



# Death's Boutique': The lighter side of dying

'Death's Boutique': Two artists from L.A. address mortality in a show that features a sense of humor as well as a ray of hope

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Death isn't a topic often approached without apprehension, but it ranks up there with love when it comes to motifs ripe for the picking among artists, poets, musicians and just about anyone else with the sense to consider their mortality. Los Angeles artists Marco Rios and Kara Tanaka plumb the subject with incisiveness and mordant humor in their collaborative show, "Death's Boutique."

"When you approach someone else to do a show about death ... some people might giggle and shy away," Tanaka says, "but for us, this was a perfect subject to work on."

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The exhibition - which includes sculpture, large-scale photography, video and printed matter - stems from both a personal and artistic interest in the psychological and pragmatic aspects of death, as well as research generated from the duo's travels together.

Rios says he's been intrigued with death since he was a child "raised by a protective single mother. ... I was hyperaware of my own mortality, and even now, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about it, either jokingly or for real."

Tanaka's interest lies in a fascination with religious history and the manner in which mortality "comes into play when we think of the liminal spaces between life and death ... people's attempts at getting outside the very things that make us mortal."

The pair's travels included treks to Lithuania - a country graced with the world's highest suicide rate - and Sweden, where they learned about the eco-friendly Promessa burial method, which enables bodies to crumble into an odorless, fine, biodegradable powder that becomes compost within months.

Tanaka's exhibited work includes a sculptural history of death practices in the United States going back to 1876, when modern cremation was adopted. The work includes a cremation oven that goes from the outside of the gallery to the inside, as well as molded forms of faux Promessa powder that are roughly the size of what a body would become after undergoing this burial process.

Rios, who channels elements of desire, gothic horror and romanticism, presents a series of wonderfully macabre sculptures that are essentially "death instruments," drawing inspiration from storefront tableaux and kitchenware. For instance, Rios' "Heart Extractor" is a cheekily scaled-up and modified version of the kind of apparatus that extracts juice from a fruit.

"These are pieces that are supposed to be metaphorical and literal instruments of death," he says.

Amid all the funereal sentiments, the show affords a ray of hope, Tanaka says.

"It's a subject that everyone can relate to in some way," she says. "We all have to deal with our mortality eventually, but the work is also about living for something beyond the self ... so the way we approach death can be heroic."

- Nirmala Nataraj, 96hours@sfchronicle.com  
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