

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Materializing Memory and Trauma

The mementos and keepsakes that populate many of this show's artworks were once ordinary objects but now appear totemic.

Louis Bury May 4, 2019



Emily Harris, "Reclaimed vol. 2" (2019), archival inkjet ink, linen fabric, linen yarn dyed with South Carolina indigo, silk thread dyed with madder root, naturally dyed silk, antique cotton batting from mid-1800s, cotton/polyester thread, catnip, cinnamon, goldenrod, rue, safflower, tansy, indigo, iron derived from early 1800s slave shackles, platinum & palladium print of the artist, cotton paper, salt from Arrowsic, ME, silk embroidery thread, 24k gold thread, coral, quartz, rock salt, antique Ashanti akua'ba, antique crochet doll (named Lucy), wooden peg holder, malachite, clay leaves, 81 x 128 x 24 inches (all images courtesy Matt Vicari @mvicari/EFA)

Curated by the award-winning critic, and former Hyperallergic Senior Editor, Jillian Steinhauer and dotted with homespun memorials and retiring audiovisuals, *In the Presence of Absence* is a smart, understated group exhibition whose hushed atmosphere calls attention to grief's lingering effects in public and private life, particularly for people from historically marginalized communities. Most artworks in the show reference historical traumas in the United States — from settler colonialism to the AIDS epidemic — whose horrors are often presumed to be past but whose psycho-social consequences are still very much present.

The installations that take the form of memorials stand out for their elaborate, multi-part construction. In *Accidental Saint (J.I.K.D.I.S.Y.G.I.B.)* (2019), for example, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko tenderly memorializes his brother, Abdul, who was murdered at age 22: a shrine-like arrangement of dirt, books, candles, pictures, a pair of sneakers, and gold foil strips sits beside a coffee-colored wall. In *Akhsó (Grandma): This Is a New*

Experience (2019), M. Carmen Lane elegiacally adorns two large, black-and-white deathbed images of their grandmother, Vivian Murphy, with feathers and braided rope; these hang above an end table with mementos, and accompanied by a chilling sound piece, *Skin Hunger/the Artist as Caregiver* (2018). In *Reclaimed vol. 2* (2019), Emily Carris confronts plantation slavery's legacy through an unsettling wall arrangement that is structurally similar to Lane's, but in this case dyed yarn and silk is sewn into two large black-and-white photographs to look like contoured and colored scarring on the backs of the topless slaves depicted.

All three installations draw upon the visual idiom of roadside memorials and ghost bike shrines, in which a bricolage of symbolic and representational objects commemorates a tragedy. Their resemblance to such demotic memorials points up how the grief resultant from certain events — accidents, tragedies that make the news, historical traumas — has a public-facing side whether or not the bereaved would prefer their anguish remain private. In its focus on historically marginalized communities, *In the Presence of Absence* implicitly makes the case that such communities, which are subject to scrutiny even — or especially — when less visible to the dominant culture, don't always have the luxury of limiting grief to a purely personal matter.



Leigh Davis, "Reunions" (2019), Wood, paint, masonite, moleskin, chair, mirror, 103 x 96 x 96 inches

As a corrective, Leigh Davis's pyramidal psychomanteum, *Reunions* (2019), tucked away in the furthest corner of the gallery, offers a secluded space for communion. The heavy, black moleskin fabric that comprises the structure's exterior gives the work mysterious gravitas. Inside, a circular mirror has been positioned to reflect only darkness, to facilitate communication with spirits of the dead. The wall text invites visitors to enter one at a time

and to bring — and leave behind — a photo or personal item to aid in contacting a deceased loved one. However, even if without such an object, sitting alone inside the dark, tent-like structure inspires an eerie calm.

Questions of visibility extend to the exhibition's roster of artists, many of whom are lesser known and produce work that, while accomplished and compelling, is not flashy or slick. Indeed, grief as an artistic subject seems to lend itself to subdued, indirect approaches. Inbal Abergil's *N.O.K. – Next of Kin* series (2018) — off-kilter photographic documentation of the mementos kept by US military families coping with multi-generational war losses — is representative in this



Inbal Abergil, "Johnson" (2018) from the series "N.O.K. – Next of Kin," photographic print, 16 x 20 inches;
 "Johnson" (2018) from the series "N.O.K. – Next of Kin," photographic print, 30 x 40 inches

regard. *Dead Indian Stories* (2007-15), a grid of mono prints by one of the show's better-known artists, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, is the one exception here: its blood red backgrounds and accusatory white text — such as "500 YEARS OF DAMAGE HAPPY REPUBLIC" — present a stark tonal contrast to the exhibition's other works. *Dead Indian Stories* puts the lie to the popular notion that all grief eventually dissolves into acceptance.

This sense of lingering discontent manifests in the audio tracks that accompany the exhibition's films. In Melinda Hunt's haunting short film, *Loneliness in a Beautiful Place: AIDS Burials on Hart Island* (2018), the dirge-like operatic chants of composer David Lang's "Just (After Song of Songs)" render melancholic the film's bird's-eye visuals of Hart Island AIDS burial sites. Likewise, the sonorous drone in Valery Jung Estabrook's *Five Twenty Two* (2018), as well as the reverberating Tom Sleigh poem recited in voiceover by a woman in Nene Humphrey's *If You Were to Peer Into The Mourner's Skull* (2019), create an atmosphere of unease. More than just mood enhancers, these uncanny soundscapes make palpable how the experience of grief entails a measure of estrangement from both oneself and the larger world.

Aesthetic experience is often valued for its capacity to defamiliarize, that is, to be strange in bracing ways. But *In the Presence of Absence's* strangeness doesn't feel like a series of calculated aesthetic shock tactics so much as the inevitable byproduct of the show's subject matter. The mementos and keepsakes that populate many of the artworks were once ordinary objects that, in the wake of loss and displacement, now appear totemic. The silences and voids that characterize other artworks assume an otherworldly quality when you realize what's missing from them. In both cases, what's disquieting about these representations of grief is the complicated extent to which, in public and private life, what is no longer with us still remains.

In the Presence of Absence continues at [EFA Project Space](https://www.efa-project-space.com/) (323 W. 39th St, Manhattan) through May 11. The exhibition was curated by Jillian Steinhauer.