

In the Eyes of Others

By Gilda Williams for the exhibition catalogue *In The Eyes of Others*,
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There is a precedent for Jodie Carey's bone-clad chandeliers, the ossuary at Sedlec in Czech Republic. Documented in Jan Svankmajer's short film, *Ossuary* (1970) and dating back to 1511 – it houses some 40,000 human skeletons, fancifully arranged in a multitude of forms: decorative pyramids, wall reliefs, bell shapes, star patterns, garlands, a coat of arms and a chandelier. The devastating arrival of the Black Death in 1378 filled the Sedlec churchyard with thousands of skeletons; overwhelmed locals piled them in heaps. Around 1870 a Czech woodcarver named Frantisek Rindt was hired to put some order in the piles of bones; this he did for ten years with the macabre imagination of a Goth jeweller. Now a popular if offbeat tourist site, the bone-encrusted church is particularly renowned for its chandelier made of every bone in the human body, several times over, save for the skull.

Carey's three massive chandeliers are made from plaster casts of five human bones – the pelvis, a vertebrae, the coccyx, the lower arm and the delicately curving shoulder bone (cast from a real skeleton which once hung in a doctor's office and which the artist purchased on ebay). The long dangling bones swell at each end, so that the bulbous tips extending to the floor look like elongated calcified drips as if it made of some dripping, milky liquid. Each 4-metre high chandelier is fabricated out of 3,000 plaster-cast bones and wired together; this endless array of white, pend-ing elements hang heavily, close to the ground, emphasizing the inescapable downward pull of gravity. We sense the potential of their swinging slightly – even crashing dramatically to the floor, breaking and splintering like real bones. Evidently both Rindt and, 140 years later, Carey appreciate the way sequences of identical bones produce perfect repeated patterns. In their structural precision Carey's chandeliers recall the exquisite engineering works of a Gothic cathedral, which from the late 18th century were often compared to a 'skin and bone' organic structure: the pointed arches and the rib vaulting described as bones to sustain the skin-like expanses of wall in between. With Carey the contrast is not so much between skin and bones but between an ostentatious domestic object, the chandelier with its associations with earthly wealth and splendor, and the stark proximity of death. This is the central contradiction here: that things so common and unadorned – naked bones – could form an object usually signaling singular luxury and excess.

Linguistic references to bones often have to do with the essential, with stripped down basics: the 'bare bones' of a story, for example. We think of bones as a kind of scaffolding for the body's other fleshier organs. With the advent of psychoanalysis in the 19th century our sense of an elemental human core shifted to reside not in our central bodily fabric, in our bones, but elsewhere: within consciousness, the ego, the events of childhood and so forth. In the past, however, it was bones that suggested this essential human centre. In late medieval images of the dance of death, skeletons are animated, dancing, laughing figures who walk merrily alongside us. Philip Aries has described how, as death became historically more marginal-ized and taboo in society – as graveyards, for example moved from the centres of town to the outskirts of suburbia – the image of death became more and more sidelined, more unrepresentable. A sign hanging over the door of another medieval ossuary, that of Wamba in northern Spain and containing the bones of hundreds of villagers who died between the 12th and 18th centuries, reads 'As you see yourself, I saw myself too. As you see me, you will see yourself'. In contrast, as Aries writes, death can no longer claim such visibility.

Marcel Duchamp's tomb bears the epitaph, 'Besides, it is always the others who die'. In his chapter on 'Death' in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, the artist wrote, 'I don't believe in [death] because you're not around to know that it's happened.' Damien Hirst titled his most notorious work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). So, three of the 20th century's most prominent artists, Duchamp, Warhol, and Hirst (each held partially responsible for the alleged 'death of art') all noticed death's incommensurable distance from our living selves, its implicit unrepresentable otherness. This is the gist of Carey's title for this work, *In the Eyes of Others*, taken from the words of theorist Jonathan Strauss: 'Death always takes me from behind, is reflected in the eyes of others.' In this light Carey's endless rows upon rows of bones seem to be concealing something at their core: our own implausible, unseen and unseeable death. Materially heavy, almost touching the ground, the chandeliers have been brought down to our level. They do not – as chandeliers usually do – soar high overhead like illuminated clusters, as faraway and desirable as spectacular wealth or giddy heights of fame. No, Carey's chandeliers come close to earth: like the medieval danse macabre's skeletal image of Death itself.

Scattered behind the chandeliers in Carey's installation are stacks of ordinary perishables: cardboard boxes and newspapers – themselves filled with stories of dying and mass deaths. At first the contrast within Carey's *In the Eyes of Others* may seem to be that between the ostentatious beauty of the chandelier and the plebian, garbage-like remains piled behind them. But perhaps this is the point, the equality of both in the eyes of death, and how we all turn to bone – rich, poor, happy and miserable? The message of the medieval Dance of Death was always this: the jovial skeleton mercilessly leads us all to death, paupers, princes, the young and the old. The dances macabres made their message clear: in death we are alike, like the endless identical tiers of bones in Carey's sculptures. It is the same spirit with which Warhol celebrated the democracy of Coca Cola; Liz Taylor drinks Coca Cola and just think, you can drink Coca Cola too, he wrote. Death boasts this same blind, leveling quality. Soon after Warhol made his most famous memento mori, *Marilyn* (begun in 1962, within weeks of the star's death), he started the *Death and Disaster* series (1963), press images of ordinary people dying: crushed under crumpled cars, flung from automobiles and impaled on telephone poles, poisoned by tainted fish. As if to say: Marilyn Monroe can die and just think, you can die too. We all dance with death in the end: Carey's dangling chandeliers, kindly lowered and enlarged to come closer to us, are waiting to 'swing' with us all, if you will. Much larger than their predecessor in Sedlec, with their repetitious, labour-intensive fabrication, their engineering-heavy and gear-like mechanical forms, they are like death machines suspended in a contemporary, mass danse macabre.