ANNE MACDONALD

Ornament 2008

Photographic installation of fine art ink-jet prints

*Ornament 1* (wall piece of twenty photographs), 251h x 716w cm

*Ornament 2* (triptych) 72h x 168w cm

*Ornament 3* (triptych) 81h x 217w cm

*Ornament 4* (triptych) 74h x 194w cm

*Ornament 5* (set of five) 86h x 289w cm

*Ornament 6* (triptych) 79h x 199w cm

*Ornament 7* (triptych) 81h x 231w cm

*Ornament 8* (triptych) 93h x 195w cm
Anne MacDonald studied Fine Art at the Tasmanian School of Art, UTAS, where she completed a Masters in 1983. The following year she began lecturing at the Tasmanian School of Art and is currently Head of Photography. Since the 1980s she has produced a series of large-scale photographic installations exploring the relationship between photography, death and transience. Anne MacDonald has held thirteen solo exhibitions and participated in over seventy curated exhibitions nationally and internationally. She is the recipient of seven Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council grants including a New Work Grant in 2007 for the development of the ‘Ornament’ project.

From the installation ‘Ornament’ 2008, fine art ink-jet prints, sizes variable. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its funding and advisory body, supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.


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For Susan Sontag, ‘all photographs are “memento mori”. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.’

Discussing floral ‘memento mori’, Geoffrey Batchen argues that the substitution of artificial flowers for real ones ‘is emblematic of the process of embalming, which was also underway for photography, and also for human bodies, at the time.’ In the context of the conflation of photographs and visual representations of the body with flowers, ‘the inanimate form of artificials on the casket is now abstracted into the photographic image of the body, and also of death, while the body now has a meaning as a visual representation, and the photographs of flowers that are on display perhaps offer an indirect connection to the vanitas genre as well, and the visual representations of the body in decay as part of a cycle of life and death.’

Like the photographic image, ornaments ‘still’ life, yet, eventually they too fall prey to duration, and slowly disintegrate through the inexorable passage of time, becoming elegiac metaphors for the transience of existence; premonitions of death rather than evocations of eternal life.

As tokens of love and remembrance, floral grave ornaments offer greater longevity than freshly cut flowers. The fragile evanescence of real flowers has, since the 15th century, made them ideal subjects for representing the transience of life, mortality and death itself. 17th century ‘Vanitas’ painters in particular used the iconography of withering flowers as allegories of time, loss and absence.

The photographic still life not only builds on the long history of vanitas imagery in art, but also brings with it the additional association of the photograph as memento mori. Rebecca Solnit writes ‘All photographs in a sense still life, freezing it as something no longer living, but virtually embalmed and immortally immobile’.