



## What remains

Inside these copper urns, sprouting technicolour minerals, lie the cremated remains of the former patients of a mental asylum. David Maisel's photographs of them provide Max Houghton with pause for thought

'All knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world. We study the order of things ... but we cannot grasp their innermost essence.' From

*Urn Burial* by Sir Thomas Browne, quoted in *The Rings of Saturn* by WG Sebald.

David Maisel, who has produced the exquisite work *Library of Dust*, is connected by an invisible plumb line through time to the writer he quotes in his ac-

companying essay. Both Maisel and the late Sebald bring to their work an uncommon interest in how we remember history and the dead. Not the great and celebrated dead: kings or queens or heroes of the battlefield, but the extraordinary, ordinary dead,

whose bodies lie beneath us as we walk; whose lives and deaths were but a brief flight.

In 1913, Oregon State Hospital began the practice of cremating the remains of deceased patients not otherwise claimed by next of kin. At the

same time, new laws ordered the hospital to exhume and cremate the remains of all patients buried in the hospital cemetery since 1883, when the institution – originally known as the Oregon State Insane Asylum – first opened its doors.

What society chooses to do with its dead is a measure of its civilisation, and while cremation is widely accepted in many parts of the world, and has been for millennia, for others it is anathema. Such feeling can only arise from some deep-seated wish for an afterlife, not of the religious kind, but simply an enduring.

The Renaissance scholar Sir Thomas Browne, whose study of ancient funeral urns found in East

Anglia quickly yielded turned to a more philosophical meditation on the impermanence and immutability of life and death. In a curious twist of fate his body was disinterred and subjected to an exhumation and reburial for medical research. His skull was displayed for some years under a bell jar in the museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital.

'Who knows,' asked Browne, 'whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembered in the known account of time?'

The fate of the body after death is marginally easier to document

than the fabled 21g of the journeying soul, but its subsequent odyssey remains unknown for its (former) inhabitant. The ash remains of those whose lives ended in the Asylum were stored in the irregular copper canisters you see pictured here.

### Underground vault

Miraculously these burnished, tarnished corroded urns, whose manufacture is uncertain (they may have been made by inmates of the local prison), have been transformed by a kind of alchemy, a chemical corrosion.

In 1976 the copper canisters, numbered from 01-5121, were placed on pine shelves in one of the hospital's underground vaults,

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where they were interred with a memorial. The sudden blooms and celestial deformations that have transformed the surface of the canisters are a result of water corrosion: the vaults were frequently flooded due to the rising water table in the region. It was in this highly visual and visible process that Maisel saw his photographic opportunity.

Maisel's act of photographing these canned corpses reanimates the dead, allowing the observer to linger with them in a strange extraterritorial place, though the transformation is but temporary. Those who died here are still without name or face, but their passing has been attentively and assiduously marked. In another

twist to this already strange and ghostly tale, in 1975 Oregon State Hospital became the screen location for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The 1975 film of Ken Kesey's book, filmed by Milos Forman, mobilised liberal America into questioning the accepted diagnoses of madness and caused a seachange in the way society treats the insane.

While we wouldn't especially wish to suture the spirit of the Chief or McMurphy into these unknown lives, such fictional voices add to the restless clamour that has seemingly caused these phantasmagorical surface eruptions from these otherwise silent funeral urns.

#### Corrosive beauty

Of the four absorbing essays that accompany Maisel's work, one takes the form of a mineralogical account. It's written by Terry Toedtemeier, who is not only curator of photography at Portland Art Museum but also a trained geologist. He describes the complex chemical processes that led to these mineral deposits, resplendent in their rich hues, which serve to individualise each lost life. Toedtemeier also invites us to consider the 'extraordinary possibilities for mineralisation' that would have taken place when the corrosion progressed to the interior; when it reached the human dust within.

In photographing these

corroded vessels, Maisel acknowledges their evocation of the celestial, the aurora borealis. I would suggest they also have a Stygian, subterranean mood. In both directions, we are drawn to the very limits of the knowable universe. Perhaps they most closely resemble something that has thus far remained invisible to the human eye.

The shape and colour of the makeshift urns is not the only thing that changed over time; a word was created by institution staff in order to refer quickly to these unclassifiable objects, part-human, part-tin: remains. Such Frankenwords, created by cannibalising the useful bits of existing words, have become

common shorthand in contemporary parlance (such as the double-headed spectre of Brangelina or the non-concept of infotainment) and, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who was particularly fond of them, retain a sinister air.

And what of the urns' sudden, startling and accidental beauty? These strange chemical processes that have turned the copper surface into an aurora borealis. How should we feel about aestheticising this dark history? It's a pertinent question often posed to photojournalists, as well as to art photographers, but less frequently to Goya.

Photography's traditionally close but entirely erroneous links

with objectivity demand an ethical response to flagrant beauty-making, when perhaps it should stay mute and bask in any admiration that may come its way, gathering its rosebuds while it may.

*Library of Dust* is a body of work I want to return to, again and again. Yet these terribly beautiful photographs do not redeem the dead souls from the iniquity of oblivion. Ochres, aquamarines and vermillions that parade across our retina convince us that we can see an aura emanating from the burned body of canister number 4762. Perhaps poor Sir Thomas Browne would have called them 'isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance'. **BJP**

#### In print

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