

ARTS & CULTURE

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MAKING TRACES OF LIFE

BY ALEX MORRIS

CREMATION is not my vibe," says Genevieve Graham. She jokingly calls herself a taphophile, and she's visited countless cemeteries across the world. In her spare time she sits at home and sews her death shroud.

She's currently working on her PhD at the University of Newcastle and her area of research is "trace objects", a term she coined herself. They are the items left at graves and cemeteries, ranging from teddy bears to lanterns to beer cans and more.

"It's something we've been doing since we've been burying people, but trace objects are not heavily researched," she says.

She's not taking them or touching them out of respect, but she is documenting and photographing them. She compares her objects now with the Victorian era.

"Funerary rituals and a lot of what we do today is based on things started in the Victorian era. I'm fascinated by flowers. Almost everyone would have experience leaving them at a grave. Flowers are particularly interesting because we used to leave fresh flowers, very symbolic, fresh, and then they decay over time; like we do in life. Now we're leaving plastic flowers and pots of color, very different to where we started. I like to compare those two periods and reinterpret those objects," she says.

By creating her own death shroud, she's making her research very personal. The idea came to her when she started going to cemetery open days.

"I went to Rookwood cemetery open day in Sydney; they've got vintage hearse displays and a grave digging demonstration.

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I guess the blue is a really interesting colour, mournful without being black.

Genevieve Graham

They had a lady who makes shrouds for people. I started talking to her about it. I thought 'I can just make my own'," she says.

For Graham it's an abstract art form and a way to hone in on her embroidery skills.

She's only 31, so when people learn about her shroud they're a bit taken aback, but she sees it as a labour of love she can work on for the rest of her life.

"I like to joke it's my final artwork going down with the ship. It does freak (my husband) David out because I work on it quite a lot. It's sitting on the couch draped over me; every now and then the reality will hit him. He knows if I go first he will have to wrap me and bury me in it," she says.

She started making it at the beginning of last year. The fabric is organic hemp.

"It doesn't stretch. Generally when you're carrying someone they tend to get a bit wobbly. You've got three straps I'll be decorating for the ankles, waste and shoulders. And you have a backing board, so it's easy for people to pick you up," she says.

She draws on her shroud with thread; she has an idea and just starts sewing, giving organic results. She uses an embroidery hoop and embroiders by hand on a smaller piece, then transfers it to the shroud. The blue



WORK IN PROGRESS: Genevieve Graham with her death shroud. Picture: David Graham

in the shroud comes from the cyanotype process, a Victorian form of photography she uses in a contemporary way. It comes in a liquid form and she paints it on fabric.

"I like the cyanotype because I used it for a lot of my outdoor installations. Over time it will degenerate and I like how that mirrors the objects left at graves. The photography element is never pristine, you can see where I've missed a bit. I like that there's that trace. I'm interested in the traces that people leave," she says.

Liquid photography comes in black, blue and brown, but she finds blue is quite a mournful color. Talking about death can be too heavy or hard, in order for people to access it has to have a bit of softness.

"I read something recently: when you're creating images around death you need to give the eyes a place to rest," she says.

"You kind of want to create something that is engaging, but there is that death behind that.

"I guess the blue is a really interesting colour, mournful without being black."

Graham can tell you much more about her own death plans and the history of different alternatives including cremation and even aquamation.

"All I can do is prepare as best I can and try to have the death that I want. I don't want to leave my family and friends not knowing what to do. It's such an important conversation," she says.