What is Given and What is Left:
Ruth Steinberg's Exploration of Living and Dying Authentically

As soft as a minnow's breath, the photographs in Ruth Steinberg's exhibition *The Leave-taking* capture a fragility, a resilience, and an inescapable element of human existence: life, a breath, and death. The exhibition tells the story of Steinberg's friend and neighbour Alma as she waits for her final moments in life through the services of Medical assistance in dying (MAID)[1]. While contentious for some, the exhibition doesn't grapple with the practice itself, but instead takes the time to be with someone as they go through the process, right to the end.

At first glance the exhibition acts as a visual reminder for the audience that they too will pass on, and to take the time they have left and spend it with loved ones. Indeed, time is a fundamental theme that echoes throughout the work. From small day-to-day activities to grand life events, the elasticity of time can feel like both an eternity and gone in an instant, which is not dissimilar to the way in which a camera can transform a fleeting moment into a long-lasting work of art. These experiences are time-embodied, expressing themselves in the present, but often shuttling back and forth between the past and the future. If being in the world is represented in time, then what do we do with the time we have left? This seems to be the larger question within the exhibition where we, as viewers, get to witness Alma's story and attempt to build our own roadmap towards living (and dying) authentically.

Steinberg's video *The Leave-taking* opens with the cool click of a metronome as it counts us through images within the series. Soon, we can hear Alma's voice discussing the reasons for choosing death, who she leaves behind, and in particular her ruminations on her quality of life over its longevity. Steinberg's questions, breathy, tender and full of emotion, ask the same questions surrounding spirituality, sadness of letting it all go, and Alma's final decision, questions I myself have pondered when thinking about assisted suicide. Poignantly Alma responds to one such question "...why should I just hang around just so I can breathe? There's a difference between being alive and living." A resounding statement in which life is not inherently treasured, but rather appraised into the ways in which that life can be made full. What can we give to the world, and what are we taking away?

Alma describes a tension between knowing what will happen, wanting it to happen, and a sense of foreboding loss. Similarly, Steinberg's photographs hold a tension for the viewer who takes time learning about this person while at the same time knowing how the story ends. Viewers are able to look at and spend time with the remnants of what made Alma's life full: the objects of memory, her activities, the people that surround her. But some images also capture a pensive, peaceful hope for the future as Alma gazes off into the sky, out of a window, off camera, into the unknown. What makes her life full now cannot be found in captured memories but can be found in the sense of wonder of what is to come. Living fully now is to accept her inevitable death in

[1] MAID is a Government of Canada practice that allows eligible Canadian adults to request medical assistance in dying if they meet certain criteria. To read more about MAID, visit the Health Canada webpage on End of Life Care. Link provided in the bibliography.

the same way we accept our day-to-day activities and our grand events and remember that grief is only for the living.

As viewers, we can only understand Alma's life as a tourist, with mere glimpses of a full and rich biography. Small details stand out such as Alma's shirt that reads "When I am an old woman I will wear purple" as she stands in front of the purple walls of her bedroom. There are copious amounts of fabric and photographs scattered around her home, which allow only a cursory sense of who she might have been. But however long I extend my observations of these works, I only exhaust myself realizing that these events have already happened, and this story is already complete. As drawn to this person as I am, I cannot know her any further. This is both the power and limitation of the photograph: to die at exactly the right moment for us to take over the work we must do ourselves.

And so I feel I must ask myself: if this is Alma's roadmap towards dying, what is mine? Have I come to terms with my spirituality and my beliefs of what's next? Will I be able to recognize when my life is no longer full? What have I given to this world and what have I taken? Have I left enough of myself that in leaving, my legacy will remain? What Steinberg has captured so softly and so masterfully in *The Leave-taking* is a kind of legacy for both artist and subject that acts as both a personal memorial to Alma's last days and a public meditation on living fully and dying authentically. Philosopher Martin Heidegger would argue that it is in relation to being-towards-death that one becomes passionately aware of one's freedom. Freedom to choose, to live, to breathe, and freedom to die.

- Darren Pottie

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Biographies

Darren Pottie is an artist, writer and curator focused on the intersection between lens-based media and contemporary craft. From digital experimentation to analogue techniques, his research seeks the symbiosis of real and virtual. He currently lives and works in Ottawa on the unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation. darrenpottie.ca

Ruth Steinberg is a photo-based artist who uses the camera as a tool to open doors of conversation, uplifting the voices of her subjects. Through visual storytelling she examines facets of dignity, resilience, and presence within marginalized communities, particularly with the elderly. Her work has been shown across North America and internationally including the Atrium Gallery in Ottawa, LACP: Centre of Photography in California, and FotoNostrum, Mediterranean House of Photography in Barcelona. In 2017, as part an intergenerational chain of mentorship, Steinberg was selected to exhibit in *Continuum: Karsh Award artists welcome a new generation*. In 2022, she received first place for the Figureworks Award. Steinberg lives in Ottawa, on the unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation. ruthsteinbergphotographs.com