

London artist Jason Shulman's unusual memorial to his father

Though there is no God – dead is dead, dust to dust – there are ways to give someone continuity after death. You can build a pyramid, plant a rose or shoot them into space. But for me few of these address the wonder of life. The idea of how I would commemorate my father came to me when I collected his ashes, which at first sight looked like fire-grate ashes, dead and grey. I extracted the iron using a magnet and noticed tiny bits of colour – red, yellow and green oxidised bone. I sifted out these coloured fragments and stratified them in a 20-centimetre glass tube, with the iron at the top. The tube is suspended by a large magnet above that attracts the iron fragments and by a thread below connected to the ground. The artwork fights natural forces – gravity and magnetism – and has its own mortality: the slightest disturbance and it would fall to the ground. There were difficult moments. I found a gallstone and a tooth filling: things I recognised as having been part of my father.

A Piece of my Father. Jason Shulman. 2004.



Can you tell me a bit about yourself, i.e what you do, some examples of work etc.

One of the things I do is use basic science to expose the falsehoods that underpin our experience of reality, for example, I use concave mirrors to form reflect holograms, lenticular lenses that make the horizontals disappear, and in my 'Terrorist' print I use Hermann's Grid to make a political observation. And I've made another memento mori, this one requires the participation of the spectator to draw a portrait of the dead person out of a flawless mirror by breathing on it.

Can you tell me about your work 'A piece of my father'.

It's made from my father's cremated remains, a kind of reliquary.

Why did you want to do it?

There is no God, dead is dead, dust to dust. But there are things you can do to give some kind of continuity to someone after death. You can build a big pyramid, plant a rose in a garden of remembrance, shoot them up into a heliocentric orbit, but of all the many things you can do, very few directly address the wonder that was that life. One I thought of doing that is by using magnetism - a simple force we all know about - taking the iron in a body and using it to suspend the ashes in the air. The the piece becomes gravity - defying, becomes something extraordinary and anomalous, a bit like human life itself which is freaky and weird and shouldn't really exist. It

fights the natural forces that ordinarily would pull you down when you are dead. So it's a way of re-imposing something - not comparable to life obviously - but alluding to it in its mysteriousness and fragility, held in a delicate state of suspension. The piece has its own mortality. It's just bobbing about in the air under the magnet. If it falls to the ground, it too is dead and can't be put back together again.

How did you make it and how long did it take?

It took about three months to make. I began by extracting the iron from the remains using a large electromagnet and then I used a powerful neodymium magnet to clean the grey bits of dust off the dark metal. The idea came to me when I saw my father's ashes and remembered a diagram of the body I'd seen years ago in some kind of Ladybird book. The diagram broke the body down into what you could get from it. Something like enough carbon to make six pencils, enough iron for three horseshoe nails. They don't burn the coffin, by the way. Once I'd got the iron out I began sifting through the ashes looking for spots of colour. When I had collected the ashes they looked like fire grate ashes, dead and grey. But when I began sifting, I began to find tiny fragments of colour, I think bits of bone that had oxidised in red, yellow and green. Those were pretty much the only colours I found. Most of the time spent on the piece was spent doing that. There were two filtrations, first, filtering for the iron that would allow the remains to be held in a state of grace. Secondly, finding colour where there seemed to be none. Then I stratified the colours in a glass tube. Stratification is often the way time is marked; rings on trees, mantel of the earth, etc.

Had you discussed it with you father beforehand? Your mother and rest of family?

I only about making this piece when I was sent to the crematorium to fetch my father's ashes and they were handed to me in an ugly purple plastic urn. My mother and sisters were absolutely fine with it. My father was an atheist with quite a formidable ego. He would have loved the idea of any kind of continuum, the idea that he was still being talked about in an article like this after his death.

How did you find the experience? How did it make you feel?

The filtration process was very dry. I'd be sitting there in magnifying goggles with a pair of tweezers thinking 'where's a green bit?' because it's so far from human what you're looking at, it's not like picking up chopped-off fingers. But then I'd come upon something in the sieve, a gallstone like a small marble or a tooth-filling, something I recognised as of the body. I found those moments very difficult.

Has doing this changed how you think about life and death?

No. It has reconfirmed what I knew, that we are just elemental and fortunate.

What kind of a reaction did you have to it, public or otherwise?

I was surprised that a number of collectors wanted to buy it, but it's not for sale.

What do you think about people's general attitude to death?

A lot of fuss about nothing.