, the Sacred Conversation of medieval and renaissance Christian art, using two tea house chairs on either side of the room. On one, a large skull; on the other, me and the clothes I purchased for winter in Cappadocia, worn since my arrival and now to be put away with the coming of Spring. I documented my construction of the piece over three days, at different times of day. Like all the installations I had made there, this one too was a Memento Mori.





[See complete set of images here.](#)

Cave Projection III: Beyond the Flesh Dress

This piece consisted of 18 photographic images projected in sequence on the cave house wall doors in front of a shrine of still life objects. Alluding to the many ideological and philosophical meanings of the human body in western history, the photographs juxtapose images of friends and family with wax anatomical models and sculpture depicting saints and martyrs.





See complete set of images here.

Excursus on Fantasies of Biological Transcendence

Throughout western history the human body has had a wide range of meanings; in Greek and Roman art, for example, the male body has symbolised potency and political power. Where women's bodies were seen as earth-bound and corrupt, male bodies, in imagination and art if nowhere else, transcended the boundaries of materiality to symbolise the higher realm of reason or soul. Similarly, in Renaissance art the male nude signified public virtues, while the female nude signified sensuality and the realm of private erotic pleasure.



and the realm of private erotic pleasure.

While actual human bodies are subject to disease, dissolution and death, we continue to try to overcome the limitations of biology in fantasies of transcendence, whether these are more and more extreme medical interventions into the human body or developing virtual bodies which might allow us to be like gods.

Historically in the Christianised west the biological body has been denigrated in favour of the soul/mind. Given the paradox that, for the Christian, humans must die in order to live, the paradigmatic image of Christian art is not the beautiful god or hero of Greek sculpture, nor the powerful worldly emperor, but the martyr who gladly yields up his or her body to violent death. For both Early Christians and later Christian mystics, preparation for a life beyond the biological body involved a life-long ascetical program, which might include the mortification of the flesh and the redirection of libido from the human world to the divine.





Our fantasies of biological transcendence have taken varied forms. For Christian mystics the final destination in the mystic odyssey was the falling away of the biological body and union with God in a spiritual marriage. For Renaissance humanist thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Cornelius Agrippa the earthly body was a tool to be manipulated in the service of a transcendent end in which it would become dematerialized pure spirit. In the occult magical doctrine propounded

by Ficino, Agrippa and Giordano Bruno the human individual could through magic literally become God through the exercise of intellect and creative power. As in the beliefs of the Christian mystics, here too this result is imagined as post-biological, with the effacement or dissolution of the mortal flesh. Certainly these kinds of fantasies are not restricted to Christians; Muslims also valorize the spirit over the corrupt body, as do contemporary believers in an immaterial spirit or soul.



However, whatever the fantasy, the actual biological body imaged by art and worked upon by medical science is mortal and it may be that, irrespective of our fantasies of transcendence, finitude is a crucial condition of being human.





See more information about this project [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).



Alchemy: Performance Piece for an Audience of One (detail)
Thanks to my hosts Willemijn and Paul at the Babayan Culture House, Ibrahimpaşa.
See all photographs of my journey through Turkey [here](#).