

‘If You Leave Me Can I Come Too?’ A Show Whose Subject Is Death



Abigail DeVille's "Untitled (Till, Martin, Garner, Brown)," whose materials include debris and mannequin parts.

This carefully textured group show takes its title from a 2003 painting by Friedrich Kunath: an image of a seemingly impassable solid-black door to which a prismatic shaft of rainbow colors seems to lead like a path. In almost every other piece chosen by Arden Sherman, the curator of Hunter East Harlem Gallery, and Javier Rivero, an exhibition fellow at Hunter College, death is a light-and-dark matter.

Though not necessarily evident at first viewing, the images of crowds of colorfully dressed passengers on ships at sea in Xaviera Simmons's photo mural "Superunknown (Alive in the)" are harvested from Internet reports of fleeing political refugees. Only a wall label fully identifies a vivacious assemblage by Abigail DeVille called "Untitled (Till, Martin, Garner, Brown)" as a monument to a history of racist violence.

Other work is more private. Justine Reyes creates pictorial reliquaries in photographs she took of everyday items left in bureau drawers by a deceased uncle. By photographing her own photos, Sara Cwynar painstakingly constructs a commemorative altar to no one in particular.

In a video by Jillian Mayer, the comforting words "You'll Be Okay," spelled out in skywriting, evaporate. A handwritten letter by Jean Seestadt speaks bluntly of her fear of mortality. And a text piece by Geoffrey Farmer responds to the loss of someone dear, the novelist Kathy Acker, with whom he studied.

It's composed of sheets of found quotations that he periodically faxes to the gallery. Among them is an Emily Dickinson poem that begins, "To fill a Gap/Insert the thing that caused it," the insertion in this case being the memory of someone lost.

A fascinating 2015 video by Javier Castro, shot in Cuba, shows cemetery workers whose job is to dig up bodies to make room for fresh burials. The bones are reinterred in small coffins; the coffins are stacked by the hundreds in an ossuary, sometimes accurately labeled, sometimes not. Here the image of death is awful, but also ordinary — and comes with a kind of punch line. Two women seeking the remains of a loved one hunt through the chaos of storage and finally give up, one saying to the other in murmured disapproval as they leave, "Who can ever find anything here?"