

**Dialogues of Death-In-Life: The Photographic Works of Sandra Semchuk and the  
Exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration**

**Martin Kapustianyk**

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## ABSTRACT

### **Dialogues of Death-In-Life: The Photographs of Sandra Semchuk in the Exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration**

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Concordia University, 2003

This study is an ethno-cultural exploration concerning identity as is articulated through the work of photographer Sandra Semchuk. The particular focus of this discussion is prefaced around Semchuk's photographic exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration. Within this exhibition the context of two near-death experiences of Semchuk's father is the motivation behind the photographic composites and installation space to the show. This show is looked at as an experiential catalyst for the artist's personal journey through discovering the many layers of her identity. Within the following chapters to this thesis topics of ethnic and cultural identity as well as political, gender, and familial identity are explored. Due to the artistic and visual nature of this topic, this discussion will also pay considerable attention to the dynamics of photography, ritual and space.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis has truly been a journey of transformation. It has been an experience that has brought with it challenges, obstacles, self-doubt, and often feelings of great futility. Like any academic endeavour we often place the value of such a production within the quality of its writing, the depth of its research, and its uniqueness in approach. As much as I am proud of achieving this thesis, of the work that I have put into its realization and the academic struggles I have overcome along the way, my achievement here is greatly overshadowed by those many hands which have helped 'nudge' me along. The submission of this thesis would not have been possible without the kind and generous patience of a committed group of professors whom comprise the Department of Art History at Concordia University. Though all have at some point in my academic career given invaluable teachings within the discipline of art history, they have also shown impeccable care and professionalism both individually and collectively. I am grateful for their sensitivity and support.

In particular though I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Joan Acland, Dr. Jean Belisle, and Dr. Kristina Huneault for their extended patience and guidance, often during very difficult times. To Dr. Loren Lerner, my thesis supervisor, professor, mentor and one who is continually concerned about my health and well being, I am eternally grateful for the infinite space you have given me in order that I may find my voice . . . again.

As my thesis is as much about art and issues of death and identity, it is equally concerned with how our relationships with others can profoundly affect our lives. In the process of writing this thesis I have been quietly humbled on many occasions by the inexhaustible love, support, and acceptance I have been gifted. I would like to especially thank my friends Nicola, Nancy, and Andrea for the many days of laughter over the phone, the many years of devotion and friendship, and the sense of belonging I feel when I am around you. Thanks kids.

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Finally, to my family. For the many years that I have been away from home and going to school you, Gene, Myrna, Mory, and Bernie, have always watched out for me as my older siblings. I am grateful for your care and attention.

For many years now I have spent my time in the midst of academia and higher learning. With all due respect to those I mentioned earlier, though your knowledge, experience and teachings have equipped me in so many ways, two teachers stand foremost in my mind

and life. Just when I think I have a handle on life and think that I know everything there is to know, my Mom and Dad continue to teach me more about love, acceptance, commitment and integrity than anyone I know. I love you very much.

To all those that I have forgotten on these pages, and you know who you are, I am grateful for your presence in my life and for the dialogues that we have shared.

*To my friend Scott who chose to follow the mythical journey of Orpheus  
and see what greater things might lie beyond.*



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## **Introduction**

This thesis considers in depth the photographic exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration by Sandra Semchuk and its inherent dialogues concerning memory, identity and death. Its objective is to explore the ways in which Semchuk uses photography in a specific manner to articulate concepts of identity through the experiencing of mortality and connection. In this exhibition Semchuk explores how identity is dialogically informed, in our relationships to other people and to nature. The collaborative efforts with her father Martin Semchuk act as a buttress to the work Semchuk creates. In Semchuk's artistic work her father has been a consistent influence. Coming to Death's Door is a culmination of Semchuk's experiences with her father, helping her to uncover her own identity, as well as the fears and anxieties about her own and her father's death that informs her sense of self.

There are three fundamental aspects to this thesis and its discussion of Coming to Death's Door: identity, its role within the context of death and mortal crisis, and the manner in which artistically Semchuk articulates the related spaces of thought, action, and emotion. During those experiences of dying and death, individuals often experience profound realizations concerning their own identity. Such profound realizations often lead the individual to consider, or reconsider, the manner in which they face death and how they manage this transition through life. As well, individuals often engage the process of dying by defining themselves in relation to what spiritual/religious beliefs they inhabit. In either case, the anxiety of death and loss brings the individual to a place of fundamental self-evaluation, thus resulting in an act of great release or of great mortal

dilemma. This form of identity awareness within the context of Semchuk's oeuvre reveals the fundamental basis of identity, of being, that of mortality and our most basic, organic relationship to nature. Semchuk has sought out the source of her identity through both her relationships with others and within her own environment. When the death of a family member or friend occurs, the loss poses profound ramifications on one's identity. The relationship between her and her father is one that is built on many fundamental beliefs and ideologies that will be examined in this thesis.

The relationship between identity and death is a theme that is often looked at by Canadian artists who come from eastern European origins. In many cases, death to the eastern European immigrant and his/her children is impacted by earlier losses of home or socio-political freedom. Death is examined as a threat to one's physical and philosophical being, as well as to the inevitable dissolution of one's spiritual beliefs. The diasporas of people from eastern Europe within the first half of the twentieth century were motivated by the preservation of social, philosophical, and spiritual concerns. From this desire to seek out refuge and new possibilities in other geographies a sort of death occurred for displaced Slavic wanderers as they left their old life behind in order to start a new one elsewhere. Yet, with this new life, the cultural parent of the Old World did not follow and the wanderer is left to journey the new lands without the benefit of heritage to act as a source for memory and purpose. It is the sense of not belonging that is felt in both the earlier and later generations of Slavic Canadians who search out their cultural and ethnic roots in order to bring deeper context to their own lives. Semchuk who is of Ukrainian and Polish roots interweaves stories of desperate times in the homeland

and of seeking greater possibilities in the New World in her photographic works as her search for identity deepens.

Photography became a tangible witness to document the journey of the immigrant experience. Photographs became physical testimony to the existence of the Slavic immigrant and continue to generate a new history that takes the place of that in the Old World. Where once the practice of oral traditions and storytelling perpetuated a family's story through its generations, such histories were disrupted by dispersal and emigration. In some cases these oral traditions were used in the New World to maintain ties to loved ones from afar while trying to make a new life elsewhere. Other instances of emigration also brought discomfort to the homesick immigrant. In such cases the traditions of storytelling were dropped, making the practice of forgetting those loved ones left behind and those abandoned cherished places of home a more merciful option. As well, the horrific circumstances such as the Holocaust and World War II which caused a massive departure from eastern Europe made it necessary for the emotional and psychological well being of the displaced person to consign personal memories of home to oblivion. Photographs helped to build new family stories in the New World, to ensure an accurate collection of family members, their faces, and of places where they lived. Photographs helped to create new memories and, later, to encourage the retracing of memory and origins.

As a tool to retrace memory, the camera has become a mnemonic eye for those searching out origins and a sense of belonging. The photographic image acts as a window into the

past, implying that time can be halted in one space and can be visually frozen within the confines of a picture's borders. There is a sense, then, that time, captured and stilled within a photograph, will inevitably reveal the past and give access to memory. Photographs establish the existence of far-off places and people, of spaces that exist outside our physical reach, and often, those that exist beyond our own imaginings. Cameras and the images they produce have helped to relocate the self and his/her origins while also helping to incite memory about those whom lived before us.

For some artists of Slavic descent, the tracing of identity has often led to the use of photography as a most meaningful method to establishing connection. John Paskievich (b. 1952) has used both photography and video to document those people who, like himself, live between worlds forever experiencing a feeling of not belonging. In his earliest works of his hometown of North-end Winnipeg, entitled A Place Not Our Own (1974) Paskievich captures in photographs a composite of what Paskievich considers to be the 'never-types', the assortment of newcomers and First Nations peoples who live in Port Douglas. In his work Paskievich often uses the juxtaposition of place and person to reveal the inherent irony of disconnected life in a so-called multicultural society. Often his images betray people who bare the cultural attire of their ancestors while set against a purely North American capitalist environment. In a later compilation of photographs taken in eastern Europe entitled A Voiceless Song: Photographs from the Slavic Lands (1981) Paskievich acts as photographic tourist roaming the Slavic territories. As he travels, Paskievich takes pictures of people in relationship to the land and the

environment in which they live revealing a haunting yet seemingly 'authentic' ethno-cultural connection between Slavs and the ancient landscapes.

Denis Devenyi (b.1932) left his home country of Hungary in 1957 to escape Stalin's oppressive regime. He saw that despite the freedom Canada seemed to provide, an overall consumer temperament fuelled by "the face of the large corporation"<sup>1</sup> was influencing Canadian life. His photographic work looks largely at himself and his family in an exercise of rediscovering the self. Two shows entitled Lonely in Crowds (1963) and Stranger to Myself (1973) aptly describe the same type of identity dislocation that Paskievich presents in his work. Devenyi uses old images from his family album as photographic autobiography, attempting to reconnect with himself and to alleviate the estranged relationship he has with himself.

In Miriam Fabijan's (b.1960) artistic works, she uses photography as a source through which she investigates her Slovenian origins. As part of her multimedia installation work, Fabijan uses family photographs as "partial incomplete narratives."<sup>2</sup> In her work entitled Translations; My Hat Has Three Holes (1992) Fabijan incorporates generations of her family through photographs, as well as written and spoken text that together interweave the voices of her grandfather, her mother and herself through both written and spoken poetic verses of popular Slovenian children's rhymes. Fabijan's works make

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<sup>1</sup> <http://art-history.concordia.ca/eea/index.htm> Canadian Artists of Eastern European Heritage, Loren Lerner, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

reference to identity through the disruptive measures of exile, of the immigrant's struggle to assimilate and belong, as well as the desire and longing to connect with home.

The photograph has the ability to convey accuracy and realness about its subjects, no matter how contrived. Perhaps it is for this reason that we afford its images a certain authenticity and trust in the truth. The photograph can mirror back those that we love as though they were standing before us, and seem to have the power to replicate these personal experiences. Semchuk's photographs share the dynamics of identity formation present in Paskievich, Devenyi and Fabijan's works. She attempts through the faces of those she photographs to deconstruct the building process of identity and attempts to articulate the unfixing of the perceptions of those constructs.<sup>3</sup> "My work," she explains, "has shown me that we change one at a time. The personal is the political."<sup>4</sup> Her work is largely autobiographical, turning the photographic lens on herself and her environment to better understand the shaping of her identity. From her own experiences, from her own intimate and often vulnerable position of self-examination-- family and friends, community, familiar landscapes and mindscapes -- Semchuk re-articulates this in the form of the photograph, the honourific, the re-membered, so that identity may be more fully realized. Identity is sought out through her relationship to her own environment and gaged by the core of her own history, scrutinizing it, embracing it, celebrating it, and retelling it. Her photographic subjects act as referrants to the various layers of her identity-- her familial self, her cultural self, her communal self, her political self, her spiritual self-- all are traced back through her own environment and are mirrored back to

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Semchuk, response to questionnaire form in preparation for the web site *Canadian Artists of Eastern European Heritage*, Concordia University Department of Art History, Montreal, 1999.



her in the images she produces. This thesis traces these inquiries into her identity through a deeper analysis of her photographic works.

To better understand Semchuk's work I interviewed the artist at her home in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1999. Over a period of three days I was given full access to the Semchuk's archives and visual works. In the course of the visit, connections were made between the artist and myself as often similar relationships to Ukraine surfaced between the two of us and our experiences with family, home, ethnicity, art and the self were intimately discussed. I chose her photographic exhibition Coming to Death's Door as a representative alignment of the various aspects of Semchuk's identity and the collective physical, psychic, emotional and spiritual responses that are articulated within its exhibition space. Throughout her career Semchuk has attempted to peel away the layers of her identity one at a time, examining the texture and depth of each layer, trying to gain a stronger sense of who she is in relation to nature and her own environment. In Coming to Death's Door these various aspects of her identity reemerge. The anxieties of her father's possible death provoke a simultaneous reevaluation of her own life, her own awareness.

The following is a brief description of the chapters of this thesis. Chapter One includes an introduction to Semchuk's biography and her art. A chronological mapping of her work is presented from the early images she created to those that lead up to the exhibition Coming to Death's Door. This chapter focuses on Semchuk's relationship to photography and her shifts in identity and self-awareness that she explores. At times, honourific

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<sup>4</sup> Semchuk, Questionnaire.

portraiture<sup>5</sup> appears in these earlier works portraying the sense of respect and love for the people who influenced her. The family photo album is considered during this period as a way of looking at familial bonds and blood ties. The concept of the ethnographic photographer surfaces as Semchuk investigates and celebrates her own Ukrainian heritage in collaborative efforts with her father. It is at this juncture Semchuk starts to experiment with the technological facets of the camera to manipulate time and space and visually articulates experience and self-awareness through a new kind of gestural photography.

Chapter Two considers narratives of death in the descent myths of various cultures. It also looks at how families and societies approach the subject of death in both literal and spiritual terms. The need of humans to ritualize the experience of death and loss as a form of coping and understand such profound life changes will enter into this discussion. For Semchuk these rituals surrounding death evolve into a rearticulation of ancient Descent myths. These mythic journeys into death speak of the transformations both physically and spiritually that the individual experiences while in the realm of death. In looking at various myths relating to death, Chapter Two also considers the need of humans to ritualize and make sacred the experience of death-in-life.

Chapter Three discusses at length the visual and performative components of Coming to Death's Door. It discusses extensively the concepts of space and how the particular use

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<sup>5</sup> Semchuk refers to honourific portraiture as those images that were first taken at the turn of the nineteenth century. During the first years of photography Daguerrotypes were a popular form of making images of prominent individuals and important family members. Semchuk looks at the portraits she takes of her family and friends as a similar attempt to honour those people that have informed her life.

of gestural photography by Semchuk manifests movement within the photograph and the physical expression of experience as it is performed. This chapter walks the reader through its installation space and explains how ritual is promoted through work and incited by the viewer through his/her active engagement of the installation space. The mnemonic effect of the photographic composites, connecting the act of recollecting memory as a fundamental part of regrouping and recognizing identity and self-awareness is also discussed.

## Chapter I

This chapter is an introduction to the life and artistic work of Sandra Semchuk. It outlines her formative years as a child through to her more prolific years as an established artist. The chapter begins by taking a historical look at her early photographic works and how they incite stories of community, belonging and the early immigrant Ukrainian-Canadian experience. Several theoretical approaches concerning culture, identity and photography will be used in this chapter. In analysing Semchuk's early works that involve her home community I will consider Stuart Hall's essay "Culture, Community, Nation"<sup>6</sup> as a point of reference. To outline the history of Ukrainians in Canada and the physical, emotional, and psychological hardships they endured I will draw on personal accounts from Myrna Kostash's All of Baba's Children<sup>7</sup>. In looking at Semchuk's cooperative self-portraits with family and friends, I will introduce Marianne Hirsch's Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory<sup>8</sup>, which discusses the notion of the family photo album. I will also include a brief preliminary discussion of ideas from Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces."<sup>9</sup> As Semchuk delves into political and social issues concerning identity, I will also refer to Charles Taylor's writings in "The Politics of Recognition"<sup>10</sup> to help to elucidate the dynamics of culture and individual identity.

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<sup>6</sup>Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation,"

<sup>7</sup> Myrna Kostash, All of Baba's Children (Edmonton: Hurtig Publications, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Hirsch, Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Visual Cultures Reader Mirzoeff (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

Sandra Semchuk was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan in 1948, to Martin Semchuk and Josephine Grelowski. In her early years Sandra was encouraged artistically by her family and others within her town and took on the task of painting western cartoons on the windows of the town stores on Main Street for the annual stampede. At the age of eighteen she attended the University of Saskatchewan and achieved her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Her interest in photography came by way of her experiences working with her professor, Eli Bornstein, structuralist artist and editor of Structurist magazine.

Bornstein's discussions of Paul Cezanne, Claude Monet , Pablo Picasso and the Russian Constructivists, encouraged Semchuk to question and investigate the relationships that exist between the self and one's environment:

Through Bornstein, I learned that art was not a representation of the world based on appearance but what your mind created with your relationships to that world; that there was an internal formal relationship between the way that you connected all your experience and the manner in which you articulated your art."<sup>11</sup>

Her aim was to explore the relationship between human and nature, "to trust the primary sources of nature, including myself, as the substance of my investigation in art."<sup>12</sup> With this perspective and from her involvement in founding and opening The Photographers' Gallery, Semchuk established and committed herself to the medium of photography.

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<sup>11</sup> Sandra Semchuk, Toward Real Change:My Photographic Work Done in Saskatchewan from 1972-1982 and in New Mexico from 1982-1983 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1983) 3.

<sup>12</sup> Semchuk, Toward, p3.

At the age of twenty-two Semchuk had finished her bachelors degree and was soon to marry photographer Richard Holden. Their relationship involved intimate dialogues of shared concerns over photography and prairie artists. Living in a surrounding where they worked and lived cooperatively and with social awareness, ideas started to take form:

I didn't know at the time when Richard and I entered into fervent dialogues about photography with James Lisitza, Sylvia Jonescu, Hans Dommasch, John and Jo Nanson, Ruth(Curly) Garson, Bob Wells, Kent Martens and others that a shape would emerge from that dialogue that would create culture for more than twenty-five years--The Photographers Gallery.<sup>13</sup>

Originally called "The Group," the formation of this association was built on the immediate needs of the artists. They had been locked out of the conventional spaces of the art galleries and museums and therefore relied on themselves to locate a space in which they could exhibit their work, be self-sufficient, and generate a community to which photographers from all over could connect.

As there were no parallel galleries at the time our model evolved from the co-operative models in their various forms throughout the province. The strong rural community base, the direct ties to the land, and the utopian model of democratic socialism, the one that had inspired medicare nationwide, provided us with the confidence to consider ourselves capable of producing a centre outside major Canadian cities. . .in the middle of a landscape that was vast and spacious.<sup>14</sup>

Artistically and academically a community took shape for Semchuk in the Photographers Gallery. It was a focus to develop her own identity, in that it mirrored the socialist, community, and rural based elements of her childhood in Northern Saskatchewan. It was

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra Semchuk, "Tracing As We Make Culture," BlackFlash Dec. 1997: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Semchuk, BlackFlash 6.

an extended family, a basis from which she could explore the extraneous relationships of her own identity.

In 1974 Semchuk's career as a professional photographer began with an exhibition in her hometown of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. The images were of the inhabitants of Meadow Lake, the townspeople who helped shape her formative years. Beginning in 1972, Semchuk made several pilgrimages back to Meadow Lake to begin her process of gathering images and re-establishing relationships there: "Inevitably, people had a great deal to say that was intimate . . . I made photographs in black and white that were affirmative of their dignity."<sup>15</sup> For example Thomas Sklarenko, elevator agent at Struan (Fig.1), is imposing in form and size, and has a formidable composure that is almost god-like. His colossal physicality towers over the distant grain elevators, defying the visual perspective of a distant view. At the same time, the stiffness and almost naivete of his posture brings simplicity to the image and removes the pretence of the photographic moment. The large figure of Thomas Sklarenko relives the adolescent gaze of the artist, referencing those adults who, throughout her childhood, would have seemed larger than life and protective in their relationship to Semchuk. Similarly the quiet, introspective quality of Mrs. Ed Parker of Meadow Lake (Fig. 2) radiates as though a child is seeing beyond the ordinariness of this elder for the first time. The manner in which Mrs. Parker is profiled right up against the picture plane with the silhouette of a farmhouse in the background draws relationships of the person to nature and the lived environment. With care Semchuk sees Thomas Sklarenko and Mrs. Parker as in who acknowledges the important relationship to this place to the land.

Semchuk explains that these photographic images were meant to affirm the common man, her friends and extended family, perceiving the photographs "as an electric currency, shared consciousness, recognition, and acceptance at a basic level."<sup>16</sup> It was an introduction into *her* world, however, that was revealed, an elementary statement of her history, and her story, that unfolded like the characters of a timeless myth. "I thought I was going to affirm the importance of these people, but when I looked at these photographs, they were more about me."<sup>17</sup> This myth-story however does not unfold in the meeting of gods or in the making of heroes. It is an honourific remembrance of those seemingly everyday people who speak simple truths and are pictured within the sacred space of their everyday lives. They are the faces that carry memory and an erstwhile sense of belonging, warmth and acceptance. It is a place that is very much real yet forever mythical in the mind of the child that Sandra once was. "Looking back now, I perceive my pilgrimages to Meadow Lake as a series of performances where I gave meaning to every gesture, word, feeling, and action. Through those performances I was actualizing my own past in the present, transforming it and giving it shape in the form of photographs."<sup>18</sup>

Semchuk was giving shape to a visual articulation of a familiar culture. This specific form of civility that governs the system of a person's values guides how one lives.

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<sup>15</sup> Semchuk, BlackFlash 5.

<sup>16</sup> Semchuk, BlackFlash 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila Robertson "Artist's works show herself, family," Star Phoenix 26 Feb. 1982: F362.

<sup>18</sup> Semchuk, Towards 6.



This is what Stuart Hall states as fundamental traces of self-knowledge. In reference to Hall's discussion of identity in his essay "Culture, Community, Nation" it is Semchuk's "'placing' within another culture," her "access to a different 'knowable' community, indeed another national culture, a different structure of feeling"<sup>19</sup> that engenders her exploration of identity outside the construct of a dominant national identity. Her images do not reveal any attempt to fit herself into the conventional Canadian construct of white Anglo-Saxon, conservative, middle class mainstream values. The breath of awareness is drawn from her own experienced social surroundings: the local café, barber shop, the Semchuk grocery store and Madill's drugstore where her pictures of Meadow Lake were first exhibited. Hall explores Raymond Williams's view that culture "'is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture."<sup>20</sup> The places where Semchuk grew up impart the vital energy of a vast prairie expanse dotted by telephone poles and marked by grain elevators. But particular to the cultural life of Meadow Lake are the values of community, the strong socialist and cooperative rural ties. It is daily life of the community and the routines of everyday living -- cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing clothes, raising children -- that gives significance to the way of life of Meadow Lake.

These values are not only found within the locality of prairie life. They are also remnants of the strong Slavic values that were transported here during the three waves of Ukrainian immigrants who made their way to Canada from the late 1800s to the 1950s. The year 1891 marked the beginning of a period of great transformation in Canada's cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, "Culture" 350

<sup>20</sup> Hall, "Culture" 351

profile.<sup>21</sup> Ukrainians became central characters in a story of immigration that forever reshaped the Canadian landscape both physically and socially. Between 1891 and 1914 the first major wave of Ukrainians from Western Galicia and Bukovyna arrived in Canada. Their arrival in Canada at this time was encouraged by the Canadian government,<sup>22</sup> a political and practical strategy designed to bring "stalwart peasants"<sup>23</sup> already used to harsh living and farming conditions to the still largely untamed prairie lands. Under the auspices of Sir Clifford Sifton's<sup>24</sup> immigration project, Ukrainians were sought out to be the most desirable ethnic group of the pool of potential groups available. Sifton was "particularly impressed by the suitability of the hardy Ukrainians for taming the wild prairies."<sup>25</sup> However, the presence of these new and rather uncivilized looking people left the Anglo-Canadian culture disapproving of their new neighbours:

Most (Ukrainians) settled in the parkland belt of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, in a series of blocs extending from east and south of Winnipeg to the large Vegreville colony outside Edmonton. . . Perceived as threatening because of their size and for their preservation of old country ways and attitudes these blocs were responsible for much of the Anglo-Canadian hostility that followed."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Between 1891 and 1914 approximately 170,000 immigrants arrived from Western Ukraine specifically from the regions of Galicia and Bukovyna. This first wave was largely comprised of illiterate peasant farmers as well as a few lay and clerical intelligentsia. The second wave occurred during the interwar period with about 68,000 immigrants coming to Canada still consisting largely of peasant immigrants. In the aftermath of World War II 34,000 displaced persons arrived in Canada and were more educated and more culturally diverse than their predecessors coming from Soviet and non-Soviet territories. Frances Swyripa, Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity 191-1991. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Under the government of Sir Wilfred Laurier, Canada created an advertising campaign structured around encouraging Ukrainians to come to Canada and pioneer the still largely untamed, uncultivated prairie lands. With the fee of ten dollars every Ukrainian male immigrant was offered land to set up his farm. Under condition that specific amounts of that acreage be cleared, tilled and seeded over designated amounts of time, and that appropriate living accommodations be erected on the land within a certain amount of time, full title of the land would be given to the immigrant Ukrainian.

<sup>23</sup> Orest Subtelny, Ukrainians in North America - An Illustrated History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 38.

<sup>24</sup> Clifford Sifton was Minister of Immigration in Canada between 1896 and 1905.

<sup>25</sup> Subtelny, Ukrainians 38.

<sup>26</sup> Swyripa, Wedded 4.

Although Sifton's impression of Ukrainians as welcome newcomers was prefaced more by necessity, their endurance, agrarian experience, and propensity for hard work, his vision of what positive contributions they could make to the Canadian profile was not largely supported by others. Arriving in this new country with few dollars to their name, these peasant farmers continued to experience hard times. They were often swindled out of their meager savings by con artists, slowed in their progress of homesteading due to the harsh nature of the terrain, and exploited because of their illiteracy and lack of awareness of North American customs. This fuelled the barriers between themselves and their Canadian neighbours. Despite their unfortunate circumstances in the new world, Ukrainians were seen less as victims of an unwelcoming society and more as a race that was inherently lazy and suspect:

The English-speaking residents of the prairies were angered and appalled by the 'hordes' of outlandish 'men in sheep-skin coats,' together with their large families, which the trains disgorged in Winnipeg.<sup>27</sup>

They were a 'positive misfortune to a [neighbouring] enlightened community,' they would repel 'desirable' immigrants, they could be bribed en masse by irresponsible politicians, they perpetuated Ukrainian language and customs, and they kept their inhabitants out of touch with British institutions and ideals.<sup>28</sup>

In her book All of Baba's Children, Myrna Kostash writes of the lived experiences of many immigrant Ukrainians who came to Canada and settled largely in Alberta. Kostash brings these experiences to light literally a parallel of Semchuk's visual images through story telling. There are stories of harsh winters, hard labour, and the tragedies that could befall a family at any time, wiping them out, only to pick themselves up and start again:

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<sup>27</sup> Subtelny, Ukrainians 58

When my mother's family came to Canada they stayed with her uncle. One day everything burned down and they lost what they had brought. To make some money she worked for different families looking after children and doing housework. They used to say there was nothing here but mosquitoes. -- Mary Spak<sup>29</sup>

Much of the conflict and disapproval that Ukrainians experienced in their new country forced them to congregate as best they could in farming communities across the prairies that were either largely or completely made up of Ukrainian immigrants:

It was land on which English settlers had tried to establish ranches. It was land that distribution agencies in Strathcona had sent them (Ukrainians) out to, saying "pick your quarter here" where the CPR was or would be running. And it was land on which the American or English or French refused to settle, fertile enough but covered in brush so that only those prepared for the tedious labour of the grub hoe would accept it. The CPR and the Hudson's Bay Company and school lands picked off twenty out of thirty six sections in every township. "The area became a checkerboard of settlement where four immigrants could fill on the black spaces but the adjoining white sections remained empty. This handicap had the effect of dispersing the Ukrainians far more widely than they had anticipated."<sup>30</sup>

Whether they grew up on a farm or in a nearby village like Two Hill, Hairy Hill, Kaleland, Morecambe, or Musidora, their community was almost exclusively Ukrainian. The exceptions tended to be the Anglo-Saxons in the white-collar jobs: the elevator agent, station agent, bank manager, and, for a while, the school principal and doctor. Aside from these the community became increasingly interrelated through marriage, remained unilingually Ukrainian and was limited geographically to the immediate area.<sup>31</sup>

Communities built up by Ukrainian immigrants brought comfort and security to those immigrants longing for their family and friends and culture back home. Ukrainian immigrants, mostly farmers, were used to the life that small villages and towns provided.

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<sup>28</sup> Subtelny, Ukrainians 59. Subtelny is referring to the bloc settlements in this passage.

<sup>29</sup> Myrna Kostash, All of Baba's Children (Edmonton: Hurtig Publications, 1977) 21.

<sup>30</sup> Kostash, Baba's Children 21.

Over time the community developed into the environment that Semchuk came to know as her world:

So the town became the focal point of social life: a skating rink in the schoolyard, a baseball diamond. . . , school picnics, school concerts, chicken suppers at the church, political meetings, sitting around a radio in the store listening to Lux Theatre melodramas.<sup>32</sup>

Community was not only desired, it was necessary to the survival of these new immigrants. Often Ukrainians would have to rely on each other for help with farming and with the basic necessities of living. Community also brought a sense of celebration for those traditions inherent to the spiritual and agrarian life of the Ukrainian.

Following the photographs produced in Meadow Lake, Semchuk investigates the dynamics of family through cooperative self-portraits with her mother and father and other close relatives and friends. The photographs from the series Excerpts from a Diary (1982) explore a sense of community that is familial and blood-related. Here Semchuk creates and collects images that resemble the quintessential family photo album. The physical resemblances and shared familial nuances give the photographs a sense of the temporal and genealogical characteristics of a family narrative. As a photo album the photographs reveal the typical events that occur over time in a family: celebrations of marriage, birth, death, and the recognition of intimate connections that bond parent to child and friend to friend. During the making of this "photo album" Sandra incorporates the sort of communal involvement on which a typical amalgam of familial memories would rely. Family photo albums are a repository for family narrative, an archive in which to place visual testaments of relations that occur everyday and that are reflected

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<sup>31</sup> Kostash, Baba's Children 140.

through different perspectives of various affiliated members of its clan. Semchuk adopts a similar scheme whereby the photos to the show are taken co-operatively: "I may have the ball or my dad may have the ball or Rowenna might have had the ball or Richard. But it was something that we were doing together as a kind of ritual performance in front of the camera, in which one would hope that something real would happen."<sup>33</sup> Through this cooperative exchange there is a sense of discovery that occurs within the photos that affects a realization of connection and relation between its subjects.

Though many of the photos in Excerpts convey loving relationships between family members, there are those images however which do not always imply a loving bond or a sense of kinship. In Dad and Richard, my parents' home, Regina, April, 1980 (Fig. 3), Semchuk's husband and father are situated in the adjoining living room and dining room respectively, both deeply engaged in their reading. Such a picture placed amongst all the others in the show that otherwise denote strong emotional and biological ties is at once jarring in its expression of overt non-relation. That these two people, both important male figures in Semchuk's life, are operating within the same open communal space but have absolutely no interaction with each other speaks realistically of the distance that can often be created between family members. This dynamic is further reinforced visually by the starkly shadowed line of the angled wall that runs vertically through the centre of the picture. Division often occurs in the wake of rival personalities, during those stages within family experience when new people are introduced into the familial fold and when compromise and acceptance are necessary. A strain of relations can also be seen in Co-

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<sup>32</sup> Kostash, Baba's Children 141

<sup>33</sup> Martin Kapustianyk, interview with Sandra Semchuk, Vancouver, 9 June 1999.

operative Self-portrait, Richard and I, RR6, Saskatoon, April, 1980 (Fig. 4). In the four-images of this composite photograph the dynamics of affection and disaffection fluctuate revealing an intensity to the complex narrative of marriage.

The co-operative picture taking inserts a powerful content to the making of this visual testament of family life. "Family is structured," Marianne Hirsch writes, "by desire and disappointment, love and loss. Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrevocable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their imbeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life."<sup>34</sup> Images such as Baba, Uncle Ed and Dad, Meadow Lake, March 26, 1977 (Fig. 5), depict Semchuk's family tree, of her father, her uncle and her grandmother, pinpointing generational origins. The image of the three is crowned by a painting of a romanticized landscape: a three-peaked mountain in the background, a tall, formidable tree on either side of the stream in the foreground and a stable, arched bridge that provides access over the stream to each side. The parallels between the images in the painting and of the three family members sitting under it provide overt allegorical references to the relationship between the three and the roles that each has within the family dynamic.

A similar narrative style is played out in the proceeding image to the show entitled Self-portrait, Baba's bedroom, Meadow Lake, April 12, 1977 (Fig. 6). Within this image Semchuk documents herself, gazing into a mirror in her grandmother's bedroom the day that Semchuk's Baba dies. It is as though, while attempting to retrieve those traces of her

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<sup>34</sup> Marianne Hirsch, Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 5.

Baba which now reside in herself, in her own identity, Semchuk also recognizes the shapes and forms of her Baba's identity within the frames of those family portraits that rest on Baba's bedroom dresser. This image of Semchuk gazing into the mirror provides a precursory glimpse into the effects of what Semchuk will experience and how she will articulate the impending death of her father in Coming to Death's Door. Here, in Baba's Bedroom, she is left alone to articulate her anxieties and feelings of loss while in later years her father is there to share the experience of his inevitable death. The emotive quality of loss is apparent in Semchuk's face. Semchuk is negotiating her way through the reality of her Baba's life and death, coming to terms with the many lives that Baba has impacted upon, those that have given form and purpose to her identity and others whom Baba has also helped to shape. The Semchuk family narrative is told in this one image. Cycles of life, relationships with loved ones, celebration and loss occur in a single intimate photograph. These stories now become the custodial property of Semchuk, as she now carries on the story of her Baba.

The connection that occurs for Semchuk's sense of identity and how it is related to the influences of her Baba brings to mind what Foucault refers to in his discussion of the "utopia of the mirror". In his essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault contends that, when considering the dynamics of space and how they affect our daily operations of life, space can be broken down into two major types. The first is the *utopia*. The *utopia* is a site with no real place: "they present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces."<sup>35</sup> The second type of space is that which Foucault refers to as the *heterotopia*. The



*heterotopia*, by virtue of its contrast to utopias, are those sites consisting of real places "places that do exist and that are formed within the very founding of society."<sup>36</sup> The mirror is a form of space, however, that operates between these two sites "a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror."<sup>37</sup> It is a place wherein something can exist but not be real, and can be real but not exist. It is in fact "a placeless place." In looking at this image of Semchuk in her Baba's bedroom the contours of Semchuk's thought processes concerning identity parallel Foucault's explanation of the mirror:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror.<sup>38</sup>

In the images that Semchuk creates, in attempting to locate herself within that context, to search out her own identity, Semchuk enacts those very properties of the mirror. The landscape and people of her home town, the faces of her family and friends, the many casts of her own self that also are shown in this exhibition, all are mirrors of herself, some in-part, others more fully. Those mirrors reflect at every turn relationships that inform Semchuk's self-awareness. In Co-operative Self-portrait, Richard and I, RR6, Saskatoon, April, 1980 (Fig. 4) and Co-operative Self-portrait, Dad and I, Regina, April, 1980 (Fig. 7) physical interaction acts as that acknowledgement of awareness. Each of the two images comprises a composite of four images. In the first of the two co-operative self-portraits Semchuk is situated with her husband Richard in front of the camera. Within the composite, diagonal juxtapositions of interactive and non-interactive postures

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<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" Visual Cultures Reader 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1997) 239.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, Visual 239.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, Visual 239.

relay animated and non-animated expressions as though without that physical contact, that physical acknowledgement, Semchuk's self-awareness and their awareness of each other is non-existent. The diagonal juxtaposition of Semchuk and her father relays the same effect. This time, however, the effect is more reciprocal because physical acknowledgement is obvious seen in the gaze by Semchuk toward her father. The photos of Semchuk's father appear aimless and purposeless when only in his own presence. For the daughter the marked absence leaves a visual hole within the photographic frame.

Marianne Hirsch's book Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory delves into the notion of "familial looks"<sup>39</sup> and family connectedness. Hirsch's discussion of the family photo explores "that aspect of familial experience that has, for the most part, remained unspoken: the ways in which the individual subject is constituted in the space of the family through looking."<sup>40</sup> In much of the photographic works in Coming to Death's Door the subtle nuance of glance, of visual dialogue plays out its own narrative between its subjects. Unlike those images in Meadow Lake where individuals were honoured through portraiture, there is a sense of shared portraiture that occurs in Excerpts. Pictures of generations for example in Co-operative Self-portrait, Mom and I, Yuma, February, 1979 (Figs. 8 & 9) and Co-operative Self-portrait, Rowenna and I, RR6, Saskatoon, January, 1979 (Fig. 10) gage the relational spaces that occur between family members. These images discover physical similarity and trace lineage through the examination of shared facial features, of physical traits, associations of body language

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, Visual 240.

<sup>39</sup> Hirsch, Family Frames 2.

and body dialogue. In Mom and I, this diptych shows Semchuk and her mother engaged in a sort of playful mimicry, one that expresses the tangible markers of genealogical relation while exuding a sense of dialogical rapport: hands on hips, same distinctive smile, nose, eyes, the same endearing posture. They also reveal the intimacy of family relationships that occur through subtle glances and knowing expressions. Excerpts explores Semchuk's identity in relation to her family while it generates a strong, visually overt sense of dialogue within the works.

To look at these images is to realize the potential of the everyday, to explore the myths that are the author's reality, to experience a community that is for the author a world unto itself. A central concern in this process is a conscious effort to document those changes. The self-analysis is strikingly offered in the numerous self-portraits of Semchuk herself. These self-portraits gage her repeated moments of introspection as she connects with family and friends. Her own self-position becomes the repeated point of return throughout the show and culminates in such composites as Self-portraits, 1977-1981 (Figs. 11 and 12). Semchuk explains that these self-portraits were a way to "create a surround of self-acceptance, images of myself without masks, perhaps I would mimic my own vision, be self-so, instead of a puppet of my parents, employers, teachers, my husband, or the mass media."<sup>41</sup> As much as discovering and witnessing relationships that reflected her own identity, so too was it the witnessing of her own "autonomy of self-image"<sup>42</sup> that she desired. Self-portraits is a series of twelve self-portraits of the artist that span a time frame between 1977 and 1981. The artist is seen in a variety of forms: in

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<sup>40</sup> Hirsch, Family Frames 2.

<sup>41</sup> Semchuk, Towards 9.

some her hair is straight, hanging naturally, while in others it is pulled back off of her face or braided on either side. There are images where she is wearing blouses and sweaters which reveal the many roles of her womanhood. Sometimes she looks wistful, her expression is at times innocent, studious, or rebellious.

Her gaze is what threads together these subtle changes that occur over time. Defiance, love, willfulness, compassion, each of these emotions find their way into one self-portrait or another but all are threaded by the subtle betraying of desire:

Cut off from the authentic self by layers of accumulated knowledge and by fear of death, I burrow back through the unconscious past before the camera. With actualization, the mimicking of that past, is a revelation of desire, desire which is both original and chronic. That desire is revealed through the gaze.<sup>43</sup>

The collection of self-portraits, the span of time they inhabit create a narrative of Semchuk's life to reveal how experience in its many forms has transformed her. By displaying these images of herself Semchuk, as well as other viewers, can trace back through the chronology of her gaze to witness the revelation of desire. Semchuk uses these images, the "mimicking of the past" rather than her memory to chart those experiences that surface within each self-portrait. Accumulated experience and the recognition of her own aging leaves Semchuk unable to locate her authentic self. These images allow Semchuk to create distance between herself (her memory) and the desire which is present throughout these self-portraits. Within these images she can understand that desire was there in the authentic self (original) and remains a constant (chronic)

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<sup>42</sup> Semchuk, Toward 9.

<sup>43</sup> Semchuk, Toward 10

throughout the course of her life. Photographs of Semchuk as the daughter, the wife, the mother, the student, the artist; all cloak Semchuk's original self. By creating visual testaments of these separate yet related identities she creates a space between them and her self. This process of actualizing the layers of her self through portraiture helps to realize how these socialized layers, these social and cultural 'personalities' came to be formed and that they were accumulated over time. The gaze of desire is what anchors each portrait to Semchuk's authentic self.

The notion of desire is even more apparent in a series of self-portraits within the prairie landscape. RR6, Saskatoon, August, 1975 (Fig. 13) evokes a similar posture of longing as Semchuk stands, backed by the flat and emptied prairie landscape, similarly Self-portrait at Grieg Lake, August, 1979 (Fig. 14) offers a primal utterance of the internal forces that pull at her. Similarly, RR6, Saskatoon, May, 1977 (Fig. 15), Churchill River, July, 1977 (Fig. 16), Emma Lake, August, 1977 (Fig. 17) and RR6, Saskatoon, March, 1978 (Fig. 18) also portray the same sort of yearning, a drawing from the forces of nature and landscape to articulate internal struggles with desire. Here Semchuk's relationship to the land is direct and not measured by the familiarity of place with other people. Rather, it is the mystic struggle of *her* internal voice that needs to be heard.

As Semchuk begins to engage the interiority of her identity, creative shifts begin to occur in her photographic style. Earlier photographic images by Semchuk recall a more traditional approach of taking pictures. Semchuk made static, documentary-style photos that captured spaces of home and region as well those who lived there, while using the

same process to scrutinize the course of change within her own body and psyche. She worked within the stylistic boundaries of mid-tone black and white images, maintaining simpler and more straightforward margins of expression in order to focus on the inherent qualities of the subject-in-portrait. What emerged thereafter was a more fluid, frenetic, and spiritual style of photography -- a 'gestural photography' -- one that signifies the presence of the photographer within the image, actualizing her motions and paralleling the experience of movement that is enacted by her subjects.

Semchuk's gestural photography, as she terms it, is a product of several experiences. It was first informed by watching her daughter Rowenna at play. Seeking to gain new experience, the child inside Semchuk told her: "Experience isn't about. Experience is. Go play with your daughter."<sup>44</sup> "Goat Crossing, Birch Lake, Saskatchewan, 1985-1986 (Fig. 19) is a photographic composite of Semchuk's daughter at play. In this composite Semchuk is watching Rowenna construct her own relationships to the whimsical and environmental forces around her. Semchuk watched while Rowenna played "like she had no fears in the world, swinging from trees and cross-braiding green slime, and doing things that so engaged her that she kept moving from one action to another without stopping . . ." <sup>45</sup>

Goat Crossing was one of the composites to the show Moving Parallels: Reconstructed Performances from Daily Life(1989) introducing this new-found expression of experience and articulating the ritual of expression within the everyday. In another

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<sup>44</sup> Sandra Semchuk, Moving Parallel: Reconstructed Performances from Daily Life, (Toronto: Gallery 44, 1989) 4.

composite Baba's Garden, Hafford, Saskatchewan (Fig.20), the space is charged with life forces and cosmic beginnings. In this assemblage of seventeen cibachrome prints, Semchuk honours the site of her grandmother's garden. The space is transformed visually from a modest patch of yard outside Baba's home to a terrestrial stage, one which is vividly coloured by lush vegetation and vibrant blossoms. Baba is everywhere within this composite, looming like Gaia, the earth goddess, presiding over all that thrives within her cosmic expanse. The life giving force that she radiates takes shape within a circular vortex at the centre of the composite, transforming a 'jumbling' of fragmented and blurred images into a swirling configuration of the agrarian cycle of life, death and regeneration.

Her technique of 'gestural photography' is also informed by the ancient art of Chinese brushwork. Having taken a course in this ancient art form, she learned that "each brushstroke was an articulation of who I was at the moment."<sup>46</sup> In Chinese brushwork it is essential for the entire body to participate. Unlike western forms of writing where the writer uses a pen in a controlled manner, the use of a brush in Chinese calligraphy involves bodily movement.

[It] sets the forces and the faculties of the whole body in action and so facilitates the learning process. Each character is a dynamic form that arises from the experiential depths of the calligraphers being. Each character is endowed with a life even more intense than the object to which it refers, and thus seems to have for the mind, an even higher degree of reality, even stronger presence.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Semchuk, Moving 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Photographic artist shoots from the hip", Star Phoenix, 10 Jun. 1989: 16

<sup>47</sup> Jean Francois Billetier, The Art of Chinese Writing

Casting away any arbitrary stylization by the author, Chinese brushwork relies on the energy and internal desire of the writer to bring life to the characters.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Semchuk's gestural photography is not particularly dependant upon creating a unique form of photography. Rather, Semchuk's camera is now used like a calligraphic brush, channeling the internal forces within Semchuk and endowing her subjects with a life in relation to the forces in and around them. Baba's Garden articulates this sort of dynamism, wherein "a strong internal organization"<sup>49</sup> occurs. Baba's flowered dress repeats itself along the perimeter of this composite acting as the binding agent that controls the forces of those energies in nature within her garden. In creating Chinese calligraphic-like characters with her camera, Semchuk ritualizes her movements to seek out those same life-force energies inherent in brushwork, "like taut energies which nevertheless circulate, turning back upon themselves like a perpetuum mobile."<sup>50</sup> Semchuk creates a vortex of blurred, kinetic images that are strong in their constitution and maintains these energies as though the distinct black borders around each image of the composite fortifies their containment. Yet, even the shape of the composite enacts some semblance of a calligraphic shape, one that can be reformed and re-illustrated without losing its abundant animation.

Semchuk's new photographic language has now put aside the unconventional approaches to picture taking. What is revealed within this new process is a compositional style that at first is indiscernible at times. Over time though, as one surveys the composite, from one frame to the next, relationships begin to form. While the individual images do not

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<sup>48</sup> Billetier, Chinese Writing 23.

<sup>49</sup> Billetier, Chinese Writing 24.



tell a story, each reveals a glanced moment wherein pockets of discovery may be found. In Self-portrait, Galiano Island, 1989 (Fig.21), Semchuk builds upon various provocative and dynamic image sequences. They form rituals of potent offerings to the primal forces of the earth wherein she posits herself, near the bottom of the composite. Semchuk locates herself amongst the cosmic narrative as one who is affecting and is affected by life giving forces. Within the composite, each sequence of works reads like a sentence from a book which provokes the reader to engage this visual narrative work from left to right, reading from top to bottom. The assemblage is weighted heavily by darkness, simplifying this ritual to the basic tenants of nature: darkness and light. Within the images that include Semchuk the visual perspective is full, rich and golden. Unlike Baba's Garden, where fragmented shots are juxtaposed in relation to the visual movement they create, ultimately forming a swirling vortex image, Galiano Island portrays layers of sequences based on relationships to dominant colours, arrangements of lighting and groupings which illustrate the same elemental phenomena. There is a sense of selfhood here in relation to the hierarchical sedimenting of natural forces that overwhelm human desire and power.

Moving Parallels introduced changes to Semchuk's photographic style, and marked significant transitions in Semchuk's life and work. Within the few years preceding 1982, Semchuk had lost her mother, her Baba, her marriage had ended and she had taken a teaching position at the University of Western Ontario, thus uprooting herself and her daughter and moving away from Saskatchewan. Such upheavals and profound losses left Semchuk searching for new beginnings: " Having lost the extended family and the

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<sup>50</sup> Billetier, Chinese Writing

nuclear family, I, too, felt little comfort in looking backwards."<sup>51</sup> She moved to New Mexico to find that change, "to put a rent in the mimetic processes that bound me to Saskatchewan so that I could build with energy a new vision from fresh landscapes and fresh mindscapes."<sup>52</sup>

While Semchuk was still teaching at the University of Western Ontario, she returned to Saskatoon to install Excerpts. Here, the process of understanding the sequencing within her photographic works took form as she came to realize that "it was not a matter of needing the image to establish my self-awareness, my own strong image. Within the surround, the sequences together formed a human landscape -- the shape of the horizon."<sup>53</sup> Semchuk became aware of her relationship within these sites, in the land, and in the relationships to people within those spaces of consciousness:

As I moved around within the landscape, I and the power poles that connect one home to another are the only referrants to shifts in perspective. As I move through the landscape, the changing gait of my movement through space fragments my experience of the succession of those shifts. I move in and out of consciousness as my awareness shifts from being within the motion of the gait to visualize the expanse of the landscape.<sup>54</sup>

The visual potency within these composites are their ability to simultaneously reveal multiple fragments of perception. In earlier photographs, Semchuk used a panoramic format to photograph her subjects, to purvey an all-encompassing expression of a given moment even though it was never Semchuk's intent to try and "document" her town or

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<sup>51</sup> Semchuk, Toward 16.

<sup>52</sup> Semchuk, Toward 16.

<sup>53</sup> Semchuk, Toward 14.

<sup>54</sup> Semchuk, Toward 15.

the people in her life, "to document it would mean to try and give the whole truth."<sup>55</sup> That intention still exists in her composite works, although now she combines many photographic shots of spaces that reside in a single experience and combines them into an assemblage. The multiple images she casts now create a visual texture that is dimensional, a transfiguration of those "shifts" of experience within a larger narrative experience. These same fragmented shots document the very real aspect of what Semchuk is witnessing/experiencing, being in her Baba's garden, for example, watching her grandmother tend to the plants that grow around her. Where one panoramic image was meant to encapsulate a fuller narrative, the assemblages Semchuk creates break apart the narrative giving a visual autonomy, a visual "identity", to the individual instances within the story/myth that unfolds. Each instance is clearly and boldly self-contained by the dark border of each image's frame allowing it to have its own importance no matter how fleeting, no matter how fractured the moment, it is allowed its own sanctity.

Within these combinations of images there are those that are imperceptible or intangible that tell of those unseen spaces, those spaces that comprise the mythic forces of nature, those spaces of chaos and intuition, spaces of memory and experience that are visually brought to the fore. They are mixed together with the more discernible fragments within a momentary experience, images the viewer can recognize more clearly and help to bring narrative to the contours of these complex photographic clusters. Like the power poles that "are the only referents to shifts in perspective" within the prairie landscape, the clarity of repeated images in Semchuk's composites act as those same referents to shifting perspectives within the experiences she has captured. In Baba's Garden, Baba's

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<sup>55</sup> Gary Michael Dault, "A special kind of truth in Meadow Lake, Sask." Saturday Night Nov. 1976: 96-97.

head appears in an inverted triangle: top left of the composite, lower middle area, as well as the top right hand corner. This visual device helps to guide the viewer through this journey/composite and helps to ensure that the viewer experiences all that Baba does within her world. In Self-portrait, Galiano Island, because of the linear trace of ritual that occurs, visually the viewer is incited to read from left to right, row by row.

As the more mystical forms of Semchuk's photography start to take on a life of their own her concentration on those forces which inhabit cosmic beginnings and primal origins bring context to the next shift within her work. Throughout her life Semchuk's father has been a fundamental source which informed her way of thinking, her concerns for people, and the actions which she has taken in order to affect change. Since Sandra was a child, Martin recognized that there was already a special collaborative effort between them. A "natural evolution" occurred from the long walks they would take together when she was a very little girl. An exchange of fundamental ideals about people, love, respect and family developed: "We have worked together all your life, pretty well. So it is something that is so very natural and very normal to us that it is very difficult to talk about. This is the way we are."<sup>56</sup>

As a second generation Slavic Canadian Semchuk's own story merges the histories of the Ukrainian and Polish diasporas. "My psychic and emotional underterritory," Semchuk writes, "the fossils and ancient layers of history of the old country inhabit me, I articulate

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<sup>56</sup> Pierre Dessureault, How Far Back is Home... (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995) 33.

them thinking that they are newly invented."<sup>57</sup> It was those Ukrainians who lived in her town of Meadow Lake that divested the texture of her cultural and ethnic identity, and it was her father who gave root to the growth of her own desire to seek out those strands of her ethnic heritage.

In Ukrainians Vote to Go Their Own Way (Fig.22), Semchuk reveals the layers of her own ethnic heritage, visually articulating the relationship with her father while a piece of Ukrainian embroidery superimposed over their faces fastens their words:

Father's Voice

A family is like a small nation to me. When my grandfather Andrew came to Canada from Ukraine he brought with him pain and suffering from decades of brutal wars over the deep rich soil of Ukraine; from the imposed slavery of the overlords. He brought his history.

Daughter's Voice

Dad, you have taught me that home is where you have choice. For Ukrainian people, Ukraine has not been home for many generations. They have been exiles in their own land. As a Canadian of Ukrainian ancestry I carry that sense of exile learned from my grandparents and from you. For me, freedom of Ukrainian people, their independence, is an assertion of the right to have a home and the right to make decisions in that home. Boundaries define the territory (both inner and outer) that we call home. Love is the recognition of and respect for the home of another individual, people, or nation.<sup>58</sup>

As a child Martin faced many of the hardships that Ukrainian-Canadians suffered including the hurt and anger of discrimination. In a one hour documentary entitled Acceptance, Semchuk engages her father in dialogue searching out the stories and emotions that surface when issues of ethnicity and his life as a child are considered. The

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<sup>57</sup> Semchuk, Questionnaire 1999.

pain of growing up in a place where others looked down upon him because of his ethnic heritage provoked Martin to fight back and to work very hard. His love for family was in part due to the great amount of time he spent away at school, away from his family. These are the stories that he tells his daughter Sandra. Through her own work these stories she retells help to shape the landscape of her own life:

I am a part of the telling of my father's story. His words resonate in my body. He tells me about his passion to become a lawyer. How he had to go 32 miles away from his home to Prince Albert in order to go to high school. How he was so very lonely in that tarpaper shack with a stove, a table, and a small cot. How he would run the 32 miles home and 32 miles back every weekend in order to be with his family.<sup>59</sup>

Martin had always believed that his life was meant for helping others, to help those who had been forgotten or neglected within a democratic system. He believed that it was his duty to find a voice for them and assist them to exercise their right to happiness and prosperity. This activist purpose is rooted deeply within the Semchuk family. Back in Ukraine before the Semchuk family had made its way to Canada Sandra's grandfather was working to affect social change. Her grandfather, Andrew Woljew and his cousins plotted together to try and bring down the feudal system in Ukraine. Life in Ukraine, Kostash writes, during Semchuk's grandfather's time in the late 1800s offered very little hope politically or economically for Ukrainians:

Squeezed between the Polish landlords and the Austrian army, reduced to a strip of land that could support fewer and fewer people, denied literacy and cultural self-expression, consigned to high taxes and low wages, suspicious of the priests' compromised position within a state-financed church and harassed by personal debts piling up[ at the tavern, the Ukrainian peasant was at his wit's

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<sup>58</sup> Dessereault, *How Far* 35.

<sup>59</sup> Sandra Semchuk/Martin Semchuk *Acceptance: A Father/Daughter Collaboration*, 1988.

end precisely when the [Canadian] government opened the North-West Territories for settlement.<sup>60</sup>

The Canadian possibility for freedom and prosperity was an escape from the bleak conditions of late nineteenth-century Ukraine. Yet as a Ukrainian immigrant living in Canada, as discussed earlier, life had its own considerable difficulties. The effect of Anglo-Saxon sensibilities and culture on Ukrainians left many new Slavic immigrants disillusioned.

One of the writers that Semchuk has often referred to as being influential to her approach concerning issues of identity is Charles Taylor. In his essay "The Politics of Recognition", Taylor writes that the psychic and emotional health of an individual and even a group of people is affected by the recognition of their identity:

. . . our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confirming or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.<sup>61</sup>

Ukrainian immigrants to Canada worked hard to maintain what cultural references they could from the Old World in order to maintain their Ukrainian identity in a new land and feel as though they had a source for belonging somewhere. Living in Canada necessitated these new immigrants and especially their children to assimilate to customs, beliefs, and a language that was not theirs. Ukrainians in Canada were often coerced into forgetting who they were for the sake of helping to build a new nation as well as to help maintain Anglo-Saxon pretenses. There were those Ukrainians who did feel encouraged

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<sup>60</sup> Kostash, Baba's Children 13.

to create a new life for themselves seeing the potential that the new world had to offer and who welcomed the idea of considering themselves Canadian first. Nonetheless Ukrainians were forced to reconstruct themselves into being something other than Ukrainian and, at the same time, acknowledge the fact that other Canadians would not so easily accept Ukrainians as equal partners in this national enterprise. As such, Ukrainians continue to negotiate themselves through a distorted sense of identity and belonging. Taylor explains that this type of misrecognition can leave its victims with "a crippling self-hatred."<sup>62</sup> Taylor also states that we as individuals have the fundamental right to be recognized within our own individual identity and not just by a group or national identity. However, these recognitions are built upon relationships with others, "we define our identity always in dialogue with sometimes in struggle against the things our significant others see in us."<sup>63</sup> Semchuk uses Taylor's words to articulate how her photos operate within this dialogical process:

Thus my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.<sup>64</sup>

Sandra's strong socialist beliefs stem from the concerns that her father had for the well-being of Ukrainians in Canada. Martin worked tirelessly to affect social and economic change in his home province of Saskatchewan. As part of Tommy Douglas' CCF party, he actively participated in the formation of the Medicare system that was later adopted

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, "Politics" 25.

<sup>62</sup> Semchuk, Questionnaire, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, "Politics" 26.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, "Politics" 26



nationwide. Martin's teachings to Sandra were based on this socialist ideology that even a few people, with persistence and a belief in what they were doing could over time make change happen.<sup>65</sup> His teachings were also strongly apparent in the acts of everyday life. Walking with Sandra in Northern Saskatchewan he compares the choices we make in life to the seemingly simplistic process of eating and discarding berries picked along the way. As they walk Sandra and her father discuss faith:

Sandra

Do you think that kind of loss of faith is something that happens at middle age?

Martin

Things come and go. . . you take things upon yourself , then you discard them, and then you take something else. . . it keeps going. . . and I don't worry about it.<sup>66</sup>

As Martin surveys those berries he has plucked from the nearby branches he sees that some are ripe and edible while others are either too ripe or are not yet ready to ingest. From this ritual of choice, the acceptance and rejection of Saskatoon berries Martin analogizes that we make similar choices about faith and other personal ideologies. At different times in our lives faith serves more of a purpose, it is more fulfilling, and can be as sweet and sustaining as those berries Martin and Sandra choose to eat. While other times, faith can be as meaningless as the lifeless and unripened berries they discard along their way. The notion of the impermanence of life, of the lack of continuity in choice and change, impacts on the tone of Martin's perspective of life. It also marks a certain resolve and acceptance Martin has undertaken in these final years. Seeing My Father See His Own Death, Yuma, Arizona (1983) (Figs.23 & 24) is a series of nine cibachrome prints

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<sup>65</sup> Sandra Semchuk, unedited video footage, 1989. Sandra and her father going for a walk in rural Northern Saskatchewan. Sandra and her father talked about relationships and the nature of life and people.

<sup>66</sup> Semchuk, video interview

that mark out a narrative of the transition between life and death and the rite of passage age brings. In these images Martin is seen trekking through groves of tropical-like trees and then walking along a narrow river that curves and recedes to a point off in the distance. The landscape betrays a feeling of isolation as though Martin were a castaway on a deserted island trying to find other life, other human contact. In this series Martin is dressed differently from The Descent. Instead of being clad in vibrant reds and his physical presence being radiated by a bright sun-filled sky that eclipses his form, in Seeing My Father, Martin is presented as unshaven, less mythical in stature, more human-like, wearing an overcoat, seeming more lost and lonely in this Arizona setting. This work provides yet another glimpse into the precarious relationship we have with death and in witnessing our loved ones negotiate their way through this experience. Seeing My Father also prefaces the ensuing experiences between Semchuck and her father that culminate in the work Coming to Death's Door.

## Chapter II

This chapter discusses the theme of death in the exhibition of works, Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration and the manner in which it is engaged by the artist and its viewers. It looks at the various ways in which death incites anxiety and provokes the immediacy of identity and self-awareness. The first section of this chapter will extend the issues discussed in Chapter One about the various factors of Semchuk's identity placing these elements within the context of her relationship with her father Martin Semchuk. Through the course of Semchuk's life, her father has had a profound influence on her personal, ideological, and artistic development. Coming to Death's Door deals directly with Martin's own death-in-life situations, his anxieties over dying, and how Semchuk explores the impact of this inevitable loss on her own identity.

Semchuk's identity as a daughter to her elderly Ukrainian-Canadian father invokes certain rituals concerning death and the traditional roles that surface between family members. The discussion of these rituals and relations will be analyzed from the text of dialogues between Semchuk and her father. Concerns about death and the processes humans engage in order to cope with the anxieties and emotions that surface in such critical times will be explored with the help of two key references, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's On Death and Dying<sup>67</sup> and Dorothy Becvar's In the Presence of Grief<sup>68</sup>. An important issue in this analysis will be the shifts that have occurred from Old World rituals of dying to those

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<sup>67</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying (London: MacMillan Ltd., 1969).

<sup>68</sup> Dorothy Becvar, In the Presence of Grief: Helping Family Members Resolve Death, Dying and Bereavement Issues (New York: The Guildford Press, 2001).

more clinical and sanitized methods we now use today. Within this context, Mircea Eliade's essay "Mythologies of Death: An Introduction"<sup>69</sup> will also be considered, particularly her investigation of the ways humans have mythologized death and dying around the transformation of the spirit, the soul, and of the person. The tradition of oral storytelling to maintain the history of the Semchuk family lineage is played out both in the visual narratives of the photographic composites of Coming to Death's Door and in the texts of dialogue printed on the suspended cloths within the exhibition space. This act of oral storytelling brings into question the role of authentic author and the importance of the author's presence within the making and telling of the story. Foucault's essay "What is an Author?"<sup>70</sup> will provide the theoretical framework in this section of the chapter. As well, this chapter will consider death as it has been articulated in classical descent myths. The texts of Tamara Agha-Jaffar's Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth<sup>71</sup> and John Warden's Orpheus: The Metaphors of a Myth<sup>72</sup> will help contextualize the dynamics of descent myths and articulate the coping strategies utilized in death and dying.

In July 1988, Martin Semchuk suffered a major heart attack. Feeling that the stress of being confined to a hospital's institutional apparatus would hasten his death, Sandra initiated her father's escape from the hospital so that he could spend his last days at home. Martin Semchuk survived his heart attack only to experience another near-death situation

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<sup>69</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Mythologies of Death: An Introduction" Religious Encounters with Death Reynolds & Waugh (eds) (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

<sup>70</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author" The Foucault Reader Paul Rabinow (ed.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>71</sup> Tamara Agha-Jaffar, Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2002).

<sup>72</sup> John Warden, Orpheus: Metaphors of a Myth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

in July 1990. What occurred during the time was an ongoing intimate dialogue between father and daughter, one that enacted a ritual of preparing for death and the emotional and psychic responses involved.

Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration became the creative manifestation of that experience. The installation itself consists of photographic composites as a primary visual focal point. One composite entitled The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 28), is juxtaposed to two text panels made of white cloth, with the dialogues of father and daughter within referencing the images of the composite. Bearing a similar title to the name of the exhibition, Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 25), comprises two photographic composites that flank two other panels of text on the other side of the exhibition space. The composites and text panels of the exhibition take the shape of a mythic journey to 'Death's door' with profound awakenings and reconciliation that occur along the way. The installation space simulates a domestic environment akin to Martin's bedroom where he convalesced. This synthesized environment offers further symbolic and physical referents that engage the viewer and create dialogue around issues of death and its place in our daily lives.

In Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration (1991) Semchuk engages in dialogue with her father, so that they both may reveal their related fears around death. This process of dialogue is exercised in four distinct ways. First, there is the initial interview process where Semchuk talks with her father about death and father and daughter reveal the sources of their own anxieties concerning mortality. The interactions

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that are visually articulated in the photographic composites are a second way through which Semchuk and her father engage dialogue. The third form concerns the dialogues that have been extracted from the initial interviews between Semchuk and her father and have been printed on the text panels that hang in the installation space. The fourth way in which Semchuk's dialogues with her father is through the creation of the installation space and the interaction that is generated between the viewer and the installation.

As Dorothy Becvar writes "To understand fully what it means to be in the presence of grief we must speak of death."<sup>73</sup> In the process of creating the images and text for the show, Semchuk initiates conversations with her father. A flow of dialogue results and expressions of concern, fear, anger and acceptance are exchanged. In a videotaped interview<sup>74</sup> with Martin, Semchuk explores the experiences her father has had with death and how he has gained insight into the value of life and relationships. These conversations revealed the stories of his life as a child, his recollections of the death of his grandfather and the death of his wife Josephine.

I know when Josy died, there was no reason for living, absolutely no reason for living. I had a terrible time. I went down to one hundred and twenty pounds. I didn't want to live. I can't understand that, I don't know why, but I just didn't want to. As time went on, I began to take interest in things, I began painting<sup>75</sup>. And somehow I come out of it. Now, I still miss her as much as ever, you know, I miss her a lot. But, it's different. Time has changed things. Time is a great healer. That has helped me.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Becvar, Presence of Grief 6.

<sup>74</sup> Sandra Semchuk, interview with Martin Semchuk, 1988. Semchuk engaged her father Martin in a series of unedited video interviews from which she culled information for her exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration and for subsequent works. They are primarily discussions between Semchuk and her father that are not entirely formal in their process but rather informal, intimate and casual.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Semchuk was both a writer and a painter and his work was often given out to other family members.

<sup>76</sup> Semchuk, interview.

Though these particular words are not expressed within the show itself, Coming to Death's Door becomes a testament to the open and mutually respectful relationship that Semchuk and her father share. In her earlier works where the issue of death was examined, a distance was maintained between Semchuk and her subject that has now been broken down in Coming to Death's Door. In Self-portrait, Baba's Bedroom, Meadow Lake, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1977 Semchuk uses the mirror within her Baba's bedroom to reflect back those anxieties around her grandmother's death and reveal both physical and intimate connections she had with Baba. Yet, no matter how revealing and accessible the mirror seems, in offering access beyond the mirror's surface, it still remains a physical barrier to that which lies beyond. Seeing My Father See His Own Death (1983) offers a more raw expression of that time before death, before that time when transition occurs, when the darkness of our own memories and experiences affect change toward new life. These initial exercises in confronting death and dying helped to evolve Coming to Death's Door into more of a collaborative experience for Semchuk and her father. In this exhibition shared stories of love and loss make possible revelations of fears, expressions of desires, and intimations of personal moments and feelings that most often are left unspoken during times of death and dying. From this exchange, Martin is able to give more of himself to the awareness and acknowledgement of his own mortality.

And then I went through this terrible period when I had my heart attack back in 1988. And, I wanted to live. I did not want to die. But I am a realist and I had thought that my time had come. And I had to do everything I could to prepare for it.<sup>77</sup>

In her book In the Presence of Grief, Dorothy Becvar writes that most people receive from their families a variety of messages, "both implicit and explicit, about whether death

was to be considered an uninvited stranger or a welcome guest."<sup>78</sup> She explains that it is important to look back to earlier stories and understandings families had about death and how these ideas were translated to us as children. For Martin, death was something he experienced as a fact of life to be shared with family. Martin also understood that in nature examples of the cycle of life were all around him. Martin retells a story about a trip that he took with a couple of friends to Williams River when he was some twenty years younger. During this trip the lessons his friend taught him about the life cycle of the Jack Pine tree gave Martin insight about the nature of life. Martin noticed amongst a grouping of Jack Pine trees the proliferation of seedling cones that rested on and around each tree. Martin shares his story:

Tom is a biologist, among other things, he is very interested in the nature of things. . . I said to Tom that I saw these Jack Pine trees and they just had tons and tons of pine cones on them. And Tom said "Well that's understandable. You probably also saw tree trunks there right beside them that had completely rotted and just saw the rotten outline of the tree trunk where the tree had grown, lived, and died." And I said "Yes, yes I did." And he said, "well that tree is figured that it is time to die. And so it's producing all the seed it can to produce its young. And if you look closely around some trees, you will see where the young have sprung up." And sure enough, the next time I went out there, there it was. And it was a very important lesson for me.<sup>79</sup>

In The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 29 & 30), the story about life and death and the Jack Pine seems to be echoed here in the photographic composite. This composite is dominated by the proliferation of trees, clustered in a sweltering group that echoes the lushness of Martin's life and his effect on those he has parented. He hovers around these trees in some points as though he is the sun god himself providing the warmth and

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<sup>77</sup> Semchuk, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Becvar, Presence of Grief 6.

<sup>79</sup> Semchuk, interview.



sustenance needed from the radiating sun. In other photographs of the composite Martin is immersed in the foliage, deeply connected to these organisms of various origins and of various ages. It is as though Martin has become the aged Jack Pine, knowing his time is near, and thus extends his fertile reach over the land, casting out his progeny so that life, and his lineage may grow anew. In and amongst these trees we see the face of his progeny, the face of Sandra, radiating the life that once was Martin's youth, and now is hers to exercise. What we see here is Semchuk's expression of love for her father, and the acceptance of his inevitable death as something that is a part of life. The life that has been lived, the death that is yet to be experienced is all part of the life-long ritual of their relationship.

Death plays an important role in the quotidian rituals and traditions of many cultures. Classical Greek myths highlighted stories around Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, and her daughter Persephone to explain the cycle of life and death, of rejuvenation and regrowth in nature. Myths such as Orpheus and Eurydice gave meaning to the physical and spiritual transformations that occur in life and death. Ancient mythologies were developed around the cycle of life and death and various other aspects of the natural world in order "to render comprehensible what would otherwise be incomprehensible."<sup>80</sup> Myths humanized the various aspects of nature through the form of gods and heroes and thus created a felt sense of relatability for the community. Myths were attempts "to invest regularity and order in an otherwise apparently chaotic world."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Tamara Agha-Jaffar, Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002) p5.

In her essay "*Mythologies of Death: An Introduction*" Myrcea Eliade also discusses the relationship between death and life and how this relationship has been articulated in ancient myths. She begins her discussion by clarifying the disparity between those people who see death as a spiritual encounter and those who do not:

For the common non-religious person, death was emptied of any religious significance even before life lost its meaning. For some, the ineptitude of death anticipated the discovery of the absurdity and the meaninglessness of life. . . . 'Then we die' -- admirably expresses the Western man's understanding of his destiny, but it is a somewhat different understanding from that found in many other cultures. There, too, people strive to pierce the mystery of death and to grasp its meaning.<sup>82</sup>

Death in myths takes on two particular themes. The first theme addresses how humans lost their immortality and became mortal. Within this theme, death is brought upon humans through three different means, either as "a consequence of man's transgressing a divine commandment"<sup>83</sup>, through demonic intervention as an adversarial act against the Creator, or through the more common mean wherein death is brought on by an absurd accident or a stupid choice made by the first ancestors.

The second theme of death in myths looks at how death is encountered and challenged by either a hero or god in order to redeem a loved one. It is a theme that uses the act of death and the struggle to defy death as a necessary performance, a necessary challenge in order to become spiritually transformed and enlightened. It is a common theme used to evoke the heroic attributes in humans, qualifying their actions as necessary rites of

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<sup>81</sup> Agha-Jaffar, *Demeter and Persephone* 5.

<sup>82</sup> Eliade, *Mythologies* 13.

<sup>83</sup> Eliade, *Mythologies*, 13.

passage in order to gain access to that higher, spiritual realm. Descent myths are the manifestation in many cultures of that transformative process:

Beliefs concerning the descent into the underworld are often connected with the concept of a three-layer cosmos, according to which the human world is located midway between the realm of spirits above and the realm of the dead below, the "underworld."<sup>84</sup>

As Martin was recuperating from his first heart attack he was under the belief that he in fact was dying and would not recover from this. His pragmatism around his own death initiated a series of rituals, of putting his affairs in order so that he could leave peacefully accepting death and be able to leave his family without any residual burden or fear. In a series of unedited video interviews Semchuk attempts to gain further insight as to what extent her father has reconciled his experiences with death.

Martin:

I did everything I could possibly do preparing for death. And lo and behold I didn't need to.

Sandra: But you've done it. What does it mean now that you have done it?

Martin: Well, it's just done, that's it. There's nothing more to do.

Sandra: So now you don't have to worry about doing it. So maybe that is where your freedom has come from?

Martin: Yeah but the danger is too, that if you have done all the work that needed doing and there is no more work to do, what the hell are you doing here? You see, my work is done.

Sandra: So maybe you can never really be free as a human being?

Martin: No, you cannot be totally free. You must, you still must have a future, within your mind, within yourself. You must still have a future in order to keep on living. If within your mind you have no future, you are dead. You may appear to be living but in every other sense you are dead, because why are you here, what

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<sup>84</sup> Lawrence Sullivan, "Descent into the Underworld" Death, Afterlife and the Soul (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989) 117.

are you doing? If you are not doing anything or producing anything of value to anyone, why are you here?<sup>85</sup>

Martin's journey through death afforded him a transformative experience, one that allowed him freedom from the emotional and psychological constraints that years of struggles, hard times, and concerns for the betterment of humans had weighed on him. He emerged from that process, that descent journey freed from the anger and the hurt of earlier years:

I love people but keep them at a certain distance. I smile even when I am hurting. As a young person inside I hurt so very, very badly. I can handle people at arm's length, I can, I really can. My boundaries are down after the heart attack. The problems of trust in relationships are the same as the problems of trust between nations. I want so profoundly to see the boundaries between nations removed. After my death experiences I am prepared to remove boundaries.<sup>86</sup>

By tracing the processes of her father's experiences with death and his subsequent periods of recuperation, Semchuk is synthesizing the mythical descent stories of classical mythology that speak of the journey through loss, reconciliation, acceptance and transformation of the self. The descent stories that Semchuk initiates in the course of documenting her father's near-death experiences was not something that was planned, ". . . I didn't set out to do a descent story, descent stories happen. . . "<sup>87</sup> From this statement, that descent stories "happen" there is an implication that in humans there is an inherent need to 'ritualize' experiences with death. Somehow, in some way, we understand death to be a profound stage in our lives, or, that we are so internally affected by death,

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<sup>85</sup> Semchuk, interview.

<sup>86</sup> Sandra Semchuk & Martin Semchuk Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration . Figure 31, text panel for Coming to Death's Door, Cochin Saskatchewan, "Father's Voice 3:"

<sup>87</sup> Kapustianyk, interview.

emotionally, spiritually, psychically, that we must through some course of ritualized movement or expression sanctify its occurrence. Like Eliade's discussion of the second theme of death in myths, Martin's experience with death mirrors those same myths that set the hero on a journey, to pass through certain challenges and conditions so that the hero may emerge transformed by the experience. As Martin earlier explained to Sandra, he underwent a process of finalizing whatever business he had left undone so that when he did die he would not be leaving his family to deal with any unnecessary details. This process of Martin's process becomes a ritual of tasks through which he internally comes to terms with his own mortality, in order to erase the fears and anxieties and accept his impending death. That death did not end up taking him then left Martin transformed, understanding and accepting things in his life that had for years been problematic. Martin had faced the challenge of death, walked the path to the Underworld and had returned with his life and a new perspective. Now Martin could live the rest of his life celebrating its joys rather than its pain. His life is now built around new boundaries, ones which afford him the space to enjoy the everyday moments of life and no longer feel the pull of social and political demands and needs of other people.

In preparing for Coming to Death's Door Semchuk conceives a sacred space within which the rituals of honour, respect and love are revisited. While beginning the process of photographing her father as he recuperates Semchuk sees that ancient rituals spoken about in descent myths start to emerge in her father's daily life. She sees that he invokes familiar descent stories that parallel the journey that her father is taking in witnessing his own mortality.

Its interesting that how sometimes stories about how to recuperate oneself or someone else either they speak of going down into some kind of descent into Hades or a notion of the underworld, or else, they speak about climbing up to the top of the mountain.<sup>88</sup>

These stories which articulate the journey of death and the transformation of the self either from one realm to another or from one state of being to another are the kind of stories through which ancient cultures expressed the profoundness of the cycle of life. In her explanation of death and recuperation as it relates to her father's near death experiences and the subsequent production of Coming to Death's Door, Semchuk tells this story:

There is a Japanese story that talks about a woman whose husband has just come back from the war, he's just raging, it's like she doesn't have him at all. He's so angry, he won't do anything, you know, nothing makes him happy, so she decides to go see the medicine woman and she asks "Well, what should I do?" And the medicine woman says "Oh, I know what you should do, you should go to the top of this mountain and you should get a white hair from the chin of the Great Bear--this great black bear that lived at the top of the mountain. And the woman said "whoah" but still, she would do anything because she had the love of her husband and she wanted to help her husband. So she climbs to the top of this hill and it takes her a long time to climb up but she is very careful. And she goes up, way up, and it takes her a long time and finally she gets to the top and there's white snow everywhere and it's very, very cold. And she experiences a great deal of hardship in the process of going up the hill, and she gets up to the top and she sees these tracks that lead into this cave. And so she leaves a bit of food at the entrance to the cave and then she goes away and the bear comes out and takes the food. Then, later, she takes a little more food and keeps on doing this until the bear asks "Who is there?" And the woman comes forward and the bear is very, very angry that she would come and trespass in his territory like that. And the woman gets down on her knees and begs, she says, "I've come here to help my husband..." and she tells her story. And the bear takes compassion and lets her have the hair and she takes one of the hairs and goes back down being very careful to honour the ancestors along her way. So she gets to the bottom of the mountain and she says "I've got the hair" and the medicine

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<sup>88</sup>Kapustianyk, interview. 1999.

woman looks at the hair and then looks back at the woman and says "Well, now you have the patience and the courage which got you the hair, now go back and be patient and courageous and be with your husband."<sup>89</sup>

Much of the message that many myths around death articulate are those processes of personal transformation that occur either through challenging death or in making concessions of surrender in the face of death.

Within the show Coming to Death's Door<sup>90</sup>, Martin's near-death experiences are retold through a mythology that ritualizes his journey through death. Martin was unaware at the time that these photographs were being taken that his movements paralleled ancient descent myths: "When I told my father that the descent story was very old, thousands of years old, he was amazed that his actions paralleled such ancient and archetypal stories." In The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 29 & 30), a mythology is created that echoes the same narratives of the Greek myths of Persephone and Orpheus.

The story of Persephone is one that deals with an untimely separation of parent and child, the parent's success at locating and retrieving her child and their reunion that is at once joyful but also forever transforms the state of those involved. The story begins with the beautiful young maiden Persephone who is playing in a grassy field with her maiden friends. Overcome by the beauty of a Narcissus flower, Persephone kneels to pluck it from the ground, at which point, the ground itself opens wide enough to release Hades,

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<sup>89</sup> Kapustianyk, interview.

<sup>90</sup> The exhibition Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration consists of three photographic composites. Two are similarly entitled Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (fig.22), while the other third composite is entitled, The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan(fig.23).

god of the underworld and his chariot and horses. Hades seizes the maiden and takes her back down into his kingdom of the dead, the Underworld. Demeter, Persephone's mother and goddess of the grain, hears Persephone's cry and immediately sets out to seek the aid of Helios, god of the sun. Helios explains that it was indeed Hades who came up from the Underworld and took her daughter, all under the permission of Persephone's father, Zeus. Enraged by her daughter's abduction she leaves Mount Olympus and takes the form of an old maid seeking shelter in the city of Eleusis. There she works as a nursemaid to a noble family. Over time Demeter becomes overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her daughter. As goddess of the grain she vows to withhold her bounty from the earth and let all humans perish in her misery. Seeing the suffering of the humans Zeus summons Demeter and concedes to the release of Persephone from the Underworld so that she may return to her mother. One condition remained, that if Persephone ate anything of the Underworld, the conditions of her release would be compromised. While in Hades' stay, Persephone indeed eats the seed of a pomegranate. As a result, Persephone must spend four months of the year in Hades and the rest of the time with her mother. While Persephone is with Demeter all the world will enjoy the bounty of the earth, but when Persephone is with Hades, her mother's sorrow introduces the annual cycle of winter.

The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 29 & 30) reveals the same process of loss, desperation, searching, recovery and concessions that the Persephone myth illustrates. Within the composite, Martin is seen as a custodian of nature, watering the trees planted on his land. He looms as a shadowy presence, one who carries with him a timeless



wisdom and cosmic prudence gifted him by the spirit voices of his agrarian ancestors. He is instrumental in shaping this natural world, this little piece of land lush with vegetation. Yet as he journeys through the trees to the lakefront and pulls from it water to replenish the thirsty forest, death chances an encounter, an opportunity to call Martin beyond the River Styx. Martin feels his heart is failing him, he is not getting enough oxygen as a result of the physically laborious attempt at walking down to the lake.

Here the role of parent and child is reversed from the Persephone myth. In The Descent, Martin is the character who is being 'abducted' by death to descend into the Underworld. In the composite, images of Martin vary from those which are forced up against the picture plain to those which recede deep into the back of the picture. As well, the repetition of images as seen in the left hand side of the composite shows a succession of Martin images in a descending pattern, reiterating the idea of descending into death. It is Sandra who becomes the Demeter in this story, the one who journeys with her father, alongside his descent in order to witness and detour death's focus and bring her father back to the land of the living. However, unlike the Persephone myth, there is an equity of trust between father and daughter as they become companions in Martin's experiences with death:

I am in my father's home on the top of a hill in the midst of a bird sanctuary. From the window the view is vast -- sky and water and pelicans floating by. Each day I watch my father go down the steep hill to the lake where he starts the first pump to bring water up the hill to the second pump which he starts next. The pumps are quite new, brilliant yellow, and once he primes the first one, they respond quickly to his pull on the starter ropes. This is a ritual. When the second pump is going he listens to the hose to hear if the water is running through it. He walks the rest of the way up the hill, unrolls the long green hose, and begins the long

slow task of watering each of the one hundred and seven trees that he has planted. Today my father has had a shock. He does not feel well. Yet he wants to go down the hill to start the pumps. I am mute. I cannot forbid my father to go down this hill. I am outside his own dialogue with death. He says when you die you are dead, nothing more. He is not giving up his soul to any construct of a god for safekeeping. There is another story being played out here. My father is setting himself up to learn something. I am scared but I trust him. It is his choice.<sup>91</sup>

The myth of Demeter and Persephone offers insight into the relationship between parent and child, between generational ties that, where death is summoned, the cycle of life is both altered and yet renewed. In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice a similar quest to retrieve a loved one offers a more tragic ending and yet reveals perhaps a more spiritually transformative experience. The two composites of Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 26 & 27), parallel the story of Orpheus and his journey into the Underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice. As the result of a serpent's bite while playing in a grassy field, the young and beautiful Eurydice dies and is taken to the Underworld. Distraught by the loss of his wife, Orpheus decides to descend to Hades and convince the lord of the Underworld to release Eurydice back into Orpheus' care. Orpheus descends into the Underworld and approaches Hades, using his lyre to make sweet music that appeals to the emotions of Persephone, queen of the dead. Hades, abiding his wife's request, releases Eurydice from death on the proviso that should, on their journey back to the land of the living, Orpheus ever attempt to look at Eurydice before reaching the surface, she would be returned to the Underworld forever after. As they journey back up to the surface Orpheus can no longer hear the footsteps of his beloved behind him. Orpheus looks back only to see Eurydice being pulled back to the land of the dead.

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<sup>91</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door, Figure 28, text panel for The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, "daughter's Voice

In the composite to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 26 & 27), the type of ritual seen in the first composite performs the ritual of moving from one place to another from the internal to the external spaces of life and death just like Orpheus did in his descent to the Underworld. Unlike Demeter who never had to make the descent to the Underworld to retrieve Persephone, it was the journey that Orpheus embarks upon to the Underworld that is central to the myth. Orpheus passes through the various realms of life and death and simultaneously experiences all the anger, anxiety, hurt, loss, concessions, hopefulness, and subsequent grief that go along with the process of experiencing death. As Semchuk explains, this composite, through its multiple images of tent flaps, gives the sense of impermanence and transition. It is a similar experience of impermanence and transition that occurs in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice between the realms of life and death and between the emotions of love and loss. The accompanying composite to this work reveals the sense of searching out a loved one in the midst of crisis. In the composite wherein images of Martin's bedroom are assembled, Sandra is situated in the middle, tired, emotional, concerned. The absence of Martin in this composite alludes to the source of Sandra's distress, much like the distress Orpheus felt upon realizing the death of his beloved, or Demeter over the abduction of her daughter Persephone. As Orpheus used his gift for music and his lyre as the source of negotiating with the gods to return Eurydice to his arms, Sandra becomes like the mythical Orpheus, using her camera in a performative way to negotiate her way through her father's descent. By trying to parallel her father's actions Sandra is using her camera to maintain a connection to her father, even if it is to witness his experience with death. That she might step into the

active space of his experience and parallel his movements with her camera allows her in some way, like the actions of those mythological heroes, to pull something at least of her father back to the land of the living. Through the production of these photographs she is able to 'capture' her father on film, forever keeping him near, and cheating the gods of their desire to take Martin to the Underworld.

In the act of adding text to the show Semchuk also alludes to the literary act of writing myths. Through her videotaped interviews with her father, Semchuk pulls out dialogues of Martin's experiences with death and uses them as part of the installation. Like scrolls that reveal the script of ancient myths, Semchuk brings a sense of timelessness to this contemporary experience through the use of the text panels. On white parachute cloth she forms the words of herself and her father, of two figures who enjoin in the conversations of death. Like the defiant Orpheus, Martin faces the god of the Underworld and challenges death.

I am close to death. I think I am hallucinating but it is very real. I am coming to the doors of hell. The little devil stands in front. He has a square, not a round, head. He is red, as red as can be, like fire. And there he is grinning from ear to ear, a very pleasant guy. Very friendly. Standing there. I don't like him. I just grab him and lift him up. The doors open for me, big garage-type doors, and I walk right in holding this guy by the scruff of the neck. There are bodies all over the place smouldering. Everything is just smoke and stench. I walk a long ways to the very back of this dark place where there is another set of doors, the back doors. By the back door there is a peg. I just stick that red devil up on that peg. He is still smiling. And I walk out through the doors to another world. It is that simple.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Semchuk, Death's Door Figure 31, text panel to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, "Father's Voice 2:"

In both The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, and Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, the visual narrative is peaked by the intensely coloured photographic composites that loom on the wall. Arranged like puzzle pieces, these visual conceptions of memory push forward from the sky-like walls, weighted by their intensity both in colour and form as well as by the profoundness of the subject -- the anxiety of loss. At the same time these composites, placed on an airy, sky-blue coloured wall, are gentle in the way they pass like clouds on a calm prairie sky, slowly, quietly, dissipating through portal-like structures that have been fashioned over the gallery window and entranceway (figs. 24-29). The contrast of the strictly outlined images in the composites, their vivid colouring and frenetic imagery, set against the peaceful, tranquil installation of light airy drapes and the serenity of the blue walls, conveys the confusion of emotions that come with death. Yet these composites, formed like puzzle pieces, imply a larger narrative that exists outside the borders of its frame. That these composites seem to float toward the window, to be drawn out of the material world of Martin's bedroom to the ephemeral and spiritual realm of the sky creates a larger mythos that parallels those ancient stories.

It is the visual components that urge the viewer to perform the same type of ritual that Sandra might have performed in her movements between her temporary dwelling outside to her father's bedroom inside his house. While taking care of her father as he recuperates from his heart attack, Sandra situates herself in a tent, a temporary dwelling outside her father's home. A choice has been made here by the artist. Whether because of her respect for her father's personal space or because of a strategic placing of herself outside the house as an element of this performed ritual, Semchuk creates a space that

invokes transition. Every component to this show suggests an impermanence, a sense of transient behaviour. Without consistency, without predictability, our fate is left to the whims of the chaotic and random forces of nature. It is the inherent desire within each of us to try and control the precarious playing-out of our own existence, to gain control, and to create distance from the painful experiences of life.

The same strategy of randomness is set out in the arrangement of the composites. Like clouds, the composites (Fig. 28) strain outward as if being pulled to the spiritual space of the open sky through the access of the window. The viewer follows the same course by taking in the images along the way. Within those images chaotic forms of memory and experience occur. They are blurred, unclear, often fragmented and hazy representing instances of time--fleeting yet profound, momentary yet sacred.

To relate to these images the viewer performs, in some cursory way, the act of re-enacting the images, processing and attempting to assemble visually as well as experientially the narrative of the composite. These images represent pockets of memory, moments of realization and personal connection for the artist that are frozen within the span of Sandra's ritual. They are images that incite random emotions and isolate single moments as separate, significant events. These images like the words on the curtains are those moments that we as viewers are left to ponder. "The one thing you do learn as you grow older is how precious life is. Life itself is the ultimate. One moment is a terribly precious thing."<sup>93</sup>

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross prefaces her book On Death and Dying, with a story from her European childhood, an experience about death and the Old World ways of death and dying:

I remember as a child the death of a farmer. He fell from a tree and was not expected to live. He asked simply to die at home, a wish that was granted without questioning. He called his daughters into the bedroom and spoke with each one of them alone for a few minutes. He arranged his affairs quietly, though he was in great pain, and distributed his belongings and his land, none of which was to be split until his wife should follow him in death. He also asked each of his children to share in the work, duties, and tasks that he had carried on until the time of the accident. He asked his friends to visit him once more, to bid good-bye to them. Although I was a small child at the time, he did not exclude me or my siblings. We were allowed to share in the preparations of the family just as we were permitted to grieve with them until he died. When he did die, he was left at home, in his beloved home which he had built, and among his friends and neighbours who went to take a last look at him where he lay in the midst of flowers in the place he had lived and had loved so much. In that country today there is still no make-believe slumber room, no embalming, no false makeup to pretend sleep.<sup>94</sup>

In the midst of this recounting of Kubler-Ross' childhood and her experience around the rites of death in European cultures, she suggests that this type of response to dying is indicative of the kind of acceptance this particular family and culture has towards such a fatal outcome. Allowing both family as well as friends and neighbours to be present within the experience of dying helps to alleviate the anxieties and feelings of loss that occur at death. Having familiar faces and loving supportive people around to share in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences of a dying loved one opens the exchange of acceptance, love and reconciliation. Being witness to the process of dying

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<sup>93</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door

<sup>94</sup> Kubler-Ross, On Death 5.

allows one to live with death and therefore acknowledge its place within the natural cycle of life. Death need no longer be feared but now death can be understood and expected.

What is occurring in contemporary North American cultures is a gravitation towards sterilizing the experience of dying and sanitizing the response to death. As Kubler-Ross reaffirms, "Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered it on many levels."<sup>95</sup> Martin has experienced the chronic and traumatic assertion of socio-political control on his life. As well he carries the stories of oppression from the Old Country. Memory and experience have left him wary of the amount of trust and faith he can give to governing institutions and powers. The way in which he chooses to die, as expressed in the text panels, conveys Martin's attempt to resume some power over his own freedom, especially in the wake of his own death. It is as though the immediate crisis of Martin's hospitalization was more traumatic than his failing heart, Martin asserts his right to choice and to his desire to die at home:

Father's Voice:

I know my story. My son is holding me by my arms. He is saying, "You know, he's pretty strong yet." This makes me very angry. My kids won't listen to me at all. I am saying "I want to go home. I have to get out of here. It is killing me. It is killing me. If I stay here I will not be alive tomorrow. I have to go home."<sup>96</sup>

Martin knows that his condition will only worsen under the impersonal care of the hospital, that, at this most crucial point within his journey through dying he is being forceably separated from the environment and everyday rituals that signify *his* life.

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<sup>95</sup> Kubler-Ross, On Death 4.

<sup>96</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door, Figure 30, text panel to *Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan*, "Father's Voice I:"



Father's Voice:

But my kids say "No, you have to stay here. It is for your own good." I say, "Look, I have some rights, call the police--let them decide." Nobody in the hospital will decide. My kids will not decide. I figure maybe the police will decide. Mabel pretends to go outside to call the police. An obvious pretence. Just because I am sick does not mean that I am stupid. You've got to be damned angry. No one is siding with you.<sup>97</sup>

Within Martin's experience with dying, a battle of opposing agents appear. Modern death, as the first agent, regulates his passion through intravenous tubes, confines him to a cardiac monitor as though the synthesized "beats" of its mechanism are meant to console his fears and reaffirm that he is still alive. The second agent, those traditional rituals that understand dying and death to be something that is experienced at home, amongst loved ones and familiar surroundings, beckons him. Martin's death is, at some point, inevitable. He knows this. Over this reality he has no control.

Father's Voice:

It seems as though everybody, the hospital staff, my own family is against me. Nobody thinks from my point of view. Nobody considers me really -- how I think, what I feel, or anything else. None whatsoever. To hell with this, I think. I am getting out of here.<sup>98</sup>

Sandra must decide whether to rely on the experience and resources of the hospital to determine what is best for her father and his condition, or, to honour her father's request to live out the remainder of his death-in-life<sup>99</sup> as is most meaningful to him:

Daughter's Voice:

Dad," I say, "let's go for a ride in the van." I get the van. My father gets in quietly and looks straight at me. I know that I will take him

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<sup>97</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door

<sup>98</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door

<sup>99</sup> 'Death-in-life' is a term which Semchuk uses within the catalogue's introduction to her show Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration. It is an implied reference to her father's experience with death that he lived through and that this experience was still a transformative one, recognizing that death is not separate from life but is *a part* of the cycle of life.

home. "You don't die for a principle, you know," I say. I can't believe I am saying this."<sup>100</sup>

Kubler-Ross asserts that if a family member is allowed to die at home amongst those that (s)he loves, amongst all that is familiar to her/him, it will make the transition into death easier to accept and often less painful physically, emotionally and psychologically:

His own family knows him well enough to replace a sedative with a glass of his favorite wine; or the smell of a home cooked soup may give him the appetite to sip a few spoons of fluid which, I think, is still more enjoyable than an infusion."<sup>101</sup>

This same appreciation for Old World ways of dying at home become visually apparent in both the installation space to Coming to Death's Door ( Fig. 25) and in its photographic composite entitled, Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 27). The installation space recreates a bedroom environment, one similar to that which Martin would have recuperated in at his home. The intimate feeling of the drapes with text written on them that hang over the gallery window and doorway affect those positive notions of rest and tranquility, of calm and acceptance in the wake of a fearful and dire situation. The sparseness of the recreated bedroom environment also betrays an immediacy of the situation and the necessary peace, calm, and loving environment that is needed.

Undoubtedly, what prompted Semchuk to help her father escape the unfeeling confines of the medical system and hospital were both the respect and love Semchuk felt for her dad and her wanting to honour his desire to be at home where he would be more comfortable.

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<sup>100</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door, Figure 30, text panel to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, "Daughter's Voice 1:"

Yet, again, it is the shared stories of the Old World ways that Martin imparted to Sandra earlier on in her life that become markers within their experience and within the show.

Martin's voice whispers:

I trust Grandfather Andrew and he trusts me. When he is dying he calls for me to come. I know that he wants to see the world for the last time. He knows that he is dying. He asks me to help him out of bed. Asks me to help him into the open air. He says, "I want to see the world one more time." He looks and then he dies.<sup>102</sup>

Semchuk relays this feeling of connection to home and its inherent recuperative and calming qualities in one of the two composites of Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan. Within this composite (Fig. 27) Sandra's face is seen in the center seemingly casting glances over the familiar space of her father's most intimate space, his bedroom. The composite exudes those feelings of communication (through the communicative images of the telephone, antenna, and cables) with those familial attachments (as seen in the photographs of family and friends that are set in Martin's bedroom). The light curtain that gently billows in front of the window offers a comforting quality in juxtaposition to the image of Sandra's anxiety filled eyes is portrayed in the assemblage. The image of the curtain is one of the only images that is clear, calm, and passive, while all the other images are blurred, chaotically angled and more frenetic. There is also the image of the pillow on the right side that gives a sense of rest, of softness, as though the lullabies of many sleepless nights would be offered her.

As the experience of dying often becomes a profound and transforming process, experiencing the loss of a family member carries a host of its own anxieties, causing

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<sup>101</sup> Kubler-Ross, On Death 5.

emotional and psychic distortions which ripple out and disrupt the constructs of identity within the familial structure. Traditional care-giving roles between parents and children, Kubler-Ross suggests<sup>103</sup>, are often redefined based on the need of the ailing family member and thus can strain those long-standing relationships. Especially in cases where the child must assume the parental role to a dying father or mother, stresses emerge wherein the shift of power and dependence become paramount identity struggles.

I am trying to understand how my father has had the will to survive his latest bout with death. I want him to remember that boy of fourteen, the runner, his strength, his passion, and his fears. I repeat my father's own words back to him. "You get out there and there is still a little bit of light. When you're running there are pockets of warmer and cooler air and it fans you. As it gets darker you see animals right beside you -- bears and wolves -- but, you are going home. And as you pass them you see them for what they are -- stumps or trees." You . . . are a long distance runner.<sup>104</sup>

Semchuk here speaks as the mother does to the child, as an elder would impart wisdom through storytelling. Here Semchuk has had to assume the capacity of mother, caregiver, nurturer, while Martin lay in a bed, unable to control the effects that his heart attack is having on his body, having to comply and rely on his daughter and child. As well, both the issue of gender and ethnicity intensify the meaning and effect of identity displacements, importing new social and cultural impositions and expectations on family members.

Various visual and installation elements point to this and nurturing relationship between Semchuk and her father in Coming to Death's Door. The peaceful and calming colour of

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<sup>102</sup> Semchuk, Death's Door.

<sup>103</sup> Kubler-Ross, On Death 14.

<sup>104</sup> Sandra Semchuk, Acceptance (Saskatchewan, 1989).

the bedroom-like space maintains the quality of home as a place of retreat and comfort. The white cloth pieces, seemingly floating forward slightly, catch the words shared between father and daughter, between storyteller and caregiver. This series of dialogues which is performed between the two authors reveals the sense of equality and mutual respect that is present in their relationship. Inversions of their roles as caregiver and nurturer, of child and parent, appear particularly in the photographic composites to the show. In The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 29 & 30), Martin reappears throughout the composite, never entirely visible or discernable, more as a strong ethereal presence that is all encompassing. His multiple images entirely envelope the one image of Sandra that is at the bottom of the composite. Martin is strong and concerted in his efforts to maintain the trees outside his home. He is vital like the vivid red of his shirt that stands out so prominently. He frames the swelling lushness of the trees and is thus rooted to the very earth from which these trees spring. From all that Martin has created and nurtured, there, in the middle of all that, Sandra is smiling, comforted by this arrangement. Martin is everywhere within this reality, conveying the strong and impenetrable layer that is his guidance, his teachings, his wisdom, his love. This is what he is to Sandra adorned in a lush evergreen crown about her head. He has impacted on her identity. His absence would transform her life. She, the ethnic daughter becomes the elder, the student now the teacher and the storyteller.

In Coming to Death's Door, there is a unique interplay of authorship. This is not to dispute that Semchuk is the author of this exhibition. However, within the construct of this installation, its experience, its multiple use of storytelling, there is the continual

shifting between Semchuk, her father, and the viewer as storyteller. Semchuk uses herself as the subject and her life in relationship to her family and friends as the story through which she articulates her concerns in her works. Semchuk further challenges the importance of the artist/author in Coming to Death's Door as she becomes both witness/author as well as subject. Semchuk develops narratives through her photographs that work out her identity strategies in dialogue with others around her. Within the images she produces stories are told that often recall the history of her own family, memories shared and passed on through the Semchuk lineage that harkens back to traditional forms of oral storytelling. Through this aspect of her work the role of author oscillates between Semchuk, other family members, and the ghosts of ancestors long since past.

Second, within the show Coming to Death's Door, Semchuk establishes a gallery environment that invokes rituals that the viewer may or may not be aware he/she is enacting. Through the visual organization of the installation, memory is incited in the viewer, bringing to the fore the experiences with death-in-life that the viewer inhabits. As a result, each viewer rewrites the experience of death within the gallery space and thus the viewer becomes complicit in the shaping of the work.

In his essay "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault writes of the relationship between text and author in literature. His argument centres around the privileged position that the author embodies in a work or body of works. According to Foucault the "'author' only exists as the product of a text, or of writing," and "the manner in which the text points to

this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it."<sup>105</sup> Foucault looks at this dynamic of the author and the manner in which the text points to this "figure" as an important element .

From this perspective, Semchuk is the author and creator of this exhibition. Semchuk created the photographs, the intuitive layout of the images and the installation as she edited the interviews with her father that were retold in written text in the gallery space. The viewer becomes a performer in this exhibition, reenacting the ritual performance of journeying through death-in-life. This places the viewer in the position of author. Following from Foucault's analysis of the writing as author, the author then becomes like the "reader" and thus becomes the part of subject.

From this perspective Coming to Death's Door, is self-referential, with the audience taking on the role of author. This dynamic also relates to Semchuk's Ukrainian heritage of oral storytelling. These ritual stories were at one time imperative to the longevity of a family's history. Since most Ukrainians were illiterate story telling was the only form of maintaining a documented history. These stories over of time would have many authors. Each time the story is retold it is altered based on the perspective and memory of the specific storyteller. Thus the story known as the Semchuk family history is unending, remaining intact as its own language. In the narrative of Coming to Death's Door, it is less important to Semchuk that the viewer is able to identify specifically that this is her and her father's story but, rather, that this is a story about dying and death and the

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<sup>105</sup> Foucault, Author 101.

transformations that occur between loved ones. The narrative is meant to be understood more so in its intent to incite our own memories and experiences around death and dying. The audience becomes the storyteller through Semchuk's speaking about her experiences with death.

Our concern over death's unknowable consequences is not entirely motivated by the loss of the physical self. Death and dying are both representative of that stage of life that reveals an ultimate change, a profound transformation into the spiritual. Most traditional stories concerning dying and death have paid a concerted attention to a process of heightening awareness, experiencing surrender and reconciliation. In the outcome of this process is a sense of enlightenment, peace, and spiritual being. Eliade says:

Death becomes part of the human condition because, . . . , it is the experience of death that renders intelligible the notion of spirit and spiritual beings. In sum, whatever was the cause of the first death, man became himself and could fulfill his specific destiny only as a being fully aware of his own mortality.<sup>106</sup>

For although it certainly is the most inevitable fact of life, death also represents the quintessential paradox. Becvar describes this duality of fear and spirituality:

From the very beginning we sense the oxymoronic quality of death. Death is destroyer and redeemer; the ultimate cruelty and the essence of release; universally feared but sometimes actively sought; undeniably ubiquitous, yet incomprehensibly unique; of all the phenomena, the most obvious and the least reportable, feared yet fascinating.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Eliade, Mythologies 18.

<sup>107</sup> Becvar, Presence of Grief 6.



In Coming to Death's Door Semchuk has shown the unique relationship that humans have with death. In the experience of her father, they have both been able to experience that "oxymoronic quality of death." Martin through his near death experiences has been able to articulate through his own series of descent journeys a process by which he can reconcile his life and be free to re-enter life with a fresh and enlightened perspective. His fears of death have been wrestled with and overcome only to rise again like Persephone, connected to both life and death now, engaging in a more intimate relationship with nature. Semchuk has been able to accompany him on these journeys, sometimes playing the hero, others the distraught guardian, and at the same time the creative muse who weaves the tales of her father's triumphs through death as she walks beside him, step by step.

The installation on the surface reveals the story of a daughter and father negotiating their experience/journey through death. Yet, it is the active performative rituals that the audience acts out as they move through the installation space that informs the mnemonic experiences that linger, ever changing, within the show. By Foucault's definition, the author is but another element of the story, secondary to (in this case) the 'visual' writing of this story. However, without the presence of the author, whether it be the discernible faces of the artist and her father in the composites, the resonating text of the same two figures, or, the presence of the viewer to these works, experience and memory give this installation its meaning.

### Chapter III

The focus of this chapter is a formal analysis of the show Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration by Sandra Semchuk. It situates the work in the photographic and installation practices of the artist. This chapter also explores how the exhibition operates to incite memory, offering the viewer an opportunity to incorporate their own personal experiences about family and death while journeying through the gallery space. The notion of space that is central to this discussion, comes from Michel Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces'<sup>108</sup>. This chapter shows how space has the capacity to harbor memory and emotion. Ritual and performance in different spaces are the physical catalysts that enact these acts of awareness.

Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 26 & 27), and The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig.29 & 30), evoke an almost inter-dimensional space. Details of swirling vortexes, blurred dream-like states and oft-times chaotically angled views, leave viewers at first estranged from the images. The composites take time to discern, image from image. While this is occurring the viewer stops and resides momentarily in his/her own memories and experiences. It is as though this space of reflection acts as a space for meditation and spiritual access. Then, after an extended viewing of the composite, the fragmented images start to take form and offer narrative, only then to break apart again. The potency of these images, in both their visual dynamics and assemblage format, lies not only in the specific stories they tell. It also resides in the way

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<sup>108</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" Visual Cultures Reader (London: Routledge, 1997)

they function through their 'unfixedness' to provoke the viewer to re-articulate and participate within the act of memory formation and recounting. In this three dimensional, multi-sensory space the viewer may walk and experience both the visual and textual elements of the show. By viewing the composites the viewer can incite memories concerning family, death and an awareness of one's own existence. When Semchuk took these pictures she stepped into the active space of her subject. As the viewer walks through the gallery space he/she is effectively stepping into the active space of Semchuk's creative process. Like the co-operative self-portraits Semchuk engaged in Excerpts from a Diary (Figs. 3-17), Semchuk is passing around the proverbial "ball"<sup>109</sup> so that her audience and not just her subject can participate. What results is a dialogical occurrence, an experience shaped around life and death, a co-operative reclamation, between artist and audience, of memory and identity. The composites act as visual touchstones of mnemonic experience while the installation acts as physical referents, places where the transitions of mortality, love, loss and family reside. All of these spaces are revisited in Coming to Death's Door in a culmination of experience, recognition and reconciliation.

The scope of Semchuk's work has consistently addressed issues of identity and recognition. In much of her photographic works, space and the site have often been incorporated to articulate these notions of identity. In Chapter One, an historical approach to both Semchuk's life and ethnic lineage helped to show the determining factors that motivates her desire for self-awareness. Her ethnic heritage promoted

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<sup>109</sup> As discussed in Chapter I, Semchuk involved her photographic subjects to work cooperatively in taking pictures for Excerpts from a Diary, passing around the shutter ball between herself and her subjects so that they may take pictures of each other. In Coming to Death's Door, the viewer ritualizes the journey of death

concerns for socialist ideals, equality, and gaining voice for those who have been disenfranchised and marginalized within a much larger 'democratic' culture. From this focus came early photographic works by Semchuk that reveal a documentary style of photography. Within these images an ethnographic tendency surfaces, the static images produced carry more of an anthropological weight to them. Her earliest works identified place - the familiar site - to situate and record origins of community identity.

Geographical sites, like her hometown of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, expresses connections in a physical sense to the locality of identity, bridging spaces of community and ethnicity while questioning those more exclusive spaces of nationality. Later, spaces of family and domestic environments in the form of honourific portraiture allowed Semchuk to reveal relational spaces between herself and those who have informed her life either through kinship, friendship, or mentorship. While still utilizing the traditional modes of photography, Semchuk focussed on self-portraits to gage at the complexities of interiority - those emotional, spiritual, psychological, even fantastical spaces that reside within the individual. Through this focus she documented the process of change and articulated it as something that is slow and drawn out, a happening that occurs over time. Subsequently, Semchuk engaged a form of 'gestural photography' reaching beyond the material form of the subject she attempted to capture experience as it is performed, memory as it is exercised, identity as it is realized. This realm of the fantastical employs chaotic and mystic forces that govern our relationship with nature and are visually and performatively accessed as Semchuk ritualizes her relationship to life and death.

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in his-her movement through the gallery space acting as the tool through which the experience of death and dying is re-visited and re-experienced.

While death is a natural thing, as humans, our reactions to death's inevitability are far more evasive than they are accepting. As Chapter Two discussed, our social and psychological fears of death can often challenge our spiritual beliefs and identity or else inspires a certain spiritual surrender. The analysis of descent myths in relation to Coming to Death's Door focused on those spaces of spiritual transformation and looked at those spaces of convergence as an axis wherein profound truths about the self occur. The work also confronts that place where our most primal and fundamental fears about death rest, within the space of the unknown.

For the most part we have learned to live within spaces -- neat little environments of social, personal, emotional and spiritual confinement -- into which we place corresponding experiences for further celebration and reverie, or, for the sake of forgetting and denying. In Coming to Death's Door, Semchuk explores these spaces with her father in order to gain some mutual understanding of the anxieties, hopes and complexities that impending death can invoke. Equally as important, Semchuk explores death as a transitional process rather than one that denotes finitude. Here death is articulated through a series of movements, of ritualized transitions between spaces, between the exterior landscapes around her father's home and the sacred and intimate space of her father's bedroom. This constant theme of movement and transition, echoed as well in the photographic composites and through the incorporation of an active installation space, negate any notion of permanence, stasis, or completion to life. Thus the relationship of physical spaces -- internal and external -- become performative as well as informative tools to articulate those spaces that sometimes collide, and other times

synchronize, to understand life and death and the relationships that occur in between. In its entirety, Coming to Death's Door functions within a multilayered set of spaces, some within the real space of the gallery, others within the more esoteric space of the photographic composites. Enacting the performance of moving through the gallery space that houses this exhibition allows the viewer to intersect all of these spaces and engage and enlist mnemonic realms of space as well as those spaces grounded in the material world.

In "Of Other Spaces" Michel Foucault writes that the twentieth century has been perhaps most obsessed with the consideration of space. "It is the epoch of simultaneity: we are the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."<sup>110</sup> Further, he writes, "our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."<sup>111</sup> The installation to Coming to Death's Door operates within similar conceptual parameters as Foucault's analysis of contemporary space. Through a presentation of interconnected sites and spaces, both corporeal and ethereal, Coming to Death's Door becomes a place of spacial convergence wherein spaces of memory, experience and identity interact with those spaces of the gallery site, the installation's sensorial apparatus, and its viewers.

Our preoccupation with contemporary space, Foucault writes, has a longstanding obsession in Western experience. During the Middle Ages, space was performed within

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<sup>110</sup>Foucault, "Other Spaces" 237.

<sup>111</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 237.

a clearer hierarchical construct, a "hierarchical ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places."<sup>112</sup> Even within a cosmological context space was defined within three spheres, those of the terrestrial, the celestial, and the super-celestial. Finally, within this same hierarchy there were either places where things had been "violently displaced" or had found "their natural ground and stability."<sup>113</sup> Foucault suggests that with Galileo's discovery that indeed the earth revolves around the sun, our consideration of space became inextricably altered. In Galileo's discovery of the earth's relationship to the sun the discovery of the infinite expanse of space came to be realized.<sup>114</sup>

Since the findings of Galileo on the nature of space, our daily lives have become a continuous discovery and negotiation of space. Work spaces, travel spaces, domestic spaces, social spaces - they are all spaces rarely left autonomous - spaces which are independent in both their existence and in their operation, and which often remain contingent on one another. As well, the specificity of these spaces does not exist without the inclusion and interaction of humans. Spaces intersect, collide and exist as both physical and aerial places, as logical sites and abstract sites, as practiced structures of operation and conceptual enigmas. Yet as Foucault suggests, like history, Western culture tends to read space in a purely linear way and thus tends to negate the inherent dynamic form of multiple spaces interacting simultaneously.

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<sup>112</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 239.

<sup>113</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 238.

<sup>114</sup> Galileo's consideration of space has now afforded current understandings of space to extend beyond simpler notions of place. Rather, space becomes a highly complex integration of sites, places both independent and integral on both a molecular and monolithic level. Space today is not just defined by its physical parameters. Space can be defined, understood and located in more ethereal and abstract ways.

In the first part of the essay Foucault distinguishes between the two major forms of space, those types that are distinguished as internal and external realms. Those internal forms of space, those which Foucault relegates to a position of "fundamental for reflection in our time,"<sup>115</sup> are those spaces to which "our primary perception, the space of our dreams, and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic."<sup>116</sup> Foucault's main discussion is about external space, which he breaks down into two major categories.<sup>117</sup> The first he calls *utopias*. They are "sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society."<sup>118</sup> Physical sites like the constructed realm in popular culture of 'the fashion show' is one of these utopic spaces. Within the staging of a fashion show real people function within a space that is contrived, creating an environment of lighting, sound, and scenery that make this real space appear flawless, the people ideal, and "present society itself in a perfected form."<sup>119</sup> The exhibition to Coming to Death's Door inhabits a similar utopic space. The installation space, strategically marked by its photographic composites and its texts on suspended cloth initiates ritualized movements through the show creating a mythic space. Like the fashion show the installation space to Coming to Death's Door involves real people and functions within a space that is contrived. The photographed subjects involved in the installation are framed within the context of the photographic composites and are not portrayed as perfect. The images of Martin and

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<sup>115</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 239.

<sup>116</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 239.

<sup>117</sup> This explanation of space was briefly told in Chapter I.

<sup>118</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 240.

<sup>119</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 240.



Sandra are suspended beyond the simple value structure of perfect (looking) and imperfect, instead they radiate an ethereal quality.

The second form of external space are those which Foucault calls *heterotopias*.

*Heterotopias* are those real places in society, "places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society."<sup>120</sup> By this definition, the gallery space is also considered a *heterotopic* space because it does exist as a real space in which people function, operate, and interact. Under the rubric of *heterotopias*, two main categories exist. First there is the *crisis heterotopia*, those privileged and sacred places wherein individuals are placed, in relation to society or environments in which they live, and are "in a state of crisis."<sup>121</sup>

Throughout Semchuk's artistic productions we can see examples of crisis heterotopias since her work deals specifically with the crisis of identity. Each site or space to which Semchuk draws relationships to forming her identity creates a space of crisis while trying to determine her sense of belonging within that space. In the case of Coming to Death's Door we see glimpses of crisis heterotopias. We can look to both Martin's bedroom and hospital room and Martin's state of ailing health and fragility during the process of his recuperation as *crisis heterotopias*. The second category, those called *heterotopias of deviation*, consist of those places "where individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed."<sup>122</sup> Although Martin went to the hospital to receive physical treatment for his heart attack, his unwillingness to stay in the hospital,

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<sup>120</sup> Foucault considers these places wherein crisis heterotopias exist to include adolescence, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.,

<sup>121</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 240.

<sup>122</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 240.

his desire to leave in such a weakened and susceptible condition, challenged the doctors to take a more 'institutional' approach in securing his immobility.

Daughter's Voice:

My father sees them try to slip a sedative into his IV. He tears the IV off his arm and he runs. We bargain. "You can have your own room." "Sometimes we send them to the mental home," the young doctor says.<sup>123</sup>

Threats of psychiatric assessments and attempts to physically restrain him shifted the site of this recuperative place into one that challenged Martin's mental capacity, proposing to diagnose his state of being, his behaviour, as deviant.

As these types of spaces develop through the narrative of Coming to Death's Door, the type of emotional and psychic undertows which reside in these spaces bring forward the many anxieties that most individuals would experience during these times of mortal crisis. As much as these "external spaces" comprise the physical narrative of the rituals in the gallery space to the exhibition, it is these feelings and experiences, these internal spaces that charge the rituals with meaning.

The core of the exhibition Coming to Death's Door functions within the gallery space at Presentation House Gallery. A gallery site is one that converges both the *utopic* and the *heterotopic* models of Foucault's discussion of space. First, the gallery space is a place where theoretical, creative, and emotional experiences are created and enacted, experiences which are not tangible. These experiences and ideas are invisible but present and in this sense remain in a perfected form. Whereas the gallery space is also a heterotopic site as it is also a real space, a room wherein people walk, interact, and place

objects for further scrutiny and interaction. The installation to Coming to Death's Door attempts to recreate two environments to the show. The first environment is that of Semchuk's ailing father's bedroom. As a *heterotopic* site, the setting is not entirely obvious in the manner that a conventional bedroom would appear: a bed, a dresser, nightstand, lamps, etc. Rather, the recuperative atmosphere of a bedroom, this "closed site of rest,"<sup>124</sup> is promoted through the presence of calming blue walls and translucent white cloth hung like drapes over the window and doorway. The photographic composites offer many symbolic references. They represent, what Foucault refers to as internal spaces. However, within the physical description of the bedroom installation, the purpose of these composites resides perhaps in their ability to present themselves like mirrors and family photos that would hang on bedroom walls.

In the domestic environment, the bedroom is often seen as a sacred place. It is one of those unique spaces that, as Foucault states, "despite all the techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, [contemporary space] is not entirely desanctified."<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, he writes, "perhaps our lives are still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable. . . between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred."<sup>126</sup> Yet the sanctity inherent within

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<sup>123</sup> Semhuk, Death's Door

<sup>124</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 239.

<sup>125</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 238.

<sup>126</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 238.

these spaces is often one which is performed by the individual, where personal longing and desire remain its salient properties.

The bedroom space is one of those sites that remain inviolable. As a *utopic* site, to adolescent children, bedrooms induce imagination and dreams and provide a place wherein fantastical realms of play occur. To teenagers a bedroom offers autonomy and expressions of personal identity, a site sanctified by the need for privacy and respect. For parents and adults alike, bedrooms too offer a space for retreat and brief respites from family and day to day operations. Bedrooms are also sacred places of self-discovery and sexual recognition, appreciation and indulgence. They are designed and desired to be places of comfort, calm and introspection, places where memory is most wanting and preserved. They are also places to which we ascribe our most basic fears and anxieties. Within the function of sleep or recuperation we become physically and psychically our most vulnerable. Thus, the bedroom can also become an unnerving realm.

Since the bedroom is a place which most times, induces extreme emotions, memories and dreams, it is a space that has become representative of our internal and internalized feelings. It is here that the bedroom can also invoke greater meaning and sanctification when concerns for mortality perforate the walls of its sanctuary. The sparseness of the mock-bedroom in Coming to Death's Door relies more so on, and even helps to generate, the internalized anxieties of the viewer rather than the conventional physical markers of a bedroom to create an atmosphere of recall and recuperation. The neutral visual markers

of this space also disengages this site as being one denoting an experience specific necessarily to Sandra and her father but rather to the experience of loss and anxiety itself. In this manner the gallery space becomes an active visual and experiential agent that emphasizes the concept of ritual rather than reliving the ritual that Sandra and her father enact.

As the viewer negotiates his way through the gallery space, he/she performs a ritual of discovery, realization and transformation. This process echoes the narrative choreography that occurs in many classical descent myths. As the viewer enters the gallery space through the first set of text panels over the doorway, he accesses the realm of discovery to which death initiates its hold. By then proceeding to view the two composites to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 26 & 27), the viewer establishes his present relationship with death. The two composites evoke many of the emotions and feelings death invokes: fear, desperation, loneliness on one side, while reaffirming the impending ritual on the other. As the viewer then proceeds toward the window where the other composites hang, personal memories and experiences around death emerge and allow the viewer to re-author this journey with his-her own experiences with death. Once the viewer reaches the second composite entitled The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 29 & 30) he/she is witness to the sacred art of dying, of the ritualized descent that Martin undergoes. In participating in this ritual through the gallery space the viewer becomes complicit in this journey and, in effect, experiences the spiritual transformation, ending up at the window where the other text cloths hang and out through which the viewer would proceed into the realm of spiritual enlightenment.

The second environment that is created in this same exhibition space is the external terrain around Martin's home. It is there upon which Sandra creates a temporary dwelling (a tent) wherein she lives while aiding in her father's recuperation. The same blue walls used to effect the calming, restful atmosphere of a bedroom also refer to the vast open prairie sky that surrounds Martin's land. The pieces of parachute cloth perform a threefold task within Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan. First, the pieces of parachute cloth act as the main portals that access the bedroom space through which Semchuk operates on a daily basis as she comes to care for Martin. Second, the very nature of the parachute cloth itself is similar to that of the cloth used for tents and its lithe texture relays the sense of easy movement in and out and through its frame. Similarly, the parachute cloth carries a supple and extensile quality that enhances its ability to be carried by a breeze or wind or by the movement of bodies passing through it. This particular action of the cloth being carried in the breeze gives an ethereal feeling of the spirit in transit and in transition:

That sense of the tent, of a temporary dwelling place which for me is an image of the body, also the image of the photograph, also the image of the departure, the movement or the transition of spirit, of self from one location to another - a sense of transition - and those works were very much about that place of the liminal or that place of movement, rather than stasis and meaning something or appropriating (reality).<sup>127</sup>

These pieces of cloth articulate the same sense of mutability as the fragmented images in the photographic composite but in a more fluid and poetic form. This latter quality intensifies the third function of these pieces of cloth in Coming to Death's Door as they

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<sup>127</sup> Kapustianyuk, interview

carry the words of both Semchuk and her father's solicitude regarding dying and loss. In this form, words become whispers, dialogues become prayers, and somewhere in between, hope and reconciliation over death-in-life is revealed.

I don't know if we can know about death. We can watch and see how others die if they let us but I don't think we can ever really know. The more that you know about life or death the more you know about how little you know. It's a humbling kind of a thing. You feel that you need to know more, need to make choices that help you to learn, and then time starts to run out. When the time comes it will not bother you. You will keep learning as much as you can. You will keep on living and making choices as much as you can. Somehow nature provides a kind of balance so that you don't realize that you are doing less or learning less. You feel as alive when you are 78 as when you were seven. You don't feel any differently about yourself -- not really. The process is so slow and so gradual that you don't notice it. Other people do, but you don't. The one thing that you do learn as you grow older is how precious life is. Life itself is the ultimate. One moment is a terribly precious thing.<sup>128</sup>

Both the doorway and the window to the gallery space enact important functions to the gallery space as well as to the bedroom/outdoor site of the installation. First, in practical terms, the window offers natural light for the exhibition space while the doorway provides entrance to the space as well as connects this space to those other spaces incorporated in the gallery as a whole. The function of these two spaces is one aspect that Foucault does not address in his discussions in "Of Other Spaces". Yet, within the framework of Foucault's description of external spaces both the window and doorway act as spaces of transportation. In this sense, both sites function in a similar manner, but perhaps in more abstract ways than Foucault's example of the train. Foucault describes the train as "an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another,

and then it is also something that goes by."<sup>129</sup> By this definition, the train is an object that travels through space while concurrently other objects, namely passengers, move through its space. Though the dynamics are not entirely the same wherein a doorway or window do not travel as independent kinetic objects through space, they are sites that provide an axis of movement for whatever may pass through its space (in this case, the viewer). It is a space that promotes the movement (or, in some cases, the lack of access or escape) from one space to another. They are points within the localized space and surroundings of the gallery that articulate the notion of convergence and points for interacting multiple spaces. They also carry a "fantasmatic"<sup>130</sup> property, what Foucault refers to as when considering the profound transformations that can occur in the individual when engaging in a ritual process, wherein the axis of transportation also denotes points of realmic<sup>131</sup> shifts for the participant.

The texts of dialogue that are offered on the cloth panels provide an unusual space within the installation where space plays an even more evocative role. These panels are positioned in two pieces over the window, hanging like drapes, and the same over the doorway except the panels do have some space between them in order to afford access to the room for the viewers. The panels are anchored at the ceiling and on the floor and

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<sup>128</sup> Semchuk, *Death's Door*, Figure 29, text panel to *The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan*, "Father's Voice 1:"

<sup>129</sup> Foucault, "*Other Spaces*" 239.

<sup>130</sup> Foucault, "*Other Spaces*" 239. 'Fantasmatic' is a term Foucault uses in his essay "*Of Other Spaces*" in referring to the phenomenologists' consideration of space wherein the space of our dreams and passions hold intrinsic qualities. Internal spaces that are considered ethereal in quality and not of the real, concrete world.

<sup>131</sup> The term realmic denotes the spaces of consciousness and of memory that the viewer experiences while working through the installation space. While there exist various spaces that collide and intersect, as the viewer passes through these spaces, the viewer surfaces many different memories and experiences that charge each space with its meaning creating realms of experience and thus realmic shifts.



gradually project outward from the wall and into the gallery space as the cloth hits the floor. To use Foucault's appropriation of the fantasmatic qualities of space, the spaces that both the window and doorway provide, are ones which mark material gateways for spiritual transition. Semchuk uses the visual and textural apparatus of the window and entranceway to evoke such transitions. "And by bringing in the case of The Descent, by bringing in the cloth, the parachute cloth that was back lit and moved in the wind with my father's text on it, what I was bringing in was a physical element which in itself became an articulation of the content."<sup>132</sup> The text speaks of profound and sacred moments which in turn sanctifies the space of the window and doorway which usually functions in practical terms. Now, alternately they function in spiritual terms.

Formally, Coming to Death's Door articulates a culmination of Semchuk's photographic practices. Whereas her earlier photographic works portrayed a far more static representation of the subject, employing a documentary-style of taking pictures, the distance between the subject and the photographic lens has now been opened in order for the photographer to enter the active space of her subject. Semchuk's pursuit of seeking out identity formations now allows her to unfix those presupposed notions of where identity is located breaking down physical borders that usually define and establish identity, and look toward those spaces that are intuitive, transforming, instinctual.

Chinese brushwork allows through physical gesture, the recognition of body in space, of an immediate awareness of the self. In gestural photography, the camera is no longer a static tool through which images of the real world are captured. The camera becomes a moving visual apparatus, an extension of the photographer's body that moves around by

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<sup>132</sup> Kapustianyuk, Semchuk interview.

way of the articulated gestures that the photographer's body performs. As this performance occurs, photographs are taken, pressing the shutter button when it feels more intuitively "right" to do so rather than looking for an appropriate composition to form in the lens. Semchuk incorporates animated calligraphic symbols through her physical gestures to enhance the ritual-like quality of her gestural photographing process. It is a performance, a ritual enacted by both the subject and the photographer, that imbues the experience with something more enigmatic, something that is sacred in its everydayness.

Semchuk in this sense, does not seem concerned whether or not it is her and Martin's specific experience that is translated and understood, but rather, that the artifice of its fundamental ideas are exchanged. "Semchuk seems less intent on capturing the details of a particular 'performance,' than evoking the feeling of being involved."<sup>133</sup> Semchuk leaves the details of this experience up to the viewer allowing the viewer to reference the show's inherent symbolism and relate it to his/her own lived experiences. While photographic composites 'float' along the walls as though suspended in the sky, the material aspects of the installation space act as physical referents to the rituals that are being enacted within the composites. These composites include the internalized and externalized rituals of the viewer in situ. Text of dialogues between father and daughter superimposed on suspended translucent white curtains offer both a textural feel and textual access to those expressions of grief, anxiety, loss and the spirituality.

The composites to the show are its most intriguing aspect. As the viewer walks into the gallery space, through the first set of text panels hanging over the doorway he/she is first

met with one of two photographic composites entitled Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 26). Within the composite of twenty-one cibachrome colour photographs, the images at first seem innocuous: scattered images of the immediate landscape, blue sky, clouds, grass, dirt road, a minivan parked off to the side of the road, tent flaps, a hand in one image, a blurred foot in another. Some images are blurred and far less discernable as to their shape, form, context, and yet others are clear, in focus and in and of itself a full and complete image. Perhaps each image on its own would challenge the viewer to realize, or make sense of what in fact the image would represent. Even collectively these images are presented in what at first appear to be a confusing assemblage of disjointed, off-angled, and blurred photographs that are relative to each by both proximity and a consistent blue overtone.

Yet, considering again Foucault's notion of space, what these composites provide is an insight into a realm of otherworldly space, a space that Foucault describes as "thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well."<sup>134</sup> These spaces within the photographic composites provide the catalyst for the viewer to reach in and beyond what the surface of this show offers. These images move beyond the physical realm of the gallery space. These images also speak of far more intrinsic experiences than the dialogues that are presented on the suspended cloths in front of the doorway and window. These images even extend beyond the surface of their own material presence, beyond the appearance of their own representative image. They create and inhabit a space of memory, of experience, of places where stories are told and reside. These are

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<sup>133</sup> Star Phoenix, "Shoots from the Hip" 16.

<sup>134</sup> Foucault, "Other Spaces" 239.

internal spaces. These are the spaces where photography is most present and most powerful. Though we may not be able to physically enter these spaces like we would enter a gallery space, or any other room for that matter, we are able to engage our mind and emotions, indeed our own memories and experience to interact with these spaces. From this engagement we can then draw connections and gain context for these composites. The images to this assemblage give a sense of transience or transition, a place of temporary dwelling (as indicated through the repeated images of the tent), and of inevitable movement or departure from this place (as prompted by the images of the minivan). The random images of the sky positioned near the bottom of the composite give a sense of freedom, of "open-air", of mobility, and of flight from this dwelling.

In the partnering composite to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig.27), the viewer's eye enters a space where emotion and realization occur. On the opposite wall, a second assemblage of twenty-one photographs hangs in a different collective shape than its partner. The images take us into the space of Martin's bedroom and thus complete the ritual cycle that Sandra enacted everyday, moving from the space of her temporary dwelling of the tent outside her father's home into the recuperative space of her father's bedroom. Where the tent space evokes a sense of movement and mobility, of calm and airiness, Martin's bedroom evokes feelings of haunting stillness, an anxious tentativeness for Sandra, his daughter and caregiver. As well it is a site of limited space and one which represents human limitation. Amongst photographs of this assemblage, images are often blurred and strained like glances across the bedroom that also simulate internalized panic and the longing to search out tangible markers of memory. Several of

the images in this composite refer to modes of communication, eager to seek out words of comfort from loved ones. Glimpses of family portraits and photo albums that occupy prominent spaces within Martin's bedroom gather the history of the Semchuk family, a lineage once again faced with transition and loss. These spaces of transition are further punctuated within the photographic images, with a narrative of familial generations, looming like mnemonic whispers, glancing the shifting emotions that push out and then recede within the composites. Sandra is present in this room. Struck by the randomness of accumulated memories her face becomes exposed in the space of the composite. The fleetingness of time is apparent in both her stance and the expression in her eyes. It is here that the many aspects of Semchuk's identity converge in the space where she has to realize personal loss, the loss of her father. Images within the composites mirror back Semchuk's emotions and her relationship to this space. The drape delicately billowing from the quiet breeze through the window suggests the nurturer, the caregiver. The vintage pictures of her father and other family members as well as the portrait of her daughter, Rowenna, give evidence to Semchuk's life as a mother and daughter. Images of antennas and cables and telephones reference Semchuk's identity within a family of storytellers, those who carry on the family heritage of oral traditions. As a result of this last reference, her ethnicity becomes clearer as well. All of these identities rest within the creative structure of her own work, as Semchuk the artist and teacher. Her presence within brings greater awareness to Martin's absence. Martin at this point is still alive but his absence, or at least his imagined absence by Sandra reveals the poignancy in the transformation of meaning and function of this bedroom space.

Each assemblage harbors a certain type of space. While the assemblages to Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan visually articulate the ritual Semchuk performed while her father recuperated, The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Figs. 29 & 30) creates a mythology around Martin and his ritual of descending into the underworld. This composite has perhaps the most mystical and spiritual qualities. Vividly coloured images of Martin illuminate this photographic mosaic. Bursts of sunlit prairie sky radiate from behind his multi-silhouetted figure mystifying his presence as ominous, concerted in his tasks, in his governance of those realms between the sky, water, and earth. His journey here is one of transformation, of gleaning nature's potent offerings and drawing from them the divine energies that offer strength and sustenance before his long, arduous journey beyond his home, beyond this life. His journey in this composite unfolds in four parts. Immersed first within the grounded earthiness of the surrounding foliage Martin establishes his connection to the earth and to his corporeal self. It is as though Martin understands that the body and spirit belong on different paths beyond this life. The body is part of the earth, and so Martin, following the path that winds down into the dense clusters of trees intuitively enjoins himself to the cycle of nature. Within the few steps into his descent he is welcomed back into the earth. As his body does this Martin, the spirit, is lifted into the heavenly forum of sun and sky. As water replenishes itself through the cycle of evaporation and condensation, between its ethereal and corporeal states so too does Martin's spirit and body reconnects through the baptismal-like waters of the lake that lies down and beyond the trees. This composite leaves Martin, re-emerging from the waters to regain his footing, regaining his trek along this immortal passage to spiritual transformation. This time it is the spirit form of Martin, not the little

boy of long ago that becomes the long distance runner. This composite alone articulates the cycle of life theme which descent myths endeavour to convey.

This chapter has attempted to speak of space as a means by which to bring some degree of tangible evidence to the markers of memory and identity which perforates every aspect of our lives. In looking to Foucault's notion of space we can gain some sense of what spaces of operation and interaction exist in our everyday lives. In looking at these spaces as separate spaces we can gain a deeper sense of the sacredness in all that we do, all that we feel and experience in things that, more often than not, are otherwise left unnoticed, left to oblivion. By retracing in a physical sense what spaces exist in Semchuk's exhibition, we gain a sense of where identity resides, where memory lingers. For Semchuk, her identity in relation to her father is sought out and remembered in the shape of his home, the textures and sites which fill his home, the enveloping land that he carefully tended, and the voice of her father interwoven throughout these spaces. These spaces of the real and the unreal, the physical and the fantasmatic, exist separately and are given meaning and purpose in their relationship to each other through the performances of daily life that humans carry out. The rituals of the everyday sanctify the meaning of space and so too then memory is a space that is everywhere within all those other spaces. These memories are what become performances captured in the photographic composites.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis analysed Sandra Semchuk's Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration to demonstrate the many facets of Semchuk's identity that unfolds through her artistic work. The relationship of death and identity, how memory and experience shape the awareness of death, was a major concern. In discussing the visual arrangement of the show, Foucault's ideas concerning space helped to articulate the notion that, within a given physical and emotional experience such as death, a multitude of spaces both real/tangible and unreal/ethereal converge. Space in the context of this thesis and in relation to the experience of death and its related anxieties inhabits Semchuk's various layers of identity, converging at the point of her awareness of her father's mortality. Transitional spaces within the exhibition mark also the shifts Martin and Sandra face as they both experience the journey of death-in life. What becomes apparent through Semchuk's collaborative work with her father is an intimate dialogue between a parent and his adult child that rarely is witnessed and documented in visual imagery.

In the subsequent years work after Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration, Semchuk has continued to examine those spaces of identity. In 1991, images from Self-portraits, 1977-1981 (Figs. 11 & 12), were recast into a larger fold of self-portraits that is entitled Mute Voice, RR 6, Saskatchewan/Vancouver, British Columbia, 1976-1991(Figs. 34 & 35). Here, prompted perhaps by her experiences of near-death with her father and the immediate self-awareness one undergoes with one's



past, present and future, Semchuk creates a narrative of female generational ties. Visually articulated through a series of 77 silver gelatin prints is Semchuk's face that chronicles her aging process over 15 years. A video screen is inserted within these images to give voice to the artist and, in turn, give voice and presence to her Baba, her mother, and her daughter.

Semchuk's partner, James Nicholas, a Cree native indian, joins Semchuk now to offer his voice as a way to deepen the investigation into identity and concerns for First Nations People who search to reclaim or at least reconcile that which was earlier appropriated by the white man. In Taking Off Skins (1994), James is photographed by Semchuk as he takes off his clothes, the white man's skin that cloaks him and in part denies his identity. The 36 black and white images to this work are set up in a grid fashion and are accompanied by a text of James' words which condemn the white power which tried to gain control over nature and the life and culture of his people. His words speak of this tyranny:

Lunging at my throat the black robe tore off the bear claws from my chest and his mistress tied the British scarf of tyranny about my neck.<sup>135</sup>

Further collaborations with Semchuk's father occurred in Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart (1994) (Fig. 36) and In Death's Embrace (1994) (Fig. 37). Martin and Sandra revisit the process of understanding death as something which is a part of life, something to be honoured and cherished as much as life itself. In Death's Embrace is an

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<sup>135</sup> Pierre Dessereault, How Far Back is Home: Sandra Semchuk (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995) p37.

installation that incorporates both photographic images and text maintaining the same storytelling narrative that Semchuk uses in Coming to Death's Door. This installation incorporates a triptych of bear images screen-printed on three large sheets of copper. In the first of these three images the bear is seen entering the water while in the middle image the bear is swimming around in the water. In the final image, the bear is still and upright searching the water for fish. The top half of each of these images is blacked out whereupon words fill the black space. Over these three images is written respectively "IN DEATH'S EMBRACE -- LIFE BECOMES SUBSTANCE -- WITHIN US."<sup>136</sup>

Semchuk employs the image of the bear, a creature that is mythically and spiritually potent in many cultures. In stories of both Slavic and First Nation peoples the bear is often used to characterize the cycle of life, death and rebirth. The bear lives out in the forests during spring and summer and retreats to its subterranean home in the caves for hibernation during fall and winter. In Death's Embrace echoes the same aspects of death, mythology and renewal as Coming to Death's Door yet the focus within this triptych seems to be about regenerating and purifying the self in the process of death. As the bear enters and moves through the water he purifies and cleanses his body while searching out a means to physically replenish himself with food. In the exhibition Coming to Death's Door, Martin journeyed through a similar process that was articulated in the composite The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan (Fig. 29 + 30). Though in The Descent Martin's journey seeks out a replenishing and a renewal of the spirit rather than of the body, the same kind of interplay between descending into the earth while also emerging from the water makes reference to the life cycle of the bear. The caption that

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<sup>136</sup> <http://art-history.concordia.ca/eea/index.htm>

sits over these three images of the bear reiterates the value of life that is often only realized in the face of dying and death. Adjoining this installation is a text panel that precedes the bear trilogy that expresses both the white man's fear of death transferred on to the bear and Martin's point of reconciliation toward an unjust society:

And there it is, oh Canada,  
our home on native land,  
hidden in  
the fear of bear:  
that pathological terror  
and awe of death brought  
from the old country to the new:  
genocide that kills from  
the inside out.

I do not know the languages, rituals,  
stories of my ancestors.

"What have I brought forward of  
that which you value, Dad?"

There are tears in my father's eyes.

"Everything, just everything."

My father looks at the bear trilogy  
in silence: smiles.

"Now I know I want to live."<sup>137</sup>

Here Semchuk expresses her loss of heritage, the traditions and language of Ukraine, and in so doing reaffirms a part of the deep connection Semchuk has with her father.

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<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart (Fig. 37) is a series of sixteen selenium-toned black and white photographs that show Martin carrying on his daily routine of life during the summertime. In many of the images he is shown as active and engaged in his life. Martin defies those stereotypes of old people disengaging themselves from an active life, he is not giving in to time nor is he allowing his day-to-day life to become less fulfilling. The realization of inevitable death and its heartfelt understanding between father and daughter is intimately and simply expressed in three small panels to this work:

Death is a natural thing, sweetheart.

I am going to miss you, Dad.<sup>138</sup>

In 2000, Martin Semchuk passed away. Sandra created a web site entitled Recognition and Dialogue: Martin Semchuk September 21, 1914 to November 18, 2000<sup>139</sup> about her father as a way of continuing his memory and honouring his life. The web site is designed as a forum for sharing stories about her father with other family and with friends. She invited them to include their own stories that relate either to Martin or to family and death. The main web site page shows an image of Martin while a text runs down the left side of the screen. It reads:

I would like to honour my father's life by creating a space where family and friends can gather and tell stories.

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<sup>138</sup> Pierre Dessereault, How Far Back is Home: Sandra Semchuk (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995) p37.

<sup>139</sup> [www.eciad.bc.ca/ssemchuk/semchuk/index.html](http://www.eciad.bc.ca/ssemchuk/semchuk/index.html) Recognition and Dialogue: Martin Semchuk September 21, 1914 to November 18 2000, Sandra Semchuk, 2001.

The stranger is always welcome. At Christmas, Dad told me, in a Ukrainian household a place would be set at the table for the stranger to come.

Please join me.<sup>140</sup>

As part of a ritual to honour her father Sandra practiced a Cree tradition of weaving one small basket made of sweetgrass for everyday during the first year after her father's passing. Here Semchuk has set aside much of the classical Greek mythological references used earlier in her work. Now she examines death and dying through more local mythologies of the First Nations People and still her Ukrainian heritage to articulate ideas concerning both death and identity. These baskets took on the impression of the braided Ukrainian bread called *kabka*, a bread made during celebrations of life, a bread in the middle of which was lit a candle to honour the dead. Images of these woven baskets and of the braided bread appear on the web site as symbols of those rituals that signify the passing of a loved one.

Under each of these images of the baskets, access is revealed to individual stories shared by family and friends about Martin. As well, subsequent pages are listed which speak of Martin's life, his family tree, stories, photo stories, collaborative projects that Martin and Sandra worked on together, a forum for dialogue, and an invitation to participate. Many of these pages are still under construction however, but what this site does initiate is an extension of Sandra's past dialogical experiences with her father, opening it up now to anyone and everyone who wishes to share in a story and in a life. We as viewers in this visual, textual and media work can continue to also share in the authorship of experiences

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid*

around death, not only in our own personal memories and experiences that surface but also in the same experiences that we contribute to the site.

As an extension of this thesis, it would be interesting to examine the particular ways that this web site may reveal the extent of dialogue that can occur between people who visit it and who have experiences to share concerning death, family and ethnicity. Revisiting ideas around storytelling can open a plethora of collaborative projects and story sharing that is inspired by earlier methods of oral traditions. In Semchuk's photographic composites the viewer was able to step into the spaces of Semchuk's photographic works through a relationship of memories and experiences. In cyber space the viewer can enter the space with more of a tactile, emotional and cerebral participation, creating an experience around death and dying that is continuous and ever-expanding, whereby the pursuit of dialogue is fulfilled by creating a potentially global interconnectedness between humans.

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Figure 1. Tomas Sklarenko, Elevator Agent at Struan



Figure 2. Mrs. Ed Parker, Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan



Figure 3 Dad and Richard, my parents' home, Regina, April, 1980



Figure 4 Co-operative Self-portrait, Richard and I, RR6, Saskatoon, April, 1980



Figure 5 Baba, Uncle Ed and Dad, Meadow Lake, March 26, 1977



Figure 6 Self-portrait, Baba's Bedroom, Meadow Lake, April, 1977





Figure 7 Co-operative Self-portrait, Dad and I, Regina, April, 1980



Figure 8 (Part I) Co-operative Self-portrait, Mom and I, Yuma, February, 1979



Figure 9 (Part II) Co-operative Self-portrait, Mom and I, Yuma, February, 1979



Figure 10 Co-operative Self-portrait, Rowenna and I, RR6, Saskatoon, January, 1979



April 3, 1977



April 9, 1977



April 22, 1977



Figure 11 (Part I) Self-portraits, 1977-1981



May 3, 1977



January 16, 1979



January 17, 1979



February 23, 1980



August 3, 1980



February 25, 1981

Figure 12 (Part II) Self-portraits, 1977-1981



Figure 13 RR6, Saskatoon, August, 1975



Figure 14     Self-portrait at Grieg Lake, August, 1979





Figure 15 RR6, Saskatoon, May, 1977



Figure 16     Churchill River, July, 1977



Figure 17     Emma Lake, August, 1977



Figure 18 RR6, Saskatoon, March, 1978

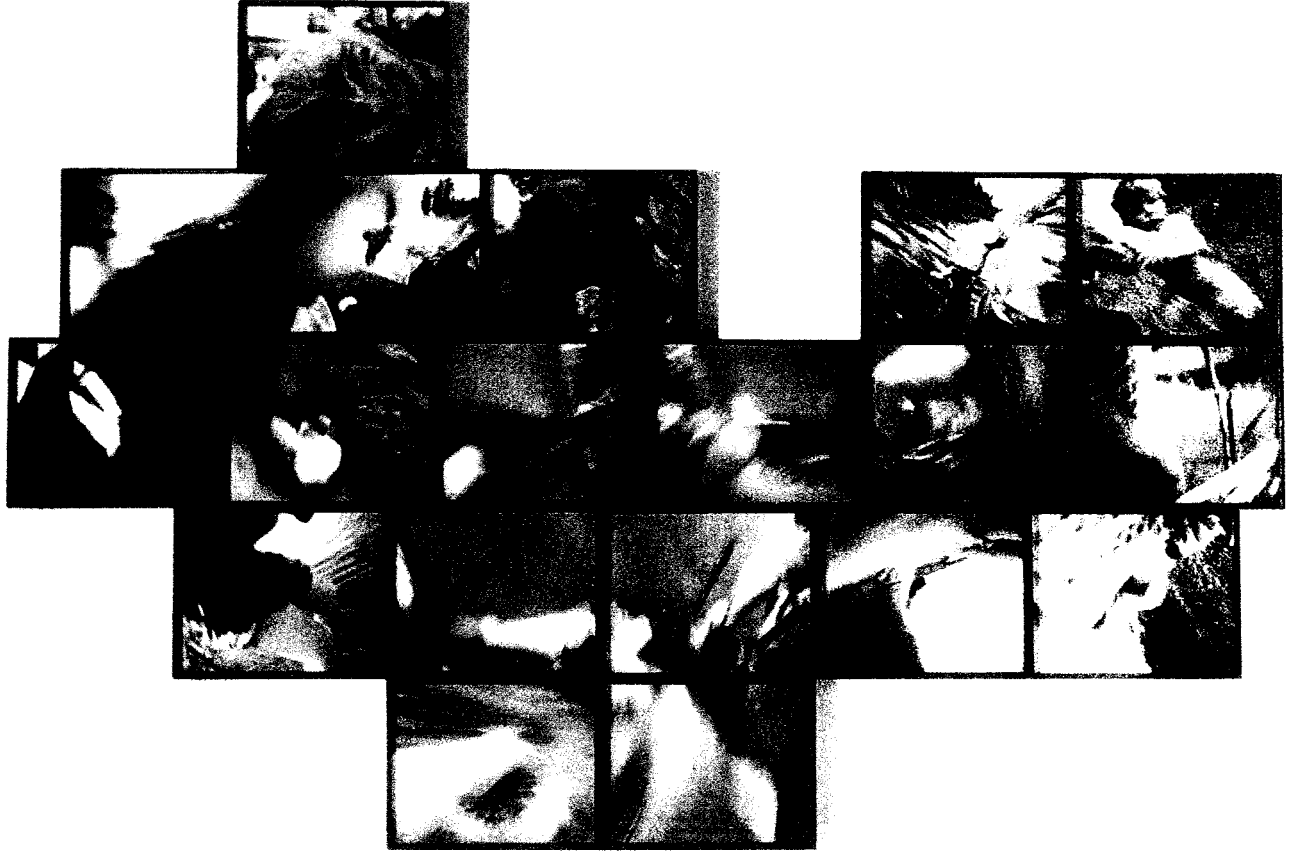


Figure 19 Goat Crossing, Birch Lake, Saskatchewan, 1985-1986



Figure 20 Baba's Garden, Hafford, Saskatchewan, 1984-85



Figure 21 Self-portrait, Galiano Island, 1989



Figure 22 Ukrainians Vote To Go Their Own Way





Figure 23 (Part I) Seeing My Father See His Own Death, Yuma, Arizona, 1983



Figure 24 (Part II) Seeing My Father See His Own Death, Yuma, Arizona, 1983

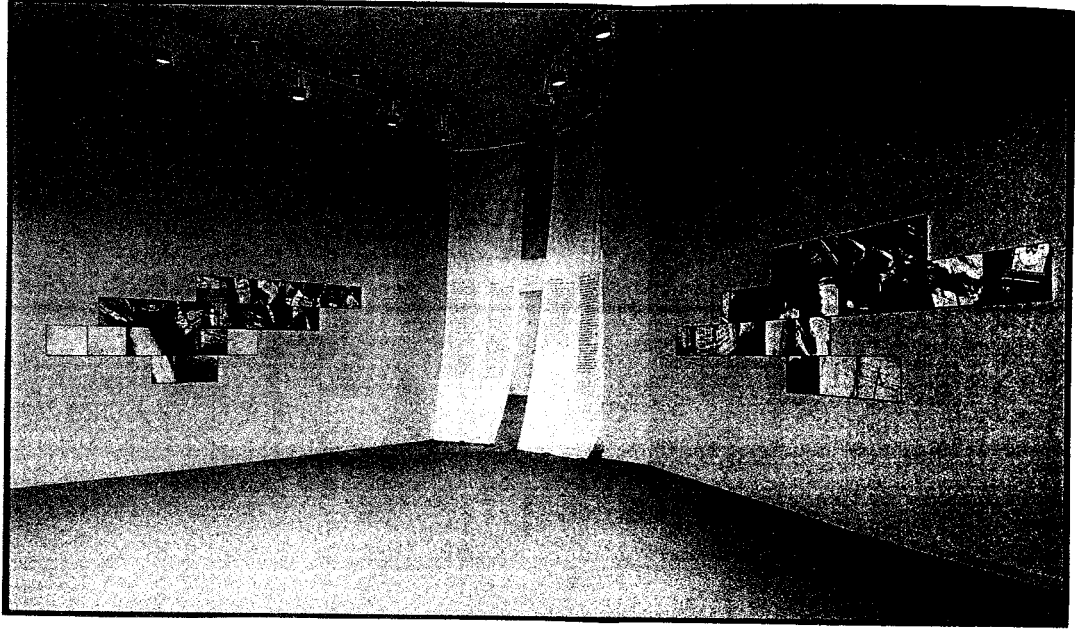


Figure 25 Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-91 (Full view)

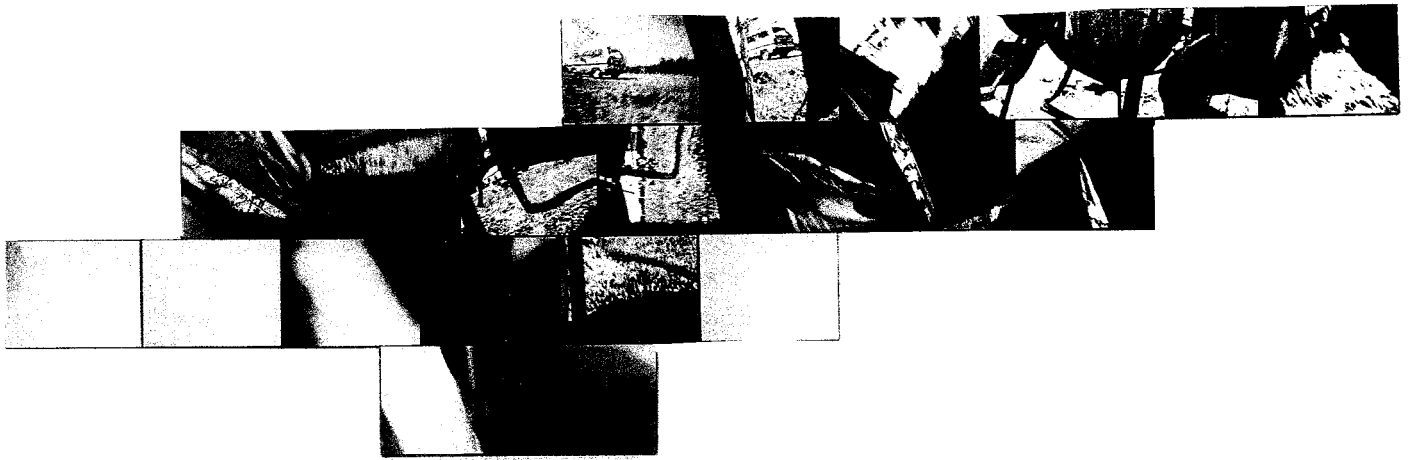


Figure 26 Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991  
(Left Composite)

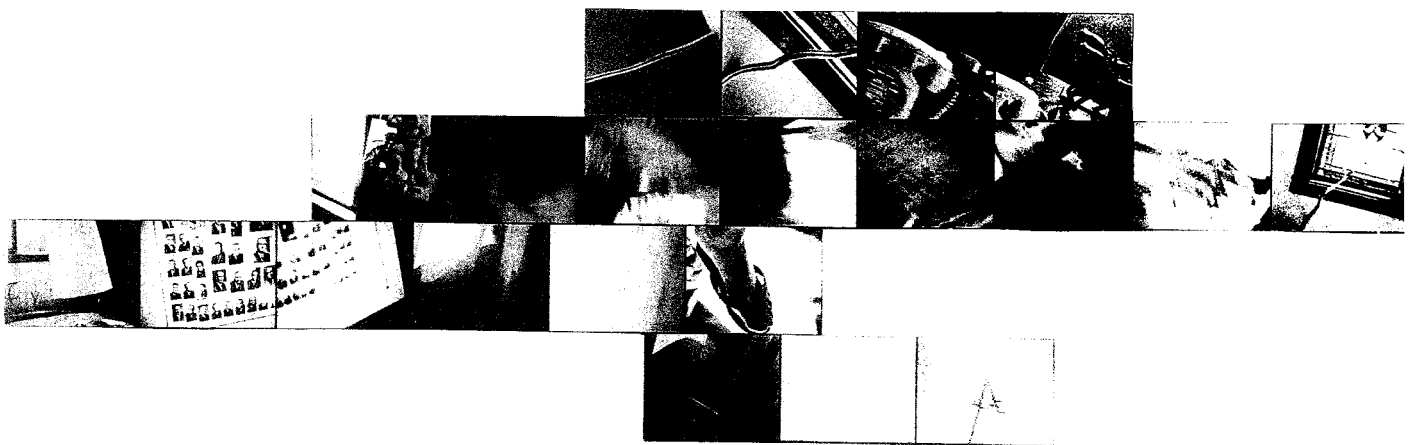


Figure 27 Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991  
(Right Composite)

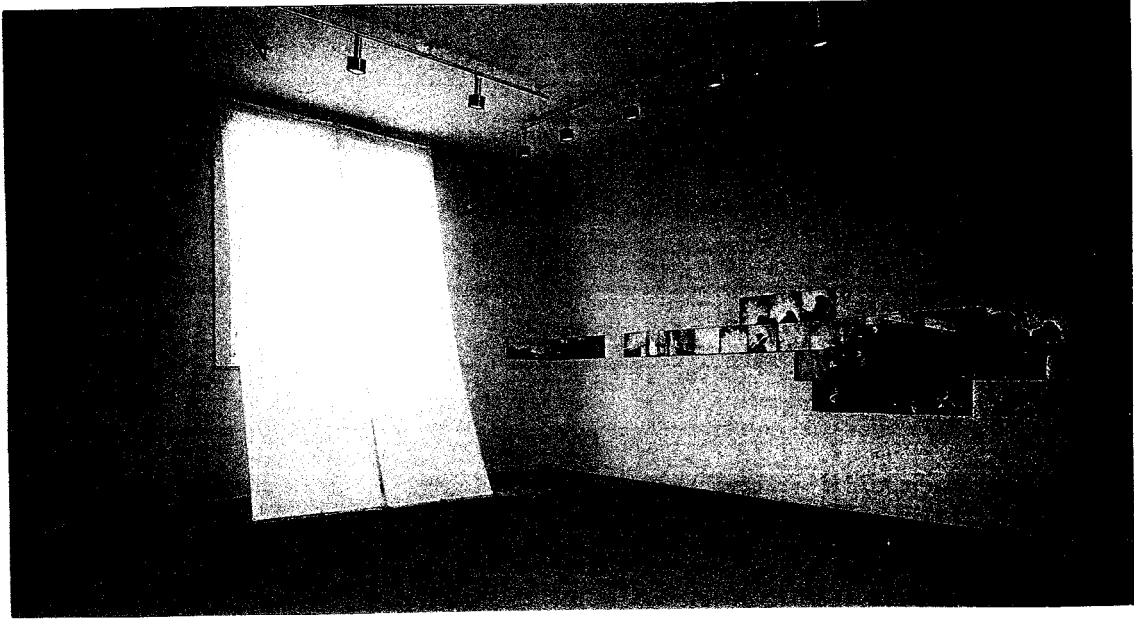


Figure 28 The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1991 (Full View)

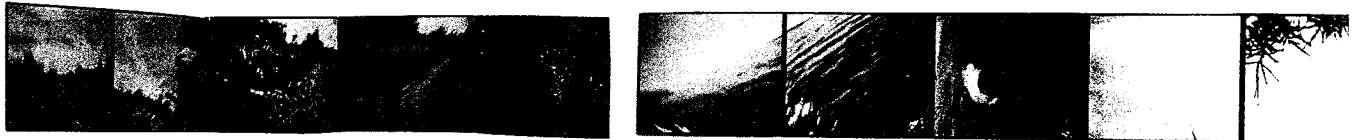


Figure 29 The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991 (Left Composite)

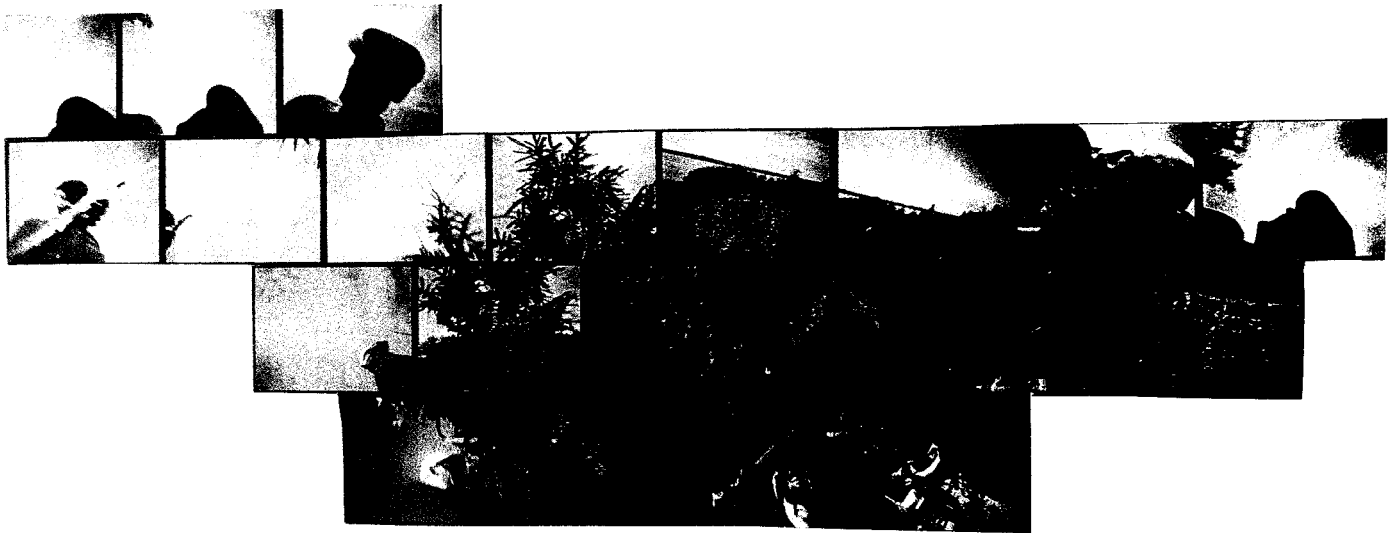


Figure 30 The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991 (Right composite)



**DAUGHTER'S VOICE 1:**

*I am in my father's home on the top of a hill in the midst of a bird sanctuary. From the window the view is vast—sky and water and pelicans floating by. Each day I watch my father go down the steep hill to the lake where he starts the first pump to bring water up the hill to the second pump which he starts next. The pumps are quite new, brilliant yellow, and once he primes the first one, they respond quickly to his pull on the starter ropes. This is a ritual. When the second pump is going he listens to the hose to hear if the water is running through it. He walks the rest of the way up the hill, unrolls the long green hose, and begins the long slow task of watering each of the one hundred and seven trees that he has planted. Today my father has had a shock. He does not feel well. Yet he wants to go down the hill to start the pumps. I am mute. I cannot forbid my father to go down this hill. I am outside his own dialogue with death. He says when you die you are dead, nothing more. He is not giving up his soul to any construct of a god for safekeeping. There is another story being played out here. My father is setting himself up to learn something. I am scared but I trust him. It is his choice.*

**FATHER'S VOICE 1:**

*There's a simple logic to things that people do. I am not feeling well. But I also feel that going down the hill will help me. At the same time I sense that it could kill me. For the first time I ask you to come with me. I have to go down. Not that I have to pump water—pumping water isn't crucial. I have to go down. As we go down the hill I think, "Golly, I feel pretty good. I feel strong." Once you get the bottom pump going I tell you to go on up ahead to start the second pump. I am not feeling good. By the time I get to where you are at the second pump I am in deep trouble. I don't know how that heart can take it. I can't get any breath into my lungs. I don't know enough to take a nitro. The mind goes dead, no oxygen—it just isn't functioning. Maybe it is a mechanism that when a person is dying that they don't feel anything. No strong feeling of pain or anything. I say to you, "I'm in trouble" because I don't want you to be scared. I think "This is it" and I don't want you to be afraid. As far as I am concerned I am breathing my last few breaths and I am not breathing them because I can't take them in. It is really that simple. You ask me "Dad, do you have your nitro?"*

Figure 31 Text Panel I for The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991

**DAUGHTER'S VOICE 2:**

*I follow my father down the hill. I wonder if I can do CPR if I need to. At the midway point he stops, rests. He points at the chokecherry bushes. I go into the bush and come back with a gas can, fill the pump, and follow him the rest of the way down to the lake. At the bottom he parts the bush and opens the way for me to go to the lake where he shows me how to take in and clean the intake valve. I throw the hose attached to a rock back into the water and get a pitcher of water to prime the bottom pump. I know my father is teaching me so that I will know how to do this when he is no longer here. He tells me to go on up the hill and to start the second pump. I climb. The pump starts easily. I put my ear to the hose on the ground to hear the water running through. After a long while my father climbs slowly past me then stops. I look at him. His face is gray, his eyes are vacant, his hands are blue. He says, "I'm in trouble."*

**FATHER'S VOICE 2:**

*I don't know if we can know about death. We can watch and see how others die if they let us but I don't think we can ever really know. The more that you know about life or death the more that you know how little you know. It's a humbling kind of thing. You feel that you need to know more, need to make choices that help you to learn, and then time starts to run out. When the time comes it will not bother you. You will keep learning as much as you can. You will keep on living and making choices as much as you can. Somehow nature provides a kind of a balance so that you don't realize that you are doing less or learning less. You feel as alive when you are 78 as when you were 7. You don't feel any differently about yourself—not really. The process is so slow and so gradual that you don't notice it. Other people do, but you don't. The one thing that you do learn as you grow older is how precious life is. Life itself is the ultimate. One moment is a terribly precious thing.*

Figure 32 Text Panel II for The Descent, Cochin, Saskatchewan, 1990-1991

**DAUGHTER'S VOICE 1:**

*I am leaving my father's home by the lake. My uncle sits in my father's chair. In my imagination I see my father's death. "A friend is waiting," I lie. My friend is not home. I sit in the van immobilized for a day and return to the home by the lake. My family is trying to reach me. My father is suffering from a serious heart attack. He is alive. The family is there. At the hospital. My father is in great pain. When the worst seems over, when we breathe a sigh of relief, my father says, "I want to go home." "Dad, you've got to stay in the hospital," we say. My brother looks awful. He is hurting his father trying to keep him in bed. The staff is young, compassionate. My father sees them try to slip a sedative into his IV. He tears the IV off his arm and he runs. We bargain. "You can have your own room." "Sometimes we send them to the mental home," the young doctor says. "Can I take him for a ride in the van?" I ask. "Yes, take him around the block. It may calm him down," says the doctor. "Dad," I say, "let's go for a ride in the van." I get the van. My father gets in quietly and looks straight at me. I know that I will take him home. "You don't die for a principle, you know," I say. I can't believe I am saying this. "I have my rights too," he says.*

**FATHER'S VOICE 1:**

*I know my story. My son is holding me by my arms. He is saying, "You know, he's pretty strong yet." This makes me very angry. My kids won't listen to me at all. I am saying "I want to go home. I have to get out of here." It is killing me. It is killing me. If I stay here I will not be alive tomorrow. I have to go home. But my kids say "No, you have to stay here. It is for your own good." I say "Look, I have some rights, call the police—let them decide." Nobody in the hospital will decide. My kids will not decide. I figure maybe the police will decide. Mabel pretends to go outside to call the police. An obvious pretence. Just because I am sick does not mean that I am stupid. You've got to be damned angry. No one is siding with you. It seems as though everybody, the hospital staff, my own family is against me. Nobody thinks from my point of view. Nobody considers me really—how I think, what I feel, or anything else. I have no rights whatsoever. None whatsoever. To hell with this, I think. I'm getting out of here. I don't give a damn how I get out or what happens. I am out of here—that is it! I am dying in here anyhow. What is the difference if I die on the road or anywhere else. Nobody is stopping me.*

Figure 33 Text Panel I for Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan

**FATHER'S VOICE 2:**

*I am close to death. I think I am hallucinating but it is very real. I am coming to the doors of hell. The little devil stands in front. He has a square, not a round, head. He is red, as red as can be, like fire. And there he is grinning from ear to ear, a very pleasant guy. Very friendly. Standing there. I don't like him. There is no reason why I don't like him. I just grab him and lift him up. The doors open for me, big garage-type doors, and I walk right in holding this guy by the scruff of the neck. There are bodies all over the place smouldering. Everything is just smoke and stench. I walk a long ways to the very back of this dark place where there is another set of doors, the back doors. By the back doors there is a peg. I just stick that red devil up on that peg. He is still smiling. And I walk out through the doors to another world. It is that simple.*

**FATHER'S VOICE 3:**

*Grandfather Andrew is always concerned about teaching me. He walks slowly with his hands behind his back and talks about things that I should know about. Down-to-earth philosophy. What is freedom? He is a loner. I am like him. I love people but keep them at a certain distance. I smile even when I am hurting. As a young person inside, I hurt so very, very badly. I can handle people at arm's length. I can, I really can. My boundaries are down after the heart attack. The problems of trust in relationships are the same as the problems of trust between nations. I want so profoundly to see the boundaries between nations removed. After my death experiences I am prepared to remove boundaries.*

*I trust Grandfather Andrew and he trusts me. When he is dying he calls for me to come. I know that he wants to see the world for the last time. He knows that he is dying. He asks me to help him out of bed. Asks me to help him into the open air. He says "I want to see the world one more time." He looks and then he dies.*

Figure 34      Text Panel II for Coming to Death's Door, Cochin, Saskatchewan



Figure 35 Mute Voice, RR6, Saskatchewan, Vancouver, British Columbia, 1976-1991



Figure 36 Mute Voice detail

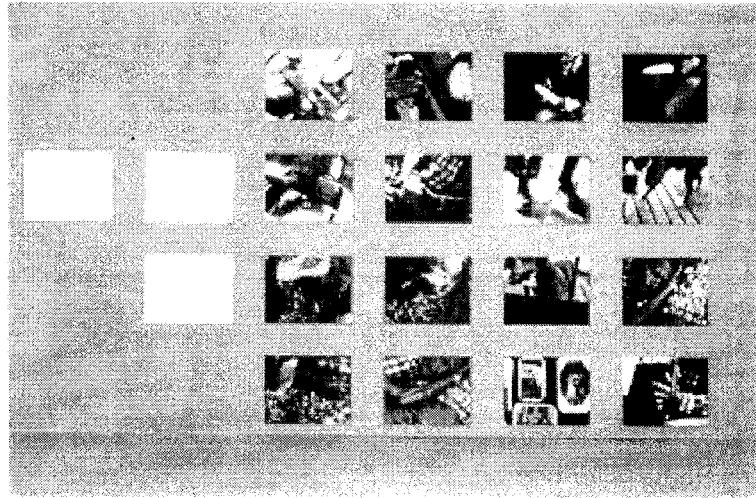


Figure 37 Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart



Figure 38 In Death's Embrace



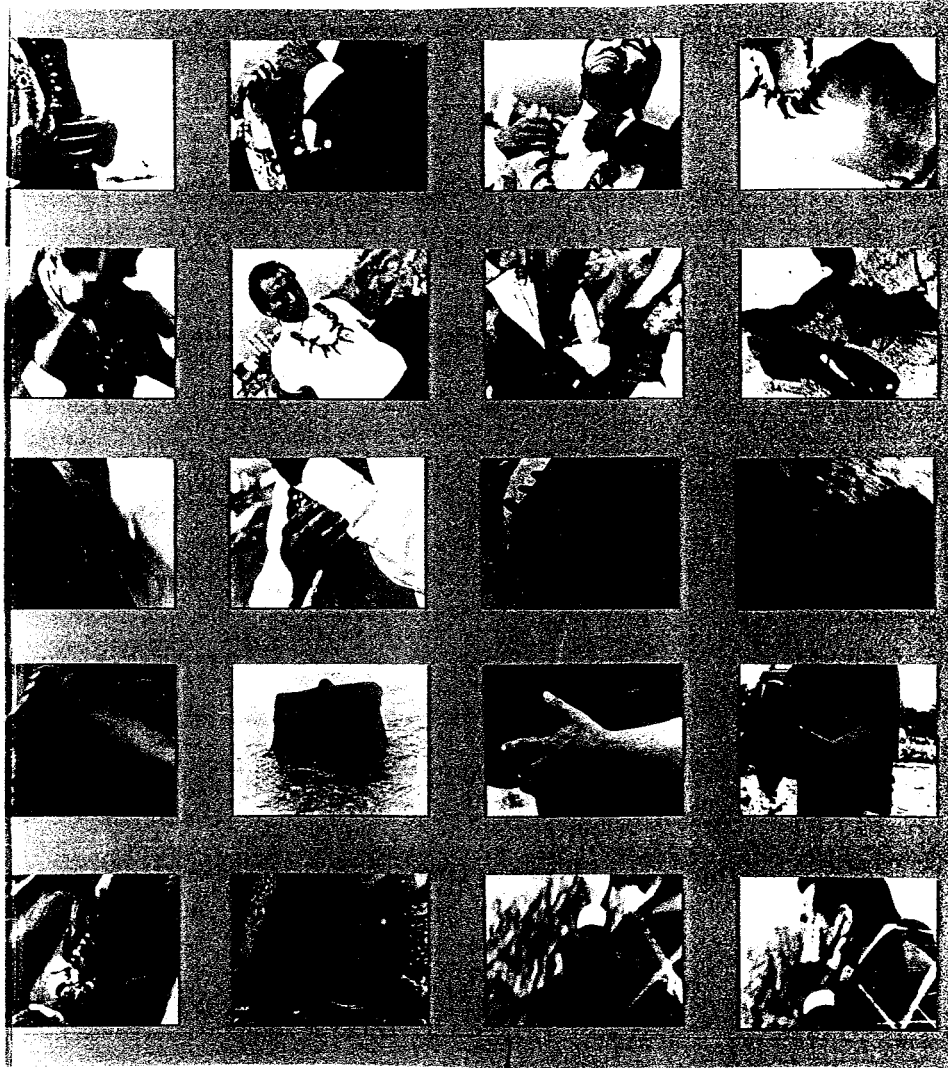


Figure 39 Taking Off Skins