



Statue wrapped in cloth (Waddesdon Manor, UK), 2016. Photo: Jonathan Michael Ray

Oakland Cemetery (Atlanta, USA), 2015. Photo: cws_design, iStock Getty Images



Memento Park (Budapest, Hungary), 2012. Photo: Suede Head, Flickr

The idle cloth
By Elaine Tam

1.

"She is drawn to a certain spot. At times. There stands a stone [...] Never had much. Now none. As had she the misfortune to still be of this world. But when the stone draws then to her feet the prayer, Take her. Especially at night when the skies are clear. With moon or without. They take her and halt her before it. There she too as if of stone."¹

It was the smell of drying rain rustled up by wind between the blades of grass. He was not sure if it was more or less imposing, bundled up like that in cloth, a thing of awkward silhouette. This is the way of the sheet that dresses the attic furniture in gowns, like groups of ladies awaiting unknown futures. The sheet kidnaps the sculpture so that, without its identity, it undergoes the soft type of defacement: René Magritte's drowned mother, her soaked nightgown wrapping her head. Tragic and fated, the cloth becomes Magritte's famed visual cue, the negative space of a personage behaving like a screen for all manners of projection.

Waddesdon Manor, England, sometime late 2016. Firstly, the austere presence of the swaddled sculpture is perhaps consistent with the unusual amount of time Ray spends wandering graveyards, mostly without reason, and often quite alone. Around the graveyards, we might note a sculptural motif in frequent use—a Grecian urn draped in the luscious folds of petrified cloth, all of carved stone or verdigris bronze. The idle cloth, which represents the curtain dividing the living and the dead, is a striking and lyrical choice of symbols. The undulations of cloth, like a Baroque trill, create fold upon fold and suggest the enthrall of further mysteries. We are most readily reminded of philosopher Gilles Deleuze's *Le Pli*, and of a simple complexification: what is the inside but a fold of the outside?²

The statue is suppressed but cannot struggle. We may secondly think upon Memento Park, Budapest—the open-air 'museum' and graveyard for decommissioned Communist-era statues that this writer visited just once, years ago, wondering if this is where the immortal go to die. She noted with sordid fascination the only Cubist rendition of Marx and Engels, which was appropriately housed in the window of an airy neoclassical façade. To this, the shadowy figures of Chris Marker's filmic essay *Statues Also Die* (1953) add insight:

"When men die, they become history. When statues die, they become art."

At Waddesdon Manor, Ray raises his camera loaded with 35mm film and within the duration of a shutter's click, against all its expectations, the swaddled statue becomes immortal a second time.

Jonathan Michael Ray, *Each Figure Now a Phantom* (2019)



Sundial on St. Buryan Church (Cornwall, UK), 2007. The Latin phrase "Pereunt et Imputantur" translates to "they perish and are recorded." Photo: Nabokov, Wikimedia



Jonathan Michael Ray, *Umbra Sicut Hominis Vita* (2021)



2.

The sun is low when they light their candles. He is wandering graveyards again, this time among the foreign ruins of Lisbon. The soil between elaborate single-tomb mausoleums stirs with the whispers of unnameable creatures and unseen life. Here, he discovers shelves choked with personal effects. Their deracinated remains summon, in fits and starts, the inimitable qualities of someone who once, too, may have wandered this place of breeze-filled cypress.

The shelf becomes both a structure and a locational device, through which Ray posits the human and non-human conditions of the artefact. In reinstating this ubiquitous shelf, the artefact interfaces between two tremulous worlds, much like a veil. Like the shroud slung over the solid urn with special torpor, Ray's ready-made gesture makes use of the unrushed contradictions of the speechless object. Works like *Each Figure Now a Phantom* (2019) recall the interstitial, purgatory zone of mausoleum and museum—the zombification of the object underlined through a twin bid to reinstate life and mourn the lifeless.

Ray's shelf-works made of slate bear inlaid engravings of Latin aphorisms taken from faces of sundials. The play of shadows—their sinewy elongation and slow slide across the sundial's surface—is so easily whisked away with the disappearance of the sun. Death, like nothing else, bears heavily upon the living and figures frequently in their endless meditations on the enigma of time. But as the philosophers edge closer to the precipice of great discoveries, the day falls and their time is cut short. We are left with nothing but this small piece of wisdom: *Umbra Sicut Hominis Vita*. "A person's life is like a shadow."

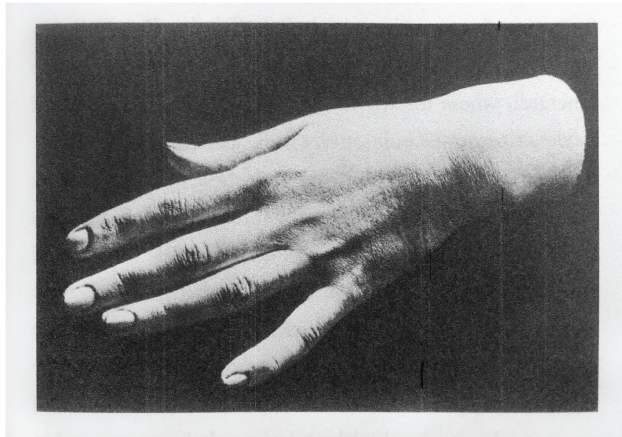
The mausoleum shelves that feature in Ray's work operate through dual movements of attachment and removal. Take, for example, the mannequin's hand that lies forlorn in Ray's work *The Shadow's Shadow*. Conjectures are made by simulacrum: could I permit myself to imagine the hand of Metilde, the 19th-century spurned love of French writer Stendhal? Metilde's hand, which Stendhal had cast in plaster and kept close on his writing desk, which "meant almost as much to him as Metilde herself could ever have done. In particular, the slight crookedness of the ring finger occasioned in him emotions of a vehemence he had not hitherto experienced."³

Stendhal's desire crystallises everywhere, or is that the grain of the page of my book? It carries the image of the plaster reproduction of Metilde's amputated left hand, the apparition white against solid black ground. Its petrified appearance invokes the hand of a mannequin, for Stendhal's recourse to possess Metilde relies on fantasy and objectification: the plaster-cast through which he made her a doll.

Jonathan Michael Ray, *The Shadow's Shadow*
(2019)



Plaster cast of Metilde's hand as it appears in
W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*. Photo: author's own

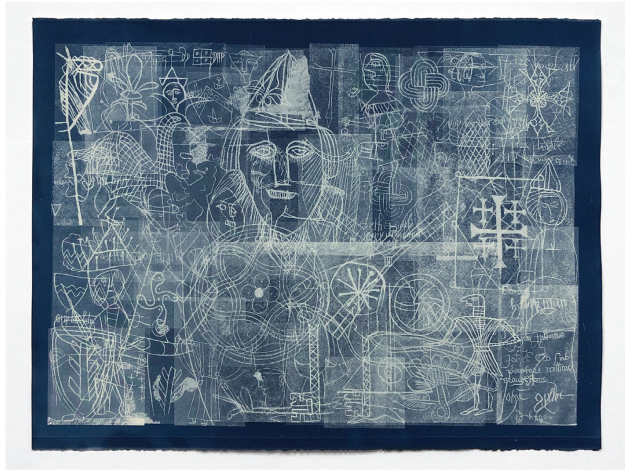


The feeling was so exact. The reader forgives W.G. Sebald's re-telling of Stendahl with potentially falsified sources, and similarly we do not question the origins of Ray's mannequin hand. This is because origin is not the purpose and less the point, when its effect is to issue forth a syntactical chain of associations that speaks to the morbid powers of a love lost. The hand thus comes to stand for an enchanted hold from beyond the quiet dead; its grip bears uncanny similarity to the haunt of religious feeling or the strength of divine passion which, wraith-like, wraps and warps the stable mind.

Found objects are shown strewn in Ray's work, contingent like the by-products of a midnight spell or private incantation, or wishes that exist in want of bygone times. Their ceremonious quality gathers magic to itself, pleating the realms of mortal sensation. They call to Ray's intuition as he selects them from the rabble of items against the jostling backdrop of the weekly market in central Lisbon, known as *Feira da Ladra*. (Is it not suitable that, along with graveyards, he regularly takes his *dérive* through the "Market of Thieves?")

As such, Ray's shelf-works may be likened to one of his favourite books, Italo Calvino's *The Castle*, an extraordinary exercise in which the writer builds a labyrinthine narrative through the cartographic "crossed destinies" of tarot spreads.⁴ Through Calvino's account, we learn of the artist as shaman: a collector and transmissive channel for untold stories. Ray possesses some qualities of the withdrawn narrator of *The Castle* who, in the throes of the stories told by others, does not compete to tell his own. Yet, this story is his to tell, for in his absence, we would have no story. Just as the resistive silence of a work of art draws its viewer into a game of interpretation, the artist does not tell us what we need to know, but brings to our consciousness that which we often fail to see. We enter their sphere of orbit by way of their attenuation. Attenuation, which works through the dislodged logic of negative space, is most effective by lack of disclosure.

Perhaps it is in this way that we are invited to engage with Ray's work; through a non-hierarchical, *chassé-croisé* of readings. We follow the tail of one route only to realise it imbricates the massive body of another.



Jonathan Michael Ray, *Pritchard's Crypt III* (2021)



Graffiti covered wall of Palácio da Pena (Sintra, Portugal), 2019. Photo: Jonathan Michael Ray

3.

"Changed the stone that draws her when revisited alone. Or she who changes it when side by side [...] Is it to nature alone it owes its rough-hewn air? Or to some too human hand forced to desist? As Michelangelo's from the regicide's bust [...] On its what is the wrong word its uplifted face obscure graffiti. Scrawled by the ages for the eye to solicit in vain."⁵

A violence spills forth in and among wistful lines of giddy jubilation, such that the grasping of the mongrel verbiage of graffiti is imbued with an energy or force of life. Its hyper-tangled tracery may appeal to those with a keen interest in the cryptographic but, for the rest, these "[walls] are as good as a screen against the gaze of the passer-by who finds neither form nor lesson."⁶ Here again we find Ray meandering the streets of an indifferent city. Ray is drawn to the placeless glyphs of the anonymous: so immediate yet taciturn, so readily available yet suffused with eerie displacement.

Graffiti, like signing one's name, is a reclamation over that which is not owned: an attempt to find a suitable form of expression for spatial dispossession. Out of this tension emerges a form which constructs as much as it destroys. The defacement is not simply a sign of irreverence; we can understand in these trials a struggle for enunciation, something not wholly dissimilar to classical mark-making. Graffiti both medieval and modern comprise Ray's cyanotype series *Pritchard's Crypt* and *Pedestrian Scriptures*. These works find, as art historian Hal Foster says of Jean Dubuffet's *Les Murs*, "analogy between lithographic stone and urban surface."⁷

Assault through repetition gives graffiti its density, so that this amalgam of signs creates semantic pollution. Ever-thickening scrawls companion to the array of romantically lit adverts cloaked by a luckless sky. These pictographic accretions, rendered flat, exist at the juncture of image, text and sign, but also verge on becoming pattern. Within these palimpsests, a single story must be told refracted through the others with which it is enmeshed. While our singular history purports to be phasal or linear, here, Ray reminds us that histories are cumulative, conglomerate, and simultaneous, like the scores of a polyphonic chorus.

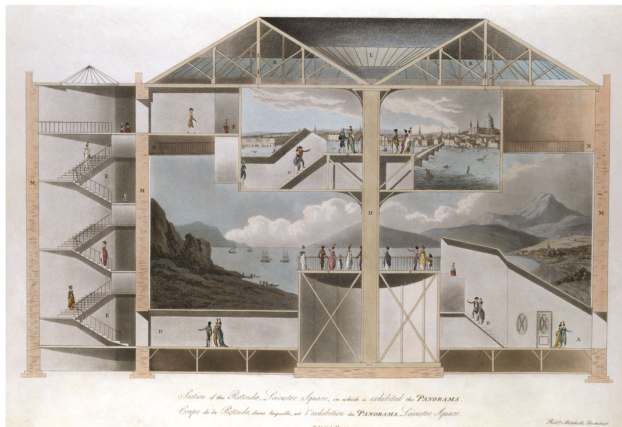
Jonathan Michael Ray, *From Above* (2020)

Jonathan Michael Ray, *Portal (prayer)* (2020)

Jonathan Michael Ray, *Shroud* (2021)



Jonathan Michael Ray, *Cell* (2021)



Cross-section of the Rotunda in Leicester Square (London, UK), 1801. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

4.

The window is the hypnotic screen of the daydream, which carries the imagination away from its imprisonment in the mindless doldrums of ordinary life. Windows of different kinds appear through Ray's work to date: permutations in a range of coloured and colourless salvaged glass. The figurative fragments were once used to re-present idolatry figures and depictions of saintly acts; the glass a favoured vehicle to inspire veneration for far-flung myths of ages past. Some of Ray's works reconstitute the formal qualities of glass for adulation—*From Above* and *Portal (prayer)* (both 2020), for example, make use of their compositional logics: harmonious symmetries, tight tessellations and the transcendent apex. Another stained glass series, created a year later, strikes an altogether different chord—free-floating fragments appear on a plain glass ground, and emphasise the artist's ability to not simply appropriate, but also work with desecrating abstract prowess.

The strategy of *Cell* (2021), however, is unique in that it appeals to the realism of our more modern sensibilities. Composed of an image of the ocean set behind a gridded lattice, its diagonal muntins, like lacerations, divide the view into diamantine segments reminiscent of a 15th-century monastic window. The image beyond the frame swills with a presentness offered by the speed of the photographic image and its indexical value; she looks out to the water, crest giving way to trough; the imagined rhythms arrest and soothe, as though somehow heard. The viewer today takes up the same position as those from centuries past, who may have gazed with similar immersion or fixation upon a stained-glass window or scenic apse.

Extensive and intensive, *Cell* transforms the room by folding the surrounding space into the bounds of an illusionistic self-enclosure: the effect is as bodily as it is architectural. Through the gesture of folding, the cell involutes and individuates by splitting off from its forebears, forming an inside distinct from the outside.

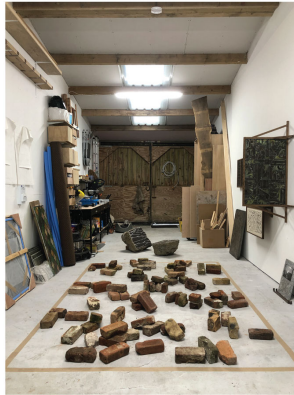
The joint processes of separation, re-presentation and immediacy at work in *Cell* recall the phenomenon of scenographic panoramas. The early 1800s multi-level developments were built to house massive painted scenes, which permitted Rotunda-goers the delight of great views across distant lands, and a means of travel for those who could not.⁸ But the appreciable paradox of *Cell* is that it transports and it contains, and is thus pervaded by the pleasures and pains of a forbidden longing.

The gallery is closing and, having contemplated it for more time than she realises, she leaves the room with unusual eyes.

Jonathan Michael Ray, *Underdeveloped Reconstruction (Made in China)* (2017)



Bricks for *Underdeveloped Reconstruction* in the artist's studio, 2022. Photo: Jonathan Michael Ray



Cabinet of fake ancient Assyrian items, British Museum (London, UK), 2022. Photo: Jonathan Michael Ray



5.

A person is liable to skew the events of her time by projecting her desires upon them but, for this writer, that is as good as any reality. That particular day, she spotted this scene of relative address: a man trawling through the skips outside the headquarters of Pre-Construct Archaeology, a heritage company in London. London bricks of all ages were jumbled in the heap: Roman, medieval, modern. Knee deep in rubble, he picks through the cast-offs, hands dry and dusty. What could he be doing? "I've always had a feeling that history doesn't really stretch away behind us infinitely, but rather is all just piled up on top of itself like landfill," he will tell me later. But we haven't met yet, and it's still five years until we will. The archaeologists were happy for him to take what he wanted. Little did they know the bricks would find themselves a different configuration, one totally unlike the landfill for which they seemed destined.

The destiny of an object is a strange thing, which Ray sometimes has the habit of intervening in. It's a matter of degrees, or adjacency, he might say. When he arrives at his studio, the bricks strain and bulge conspicuously in his rucksack, having required a kind of bullish determination to be carted back. The floor strewn haphazardly with brick piles, he lays a carpet of foliage over it and it becomes landscape.

When humankind flounders in its puerile discourse; when all last centuries' papers—so carefully scribed—become masticated by tempestuous weather; when the sun finally disappears and we can neither tell time nor power up its fields of external storage, will we then be destroyed, or no longer be human? Without history's record, will we cease to be, our ventures receding into the lurch of oblivion? When our grand architecture smoulders in ruin, becomes dark and decayed, the world may find a way back to the supernatural glamour of nature. No-one will be known; no sign will be borne. But for that brief instant, we might bear witness to the miraculous complexity of earthbound gifts and we will perhaps know a beauty such as that we have never known.

"Especially at night when the skies are clear. Invisible nearby sea. Inaudible. The entire surface under grass. Once clear of the zone of stones. Save where it has receded from the chalky soil. Innumerable white scabs all shapes and sizes [...] They are white and make do with little. Whence suddenly come no knowing nor whither as suddenly gone."⁹

Our meeting is closing and Ray is sharing some images from his recent trip to the British Museum. "That's why the cabinet of fake ancient Assyrian items is probably the best thing I saw that day," he says, vibrating with excitement. "Modern fakes transported to the UK to be sold as real antiquities, discovered at Customs, sent to the British Museum for analysis, proved to be modern fakes, but instead of throwing them in the skip the museum decides to display them. The way the objects and their meanings fold in on themselves just seems too perfect to me." An associative daisy-chain grows strong like chain mail when, link to link, its delicate stems combine to create tensile strength.

It's getting late as she writes these last lines and, for whatever reason, she's thinking of her intercostal muscles: what it would be like to be one, nestled between two ribs. What is the comparative value of the counterfeit, the bent truth, the digression, a figment of the imagination, the interpretation of art, a piece of fiction? Somewhere overhead the pallid moon is boneheaded, drunk on clear vermouth. Its light mingles with the smell of drying rain, rustled up by wind between blades of grass. The gravestones lean in for the answer, the urn draws its cloth around it like a protective sheath, all but for silence: for the swaddled sculpture cannot speak.

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1. Beckett, Samuel. *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 1982 (London: John Calder Publisher), pp11–12.
 2. Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1993 (London: Athlone Press).
 3. Sebald, W.G. *Vertigo*, 2002 (London: Penguin), p21.
 4. Calvino, Italo. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 1978 (London: Pan Macmillan).
 5. Beckett, Samuel. *Ill Seen Ill Said*, pp43–44.
 6. Dubuffet, Jean. Quoted in Hal Foster, *Brutal Aesthetics*, 2020 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p41.
 7. Foster, Hal. *Brutal Aesthetics*, p40.
 8. Christie, Ian. *Kings of the vast: John Martin II*, 2011 (London: Tate etc. Issue 23).
 9. Beckett, Samuel. *Ill Seen Ill Said*, p10.