**Joe Ruckli: Twilight**

“There is only memory, the past does not exist . . . If a past does not literally exist, no more does death, only mourning”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Following the loss of his close friend, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida penned these existential words, complicating our understanding of temporality and mortality. In his two exhibitions—Twilight and The Shadow’s Edge—Joe Ruckli continues this work. Each body of work captures moments from the ends of a lifetime. Through his photographs, Ruckli reveals that death is not a singular moment belonging to either the past or the future, but an ongoing, unfolding temporality. Across his imagery, dying is complicated, medicalised, ritualised. It is monotonous and unpredictable, anticipated and delayed. Ultimately, Ruckli uses the camera to gently, starkly and poignantly humanise this temporally-complex zone where dying unfolds.

— — —

In Twilight, Ruckli records individuals with chronic and terminal illnesses seeking voluntary assisted dying. Three figures sit together in solitude. Their expressions are deeply engaging, requiring our careful time to read and articulate as clarity, acceptance, longing, reluctance, suffering, exhaustion, resilience, determination. Ruckli pairs each figure with the life-assisting/ending objects of contemporary science. Notably, without Ruckli’s titles, it’s difficult to tell the difference between the two. A canister of nitrogen might just as easily be read as oxygen. A bottle of nembutal appears like any other. And a daily dose of vitamins, medication and pain relief could spell out an overdose.

Around his sitters, dark shadows conjure the pathos of Carravagio and Gentlischi just as delicate moments of brilliant light call to mind the spotlighting of a spiritual realm, so familiar to religious paintings. Sitting in the gallery is like sitting at the intersection of art history, photojournalism and medical science. Further referents range from Fiona Pardington, Rosângela Rennó and Suzanne Opton’s haunting portraits of Oceanian life masks, Brazilian prisoners and North American soldiers to Bill Viola’s slow, sublime films that play in the darkened sanctuaries of Christian churches. There is also something of William Yang’s frank documentation of difficult lives in this body of work and the high gloss finish of *Scientific American*. Across it all, the lighting is unnaturally blue.

Ruckli describes his intentionally complex visual lexicon as a method for communicating the liminal space where his sitter’s are caught and their possessions as both threatening and treasured. We might also describe the photographs as stuck yet memorialised, secret yet exquisite, pragmatic yet philosophical. In a similar manner, Ruckli’s film for Jules Hunter brings together absence and presence. Although her figure is missing from the balcony, Hunter’s words—describing her pain and savouring her life—persist. By drawing on the sterile documentation of medical science andthe aesthetic sublime of art history, Ruckli imbues his work with documentary gravity *and* coaxes us through a sensually-affective labyrinth. Said more simply: Ruckli creates a space to grapple with the end-of-life as both tangibly real and emotionally knotty.

Ruckli’s accompanying texts walk the same line. They are curiously deadpan and awash with emotion. Here we encounter the all-consuming nature of dying: Dennis’ fridge filled with medicine rather than food, Jules’ and Pam’s fire and ice pain, Denise’s exhaustive commitment to communicating her end-of-life wishes. Dying stretches into life. It fills domestic spaces and prompts new routines and plans. And it lingers after the fact. Ruckli allows us to see this more clearly.

In showcasing death’s drawn out relationship with temporality, Ruckli also unsettles the relationship between photography and time. Returning to the portraits at the heart of this body of work, the sitters appear undeniably here. Yet via Roland Barthes, we know that photographs only ever point to a moment that “has been”. Ruckli expands this coexistence of static moments in the past and the present into a lifetime. His fleeting snaps more fully record durational bonds between himself and his sitters: one filled with patience, trust and care, as he collected their stories, recorded their objects, and traced their lives. Ruckli tenderly employs this relationship to share the confronting lack of agency we hold over our end-of-life care.

Twilight looks into the eyes of individuals confronting their own mortality, and in turn shines a light on the medically and legally fraught context of end-of-life care, where individuals are divested of power, agency and decision-making by medicalised norms. Twilight seeks in small ways to repair this harm. It honours the individual—the marginal and the marginalised—and wishes them dignity, peace and rest.

— — —

The Shadow’s Edge records end-of-life patients in the care of St Vincent’s Private Hospital Brisbane. The body of work is carefully fragmented and visually diverse. Some capture candid portraits, others are more obviously framed for the camera. Many note the day's sunlight through hospital shades, others borrow from clinical photography, washing out shadows to record a typology of objects. Some photographs are easy to interpret. A plain white clock and small crucifix attached to a bare wall stand in for a religious institution. (No one keeps such clocks at home). Other photographs are more visually complex. Positioned between the hospital crucifix and a garden statue of Mary, Mark Condrit’s open expression and lifted gaze evokes both the pain of throat cancer and the spiritual ecstasy of Bernini’s Saint Theresa. *Untitled (Peter Kennedy)* marks the longest series of works, others are confronting in their brevity:

choking, feed, suction, muscle cramps, dressing, pain relief

Across the gallery, Ruckli’s work shifts from polaroid to lumen and gelatin prints, handwritten notes to video projection, in turn recollecting a plethora of artistic and medical forms: from x-rays, to scans and scrawled doctor’s notes.

Ruckli explains The Shadow’s Edge as an exploration of the routines, rhythms and rituals of life, disrupted by illness and managed by medicine. His disjointed aesthetic mirrors the medical world’s rhythm of interruption and constraint, just as his individual photographs record its incursion into everyday life. We see hospital paraphernalia in the home, medical appointments fill a diary. Yet the exchange of domesticity and medicalisation only flows one way. The manufactured placement of symbols of home in medical zones—flowers, paintings, bedside tables and plastic sitting chairs—only serves to reinforce their cold monotony. In hospitals we are always, somehow, out of place.

Ruckli also captures the unpredictable temporality of end-of-life. On first glance, his series of Brandenburg memorial pamphlets appear to be scrawled with the unconscious notes of funeral attendees. A closer look reveals these as Brandenburg’s own edits and the stretch of his anticipated death across multiple years. Moreover, this series captures something of the relationship between photographer and subject. As Brandenburg’s second layout fondly notes, Ruckli created his suited portrait. In just eight words Brandenburg brings tears to my eyes, again and again, writing: “Glad you like this—Thanks again for photos.” As poignantly articulated by Ruckli, dying is filled with such tensions between the profound and mundane. Ruckli shared that Brandenburg also composed his own organ piece for his funeral; the photographer sat outside as it played.

Following Michel Foucault, David Armstrong likens the doctor’s stethoscope to the prison guard’s panopticon. Across both scenarios, the inmate/patient is silenced by the surveilling guard/doctor. In Ruckli’s photographs, hints of the unsettling power dynamics, medicalised gaze, mechanical regimes and impersonal spaces of the hospital as a total institution are both acknowledged and undone. In The Shadow’s Edge where medical advancements prolong the end-of-life, Ruckli creates moments of intimacy and tenderness. Small polaroids beckon us near. Reflective surfaces catch us in their light. Illuminated texts seek our slowed discernment. Frail skin reminds us to be gentle. And sunshine warms the soul.

Words by Louise R Mayhew

1. Jacques Derrida, *MEMOIRES for Paul de Man,* New York: Columbia University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)