Maxwell Snow

Jesus is Showing Me Amazing Things

The day after his mother died, Roland Barthes wrote, "Everyone guesses—I feel this—the degree of a bereavement's intensity. But it's impossible (meaningless, contradictory signs) to measure how much someone is afflicted." Barthes, who was very close to his mother, calls mourning "a cruel country", and indeed his notes feel like missives from an isolated, unknowable land.

The same can be said for the work of Maxwell Snow, whose photos from the year after his brother died are like visual dispatches from the dark and lonely island of grief. The series, Jesus is Showing Me Amazing Things, translates the language of loss better than most any other body of work I've seen. The photographs are of many things: symbols burning, mummies with dead eyes, self-portraits of the artist hanging himself, the artist kissing a statue. They are diverse, but all point to the same place—the unfathomable void left when someone you are close to is suddenly gone for good.

"While working on these images I was in a very dark place," Snow wrote in an email. "I did not sleep, because I couldn't and because it was better to lay awake than to face my dreams. That year felt like a long hallucination and I remember almost nothing from that time. Haunted in my waking hours, I felt barely on this planet. I made these images because I could never explain what I was feeling and where I was coming from. I had to do something with my grief and I had to share my view somehow."

Snow is a New York-based photographer and curator best known for his documentary work of Latino gang members and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). That he was formerly able to navigate the inner sanctum of a KKK gathering in Kentucky is testimony to his talents as photographic anthropologist: if ever there were a subject that put a photographer at risk of getting his cameras tossed and ass kicked, that's it. But Snow came out alive, and the series, charmingly titled It's Fun to Do Bad Things, is a window into a world that makes most of us shudder, but which we know very little about.

But the same can be said of this current series, even though the lens is now turned inward: very few of us could know much about losing an older brother, just 27-years-old, to an overdose. Dash Snow, also an artist, was found dead in a hotel room in the summer of 2009, and these are the photos that Max Snow made in the year after.

It's not surprising that the brothers are both artists—it's in their blood. They are great-grandchildren of John and Dominique de Menil, the Houston oil heirs and generous art patrons who are akin to art royalty in the US. Dash Snow, who had work in the 2006 Whitney Biennial and the collection of Charles Saatchi, was first known for his early graffiti work, and later for his controversial semen art (he ejaculated on newspaper headlines about corrupt cops, amongst other things), his Polaroids of wild marauding, and for making "hamster's nests" of shredded phone books, booze, and other liquids—things that some might be reluctant to consider art at all. But he was best known for the intense, colourful life he lived: he shoplifted, took drugs and drank to the extreme, created things with other beautiful, besotted artists—he was downtown New York's exuberant, reckless, l'enfant terrible.

But Dash Snow's notoriety has nothing to do with the success of Jesus is Showing Me Amazing Things; the images are strong enough in their rawness and honesty that the artist's biographical particulars are not relevant—the images transcend the cause of their making. Because they brave the existential questions from the perspective of one young man pierced by circumstance, they point towards a universal, inexhaustible narrative; here there are traces of Hamlet or Tolstoy's Prince Andrei deciding whether to live or die.

The most beautiful photo in the series is a floating casket—streamlined and elegant, it resembles a Donald Judd sculpture pushed out to sea. It is gorgeous and dark, with reflections of water rippling against the smooth wood, and it hits you at a very visceral level. Like the skull and cross bones carved into medieval churches, it's a reminder that we are all in the same boat—we die. A platitude, yes—but still it's a simple fact that few of us, especially when we are young, can fully taste at the core. But Snow's work proves that images often take us closer to elemental, hard-to-grasp truths than our intellect is able.

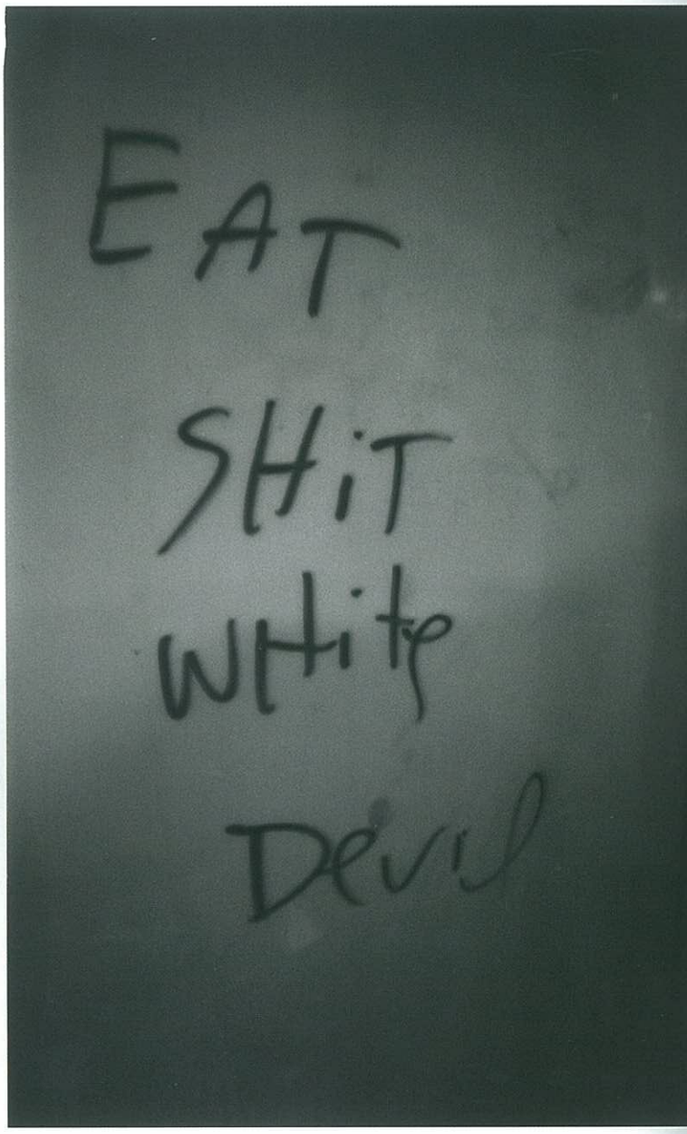
And this image, like most in the series, is multi-layered. Snow's floating coffin may symbolise the universal, but it simultaneously speaks to the very individual and isolating nature of mourning for those left behind. Like a sealed box, mourning is a closed off experience—you can't fully comprehend any one person's very particular loss. As Barthes writes, it is its own cruel country from which you may or may not find your way back.

In an email, Snow writes of the making of that photo, an experience redolent of a Viking funeral:

"I needed some rest. I built the coffin in my studio and then drove it out to the water one night. I originally set the coffin on fire in the shallows. The coffin and the water around it were enveloped in flames but I preferred it afterwards once the flames had gone out. Afterwards I pushed the coffin out into the bay."

Along with water, fire is the other element that stands out in this series. Apparently, Snow likes to burn things. You see it before in the KKK work; there Snow photographs the KKK's ritual burnings of crosses. But in Jesus in Showing Me Amazing Things, Snow builds his own symbols to burn. "Setting them on fire was a purifying experience for me," says Snow, "cleansing through fire…I liked the idea of building something just to destroy it. Supposedly, Eskimos when finished with a carving would just drop it in the snow and walk away, believing that once the soul of a thing was achieved there was no point in idolising it. Or like a Tibetan sand painting. Although ultimately I did make a lasting image, you can never capture the fleeting experience in life."

Pushing coffins out to water, building things and burning them, kissing statues, wrapping his friends in white gauze—this series is very tactile, physical. It's photography as a full contact art form. So perhaps the very act of making these photos is its own ritual cleansing. Despite the fact that he "felt like the walking dead at that time," Snow dug into it and put himself through the physically rigorous process of creating (and destroying) his art. That he is willing to make,



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build, burn and create whilst stuck in a sleepless, nightmarish period implies that the man is not faking it—he needs art.

"It (the process of photography) is a way to externalise your dread and sorrow, to reduce and compress it into an image and be able to step away and review it," Snow says. "Through this process you can come to the understanding that you don't need to identify with your thoughts and feelings completely, that it's just something that is happening to you that is not necessarily you or something that owns or defines you."

Other than their physicality, these photos strike me with their deep vulnerability. Their subject is a man stripped down by loss. He is doing this because he has to, and there is no room for pretence—he is honest about his own fragility. This comes through the strongest in the photo in which he stands naked kissing a statue of an angel, the camera's shutter release cord draping behind him. That pose represents all the longing that a human heart can hold—it feels profoundly human.

"That angel belonged to my great grandmother and has always seemed like a protector to me," Snow writes. "I believe at one time she may have held a candle in one hand and a book in another. Those things are long gone. I put a black rubber ball in the hand where the book would be. The candlestick in the other hand seems almost to be striking it or me. To me, a black ball symbolises bad thoughts or bad energy, evil. In one way in the image it feels like a caress where she is protecting me but she is still holding the evil ball next to my head with the same hand that is caressing it. Everything in life is bittersweet."

I asked Snow about the title of the series, which I had assumed to be fully ironic. But no, there was more to it—there's a story behind it, a different story of dying, this one about his great-grandmother. It leaves the title open-ended, as is the whole series, and the whole story.

"It was around Christmas, I had just turned thirteen, and the whole family went down to Houston to gather around my great-grandmother's deathbed. I remember drinking sherry with her then. She had a stick with a sponge on one end that she would dip into her glass and put in her mouth because she couldn't swallow. At one point she said, "Don't be afraid for me because I am not afraid. Jesus is showing me amazing things." She was so strong that she was reassuring the people around her as she was dying. Born into a Protestant family in France and converted to Catholicism when she married, she was very devout and her devotion to her religion informed her love of art. To her a good work of art would bring her closer to God. She gauged a work by the artist's connection with the spirit. When you're born you are completely alive to your impressions. Then things become routine as you get older and you become habituated to your environment and to your experience and we fall into a trance, sleepwalking through life. Maybe only on the threshold of death does the clarity return?"

Given Snow's authenticity, daring and compulsion to create, it is doubtful that he risks the fate of a habituated sleepwalker; he will likely have his clarity on his own terms, long before Jesus shows him anything.

Text By Clayton Maxwell

(Barthes quote taken from the New Yorker article titled "A Cruel Country, Learning to Mourn".)

Maxwell Snow photographs will be soon available on EYEMAZING Editions.

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