

SUZANNE SAYLOR

*Born in 1963 in Kansas City, Missouri
Lives in Sammamish, Washington*

*Images of death, vibrant and lushly
colorful, almost festive.*

*Blooming flowers, bright ribbons,
balloons and toys.*

*Potato chips and candies placed on
headstones dotting paradise.*

*Plates of food and birthday cakes,
beer and cigarettes—all set out for
the dead.*

*Some have signs for the living,
“Kapu! (forbidden!) Do not touch!”*

*Other have messages for the dead,
“We love you Mom.”*

Thus evoked by the artist, Suzanne K. Saylor's photographic series *The Garden Cemetery* is a complex meditation on the passage between life and death, and on the multiple cultural inflections of meaning and ritual practice associated with that passage. Subject to strong cultural protocols, the marking of a death is also a profoundly personal experience, and Saylor examines a terrain in which general traditions of funerary practice are overlaid with highly individualized and poignant expressions of remembrance.

The historic context for Saylor's work comes from a shift which occurred in nineteenth-century, post-Civil War United States, when the first large-scale cemeter-

ies, often benignly modeled as gardens, were created on the East Coast. Such institutions, so different from private or family-centered burial grounds, created a different and more public topography of mourning. From a feared yet inescapable fate, death became a final rest, and cemeteries, beautifully landscaped, provided a place for that rest. Grave sites were no longer places to shun, but places to visit, and such excursions even developed recreational inflections, becoming, for example, occasions for family picnics. Saylor saw in contemporary practices in Hawai'i much of the same spirit of casual yet transcendent connection between loved ones.

Saylor's connection to Hawai'i began in 1979 when her mother and two siblings moved to the islands from Seattle, Washington. She lived in Hawai'i for the next twelve years, earning her BFA with High Honors in Photography and Graphic Design in 1989 from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The artist then moved to New York City to attend graduate school at the School of Visual Arts, and earned her MFA in 1993 in Photography and Related Media. Despite their radical differences in scale and pace, Hawai'i and New York were each appreciated by Saylor for their

intercultural communities. Saylor has continued, until recently, to live and work in New York, and now, coming full circle, has returned to the Seattle area.

The Garden Cemetery is the result of more than ten years of work, beginning when Saylor lived in Hawai'i, and augmented as the artist returned to the islands occasionally between 1998 and 2000. As the artist has noted, "I would periodically visit a cemetery and I was often amazed at the elaborate nature of many displays. Over time, I realized that the grave sites were often lovingly cared for in a devoted manner through the year. I came to understand that many people who tended these sites viewed their endeavors as a life-long commitment."

The Garden Cemetery thus offers an explicit record of the material culture of mourning and remembrance, as well as an implicit celebration of sustained devotion. In Hawai'i, symbols of Christian faith are easily juxtaposed with offerings of food or burning of paper money, practices associated with asian traditions (*Lychee and Peppermint Grave*.) The artist also came to understand the ways in which grave site visits and the renewal of offerings acknowledge not only the seasons of grieving but the recurring seasonal holidays. The Christmas holiday, for example,

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brought presents and decorations (*Christmas Grave*); at Easter, bunnies and easter eggs would appear. Saylor has also noted and recorded artifacts of popular culture which have changed over the years; recently, for example, she has sighted Pokemon characters, and birthday cards from Bill and Hillary Clinton (*Presidential Birthday Card*.)

Though Saylor's goal in this series is to document the unique character of Hawai'i's funerary culture, the work is ultimately more poetic than anthropological in feeling, and it is the personal face put on a common social experience which is ultimately most compelling. As Saylor has observed, "There is no cultural tradition I know of that calls for individuals to make big colorful letters that proclaim 'I LOVE YOU JOE' that can be read from across the street. But, someone decided that was the best possible way to testify to their love."

The Garden Cemetery series thus offers a distinct perspective on both site-specific rituals and on the human community which nurtures them. Each image offers subtle variations on the relationship between grave and garden, between the intimate space of death and the expansive space of the living landscape. In some works, the artist has focused on the ground-level marker or headstone with no external

spatial reference; the viewer is quietly placed in the focused position of visitor, even mourner (as in two untitled works which center on small plots within larger fields.) In other images, the horizon line provides a kind of mediating presence between ground and sky, earth and heaven (as in *Invincible Thunder*.) Other images make visible the tension between rooted headstones and cut flowers. Whether the perspective is intimate or expansive, the artist is primarily concerned with allowing the viewer to enter a contemplative space, a personal space to reflect. In this sense, Saylor's work moves beyond the purely visual to the more wholly experiential.

Saylor's work thus creates a connection between those sites which she has specifically documented, and those which might come to the mind of the viewer while engaging a private memory. In this, the artist is speaking in different ways about human connections, generations, and communities. Who resides in these quiet final spaces? It might be a parent, (*National Enquirer for Mom, Dad and Mom*), a spouse or partner (*I Love You Joe, Beloved*), or a child (*Babyland Landscape, God's Little Angel*.)

The last are inevitably the most poignant, for there is something unnatural, more so in this lush and natural setting,

about the death of a child. In *Child's Grave with Pinwheels* Saylor subtly captures the surreal quality of the event. Her use of color photography not only provides a sense of immediate experience—we know this blue sky, these red ginger and heliconia—but endows the image with a sense of energy and intensity that is clearly in tension with the subject matter. The pinwheels, blurred by their motion, also possess an inherently discordant animation.

The playfulness of the numerous toys—from Winnie the Pooh to action figures—scattered about the site, around and between the three bouquets of cut flowers, suggest both an affectionate tribute to the child who is gone, and a subversion of the sobriety of the place.

What else does the artist want us to know about this particular site? From the exposed earth in the foreground, we may understand that the event is new, the feeling no doubt intense in its freshness. From the implied point of view, low to the ground, we find ourselves kneeling, perhaps, or somehow at child's-eye level.

Saylor's quiet and powerful visual essay on *The Garden Cemetery* moves beyond the poignant and specific details of individual locus and experience to visual spaces which provide each of us a moment of reflection.