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“Ghostly Imprints”: Revisiting the death mask in digital clay

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For centuries artists have explored the concept of death – whether for medical, commemorative, or transcendental purposes, to depict atrocities, or as an existential confrontation of the human condition. This paper engages with the concept by detailing a developing creative project that responds to forensic facial photographs of unclaimed and undocumented deceased from the Johannesburg Forensic Services. The project comprises a series of 3D digital sculptures that draw on the genre of the death mask

The project has a formal association with the International Committee of the Red Cross’s (ICRC) “Missing and Deceased Migrant Project.” The ICRC initiative is a humanitarian effort to identify the many unidentified and undocumented deceased who die in South Africa everyday - most of whom are assumed illegal migrants. Due to the sensitive ethical issues around illegal immigration and retaining anonymity of the dead, this art project does not represent photoreal portraits of individuals but responds to the forensic photographs through the abstraction of white digital clay and the aesthetics of the plaster cast death mask. The digital sculptures themselves are not death masks, they are artworks, but refer to the tradition and the related notion of a ghostly imprint. The white digital clay resembles plaster and, as with the traditional death mask, veils reality and removes the abject horror one may experience in confronting the dead or the gruesome truth of a forensic photograph.

Of interest to the investigation and the creative research is the idea that the plaster death mask is an attempt to freeze a significant moment in time – a moment when one has ceased to live - whether it be minutes, hours or even days after death. In this instance, the production of a death mask has been perceived as an existential act of rebellion in the face of death - an attempt to retain a tangible presence of the deceased in the physical realm - albeit a ghostly plaster imprint. Relatedly, the creative project aims to produce a final portrait (after the tradition of the death mask) of an anonymous individual for the sake of posterity and as a reference to the commemorative original role of the death mask. The paper will further consider the idea that the death mask bears physical impressions of the pain or circumstance of death - a notion that will be discussed as it relates to the creative project and to some key examples within the genre.

Lastly, the discussion will illuminate the production of the digital sculptures and how they appear on the digital platform. It will also detail the printing of the sculptures in polymer plastic and their presentation as tangible 3D objects in a gallery space.

BIOGRAPHY

Michelle Stewart is a lecturer and academic coordinator of the Digital Arts program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She holds a master's degree in Fine Arts and a PhD in animation studies. Her research interests straddle both traditional and new media art approaches, and include traditional painting and drawing media, experimental animation, and digital arts.