

Malcolm

Clare Samuel

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Cosmos in a Shell

In an intimate and moving meditation on loss and madness, Toronto-based artist Clare Samuel memorializes her father, Malcolm, who died in 2018 following heart surgery complications.

Malcolm was acutely aware, as early as the 1970s, of the science of anthropogenic climate change. Grippled by a vision of the future that looks much like our present reality, he distributed flyers to raise awareness about the environmental impact of fossil fuel emissions and increasing carbon dioxide concentrations. On two occasions, he even ran for office with the Green Party. As a member of the British Interplanetary Society—the world’s oldest space advocacy organization—he petitioned leaders to work collaboratively to expand space exploration and to ready planet Earth for our collective “off-world” relocation. Malcolm envisioned a future “on Earth, the moon and beyond” that included renewables, biodiversity protection, solar radiation shelters, and coordinated defense against comets and other “near-Earth objects,” as well as airlock space stations and moon colonization. His techno-survivalist vision feels all more prescient today against the backdrop of the climate catastrophe we are presently living—however unevenly in different parts of the planet.

Paying homage to Malcolm’s engagement with ecology and astronomy, Samuel combines photographs and video, weaving a personal cosmology from fragments left behind in his Northern Ireland council flat: medical records, photocopied ecojustice pamphlets, snippets of hair, dense hand-written journal entries. The act of sifting through objects and their affects is crucial to Samuel’s attempts to come to grips with loss, which is complicated by Malcolm’s experience of living with schizophrenia.

A large-scale vinyl facsimile depicts Malcolm’s flat, hollowed out of its contents by Samuel in three tumultuous days following his death. Gone are the blue curtains, the wingback reading chair that once sat by the window, and the stacked boxes of belongings that were shipped to him after his mother’s death. Tracing the contours of absence, his room confronts us as an empty shell.

Samuel responds to this absence with a series of lumen prints—an early photographic process of solar photograms—of her pony tail and of Malcolm’s diary from 1978-79 in soft millennial shades, alongside a view of Holywell Hospital, a psychiatric intensive care unit in Antrim where Malcolm spent several stints of time following serious mental health episodes. Her images examine how memory is held within objects, while transforming it through a material process that pushes towards abstraction. An image of Malcolm’s hair cuttings collected

from the undertaker recalls the finitude of mortal bodies, while a shell, likely collected by Malcolm on his 1978 trip the West coast of Canada, floats against a dark backdrop, its spiral structure transformed into an iridescent cosmos.

Malcolm once warned a young Clare to burn the hair she cuts: "so that no one can get a hold of it and do magic on you." But Samuel has other ideas. Perhaps she has her own magic in mind when she places her own hair on photographic paper, exposing it to sunlight for up to twenty-four hours—the time it takes for the Earth to spin 360 degrees on its axis. With these durational exposures, she casts a counter-spell that draws him closer, deepening connections with a father who remained evasive in life.

Samuel's rituals reflect on the structure of inheritance and mourning. One leaves things behind—pieces of paper, journals, a corpse, traces and memories—and those who remain inherit. Samuel mourns her father, who she has called "Malcolm" since early childhood, by collecting and transforming the traces he has entrusted to her in a constellation that is both intimate and tender. It recalls Malcolm's unique and singular life, and bears witness to her relationship with him. Yet, her portrait of him is also a portrait of herself, or more precisely, of the planetary threads that weave them together across generations.

In *Malcolm*, Samuel holds her father's abalone shell to her ear. Is she listening for the sounds of the sea that separated them at the time of his death? Can we hear in this image the low murmur of a world beyond the grave? Or the venous hum of the flow of her own blood-in-the-ears? In "Seashell Sound" Stefan Helmreich discusses historical explanations for the oceanic sounds that reside in seashells.¹ Nineteenth-century spiritualists believed they could hear the ghostly sounds of the departed. Trading enchantment with empirical explanation, in the twentieth century, scientists claimed the sounds were actually our own blood surging in our veins. Without taking sides, Samuel's images asks us to listen: to the space that opens up when the voice of a loved one falls silent and to the resonance of our own bodies in the gallery space.

— Gwynne Fulton

1. Stefan Helmreich, "Seashell Sound: Echoing Ocean, Vibrating Air, Brute Blood," *Cabinet Magazine* n° 48, *Trees* (hiver 2012–2013), <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/48/helmreich.php>.