



CYNTHIA KARALLA

Rosalia and The Palermo Mummies

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HEADBONES GALLERY

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Essay by Eleanor Whitney

RICH FOG



Micro Publishing



Rosalia

ROSALIA AND THE PALERMO MUMMIES

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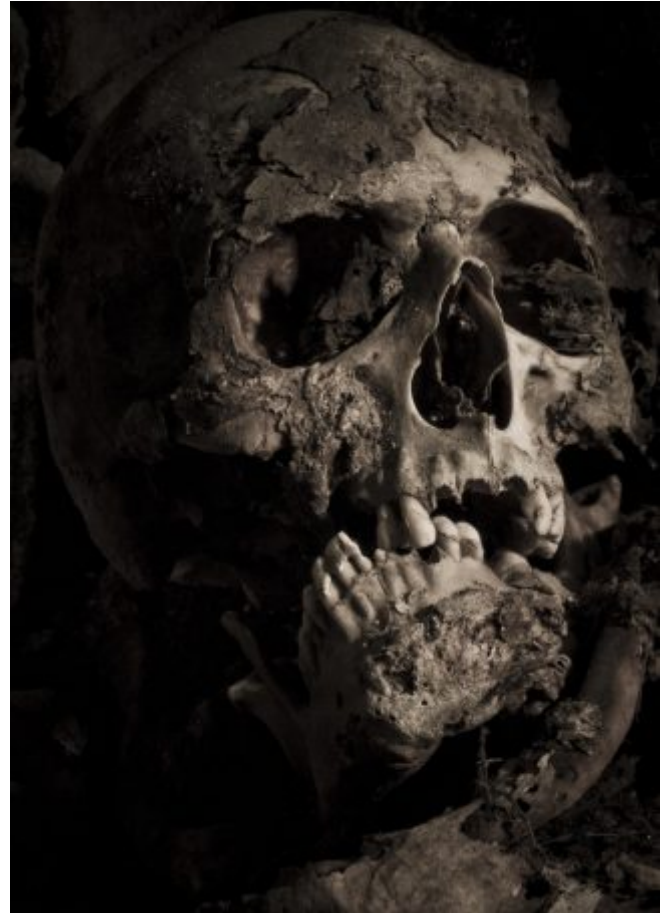
I spent several years working at a prominent New York City museum. Included in its encyclopedic collections were several unwrapped Egyptian mummies. New York State law prevents the exhibition of human remains and so they spent their eternity slumbering in climate-controlled art storage. A colleague in the collections office took me to see them during a lunch break, her jingling keys opened door after door until we found ourselves deep in the storerooms, far away from the daily museum bustle. There, on metal shelves, in airtight containers, were the mummies. Desiccated, shriveled, but overall, human. I looked at them and tried to wrap my head around the people I saw in front of me. I leaned in to look closer. I noticed hair and toenails, the whirls of skin on the thumb, still intact. I shuddered slightly. My friend turned to me, “Just remember,” she said with a smile, “They are friendly mummies.”

Ritual mummification is an ancient tradition that has been practiced all over the world. Mummification practices in Ancient Egypt are the most widely known.

The average American middle school student, having studied Ancient Egypt in world civilizations class, will proudly tell you that as part of the embalming process the brain was removed via a hook inserted through the nose to prepare the body for mummification. Mummies have also been found wrapped in intricately woven textiles in Paracas, Peru, located in the driest region on earth.

Despite my experience with mummies, I was unfamiliar with those housed in the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo until I saw Cynthia Karalla's photos. What makes these mummies so intriguing is that they are part of the modern world and recent history. The contemporary viewer cannot detach from them the same way one might when looking at a mummy from Ancient Egypt. The first, and oldest, mummy in the crypt belongs to the friar Silvestro da Gubbio, who entered the catacombs in 1599. The most recent, and most celebrated, mummy is Rosalia Lombardo, who was 2 years old when she passed away from pneumonia in 1920.

The crypt at the Capuchin monastery of Palermo has over 2,000 mummified bodies on display. Like the cities of the living, there is some semblance of order in





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this city of the dead. Bodies are arranged along corridors or hung in niches in the wall, a hook around their neck to keep them in place. They are categorized by profession—clergy members are buried with other religious practitioners, doctors with doctors, and so on. The first mummies were created by accident, or by divine providence, depending who you ask. After years in the crypts the bodies of monks that been buried there were found to be intact, instead of decayed as one might expect. Their preservation was viewed as a miracle willed by God and the dead monks hailed as saints. Over time residents of Palermo began employing mummification technologies, leaving less to chance and God. Early on bodies were left to dry naturally in the limestone crypts, placed on terracotta racks to let bodily fluids drain. After several months the bodies were washed in vinegar, dressed and put on display. Later chemical embalming procedures came into vogue. It was embalmer Alfredo Salafia who used such a process that preserved Rosalia Lambardo in angelic eternity. Salafia kept the solution for his popular and effective embalming formula secret and it was only recently rediscovered and published in National Geographic.

What, exactly, compelled the residents of Palermo to display mummified bodies is up for debate. Some surmise that the public display of the mummy's desiccated corpses was the continuation of a pre-Christian tradition. Others hypothesize that the mummies are a life-size memento mori, reminding all what comes next. What is for certain is that the Palermo mummies are unique in Italy and throughout the world. In the crypt the living can walk among the dead, spend time with them and get to know them a little bit.

As the process of mummification gained popularity the Capuchin monastery began to sell the residents of Palermo places in the crypt. They promoted a place in the catacombs as a fashionable and respectable way to spend eternity. The monks used the proceeds to pay for the upkeep of the tombs. By the nineteenth century the crypts became overcrowded and the municipality passed a law banning the practice of mummification. Rosalie Lombardo was the last person to enter the crypt, her body nearly perfectly preserved by Salafia's embalming formula.

It is usually forbidden to photograph the mummies. However, Cynthia Karalla obtained permission to take their portraits over the course of two





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months. She worked in the catacombs with an assistant to document the mummies and to showcase their other worldly glory. Karalla told me a story about how, at the end of a long day of shooting, the monastery staff forgot that she was there, and turned off the lights and shut the door to the crypt. Instead of feeling fright, Karalla felt a sense of calm and peace, as one would feel in a church or another place of reverence. In darkness one can no longer be detached from the reality and eternity of death.

Not just an interesting or artistic subject matter, these dead souls have contemporary power. Awestruck by the mummies, Karalla wanted to give something back to them. She decided to offer them a glimpse of contemporary culture. Similar to a photographer who plays music to entertain their subjects during a photo shoot, Karalla treated the Palermo mummies to the music of Radiohead and Eminem while she took their portraits. As she photographed them in their quiet eternity they appeared to her to be dancing. She realized that in documenting the mummies she was not just taking their photos, but providing witness to their otherwise undocumented lives. Her photographs leave viewers to wonder about the secrets, experiences, and

wisdom buried in this tomb with these souls.

Karalla's images reveal a particular closeness to the mummies of Palermo. They are portrayed with both a sense of theatricality and an intimacy that spans centuries. We can look closely and see their features still intact—curly hair, lips, teeth, and faces. Through Karalla's photos these mummies get yet another chance at eternity, as their likenesses circulate throughout the world. Karalla captures the irony of mummies on public display: while they are preserved in their best clothes, many of which have disintegrated, and act as clues about our ancestors, we look at them with modern eyes. These mummies continue to have a presence in the world of today, even if their lived reality ended centuries ago. They are both frozen in time and living beside us, evolving and decaying with us.

Looking at the different inhabitants of the Capuchin crypt juxtaposed in Karalla's book the viewer begins to assign personalities and identities to these mummies. It is the viewer's impulse to give them life even in death. Karalla's photographs allow us to focus on the details that reveal the dead to be so close to us—their crooked teeth, Rosalia's bow and blonde hair—and how far away from us they seem—skeletons,



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desiccated flesh, twisted faces, and features reduced to dust. No matter what the state of their bodies, however, Karalla's photos reveal the nobility, dignity and soulfulness of these people who have been placed here purposefully. They are there due to acts of remembrance, devotion, celebration, and veneration, as well as a reminder of the end that will eventually come to us all. Quiet in their repose, at home in death and modern life, and vividly documented by Karalla, these too are friendly mummies.

Eleanor Whitney, 2011

















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Ben. Sic. Francesco Balsano
Vermiatore del Cattedrale
di Palermo
Morto il 4 Dicembre 1871.







CYNTHIA KARALLA

Born Detroit Michigan, 1966-

Exhibitions

- 2012 Subtle Slurs, Cynthia Karalla - Fat Lands, Headbones Gallery, Vernon, Canada
- 2011 Art Miami 2011, Edelman Arts, New York, USA
Ballarat International Foto Biennale, Australia
- 2007 The Baby Grand Piano' The Cynthia Corbett Gallery, Slick, Paris, France
The Baby Grand Piano' The Cynthia Corbett Gallery, Bridge Art Fair, London 07, London, U.K.
Untitled' (Mona Lisa) Opera Arte e Arti, Matera, Italy
- 2006 I Santi' Headbones Drawers Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2005 Visionari Primitivi Eccentrici - 2005 - 2006 - Galleria Civica - Palazzo Loffredo, Potenza, Italy
Rubber Souls,' Digi-Arte 2005, University of Florence, Sesto Fiorentino, Florence, Italy
Busted,' Superlative Exposition, Dekalb Area Women's Center, Chicago, USA
Baby Grand Intro & Humanity,' Young Willing & Hungry: curated by Andres Serrano at the Jen Bekman Gallery, NYC, USA
- 2004 Rubber Souls & I Santi,' 'Metamorphosis di una città: architettura contemporanea a Matera, Bari, and Florence Italy / Madrid, Spain
Humanity,' The Underground Art Fair, NYC, USA
Eleven,' Bassel Art Fair, NYC, USA
- 2003 Madonna in the Chair,' from the Humanity Series, Pels-Leusden Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland
Limmagine della Donna nell,' Arte del 3° Millennio, Ex-Convento delle Suore Pie, Brindisi, Italy
- 2002 I Santi, a Viso Aperto,' Puglia, Italy
Eleven,' video project. Arteria, Matera, Italy

Exhibitions (cont'd)

- 2001 'I Santi, a Viso Aperto,' Matera. Sassi, Matera, Italy
Busted Prints,' Because Sex Sells. Nikolia Fine Art, NYC, USA
- 2000 'The Praying Mass,' The Ukrainian Institute, NYC, USA
Narcy,' (short for Narcissism), Gershwin Gallery Space, NYC, USA
- 1999 The Irony of Ironing,' The Ukrainian Institute, NYC, USA
Karallas Corolla,' 1999 Auto Show at the Javitt Center, NYC, USA
Karallas Corolla,' The Orange Art-car Show, Houston, Texas, USA
- 1994 Spaces Dressed in White,' The Wall at NYU, NYC, USA
Boyfriends in Rocken Shades,' Gallery U, NYC, USA
Virtue = Rebel,' Gubala Gallery, NYC, USA
- 1993 The X-Girlfriend of Marcel Proust,' at The AlleyCat Gallery, NYC, USA
Christ,' at E.S.V. Vandam Gallery, NYC, USA
Nervous Collector,' The AlleyCat Gallery, NYC, USA
Comprachicoes in the Raw,' at The AlleyCat Gallery, NYC, USA
- 1992 Comprachicoes in the Raw,' at The Puck Building Exhibition Space, NYC, USA
- 1991 'Eat Cake all Natural Ingredients,' National Academy of Arts, NYC, USA
- 1990 'Layers of Life,' Museum of Contemporary Arts, NYC, USA
Layers of Life,' Soho 20, NYC, USA
Layers,' Synchronicity Space, NYC, USA
Layers,' Under Acme Exhibition Space, NYC, USA

Writings

Present Dilated Pupils,' in the process

1997 The Third World'

1992 'Comprachicoes in the Raw'

Video

2008 More French

2002 The Process

2001 'Eleven' (One minute and Eleven Seconds)

1999 Narcy' (Short for Narcissism) Documentation

2002/03 Eleven,' with a discussion panel

2002 Mary & Jesus,' Backstage, Documenting the last night of shooting the still.

1995 Karalla's Rolle Back,' Rolle Back Sculpture, Filmed by TatsushiTahara

Collections

Museum of Modern Art, NYC, USA

Cooper-Hewitt Museum, NYC, USA

Yokohama Museum, Tokyo, Japan

New York Public Library, NYC, USA

Daniel Katz, London, U.K.

Koc Holding, Istanbul, Turkey

Edward R. Downe Jr, NYC, USA

Publications

- 2012 Cynthia Karalla, FatLands, Rich Fog Micro Publishing for Headbones Gallery, 58 pages
- 2007 Pseuds Corner, Private Eye, U.K. No.1195, 12th - 25th October, The Baby Grand Piano
Art Review October 2007
LloydR17;s List by James Brewer R11; December 2007
Bridge Art Fair London 07, p 30. image 'Untitled' (Mona Lisa)
New York Cool, Interview by Anusha Alikhan "Cynthia Karalla Plays The Piano.
- 2005 Saatchi & Saatchi, Lovemarks German Edition, the art directors cut. Image Rubber Souls' SunFlower.'
Visionari Primitivi Eccentrici - 2005 - 2006
Citi, Matera, Sept - Interview with Images
The Jewish Post, New York's Best And Worst Art Shows, Volume 31, No. 5, p. 15 & 48
- 2004 La Gazzetta Del Mezzogiorno, National & Regional, Fotografia moderna,
Un pianoforte fatto di sessi per rompere le barriere fra uomo e donna, Oct 12, 04 p.8
- 2003 The image of the Woman in the 3rd Millennium Art, Catalog,
Roundtable: Art, Religion and Censorship, Conscience, vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 2003, p. 29
- 2002 Euorio 7, 2002
MATERaPACIS, 2002 p. Cover, 36 & 37
La Gazzetta Del Mezzogiorno, Sabato 16 Febbraio, E New York scopri I nostri santi
- 2001 Mathera Luogo non luogo- Materia –Ierofanie
- 1999 Ukrainian Community Press, Hohol / Gogol: From the Traditional to the Bizarre
- 1993 Chelsea Clinton News, New AlleyCat for Chelsea. January 28- February 3

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