

NETHERMIND: ON ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

Ecological grief is the experience of trying to psychologically come to terms with the human-caused changes to the environment that threaten the viability of human and non-human life. On its own, grief is a hard emotion to get a handle on. Big losses can take years to process.

Ecological grief is especially difficult to process because the size of the loss is not easily apparent. We know there's a crisis. Can we make things better? Do we still have time? Or is it already too late?

Ten Theses on Grief, Time, and Ecology

1. Denial is a stage of grief
2. Other stages of grief include rage, sadness, bargaining, acceptance, and meaning making
3. Grief is the psychological process of coming to terms with loss
4. Grief emerges from finitude and the irreversibility of time's flow
5. Those we love end, we end, everything ends.... There's no going back and there's no undoing: there are only atonement, apology, and amends
6. ...and yet things also continue. We always start in the middle – entering conversations that started without us and finding ways to contribute to things that exceed us. We encounter the residual traces of old forms, things of the moment, and emerging features that we orient against.
7. Terrible things are happening to the natural world: we are losing species, the environment is degrading, and the climate is warming and becoming chaotic
8. This combination has been called the Sixth Extinction, the Anthropocene, and the Climate Emergency
9. For my parents, the human relation to the natural world shifted radically during their lifetime – human technological accomplishment went from an unalloyed good to be celebrated to something that could despoil nature
10. At 50, I've had a growing awareness of climate change throughout my life. People a decade or two younger than I am have always had a sense that the environment has been under threat. For many teenagers, the world has always been on fire. They aren't sure there's a future for them and it's not clear why older people aren't doing anything.

ELEGY and Ecological Grief

In *Elegy*, NetherMind (and guest artists) present work that responds to environmental catastrophe. The works are site responsive and their presentation at St Anne's is part of their meaning. These pieces reflect on the role of the church as a space for publicly and collectively working through grief.

Near the entry, Reinhard Reitzenstein's *Twigged* is a complex merging of human and natural forms. Presented in a church, the bronze head on a carved wooden pillow has overtones of John the Baptist; a Prophet murdered for speaking an unpopular message. The work implies that we must either find a way to acknowledge our interrelationship with nature or perish.

Shot in a Chilean cemetery, the 144 photos of Ed Pien's *Our Beloved* explore the ecology of grief. The photos of funerary flowers stand in for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Placed in the pews, the flowers fill the sanctuary with the women's presence. Their mournful beauty places the women in communion with the congregation and invites viewers to sit in solidarity with them.

Watching over the flowers, Catherine Heard's *Sentinel* is a pair of carved wood votive sculptures that flank the steps up to the apse. The two young boys are pierced with gilded branches; their prosthetic glass eyes see everything and nothing. Evoking the strange alterity of angels, the figures bear witness to tragedies.

Kendra Yee's flag piece *Till* flanks the south stained glass window. Made up of roughly stitched dyed panels, the paired flags evoke natural forms and processes to commemorate the Anthropocene. The flags are an interesting combination of overwhelming scale and fragile delicacy. Available from the Magic Gumball Machine of Fate, the companion piece, *Tilling*, is an edition of 50 clay tiles referencing microscopic organisms.

Exploring the temporality of the catastrophe, Lyla Rye's two videos relate the evolutionary temporality of nature to the human desire to resist death. Shot in a historic cemetery in Banff, the works' use of time-lapse to speed up events makes otherwise imperceptible natural rhythms visible. *Buried Communications Cable* looks through a marble mausoleum to the world outside its window. The soundtrack of birds and squirrels fills the church with nature. We hear the work before we can read it. Brief interjections of the ground squirrels into the frame highlight the significance of things occurring below the threshold of our perception. The second piece, *Slowly Glides The Shadow, Too Quickly Flies The Hour* creates a sundial from a wooden grave marker. Tracking the movement of the cross' shadow, Rye rotates the video frame to keep the shadow in place as the sun passes. Freezing the shadow translates the daily rhythms of time into a meditation on the persistence of life in the face of our efforts to make things permanent.

Greg Hefford's playful work hangs a pair of oversized (upscaled) fuzzy dice from the balcony. Referencing the kitsch dice of a 70s muscle car, the work positions the church as a vehicle for transporting the congregation. Spelled out on the Hymn board, the work's title invites the congregation to join in the singing of "Are We There Yet?" The dice have been shaken to the point that their pips have come loose.

At the back of the balcony, under the stained-glass window, Max Streicher's *Lament* takes the form of a life-sized inflatable moose. Slowly breathing as the piece inflates and deflates, the animal appears to hover at the threshold of death. The beastly pieta mourns the threatened natural world.

John Dickson's *Sad Sack (Dumb Bell)* looms in the south bell tower. The visceral presence blocks the stairs leaving us looking up at the work. Its weight is palpable and somewhat uncomfortable to contemplate. The silent work resonates with the recurring bell from Rye's sundial. Inhabiting the baptismal font at the front of the church, Dickson's second piece is a miniature maelstrom. Exploring spiritual and emotional power of water, *Font*, references the hurricanes and tornadoes of climate change while also reflecting on the power of ritual.

NetherMind has been exploring issues of embodiment and experience throughout the group's existence. The works in *Elegy* are experiential more than conceptual. They invite viewers to feel things and through feeling things to make meaning. The works evoke a variety of emotions from whimsy to sadness to the uncanny. The works resonate with each other and with the space of the church. The elements combine to provide a space for processing the complex of thoughts and emotions tied up in ecological grief.

Matthew Brower, 2022