

Graves of the Insane, Decorated

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“For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.”

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

“Photography allowed the return of what had come before — and with it the prophecy of future returns. Whatever its nominal subject, photography was a visual inscription of the passing of time and therefore also an intimation of every viewer’s own inevitable passing.”

—Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*

WHERE DO THE MAD GO?

Now we see them on the street corners of our cities, on the ramps to our highways, sleeping in the parks. But do they choose to be there? Are they mad? Now we know that the insane make up a significant part of our prison populations. But how do we know when a person in prison is insane? Now we know that mental illnesses are diseases for which we can seek cures. But what do we know about where the mad go? Do we know where madness brings them?

In the early 1960s, when the forces of imagination and fantasy were turning against the triumphs and catastrophes of reason and civilization, there was a resurgence of interest in madness, and in how we treat the insane. It may not be an exaggeration to say that whenever progress gets called into question in some deep way, the *alternative* of madness receives renewed attention. But for whom is madness an alternative?

Before the onset of modernity, you might have found the madman on the streets of the village; you might have turned to him for special insights or even prophecy. The mad were there among us, sometimes shouting, sometimes in his own world; but we could see him up close. As notions of reason and normality became more prominent, as we became more civilized, the madman lost his place among us. He was a threat to normality, and so he needed to be kept outside the spaces we enter and leave freely. He had to be confined; perhaps he could be helped. If we come upon a person raving on a street corner, we, as good moderns, might feel we should not look or listen too closely. When we see the madman today, we are no longer merely gazing across the

street; we are looking across a border to another world, another way of being. What is our relationship to that world?

In earlier times we were encouraged to look. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, visits to view the insane in their confinement could be a nice weekend outing. As Michel Foucault and others have pointed out, looking at the mad in their asylums, and later in their hospitals, was a way of shoring up a sense of normality and of reason. We were not they. We could visit the places of the mad; they were not visitors who could return home at the end of the day. We could leave the places of the mad and know that these were not the places to which we belonged. The mad were, after all, in their own worlds, and we, in ours.

In the United States in the late nineteenth century, insane asylums were being built across the land. As Carla Yanni makes clear in her recent book *The Architecture of Madness*, the institutions that were conceived in the middle of the nineteenth century were bound up with the ideology of progress prevalent in much of the West. Asylums themselves were intended to help treat insanity. In the 1840s, Dr. Thomas Kirkbride became super-intendent of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane, and over the next decades he influenced the construction of asylums around the country. Kirkbride designed hospitals to be part of the treatment, helping patients find their way back to sanity. This was curative architecture, contrived to foster normality inside the walls and to make a statement of the value of civilization to the outside world.

The modern asylum grew in size and visibility. It seems that with its increased visibility came a greater social acceptance of committing a relative to its care. Some historians, like Andrew Scull, have argued that in economies increasingly focused on productivity, there was no longer a place at home for the crazy relative who couldn't pull his or her weight. Others, like Roy Porter, point to the increasing array of services available to deal with marginal cases. In an ever more civilized society, asylums were there to treat, to correct, those on the margins. They were part of the growing service economy. The nineteenth-century asylum was not just a safe place, as its name implied; nor was it a warehouse of the ill, as mental hospitals of the mid-twentieth century were often characterized. The nineteenth-century asylum was meant to be a place of cure, a place for what was called the moral treatment of the insane. Such treatment was premised on the idea that through proper care and the right surroundings a person could return to himself, to his moral, rational self. The key was to provide the patient with vehicles to overcome his mental alienation: exercise, routine, conversation, diet.

In the mid-nineteenth century, medical wisdom of the day dictated that the insane person had to be taken away from the family and made to live in a highly structured environment with access to nature as well as to physicians. Problems arose when it

became obvious how difficult it was to cure certain patients, now called inmates when they were committed to official care by relatives or the authorities. These inmates were not just being treated at a hospital; they were forcibly confined in an asylum. If they tried to escape, officers would bring them back against their will. The will of the insane person was, after all, at the core of the disease; mad people were said to be incapable of exercising responsible freedom because of their madness, and thus confining them was not really taking away their freedom. In reality, fathers were committed to asylums by sons who wanted control of their property; wives were committed by their husbands, or perhaps escaped abusive husbands by “becoming” mad.

By the 1870s, a key term had emerged to describe the recalcitrant cases: *incurable*. The incurably insane had to be separated from the less-volatile, more socially acceptable mentally ill. The asylum thus acquired the charge of housing the incurable while transforming the merely ill. So it took on both its sinister and benevolent sides. As cultural pessimism became more pronounced in the United States in the mid-1870s, pessimism about the possibility of an effective moral treatment of the insane likewise grew. By the turn of the twentieth century, insanity seems to have named a broad category, and many asylums became places of custodial rather than therapeutic care for people who “didn’t fit in” or were otherwise unwanted. And once confined within the asylum’s walls, it was increasingly difficult to leave.

The Oregon State Insane Asylum opened in 1883 on a hill just east of Salem, not far from the penitentiary. A few hundred men and women were soon transferred there, “representing almost every known stage or degree of insanity, idiocy, imbecility, or helplessness.”¹ At the Oregon asylum, as at other large asylums, the physical health of many of the patients was precarious, and, within a short time, arrangements had to be made to annex a nearby cemetery for the burial of deceased patients. Among the first to be interred there was Lizzie Hazelton, of Umatilla County, and afterward there were more than 1,500 other burials in what would be called the asylum cemetery.

The Asylum became the Oregon State Hospital in 1913, and expansion plans were in the works. From its inception, the asylum/hospital was intended to be as self-sufficient as possible. There was an asylum farm, an asylum blacksmith, a carpenter, and a gardener. The asylum also had its own cemetery, but in 1913 the burial land was identified as a site for a new building, and so the state had the bodies exhumed and cremated, with the unclaimed remains stored in the basement of the hospital. Afterward, cremation seems to have become the rule at the state hospital. The crematorium was on site, within yards of the wards. It may well have been that patients at the asylum helped to staff the facility; the incinerator was named Steiner’s Chimney in honor of the superintendent of the asylum in 1910. Sometimes remains were claimed by family members; in other cases, they were stored in the basement in individual copper

canisters. The canisters were labeled with ID numbers or names in case family members did make inquiries. In the 1970s the hospital created an underground memorial vault, with an accompanying plaque, as a more suitable resting place for the canisters. Unfortunately, the vault suffered repeated flooding, and the canisters, ever more corroded but still stubbornly persistent as objects, as reminders, were returned to a storage building on the hospital grounds. That is where David Maisel found and photographed them.

WHERE DO THE DEAD GO?

The Age of Enlightenment, when men of reason attempted to gain a distanced, objective view of madness, was also a period when Western attitudes toward death were undergoing an important transformation. As various historians have noted, a modern practice of caring for the dead, of memorializing them, developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Put most succinctly, it might be said that the cemetery replaced the churchyard. When the dead were buried in the local churchyard, they were in the center of town. They, like the church, were part of the fabric of daily existence. In the eighteenth century, a quasi-scientific discourse emerged that called this ancient practice into question. How crowded, it was asked, could the crypts become? More important, as concerns for public hygiene increasingly became part of Enlightenment scientific and governmental discourse, people began to ask whether it was sanitary for the living to be so close to the dead.

One should not imagine that scientifically minded people suddenly discovered unknown facts about death that led to a change in burial habits. Instead, as historian Thomas Laqueur has noted, it should be recognized that in the emerging middle-class view of hygiene and order, new modalities of civic community and segregation developed that allowed for an updated approach to interring the dead. They came to be placed outside daily life, in the modern cemetery, much like the mad came to be placed in the modern asylum. Indeed, Laqueur notes a mid-nineteenth-century reference to cemeteries as “asylums for the dead.”²

For eighteenth-century writers, the decaying corpse became an object of fear and fascination. It was thought to give off putrid exhalations injurious to those who might come in contact with the smell. Although doctors at the time disputed such tales, the public health discourse of the growing state bureaucracies won out. The dead would have their own cities, where the emphasis would not be on bodily decay but on living memory. The cemeteries were to be memorial parks, spaces for recalling loved ones without contact with anything that might remind us of their physical remains. Pastoral settings, memorial sculpture, and cemetery professionals would mediate between the dead and their visitors. In increasingly secular societies, in which traditional beliefs in

an afterlife had become contentious, cemeteries became a means for distancing the physicality of death while promoting a culture of remembrance.

With the development of penitentiaries and asylums, and the increasing secularization of society, institutional cemeteries became a fact of life in the nineteenth century. The cemetery thus became not a place of worship but one of remembrance. And yet, many of those who ended up being buried behind the prison or asylum were people unclaimed, unremembered. Sometimes, however, a deliberately forgotten family member will become the object of a later attempt at recollection. That's what happened with Ben Tabler, who, after his retirement, moved back to Oregon and traced the destiny of his paternal grandmother, who had been shrouded in mystery during his childhood. Tabler found that she had died at the Oregon asylum in 1903. Learning that her remains were among the copper canisters, he took steps to bring her home, an effort foiled, however, by the passage of time. Although he has the number originally inscribed on the canister, the hospital has so far been unable to find it.

REMAINS AND REMEMBRANCE

We are all, of course, defeated by the passage of time. In crowded churchyards, where finding room for newly deceased members of the community was a constant challenge, there was seldom the sense of a personal grave. Bodies were treated like compost, and shoved around to make room as best one could for newly deceased members of the community. In the modern culture of remembrance that grew up in the memorial parks of the nineteenth century, the existence of an individual grave, a person's own final resting place, became important. An individual identity persisted even after death, although belief in the afterlife of a personal soul was waning. In the early years of its development, photography was enlisted in this culture of individual remembrance. In the late nineteenth century, photographs of the recently deceased were a commonplace tool for recollecting the dead. When the body was laid out, the photographer was called upon to create an image of arrested decay. More aggressive photographers claimed to be able to capture the images of departed loved ones from beyond the grave. They claimed to be able to photograph memories of the deceased, or their powerful auras still glowing around the bereaved. Spirit photography—images of ghosts—attempted to show that photography could not only stop time but that it could also reach into the eternal. These efforts rested on the belief that photography made the ephemeral material and that the process of capturing light reflected off a body was a way of preserving that body over time.³

This engagement of photography with death and ghosts became the seed for twentieth-century reflections on photography's metaphorical connection to death and memory. From Walter Benjamin's ruminations on Eugène Atget's photographs of a disappearing Parisian cityscape to Susan Sontag's claim that every photograph is a

memento mori, philosophers and critics have focused on the medium's connections with mortality. Writing in the 1950s, André Bazin noted that "photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption." It is this "proper corruption" that is unavoidable in David Maisel's photographs from the asylum's crematorium. His images are alive with color and detail, but they picture death. The copper canisters contain cremated remains that are a trace of another time. Copper ages, it corrodes and colors; it records, in its own way, the passage of time: "proper corruption." Maisel's images recall the necessity of decay and the fact of death, even as they can be said to "embalm time."

The unclaimed remains at the Oregon State Hospital challenge the notions of individualism and remembrance that have developed in the modern age. Most of the labels that were affixed to the canisters are long gone. Many of their stamped ID numbers are no longer legible, and some numbers are in fact duplicates. We can never know who is inside these canisters, and it is unlikely Ben Tabler will ever be able to bring his grandmother home. The remains can be distinguished now only by the unique corrosion of their containers, the marks of time.

It is tempting to compare the illegibility of these containers with the unreadability of the asylum. The Kirkbride structure was purported to bespeak rationality and cure, but asylums came instead to signify incarceration, hopelessness, and the loss of freedom. Indeed, the Oregon asylum was the site for the filming of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which took the mental hospital as a metaphor for the imposition of authority on free spirits more generally. No longer a place where calm reason would bring the mad back to normality, the mental hospital in the second half of the twentieth century became, in the view of many, an institution of fear, a snake pit for unfortunates who had lost control of reason, of memory, and hence their freedom. For others, the mental hospital also became a metaphor for society's frenzy to normalize everyone; the insane were understood (as long as one overlooked their real suffering) as rebels against the tyranny of rationality and the civilizing process.

Maisel's photographs first claim our attention, then bring us up short because they drive home our desire for remembering the dead. But the photographs make this reminder in a context of the obliteration of individuality, in the context of the insane and their asylums. The pictures are strikingly beautiful, and yet we don't want to be seduced by their colors, their biomorphic forms, their striking clarity. These are, after all, photographs of death, of the failure of remembrance and of the persistence of the unclaimed. But through the dramatic reversal that is at the core of photography's power, these images of the unclaimed provide their own form of recognition, perform their own work of memorialization. We cannot recover the destiny of each individual or trace their descendants, but the photographs nonetheless make a claim for the importance of remembrance in the context of a community. The persistence of the

remains, now recorded, becomes an expression of our desire not to forget even as they remind us of the inevitability of corrosion. Our memories do disappear, but we can recollect that very fact about memory and learn to live with its necessary relation to forgetting. We can reclaim the past without trying to preserve it from inevitable forms of forgetting, from “proper corruption.”

On June 3, 1886, the *Daily Oregon Statesman* printed the following notice:
Graves of the Insane, Decorated — On Decoration Day, the little inmates of the orphan's home, under the supervision of their matron, gathered a lot of wild flowers, and decorated the graves of the insane dead, who have been buried in the asylum field adjoining the Lee Mission cemetery. The deed was a worthy one, and to the little ones is due a great deal of credit for doing this act of mercy to the unfriended dead.

Decoration Day, now called Memorial Day, was established after the Civil War as a day to honor those who had died fighting to preserve the Union. “Decoration” in this context meant to confer a distinction, to recognize or acknowledge. The “little ones,” who must have known something about being unclaimed, were conferring distinction upon, acknowledging, the deceased insane. They were making a claim, even if it was as transitory as wildflowers.

David Maisel’s project also makes a claim, reminding us of forgetting, of corrosion and oblivion, while also recollecting the unfriended. His photographs recognize the dead, even though the images cannot resurrect their individuality. His visual inscription of the passing of time is an act of decoration and acknowledgment; his deed a worthy one.