

UQ ART MUSEUM

TIM SILVER



The University of Queensland
Art Museum
University Drive, St Lucia
www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au
07 3365 3046

Open daily 10.00 am – 4.00 pm
FREE ENTRY

Cover image:
Sculptural remnant from untitled (killing me softly) version 2 2006
dirt and synthetic binder
14.0 x 10.0 x 18.0 cm (irregular)
Collection of The University of Queensland,
purchased 2008. Courtesy of the artist



JULIUS CRICUS PROVIDER NUMBER 000028

INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

TIM SILVER

Born 1974, Hobart. Lives and works in Sydney

Tim Silver explores the idea of life and death in the very materials he chooses to work with, such as crayons, watercolour pigment, chocolate, fairy floss, sand and dirt. These unconventional sculptural materials are 'entropic'; it is in their very nature to decay or disintegrate. The history of sculpture has been devoted to the idea of permanence and commemoration – bronze and marble, the most historically significant sculptural materials, were used because they represented durability and resistance to change. Silver turns this tradition on its head and, although he relies on traditional processes such as casting and carving, his sculptures are made to disintegrate and it is this process which constitutes the artwork. Silver often uses photography and video to document the process of decay. When exhibited, the videos and photographs 're-live' the death of his sculptures.

The subjects that Silver chooses, as well as the materials he uses to make them, comment on the inevitability of death. The human skull in *Sculptural remnant from untitled (killing me softly) version 2* 2006 is a *memento mori*, a reminder of mortality. *Memento mori* is a Latin expression which translates as 'remember you must die', a theme which runs across history and which has found its expression in art, architecture, music and literature. The theme reached the height of its popularity in 17th century Dutch culture, specifically within the genre of still-life painting, where skulls, hourglasses, decaying flowers

and fruit were frequent subjects. Art historians have linked the popularity of 17th century *memento mori* to the wealth and consumerism that characterised the new mercantile classes in Northern Europe at the time. Silver's *Sculptural remnant from untitled (killing me softly) version 2* could therefore be read as a *memento mori* for contemporary times and as a warning against today's material excesses. By casting the skull in dirt, Silver also reminds us of the environmental death and destruction our society is causing.

Silver's *Sculptural remnant from untitled (killing me softly) version 2* resembles another cultural expression of *memento mori* – the art associated with the Mexican festival known as the Day of the Dead or *Día de los Muertos*. Celebrated on the first and second of November each year, this seemingly morbid festival actually celebrates life and has been practiced for over three thousand years. Traditionally, the ritual involved the display of skulls, kept by the Aztecs as trophies. The skulls were used to symbolise death and rebirth. Today, during the festival, it is customary for friends and family to exchange skulls made of sugar and bones of bread. Silver's skull not only reminds the viewer of the candy Day of the Dead skulls, but also embodies the expression often used in burial services – 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. This phrase is used to mark the end of one's life. However, it is actually about the continuity of existence, that just as we come from dust so we shall return to it.

Activities

- Find all of the artworks in *neo goth: back in black* that include the human skull. Discuss why the skull is such a dominant symbol. How does it make you feel? You might like to write a poem inspired your emotive response to this imagery.
- Brainstorm all of the places in contemporary culture where you might find a human skull. Include art, science and popular culture and see who can compose the longest list.
- Make your own body of work in the natural environment using only the materials you find in that environment. Think about how you could document your work using video or photography and how you might prepare an exhibition where you display the results.
- Research other artists who use the skull as image and icon in their artwork. Compare the contemporary manifestations by artists such as Fiona Hall, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas with the more traditional depictions by still-life painters. Discuss the differences and similarities in approach.

Tim Silver
Untitled (killing me softly) version 4.11 (detail) 2005-06
archival ink on archival paper, edition of six
sheet 43.5 x 59.5 cm / image 30.0 x 45.5 cm
Private collection. Courtesy of the artist