

## suggested reading selected by Dawn Cerny

- Philippe Ariés, *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981
- Jean Dominique Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 1997
- John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, 1985
- Tanya Blank, *Under the Sabers: the Unwritten Code of Army Wives*, 2006
- Rebecca Brown, *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary*, 2001
- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2006
- Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry*, 1993
- Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, 1965
- Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta*, 1990
- Margaret J. King, *The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello*, 1994
- Robert Knox Sneden, et.al., *Images from the Storm: 300 Civil War Images by the author of Eye of the Storm*, 2001
- Patrik Ouředník, *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century*, 2001
- Nicholas Penny, *Mourning: The Arts and Living*, 1981
- Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1928
- Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 1995
- Sayre P. Sheldon, *Her War Story: 20th-century Women Write about War*, 1999
- Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 1994
- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003
- James Tatum, *The Mourner's Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam*, 2003
- Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 1886
- Mark W. Van Wienen, *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War*, 2002
- Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Project, A Biography 1886–1918*, 1998

## Henry Art Gallery

Faye G. Allen Center for the Visual Arts University of Washington | [WWW.HENRYART.ORG](http://WWW.HENRYART.ORG)

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Dawn Cerny. *Going to Die Shirt*. 2007. Ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Richard Nicol.

**Dawn Cerny**  
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**is it possible** to remedy the grave finality of death? Can we cheat its irrevocable grip just slightly through our traditions, stories, religion, and art? Dawn Cerny squares up to this all-too-human preoccupation with her exhibition *We're all going to die (except for you)*. The unexpected juxtapositions of her work with historical garments, art, ephemera, and other objects raise thoughts and questions about attitudes toward death and mourning in modern Western cultures.

The exhibition's frank title echoes with multiple resonances, mirroring our complicated relationship to this taboo subject. It suggests a spiritual reading: we might believe that we live on in accordance with our

individual religious beliefs. The refutation of the words "except for" expresses a darker note, an adolescent sense of invincibility that underlies the denial of death in American society. We believe it happens to other people from other places.

Cerny proposes a hopeful perspective that grows out of a common desire—that we can each leave behind some trace, made evident through the effects of a single life upon family, friends, strangers, and the world at large. We on some level escape death in the memories of those who mourn us. Cerny also acknowledges the aspiration for her art to continue on beyond her lifespan: "If I work enough, if I produce enough, secretly I wish I might live forever."

Over the last two hundred years our collective experience with illness, dying, death, and survivorship has radically changed. What was once commonly shared by extended families and acknowledged broadly within a community is now

generally hidden from public view and endured only by closest companions or a few relatives (unless it is made into a spectacle of violence flashed upon media outlets). The selection of 19th-century garments and landscape paintings that Cerny presents here harkens back to the beginning of a shift in attitudes brought on by the industrial revolution and the accompanying changes it made on society and culture.

Much of the installation—the Victorian-era mourning dresses from the Henry collection and personal effects borrowed from a private collector—foregrounds a principal duty of the bereaved to honor the deceased through memory and ritual. In the late 19th-century, precisely prescribed clothing constituted an almost theatrical display, marking the mourner with a certain distinct status. A common sight, such garments were an obligation for the wearer who observed special codes of social conduct. The pronouncement made by the black silk, photo cards, hair jewelry, and other accoutrements were a constant reminder of one's own eventual demise.



Images from left: Dawn Cerny. O.D.B. 2007. Ink and graphite. *Slayer pees on Megadeth's corpse*. 2007. Ink and acrylic. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Richard Nicol.

Cerny's drawings, inspired by contemporary t-shirts, also appear as *memento mori*. Her designs send mixed messages and contrast sharply with the clarity provided by the earlier attire. Because of death's taboo status, rebellious subcultures have adopted its symbolic representations for their shock value. Such symbols have since spread through popular culture, detached from any original intention of fearful prognostication. Cerny's drawings derive from this absurd displacement and attempt to recast these morbid caricatures as meaningful signs. During this age of terrorism, war, and violent crimes should these t-shirts perhaps be voluntary badges for those who grieve the results of our destructive behavior?

The exhibition not only bridges past and present but nature and culture as well. Her inclusion of flowers and a parliament of (taxidermic) owls remind us of the symbols and omens we assign to nature. Cerny also likens today's environmentalists to Victorian mourners. In her view, each attempts to mitigate loss by memorializing what has expired. Contemporary naturalists link us to the irretrievable through endeavors that form a type of remembrance. They also remind us that we are part of a continuum within nature, which, when acknowledged, both humbles and uplifts us.

To explore these connections, Cerny plans to create changing tableaux of her works on paper arranged in response to 19th-century landscape paintings from the Henry's permanent collection. Within this open studio (taking place during the first weeks of the exhibition), she pointedly plays with the notion of the sublime—nature depicted as simultaneously awe-inspiring and fear-inducing. Here, natural elements take on sacred status as they portend the cycle of death and renewal. As Simon Schama describes in *Landscape and Memory*, such symbolic readings go "directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality."

Within these zones of memory, Cerny hopes to find deliverance from fear and alienation. She aims for catharsis through her unique blend of comedy and tragedy. Laughing at Cerny's dry, dark wit eases terror momentarily but it never eases the gnawing acknowledgment that ultimately the dread must be faced. To look at that emotion squarely just might offer a release from feelings of doom. But perhaps the sentiment of the exhibition's title is ultimately ironic. Death is an inexplicable mystery; essentially, it is non-being. So we're all going to die and be released, except for you, and you must wait, fraught with emotions, until your own liberation.

Sara Krajewski, *Associate Curator*

