

Exhibition Essay

Postmortem Pleasure: Maynard and McClelland's *Death by Design, Co.*TM

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Consider these deaths. Herodotus tells of two strapping brothers who worked their family's fields in Argos. Cleobis and Biton had just returned from a hard day's labor, when their mother announced her desire to attend a festival in a distant village. They had already stabled the oxen, so they hitched themselves to their mother's cart and hauled her up a hill to the temple in the land of the Argives. Exhausted from their exertions, they rested on the grassy plain outside the temple while their mother entered to ask the goddess Hera to reward them. As the men of the Argives gathered around to admire the strength and beauty of these sleeping youths, and to praise them for their filial devotion, Cleobis and Biton expired in their sleep. Herodotus called it "a most exciting ending."

Hollywood offers a different example. James Dean rocketed from his obscure Indiana origins to instant fame. With only two starring roles to his credit, *East of Eden* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Dean seared his image on the popular imagination. His smoldering good looks and his ability to convey youthful discontent and rebelliousness had made him an American icon. His romantic off-screen image was in great part forged by the Hollywood publicity machine, but his love of fast cars was genuine. In 1956, Dean was speeding on the highway in his silver Porsche, bound for a raceway in Salinas. Testing the power of his new wheels, he crashed into a Ford sedan. The glamour of Dean's death has endured far longer than his brief life and is read as a testament to a popular catch phrase of the day: "Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse."*

It is easy to see the parallels between these deaths. In each, the force of youth—handsome, vital, seemingly boundless—is smothered by the pall of mortality. Both fatalities prey upon men at the height of their masculine power and beauty, men who embody ideals of manly youth. And these lost young men are remembered, their legacy burnished by the admiration of those who mourned them. But the essential difference between them is striking. Cleobis and Biton symbolize a belief held in western culture from classical times to the mid-twentieth century that is expressed in the words of Samuel Johnson (1769): "It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives." But times have changed. In

contrast, Dean 's death—a Hollywood death—gives form to our fascination with the spectacular experience of mortality rather than the reward for exemplary action in life. Its arc and appeal is sexual, rising high on the fuel of adrenalin and burning out as fast as it flares.

The appeal of the Hollywood death is central to Michelle Maynard and Teena McClelland 's installation and video project *Death by Design, Co.*[™]. It is perfectly calculated to satisfy our desire to experience the rush of the moment of morality. Our passion for high entertainment has nurtured our love of spectacle, and our fascination with horror films and video games has numbed our fears of the agony of blood and gore. As a result, our priorities in death have shifted. No longer the time of accounting—of noble action as the means to fame or pious devotion as the means to salvation—the emphasis is now on the scenario of death rather than the unfolding of the life that precedes it, and with *Death by Design, Co.*[™] staging that death, the mortal moment is more a climax than a termination.

Rather than die alone and unacknowledged, clients of *Death by Design, Co.*[™] contract Maynard and McClelland to orchestrate, film, and edit their date with destiny. Have you always longed to fight zombies in a secluded wood? Is your greatest fear being overwhelmed by rabid rats living under your bed? Do you panic at the prospect of waking up during major surgery? Maynard and McClelland will make it happen and make you the star of your own spectacular death scene. Prior to submission to the decrepitude of age, the deterioration of disease, or dying uneventfully in your sleep. *Death by Design, Co.*[™] gives you control and provides you with a DVD of a more photogenic demise to relive in the comfort of your home with your family and your friends.

Through the process of staging a customized on-screen death, Maynard and McClelland have observed that clients shed their inhibitions as they submit to the struggle, safe in the knowledge that while they die on screen, their life is never in danger. The clients are immersed in the entire creative process. They are encouraged to improvise script and action, and they experience the step-by-step process of staging special effects, fabricated wounds and stuffed vermin or monsters. Maynard and McClelland 's rejection of computer generated imagery reflects their background in object-making, and this hands-on approach leads to a powerful experience, leaving the client drenched in stage blood, exhausted. McClelland, who starred as the doomed ingénue in Maynard 's horror film *Throb* (2005), recalled that when Maynard was casting the film, everyone wanted to be

“the one that died.” *Death by Design, Co.*[™] satisfies that urge, and the results have proved cathartic. Clients scream in horror, moan in ecstasy, and laugh with hysteria. They are permitted to indulge bizarre behavior, and their reward is our contemporary gold standard of fame: a starring role in their very own film.

Our passion for experiencing deadly danger at a safe distance has its origins in Enlightenment morality and the Romantic sublime. In his writings on stagecraft, Denis Diderot observed that the sight of watching a virtuous man suffer is as instructive as it is thrilling, while his contemporary Edmund Burke asserted that ideas associated with pain are a greater stimulus than those associated with pleasure. But the traditional notion of morality plays a lesser role in our current compulsion to engage with life-threatening situations through simulation or voyeurism. We seek the thrill of the experience rather than the lessons of an epiphany. Intrusive taboos excite us, from real kills in “snuff films” to the unheard frantic screams of bear fanatic Timothy Treadwell being mauled to death in Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005). We accept the edited reality of *Survivor*, where competitors endure grueling hardships under the safe watch of an off-camera production crew. We can even hire firms to kidnap us or we can spend the night in a mock-jail hotel. Along with this element of camp is another, much older notion about death, that in the momentary climax of sexual encounter, we die “little deaths.” As a euphemism for orgasm, the verb “die” saw its heyday in Elizabethan England, but its echoes survive in dangerous practices such as auto-erotic asphyxiation and the saccharine sentiments of pop songs, such as John Denver’s exclamation in “Annie’s Song” (1974) “let me die in your arms.” And in the contemporary horror film, the hottest, hormone-addled teens, whose desires center more on sex than survival, are usually the first to die. *Death by Design, Co.*[™] allows us to venture into this dangerous territory, to craft our death and to experience it, and then to watch ourselves suffer, struggle, and die over and over again through cinematic illusion. That’s the real thrill, to have the spectacle of your own death pass before you, while you sit back and bask in the pleasing, postmortem afterglow.

*Commonly associated with Dean, the phrase “Live fast...” originally appeared in Willard Motely’s 1947 novel *Knock on Any Door*. Nicholas Ray directed a film version of this tale of a one-time altar boy who turns to crime, kills a cop, and is sentenced to death in the electric chair in 1949. Ray directed James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

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