

firstdraft

Gallery 4

8 December - 28 January

So this is goodbye?

Olga Svyatova

@osvyatova | olgasvyatova.com

Ambiguous loss is one that occurs without the likelihood of reaching emotional closure. The term was coined in the late 1970s by researcher Pauline Boss while studying families of soldiers who went missing in action. Examples of ambiguous loss include infertility, termination of pregnancy, the disappearance of a family member, death of an ex-spouse, or a family member being physically alive but in a state of cognitive decline. We all know death; when a loved one dies we are accustomed to funeral rituals. With ambiguous loss, there are no rituals; there are no customs.

So is this goodbye? explores ambiguous loss through the lens of the artist who lost their father in 2021 from Covid-19 in Russia. This highly personal and documentary exhibition draws on the photographic medium as one that simultaneously embodies both memory and loss. It reflects on universal themes of grief, loss and memory and gives the artist the opportunity to commemorate and get some relief and understanding of their loss.

The artist would like to thank Casey Ayers, Rachel Lai and Dylan Marelic.

Olga Svyatova's work addresses the complex links between memory, relationships, and identity, through a multidisciplinary practice spanning photography, printmaking, and textiles. Svyatova appropriates their own personal experience of different cultures and histories in order to compel viewers to reflect on the connections that sustain our lives. Moving from Russia where they grew up, to Thailand, and now based on Gadigal Land (Sydney), Svyatova's experience of cultural, geographic, and personal journeying drives their practice. Being a self-taught artist, Olga has been exhibiting extensively in Eora, they have held solo exhibitions at Our Neon Foe, Tiles Lewisham, and Knulp, they have exhibited at Sydenham International, Pari, Kudos, Hidden Rookwood, and West Space.

Gallery 1
Samantha Snedden
The Enlightenment

Gallery 2
Shannon Toth
Protector

Gallery 3
Sharoud Ghahani
Remnants of a dismantled state

firstdraft
gadigal land
13-17 riley street
woolloomooloo
nsw 2011
+61 2 8970 2999
firstdraft.org.au

we acknowledge and pay respect to the gadigal people of the eora nation, the traditional owners of the land on which firstdraft is built and operates.

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Artworks (clockwise from left, and top to bottom)

Olga Svyatova

Grandma Sleeping, 2022

inkjet print on archival paper

17 cm x 11.5 cm

Olga Svyatova

Do Birds Dream at Night?, 2022-2023

single channel video

3 minutes and 15 seconds

Olga Svyatova

Last Trip, 2022

inkjet print on archival paper

26 cm x 7.5 cm

Olga Svyatova

One For You, 2023

denim jacket, blue checkered dress shirt, glass cup, piece of sourdough bread, ash tray, grey goose vodka 50ml bottle, 2 books, buddhist statue, framed photo
dimensions variable

Scroll to next page for essay
by Casey Ayres

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Half

by Casey Ayres

I was four when my father died. Too young to have any memories of him. There are bits of him lying around; photographs of what you would expect – holidays, training wheels, family picnics. They stopped abruptly when he died. There were more photographs eventually, of trips down south and strained faces, with only three-quarters of our little gang left. There was also a cassette recording. Our mother kept it to herself for whatever reason. She kept it so long in fact, that the first time I heard my father's voice was at the tender age of thirty-four. Thirty years earlier in 1992, my brother and I were chatting to him on his deathbed. We sounded like the children in old vegemite commercials. It seemed impossible to think I knew these people, and that one of them was me. Besides the photographs and cassette, there was also a recurring dream that I had until I was about ten years old. It went:

There's a white room, a hospital bed with my father in it and two children - my brother and I - hiding beside the bed eating triangles of polony. No one speaks. We eat the luncheon meat and keep our heads low. Eventually, a doorway appears; a rectangular black hole in the wall. I stand up, leaving my brother behind and walk into the darkness. I fall. Sometimes I'd fall for hours in that pitch black with nothing but the sensation of plummeting, until eventually I'd wake up.

Dreams aren't incredibly accurate. Much like false memories acquired from looking at a photograph, they can often be identified by experiencing yourself in the third person.

In waking life one is not afforded the compassion of spectating their own grief. I've had thirty-two years to consider the hole in my heart, but I can only speculate on the something that is missing from it. Olga has not had thirty-two years to grieve for their father. The tragedy of losing someone later in life is that you know them. You know their kindness, their weaknesses, their generosity and their anger. You know the texture of the back of their hands. You can identify them from down the street by their gait. You not only have memories of each other, you have memories that you share. You know they love you despite doing a terrible job of it. They are a fully-realised, flesh and blood character in your story and then, on the other side of the world, a global pandemic writes

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them out of your life. You know the shape of that hole in your heart, but not how to continue when the person who has been there your entire life will not be present for what is left.

When someone in your family dies you witness everyone around you as they struggle, wounded, crawling through their days. Some pick themselves up and get on with it only for the weight of what is following to crush them later. Worse still is when the loss is wholly yours, when you must grieve alone with no benchmark for pain. When you think you're losing your mind because likely you are.

It happens to everyone eventually, unless you're lucky enough to be the first. I've buried too many people. Some had their time, others were just beginning. ██████ won't have the chance to make more art, to have the deep conversations or knock you down from twenty paces with that broad, handsome smile. ██████ will never drink another fluffy duck, dance like a demon, or come out the other side a better, stronger person. ██████ will have to suffer the 'zestless lemons' among us for he can no longer roast them. Dmitry will not live the redemption story that time could have afforded him. An opportunity to repent, to make up for lost time, or just shit times. To visit his child and together witness the roaring Pacific smash the cliffs at the North Bondi Golf Club... Now the onus is on Olga to forgive, to give up hope of having a better past.

A clock with no hands knows time.

The labour of grief is hard work. Time and dedication will not un-ring the bell, but may teach us to live without. There is no closure here however, because the story has no resolution, it simply ends. Despite our best efforts to forget and move on, our dead follow us around. They are in our music, our art, our stories, our birthday rituals, our emotional baggage and failed relationships. In landmarks, down cliffs, up streams, in chipped coffee cups, old jackets, bottles of vodka and cigarettes... in the things you would assume the dead have no right to inhabit... I guess we're just trying to hold on by any means possible, but grief is not a sturdy ledge to cling to. For Olga and I at least, we must contemplate what it is to be a fatherless child, unwillingly untethered.

Casey Ayres

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