
Colin Gray

The Parents

In Sickness and In Health

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Curriculum subjects:

Art and Design
Higher Photography
English
Modern Studies

Curriculum for Excellence:

Expressive Arts - Art and Design
Social Studies - People, past events and societies

The Parents

Colin Gray began to take photographs of his parents in the 1960s when he was 5 years old. At family occasions, holidays and celebrations Gray would be allowed one shot from the single roll of film in an old square box brownie. Over the next three decades his series of photographs has accumulated into an extensive body of work documenting his parents loving, working, homemaking and playing.

'The Parents', begun in 1980, is a series of photographs about Colin's relationship with his parents and theirs with each other. Many of the images involve enactments of memory and fantasy woven around events from the past, domestic realities, observations of daily rituals and the advancement of old age. Colin's parents Ron and Rene are depicted as impish co-conspirators in narrative images that are drawn from collective memories or based on absurd and wonderful fantasies.

In Sickness and In Health

'In Sickness and in Health' forms the final stages of Colin Grays 'The Parents' series. Begun in 2000, it shows his parents deterioration and ultimately his mothers' death.

The hospital and church visits became more frequent, the ailments more serious and the drugs regime ever more complex. Whilst his father struggled with his new role as a carer, Gray found that his photographs helped make sense of the deterioration and loss he was experiencing. Having reached the age that his parents were when he started the project, Gray now sees their history in his own future.

Born in Hull in 1956, Colin Gray studied at the Royal College of Art, London and lives and works in Glasgow.

Glossary

Box brownie is the name of a long-running and very popular series of simple and inexpensive cameras made by the company Eastman Kodak. The Brownie made photography more accessible due to the low cost of the cameras and helped establish the 'snapshot' format photography.

Narrative is a made up story that is created in a constructed format that describes a fictional or non-fictional events. The word derives for the Latin verb *narrare*, 'to recount'.

Activity 1

Creative Activity: Mind Mapping - Photography and family

We all have some family photographs and might also have some pictures of family members whom we have never met.

- What are some of the traditions related to family photography?
- Think of some family moments or occasions when we record and take pictures.
- Create a mind map exploring 'photographic moments'. Include birthdays, weddings and other occasions when photographs might be taken and kept as personal momentos.

Activity 2

Discussion and comparison: Identities and representation

- Have a look at some of Colin's earlier photographs from The Parents series and compare them to images from In Sickness and In Health. You can discuss and write down your ideas.
 - How are the images different? Notice the colours, shapes, themes, subjects and people.
 - How do these differences affect the way you interpret or understand the photographs? For example, how does colour affect the mood or atmosphere of the images?
 - How does each series inform the way you understand the lives of older people?
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Activity 3

Discussion + creative activity: Memento Mori

Memento Mori is a latin phrase meaning remember you will die. It is also the name of an artistic tradition, which varies widely in style and content but shares the same purpose: to remind people of their own mortality. It is a phrase that names a tradition dating back to early human history. In the Victorian era, (1837- 1901) death was highly visible due to high infant mortality rates and lack of modern medicines. People were encouraged to give expression to their grief and an industry of mourning dress and mementos provided visible reminders of the dead, including small photographic death portraits. For artists, death and bereavement offered powerful opportunities to explore emotions, pathos and suffering.

A basic Memento Mori image could be a portrait with a skull but other symbols commonly found are extinguished candles, fruit, flowers, hour-glasses or clocks.

- As a group, discuss some other ways that human's have celebrated or mourned the dead.
- Why would fruit, flowers, clocks or extinguished candles be used as symbols in a Memento Mori artwork?
- Create your own Memento Mori artwork using symbols that might represent death.

Activity 4

Creative activity: Headlines - Contexts and meanings

- Choose one version of The Interpreter Newspaper (these are in the next three pages of this PDF)
 - Take two copies
 - Create two separate newspaper style headlines, one for each copy
 - One should offer a negative interpretation of the photograph and the other a positive interpretation
 - In small groups discuss the impact of these different headlines on the image and chart the discussion on a mind map to record the collective thoughts of the group
 - Choose the most negative headline and as a group, write a letter of complaint outlining your concerns
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