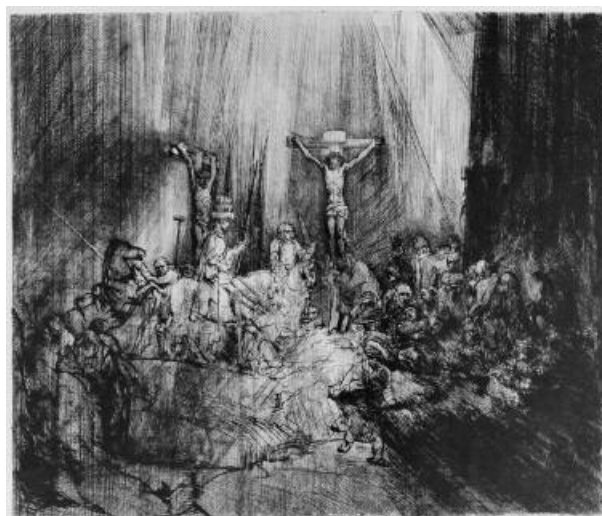


Death in Life and in Print

A Review of the Exhibits “Andy Warhol’s Electric Chairs” and “Death by Design” at the Princeton University Art Museum, 2006

Kip Deeds



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Christ on the Cross*, 1653

On a clear night in June 1995 my father succumbed to cancer. Along with his last breaths, I remember the ambulance approaching the house, quietly arriving and then quietly leaving. It seemed my father vanished in the middle of the night. Only a few family members witnessed what seemed to be his escape into the night air.

Ten years later when I was teaching a drawing class, I joked about how I wished to meet my own demise. One student was particularly upset that I mentioned death in a drawing class, though the other students seemed willing to join in the conversation (which included a discussion of historical depictions of death in art). I brought a variety of examples to the next class, including work by Alice Neel, Kathe Kollwitz, James Ensor, and Albrecht Durer – works that demonstrated a historical fascination with mortality.

The following year, while teaching printmaking at Princeton University, I became intrigued by the two print exhibits “Andy Warhol’s Electric Chairs” and “Death by Design.” Here, death appeared out in the open and viewers were confronted with death’s influence on life. Underneath the museum’s spotlights, death could not quietly slip away.

The exhibits were a good balance for each other in terms of exhibition space and content. The two exhibits were adjacent to each other in similarly sized gallery spaces. The two rooms were the scale of chapels (rather than the cathedral-like spaces of many exhibits), making each room an intimate place to reflect on mortality. In terms of content, the two exhibits contrasted in scope. Warhol’s solo exhibit was comprised of work all published in 1971, but the “Death by Design” exhibit featured work that spanned centuries.

The ten prints from Andy Warhol’s “Electric Chair” series (each 35.5” x 48”) were evenly hung one after the other, and were equally distributed over the four walls of the gallery. Warhol produced the same image of an electric chair, a constant in each picture, while shifts in color, image exposure, and painterly gestures gave a unique quality to each print in the series. The repetition and installation of Warhol’s series of ten prints reminded me of another rumination on death, that of Barnett Newman’s “Stations of the Cross,” a series of paintings made between 1958-1964. In both Warhol’s and Newman’s series, repetition allows for a comparison and reflection on death and its instrument. Given the limited number of prints, I was not immediately desensitized to the image of the electric chair. However, the aura of the color and sense of the installation as a whole dominated my senses and provided me with a kind of virtual-electric feeling.

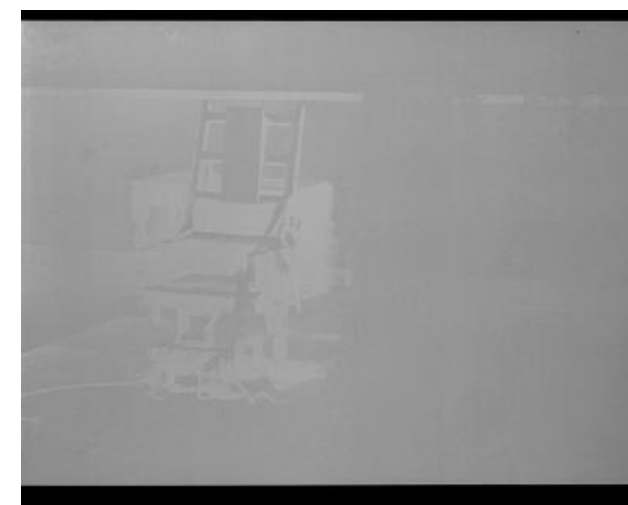
The “Death by Design” exhibit displayed an eclectic survey of seventeen prints about unnatural death. This exhibit included works by Goya, Rembrandt, Hogarth, and Kollwitz, as well as more contemporary works (e.g. Richard Bosman’s relief print “Man Overboard, 1981”).

I found several themes among the prints exhibited. One theme was mass killings. An example from the exhibit was Jacques Callot’s “The Hanging, 1633,” in which nearly twenty men (alleged thieves) hang from a single tree. Centuries later, we can still learn from an image like this that crime and punishment are inextricably connected.

Another theme was the comedy of death. For instance, William Hogarth’s print “The Reward of Cruelty, 1751” illustrates a medical examination in which doctors probe the remains of a dead felon (a man who had mercilessly tortured animals). The doctors seem to delight in jabbing at the patient’s eyes and pulling out his intestines. As if things couldn’t get any worse, the dog below the operating table seems to be holding the patient’s heart in its mouth. Here, perhaps, is an example of how humor is used as a way of coping with, or masking, pain.

Finally, the last theme I noticed in “Death by Design” was the exaltation of death. By depicting and framing the death of a person who dies for a cause, the spirit of the victim is able to live on. This is true of Rembrandt’s “Christ On the Cross,” where the dramatic light cast from the sky or heavens on Jesus forms a transcendent vision. The light does not seem unnatural, but its placement does seem miraculous.

Historically speaking, the print, as a multiple and relatively inexpensive object, appealed to an audience interested primarily in the subject, even subjects in the extreme, and may have had a key influence on the images being made about death. The medium itself seems to have allowed printmakers the financial and psychological freedom to imagine and describe images of death in direct and powerful ways. The influence of the medium may also have had an effect on the frequency and the time we spend with these depictions of death. Not always thought of as the primary images to be hung on walls and having a relationship with other paper documents, prints are more likely to be preserved in flat files. In this regard, prints are like memories that are filed away, only to be recalled when we are reminded of a past event. Death is an image that many people wish to lose in the files of the mind, which makes these exhibits poignant in another way because most of these prints were literally filed away and are rarely looked at with such scrutiny.



Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, 1971

Although views of death are all around us, for example, in video games and on television, our understanding of the effects of loss can only be realized through direct experience and informed indirectly through the consideration that art requires. When an artist depicts death, he or she has an opportunity to respond to death as well as offer a perspective on loss. The artist’s interpretation of death provides an image through which the viewer can envision the consequences of life’s passing and can re-evaluate his/her own reactions to death. After considering these two exhibits and through years of grieving my father’s death, I realize now that although death involves loss, it can be a lesson about how to better approach life.

Kip Deeds, Lecturer in the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, Princeton University