

THE AUSTRALIAN

UWA exhibition Memento Mori explores our preference to ignore death

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PERVASIVE images of death and destruction appear almost daily in media reports, from banal car accidents to beheadings and passengers who disappear in ill-fated planes. Yet another persistent aspect of contemporary life is our ongoing obsession with trying to forget death exists.

This rather daunting premise inspires *Memento Mori*, an exhibition of artworks, musical compositions and poetry on the theme of death's inevitability.

The exhibition, which opens tomorrow at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia, will be accompanied by a Manning Clark House Day of Ideas that takes as its theme the Latin phrase translated as "remember you must die", whose first known use is in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*.

The day will conclude with a performance of the late Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe's monumental work *Memento Mori* and the world premiere of *Lament*, his specially commissioned piece for UWA's school of music.

Ted Snell, UWA's cultural precinct director and the show's curator, says *Memento Mori* aims to explore "how our culture avoids death by seeking eternal youth and persistently celebrating beauty and the new".

Western society lacks the rituals surrounding illness and death observed by other cultures, he says, and fewer people in the community have direct experience of caring for the seriously ill or of encountering dying.

“As a result, death is veiled; people ‘pass away’ or ‘pass over’ or are ‘no longer with us’,” Snell says.

But for centuries art has depicted the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits.

According to Snell, the exhibition is an attempt to confront that reality by showing how artists contemplate the bleak end and use it as an inspiration to positively shape the living years that remain. Four West Australian artists were commissioned to create work around this theme.

Richard Lewer’s response is to draw up his own last will and testament on large sheets of pegboard, the kind of material on which tools are hung in men’s sheds. Instead, Lewer “hangs” his last instructions about property and funeral arrangements, all witnessed and signed — apparently with genuine legal authority — by his wife and the agent who sells his work.

Lewer has pondered end-of-life issues before. A tragic death love story was at the heart of a work for this year’s Adelaide Biennial: the animation *Worse Luck I’m Still Here*, depicting a Perth couple who make a suicide pact that one partner unintentionally survives.

Kate McMillan is represented at *Memento Mori* with a video work inspired by *The Isle of the Dead*, a famous romantic image from the 19th century by Arnold Böcklin that became emblematic of our final journey to the crypt.

The original painting shows a shrouded figure standing in a boat, headed for an island covered in cypress-pines and stones. McMillan’s work shows an Aboriginal man rowing out towards Rottnest Island, Perth’s holiday island. Rottnest once functioned as a prison for Aboriginal prisoners brought down from the Pilbara and Kimberley.

Photographic artist David Collins has created moody tabloids of naked figures, decadent-looking yet with a hint of incipient decay; one close-up image is of pubic lice.

Thai-Australian artist Nathan Beard has created an elaborate cross-cultural shrine to his recently deceased Thai uncle; taking some of his uncle’s actual bones, Beard had them cast in porcelain and fired to resemble the real bones, raising all sorts of questions about taboos around handling and displaying dead human material.

Both Collins and Beard find themselves co-opted into a Dance of Death in the work of their artist friend Andrew Nicholls, whose 13m-long *Danse Macabre* drawing extends across an adjoining gallery wall. Nicholls — presumably with their permission — has depicted several of his friends and acquaintances in a grim scene in which they are led to their graves by skeletons.

Other works from UWA's collection complement the theme of transience.

Robyn Stacey's symbolic still life *Leidenmaster I* draws on medieval traditions of depicting transience in all its forms, from empty corn husks to wilting plants, eggshells, dead butterflies, smoke and leering skulls.

But the centrepiece of the show is indisputably *Allegoria Sacra*, a major video work by Russian art collective AES+F that Snell has taken on loan from the Art Gallery of South Australia.

It is a coup that West Australians won't want to miss, a rare showing of this work outside Adelaide, where it was displayed on an outside screen to passers-by at a previous Adelaide Fringe festival and later installed for a time at AGSA.

This spectacular 39-minute video work is described as “a digital painting which seduces and overwhelms the viewer through its visual and aural splendour”.

Projected on a wall in the Lawrence Wilson gallery as a 16m x 3m image, *Allegoria Sacra* was inspired by a late 15th-century painting by Giovanni Bellini, housed in Florence's Uffizi Gallery.

Bellini's work is said to represent souls awaiting their final judgment in purgatory; the Russians have transposed the setting to an international airport departure lounge.

The setting usually elicits a knowing nod from every traveller who has sat in limbo in airport departure lounges, bored and going nowhere.

But the stylised, slow-motion action in this “lounge” is surprisingly mesmerizing to watch — larger-than-life-size screen figures are mutual strangers mingling in national costume, from Arab robes to Western suits and tight-fitting air stewardess uniforms. They listen to flight announcements and watch departure boards, anticipating news of delays and departures.

Says AES+F, “We become part of a special club of people who are united by the condition of a body and soul located between the abandoned and the not yet found.”

But sustained viewing reveals a rich re-enacting of allegorical stories in a high-definition, Hollywood film style, from the suffering of St Sebastian to the wisdom of the Old Testament figure Job. Classical figures from Bellini’s painting, such as a turbaned Saracen, become transit passengers from Darfur or Peshawar.

Sebastian is “a young traveller from the exotic countries of the south, naked to the waist and barefoot, having not yet changed his shorts for jeans”.

Job is represented as an elderly patient being transported on a hi-tech stretcher; covered with tubes and monitors, “(he) becomes younger before our very eyes and turns into a magical mutant-baby”.

Stewardesses resembling film starlets usher their passengers towards their next destination, wherever that is. As manipulative and glossy as any multi-million-dollar feature film, *Allegoria Sacra* is also unexpectedly moving and contemplative to watch.

“There’s a beautiful mix between Hollywood, fashion and a rich world culture, all in eerily sharp focus,” observes Snell. “The historical art references are playfully inserted everywhere, and there’s a contained violence that doesn’t appear on screen.”

There’s also a sad and vivid topicality to some images, as disembodied heads roll across the screen in certain scenes.

AGSA director Nick Mitzevich will be in Perth to discuss *Allegoria Sacra* at the Day of Ideas. In pursuing this cross-cultural, cross-event approach, the gallery also has commissioned four young musicians — James Bradbury, Michael Grebla, Mark Holdsworth and Drew Woolley — to compose and perform works on the theme of death.

And poets play a role in a series of death-themed compositions selected by the online journal Trove.

“So it’s a multi-arts examination of a topic that is relevant to everyone,” says Snell.

“Tragedies like the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines plane MH17 make us all conscious of the imminence of death; we see it on the news but we don’t want to think of it in our own lives.”

Memento Mori, he says, provides a quiet space to contemplate the inevitable next journey for us all.

Memento Mori runs from tomorrow until December 13 at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia.