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IOWA ARTISTS 2020  
**RACHEL COX**

OCTOBER 16, 2020 – JANUARY 3, 2021





The photographs are designed to prompt multiple questions. Why do we need these elaborately staged environments to project our grief onto? RACHEL COX

**Rachel Cox's *Mors Scena* photographs are, in the most rich and profound sense of the word, strange.** They invite the viewer into a place almost none of us welcome entering — the funeral home. Despite this subject matter, they are beautiful, crisply composed with straight lines and little clutter. Each image has a vivid, if a little surreal, color scheme. There are no humans in sight, so we don't have to feel as if we are invading a private ceremony. Although inspired by personal experience with loss and grief, Cox's images offer enough distance to allow questions about why mourning in contemporary America takes on a certain look, and happens in certain types of places with prescribed actions. Do these impersonal and yet somehow familiar surroundings help with an emotional process? Can they calm us even as we find them unsettling? Cox's images offer no easy answers, but pose a remarkable set of questions about a practice that thousands of people participate in each year but few consider its aesthetics. Although the series began before the current pandemic, the works now seem particularly relevant in this time of global loss and grief. The elegant stillness of these photographs offers a moment of study and reflection hovering around the edges of one of life's most difficult experiences.

**Curator Laura Burkhalter conducted the following interview with Artist Rachel Cox via e-mail in September of 2020 regarding her work in this exhibition.**

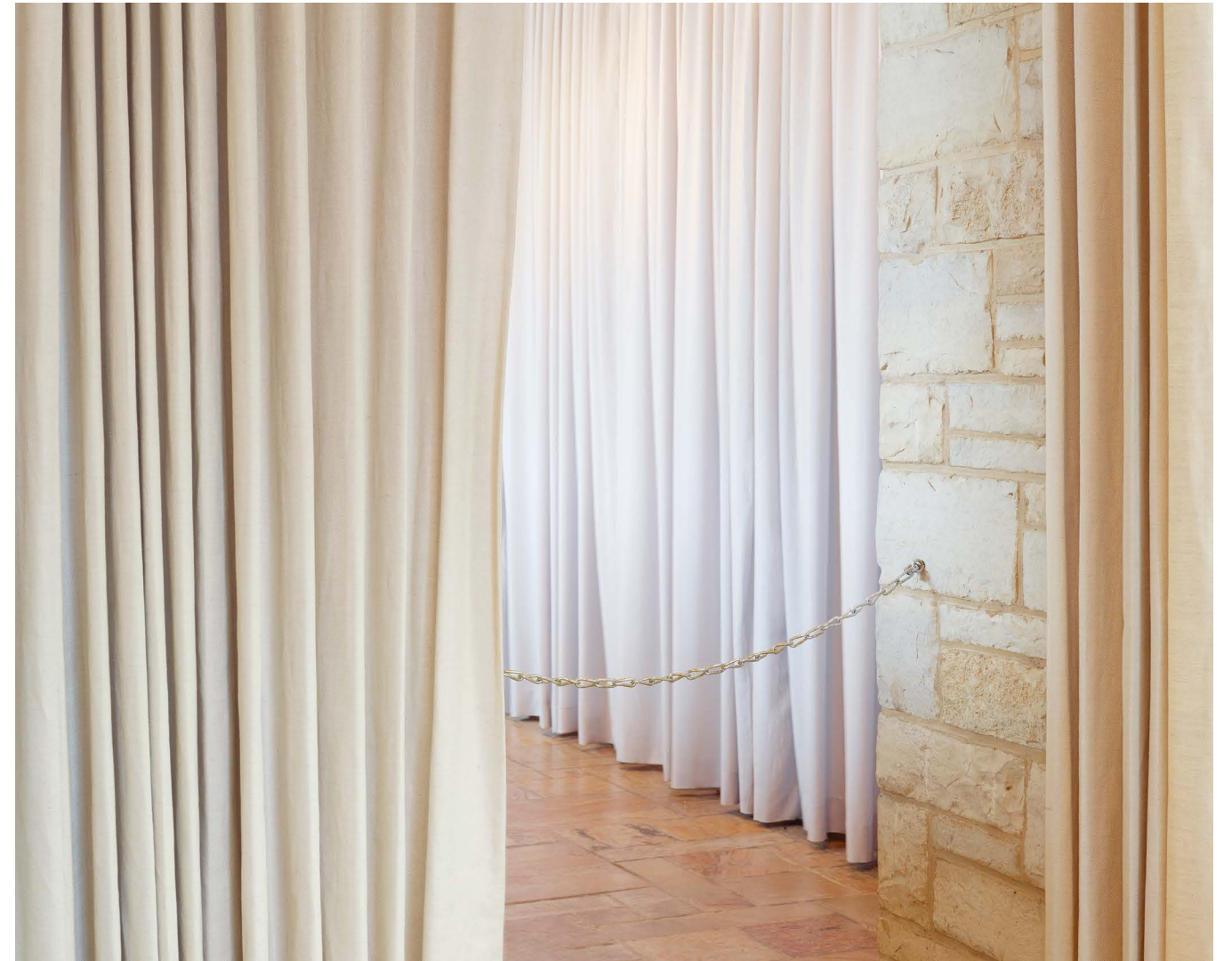
**What is the meaning of the series title “Mors Scena”?**

Mors in Roman mythology is the personification of death. In Latin, the phrase literally means “death” in the feminine gender. Scena is also of Latin origin and refers to a theatre or stage. When I begin thinking about titles, I write down words and phrases that somehow help me make sense of what I am trying to communicate with the photographs. From the beginning, I looked at these funeral spaces as very theatrical; replicating lighting and décor from stage sets and plays. Likewise, I was thinking about how the lavish objects, staging, and ornamentation that accompanies these kinds of western funeral displays almost replaces the fear and pain of death with something very beautiful to look at. It is a type of personification or even objectification. I didn’t want to use more contemporary phrases that might be too immediately literal such as “death scene,” etc. This also lacked the flare and finesse that I think many of the places I photograph possess. Using the root origin of these words seemed more authentic.

**Funerals are perceived as personal, intimate events, but your work suggests environments that are formal and detached. Can you elaborate on this disconnect?**

I think the key word here is “perception.” These places are businesses, and part of their business model is to create the illusion of an intimate space where one would have a very personal experience within. However, the interiors are fairly generalized because funeral homes serve hundreds of families a year and they need to appeal to a broad audience in terms of interior aesthetics. I think most of us who have had some kind of experience with a funeral home, whether in person or through film or television, can describe some basic characteristics the spaces might have: dated motif, theatrical lighting, ornamental draperies, etc.

So this extremely unique and personal experience of acknowledging the passing of a loved one takes place within an environment that has been designed explicitly without the individual in mind, but rather the mass averaging of what people expect these places to look and feel like. This has functioned as a type of revelation for me, so I photograph the interiors in a manner as to heighten this dichotomy.



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But I also look for the familiar. RACHEL COX



One of the core tenets of this project  
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when processing grief. RACHEL COX

*Untitled 35*, from the series “Mors Scena,” 2018

**How do you go about finding your locations and doing the research at funeral homes?  
Are they surprised to be contacted by an artist in this way?**

I research the funeral homes I visit in a couple ways. The main method is simply doing a Google search of funeral homes within a day’s drive from my home of Iowa City. If the search result has pictures this is an added benefit, and typically how I begin to make my selections. I am looking for older, family-run places that have preserved their interiors dating from anywhere between 1930 and 1970. Some of the buildings are much older than this, but their décor still dates to the mid-20th century. The funeral homes I have been in span the majority of Iowa, into Illinois and Wisconsin, and Northern Texas. The search for these spaces comes from a personal experience—my own narrative which I am still trying to make sense of. I look for funeral homes that are reminiscent of the one my own family used back in Texas (small, family-owned, ornate, dated).

Another way I search for places to photograph is word of mouth. Many funeral home directors have given me suggestions about other historic or “untouched” locations throughout the Midwest, and this has sometimes led to successful images.

After I create my list of places to contact, I send an introductory email with example images of other funeral homes I have photographed. I usually will also cite funeral homes I visited that are in the same region of the one I am trying to visit. This seems to make the funeral directors more comfortable knowing other people in their community have already worked with me.

I don’t always use the images I make at the funeral homes. Sometimes the funeral homes have recently undergone an update to their interiors that wasn’t seen on their websites or other times the photographs just don’t come together. The conversations, regardless if I get successful images or not, are always intriguing, and usually broaden my scope of this profession and service. Individuals in these kinds of niche professions really love to talk about what it is they love about their jobs. This is the most gratifying type of conversation to be on the listening end of. When I reach out to the directors and tell them I am eager to photograph their space, I am almost always greeted enthusiastically (I have only had one place say no). Sometimes the directors stick around during the shoots, help me move furniture, block window light, or sometimes they just talk to me about how they got to where they are today. It’s a really enjoyable photographic experience.

**Color, shape, and lighting are strong elements in your work. What are you looking for in setting up a composition?**

I look for uncanniness. Literally the definition of this word is “strange or mysterious in an unsettling way.” But I also look for the familiar. This project has origins that touch back to a previous long-term photographic series about my Grandmother, which included documenting her death and the funeral



UPPER *Untitled 23*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019  
 LOWER *Untitled 30*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

UPPER *Untitled 29*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2018  
 LOWER *Untitled 25*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2018

ceremonies. The funeral home in those works is one my family had used before, and shares a lot of similarities with the funeral homes I now look for and photograph.

I am also inspired by the films of David Lynch and the art direction in *Star Trek The Original Series* (1969). Both have very theatrical stages and sets that contain an attempt to make something look realistic while underscored by a very savvy handling of kitsch and artifice. I typically photograph for many months, in a variety of styles, before I start to edit down to a color palette that is harmonious with the visual and conceptual objectives of the work.

**You have mentioned to me the specificity of the frames you chose for these works. How do the materials merge with the content?**

One of the core tenets of this project is highlighting the significance of beauty when processing grief. The objectification of grief intrigues me. This can take shape in things we are familiar with such as tombstones and floral arrangements, but is also a key function of the funeral home interiors. I wanted the final pieces to preserve some of this tactile sense. I was not interested in the presentation solution to be merely a vessel to hold the print, behind glass, and framed in a consistent institutional manner. I wanted to create a tactile connection between the material that acted as the frame, and the type of materials one might find in the actual funeral homes. The frames I ended up using are brass, powder-coated, float frames. The lack of acrylic or glass barrier when viewing the print provides for a more immediate connection to the image. The thin, slightly lustrous, brass finish on the frames could easily be a material found in any of the locations I photographed.

**What has changed in how you think about (or go about making) this work in the face of the coronavirus pandemic?**

I took many months off from making these pictures. Surprisingly, funeral homes in the Midwest remained open and did not alter their public access during the early part of the pandemic, so this hiatus came from a more ethical dilemma.

Death and grief are very real, very sensitive, experiences to make art from. This project comes, partially, from my own experiences with loss. In fact, making the pictures seeks to help me dissect my own relationship with death. It was very important for me that I was not exploiting these spaces by disrespecting the funeral homes or the communities they serve in any way. Participating in a dialogue about the way our society discusses death is definitely taboo. The photographs are designed to prompt multiple questions. Why do we need these elaborately staged environments to project our grief onto? What does this say about our ability to confront death? How significant are these funeral homes for the communities they serve? And especially, what does the future look like for these businesses, many of which have historic status, when faced with the rising popularity of more modern and distanced funeral ceremonies?



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*Untitled 36*, from the series “Mors Scena,” 2019

## VIRTUAL GALLERY TALK

Artist Rachel Cox and Curator Laura Burkhalter will give a virtual gallery talk via Zoom on Sunday, November 22 at 1:30 pm.

Check [desmoinesartcenter.org/exhibitions/iowa-artists-2020](https://desmoinesartcenter.org/exhibitions/iowa-artists-2020) or the Art Center's social media for reservation information.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

**Rachel Cox** American, born 1984

*Untitled 22*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 23*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 24*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2018

*Untitled 25*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2018

*Untitled 27*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2018

*Untitled 29*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 30*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 31*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 32*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 35*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 36*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 37*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2019

*Untitled 41*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2020

*Untitled 45*, from the series "Mors Scena," 2020

Archival pigment prints


20 1/4 × 25 1/4 inches

All works courtesy of the artist

## ARTIST BIO

**Rachel Cox** lives and works in Iowa City as the Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of Iowa. Her work has been shown at the Houston Center for Photography, the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center, the Belfast International Photography Festival, and the Museo de los Artes in Mexico City, among many other national and international venues. Her images have been published in *TIME*, the *Huffington Post*, *VICE*, the *British Journal of Photography*, and *The Guardian*.

This exhibition is curated and its accompanying materials created by Laura Burkhalter, curatorial manager, Des Moines Art Center.

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