



MOURNING IS MAGIC

ALYSSA TAYLOR WENDT OFFERS AUSTIN A STARTLING NEW GLIMPSE OF GRIEF AND ARCHITECTURE

by Brittani Sonnenberg

Photography by Leah Muse

WE ALL WANT TO SKIP OVER GRIEF when it shows up like a dreaded relative. We look away from the bereaved, mumble apologies and flee funeral parlors. But when we do so, grief goes underground, a silent river, waiting for us to build a well. And, indeed, drawing up buckets of that grief, when we are ready for it, is the only way to get well. We forget that mourning is magic; that if we allow it in, it can carve out a space of breath-taking beauty in us, bestow us with new vision.

“Good Mourning Tis of Thee,” a conceptual art installation written, curated and directed by Alyssa Taylor Wendt, along with Co-Lab’s Sean Gaulager, seizes upon grieving rituals as sites of profound transformation. And in an act of radical curatorial insight, Wendt has chosen to add architecture and development to the exhibition’s heady brew of loss and recovery. Co-Lab’s DEMO Gallery, housed in a downtown building scheduled for demolition, provides a poignantly “purgatorial” setting for the show.

Our wide-ranging conversation with Wendt leapt from Detroit to Austin to her outspoken decision to sit shiva for a beloved pet.



We rarely see grief and architecture explored in tandem. How did you land on this pairing?

My work has long explored the cycles of ruin and monument. We disregard figures and structures only to venerate them at different moments of social change. Four years ago, after making a film in Detroit, I bought a historical home in the city's tax auction. Spending time in Detroit, as well as watching the unfathomable development in Austin, has had a large influence on these constructs and ideas around destruction, transformation and the animism of objects and places. A home or a specific place is a vessel for life, just as our bodies are, and they often record and contain the energy of the activity therein.

Is there a time in your life where steeping yourself in the rites of mourning has helped you? Or do you feel that you, like many others, were raised without the tools of mourning and ritual? How have you let go of houses or other beloved structures you've left behind?

I became interested in the concept of ritual early on in my art career and have explored this as a tool for art-making as well as healing. Our society has a serious denial about death and could benefit greatly from other cultures and their approaches.

I recently lost my beloved dog Prince and was at a loss on how to move on without his life energy. Despite protests from my friends and family, I decided to sit with his corpse for a day, a sort of shiva, anointing him with oil, talking to him and photographing him surrounded by flowers and his toys. This process helped me immensely; I was transformed immediately and filled with an acceptance of his sudden passing and peace. I do think that leaving homes can have a similar significance, as a loved place that has been witness to one's life, full of memories, hopes and emotions. Just think of the grief in the city of Houston and in many places in the Caribbean right now. Very apropos.

How can we apply the lessons of "death as a positive agent of change" in architectural arenas where such change negatively impacts previous inhabitants?

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This question will be addressed by a panel discussion I have scheduled for October 15th featuring an architect, a mortician, a developer, an artist and others. Healthy mourning is about feeling and expressing your true emotions to the full extent and then letting them go with an acceptance of change as a positive agent. A simple acknowledgement of how important place is would be a healthy place to start, as well as the recognition of the history of a building or structure, rather than the disregard and emphasis on new development. A symbiotic balance can be achieved when humanity is considered before capital.

Do you believe that it's possible for buildings, like humans, to die of "natural causes"? Is the razing of a healthy building a kind of execution? What responsibility do we have to the shelters/institutions we create, in how we maintain and how we destroy them?

Old age and time will weather any vessel, the duration of which depends on its innate strength and longevity. Seeing all the amazing buildings in various states throughout the Midwest and in Detroit in my recent travels reminds me of the history that precedes me. Perhaps buildings should dictate their own timeline and not be "resurrected." It's hard to say, but I do believe that razing of buildings especially for purposes of commercial gain should be seriously questioned. Preserving history through its physical and architectural manifestations promotes a sense of respect and a greater understanding of our cultural lineage.

What works in the exhibition are you most excited about?

All of the artists are contributing work from deep in their spirit and I am honored to have them all in the show. I am excited to bring installations and performances from artists who have never done anything in Austin, including Scott Hocking, Frank Haines, Jon Brumit, and Chris Carlone as well as returning favorites like Joseph Keckler, one of my muses.

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