

# GRAVE/GREBH/GRÆF

Kathryn Poole

Through this paper and research project, I explore the question of how the resting place of the body can become a catalyst for growth. Grave/Grebh/Græf explores the potential for metamorphosis and renewal through the liveliness of decay. My practice originally centred on the corpse itself, tracking the decay of individual animals found on the roadside to try to capture the last residual trace of the spirit after the body has gone. I am now searching for these traces in the vegetation that grows from their resting places.

Grave/Grebh/Græf examines various burial sites through observational drawing and grieving rituals. The drawings require intense periods, focus, respect, and reverence, paralleling the intention of the rosary prayers or other devotional obits repetitively performed by parishioners to preserve the memory of the deceased. Gallagher and Hiller (2011, p. 17) said, "That we who are still alive must perform obligatory tasks to care for the needy dead is a powerful, nearly universal human belief." We choose to notice and attend to the familiar through that attention. To notice is to care.

The sites range from carefully manicured lawns to reclaimed wildlife meadows, and each site requires a different response. One grave is now a multiplate etching, each blade of grass meticulously observed. Another grave has a rosebush that I visit and a deadhead, recording the cuttings that I take through paintings that I have turned into five artist's books. Each book, holding ten roses, becomes a 'decade' of the rosary. At my most recent site, the graves are buried under the weight of new life. The blades of grass burst through cracks in the fallen headstones, a reference to the 'Stone Tape Theory': the idea that energy and emotions can be recorded onto rocks and be replayed as ghosts. The prints, drawings, and paintings record both a metaphysical and physical renewal of life, the memory of the original subject preserved within the grave.

Susan Sontag (2004, p. 45) described Roger Fenton's 'In the Valley of the Shadow of Death'

thus: "Fenton's memorial photograph is a portrait of absence of death without the dead." In the same sense, Grave/Grebh/Græf is a collection of individual portraits of the dead present through their absence.

## FORD

Ford is an unmarked, but not unvisited, grave found in Section AF of Ford Roman Catholic Cemetery, Bootle. The print is made up of four individual etchings, each an individual organism that grows on the bodies beneath, meticulously observed and recorded. Each plate takes over 275 hours to draw, spread out over months. 'Ford II' was started in September 2021 and finished in

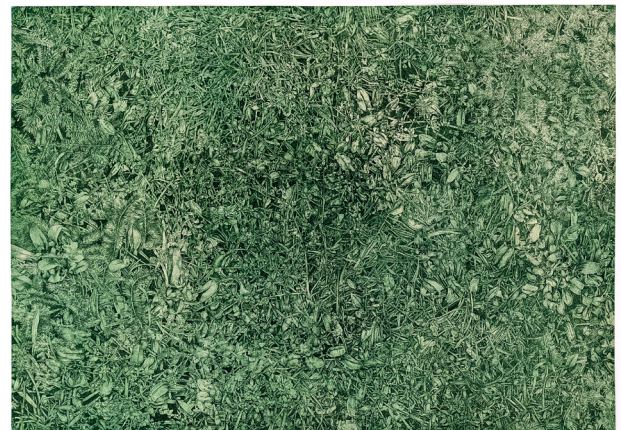


Figure 1

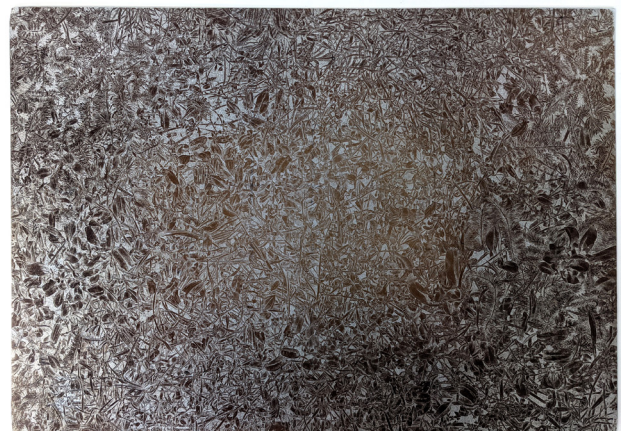


Figure 2

### Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Kathryn Poole - Ford II, Etching, 2022

Figure 2: Kathryn Poole - Ford II, drawn hardground plate

January 2022. The pace of the work changed how I viewed the subject. I was living with the grave, the ritual observances becoming a part of my everyday routine.

My practice has always consisted of creating memorials to capture a fragment of the soul before the body disappears. The bodies I visited were roadkill that existed in the liminal space of the A565 bypass, liminal in both their physical location and in their position between death and their final disappearance. Some bodies took weeks to fade, while others were gone between one journey in the morning and the next in the evening.

Creating drawn monuments was an analogy to carved stone markers, an act that would keep alive the memory of the often-unnoticed animals I would visit. The question of what happens after death led me to consider in what other ways I can make visible the continuation of life after the body has gone.

The acts of carving and cutting are fundamentally linked to both creation and death. Sandra M. Gilbert (2007, p. 46) notes, "My American Heritage Dictionary tells me that both 'grave' meaning an 'excavation for the internment of a corpse', a 'burial place' and 'grave' meaning 'to sculpt or carve; engrave' to 'stamp or impress deeply'", so as I etch the grave into the metal, I also perform the act of interring the memory itself.

In drawing the grave in this specific way, choosing to record every leaf as true to life as I can, I also become an active observer in the life now flourishing on the body. I am choosing to notice the varied species that grow within a simple plot of grass, the clovers and pansies that poke through dandelion leaves, seeing the colour and life. I move from being a witness of grief to one of renewal and rebirth.

## ROSARY

"Prayer, the Church would say - ... is the tongue in which one addresses the dead and the tongue in which one speaks of them" (Gilbert, S. M., 2007, p. 7). The rosary is both a set of prayers said in the Catholic Church and a string of beads used to help count the prayers. The word rosary itself comes from the Latin "rosarium," meaning a garden or garland of roses. During the Middle Ages, agriculture metaphor was common. Writing often drew comparisons to ploughing a field, and collecting prayers were seen as growing a garden or arranging a bouquet. In the most literal sense, the rosary is a "garden" or "bouquet" of prayers.' (Ave Rosary, no date) A set of rosary beads usually consisted of five 'decades' of ten beads interspaced with larger beads, 59 beads or prayers in total.

In the Catholic tradition, the rosary is said as an aid to meditation: As you move through the beads, you contemplate the mysteries of faith (incidents that occurred in the life of Jesus). I borrow this act of attentive meditation in my rosary, choosing a process that requires intense periods, focus, respect, and reverence for the subject, adapting the rituals and beliefs I was raised with to my current needs.



Figure 3

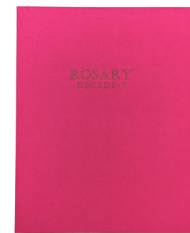


Figure 4



Figure 5

My rosary is based on a grave found in West Derby Cemetery, Liverpool. I visit the grave seasonally to tend and tidy the large rosebush that grows on it. At each visit, I deadhead the roses, and with each year that passes, the bush grows, producing more blossoms. I paint the cuttings; in total, I will paint 50: one for each of the small beads on the rosary. Compared to 'Ford', the time I spend with each cutting is short and periodic, but the production of the whole spans years. Once I have painted my current crop of

roses, I must wait for the grave to produce more. As time passes, my skill in rendering the roses also grows. I see more detail within the form, and I understand the structure of the rose: how it buds, unfolds and slowly falls apart.

The act of cutting recurs but, in this instance, cutting back the rose prompts more growth.

Every ten roses that I paint are collated and reproduced as a four-colour separation screen-printed artist book. The complete rosary, titled *Decades*, will consist of five books, each with ten screen-printed roses. The book format echoes books of hours, beautiful handwritten and hand-illustrated devotional books popular in the Middle Ages that contained sets of prayers to be performed throughout the day. They were often personalised, and the owner would annotate them as their relationship with the texts evolved through repetition. This mirrors the repetition within my drawings and visits to the graves.

## POTENTIAL ENERGY

Cemeteries as a concept were introduced to combat the waves of epidemics caused by the mass of bodies, both living and dead, crammed together in the rapidly urbanising cities of the mid-nineteenth century. More regulated than parish graveyards and burial pits, "Cemeteries were conceived and designed both as gardens of the dead and as a memorial" (Bowdler, R. et al., 2007, p. 3) with symbolism crafted to reflect the tranquillity of Arcadia or Eden. The cemeteries I investigate vary in their expressions of the designer's original intent. West Derby Cemetery's graves are individualistic: Some feature planted borders, others are decorated with football flags, and a considerable proportion of them show regular, careful maintenance. Ford is much quieter. The graves have neat lawns, mown regularly. There are fewer open expressions of grief.

Duke Street Cemetery, in the affluent suburb of Southport, abounds with dramatic tombs, angels, and metres-tall crosses. This historic section of the cemetery has joined several others nationwide that have been allowed to 'rewild'. The sites are being reclaimed by the landscape they were originally built on. "Wildlife colonizes these quiet, green spaces, which quickly become important habitats for plants and animals. These sites were often created on the edge of towns and today they are gems of countryside and remnant habitats locked



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 6: Kathryn Poole - Rosary: Decade I, spread

Figure 7: Kathryn Poole - Duke Street Cemetery

Figure 8: Kathryn Poole - Potential Energy I, drawn stone

in an urban setting" (Bowdler, R. et al., 2007, p. 3). All the cemetery sites were rural spaces on the edge of communities before being allocated as burial grounds. As the towns developed around them, they became some of the few green spaces left for those communities, the gardens designed for the dead now the gardens of the community. This development in the approach to cemetery management gives the cemetery another aspect of transitional space as the place between being and not being, and now also a space between culture and nature. In Duke Street Cemetery I look for the different expressions of the 'Potential Energy' stored within the graves. This expression can sometimes take the form of stone crosses magnified to twice their height with the weight of the ivy that has overtaken them. In other graves, I try to capture the seemingly



Figure 9

explosive recycling of life as it bursts through the stone, an action that has taken decades but appears so sudden.

In 'Potential Energy I' I have chosen the medium of stone lithography to record these moments of reclamation. The choice of stone references the Stone Tape Theory, a paranormal theory of residual hauntings that posits that energy was recorded within stones, particularly those with quartz, that would then be played back as apparitions or ghostly sightings. I use these ideas of memory transference and place memories to imprint some residue of memory that may still be held within the fractured stones and the vegetation that grows within and around them.

My drawing style is adapted to capture the seeming immediacy of the burgeoning new growth. Instead of the measured scientific style drawings of 'Ford' and 'Rosary', I use thicker, more imprecise lithography crayons and looser, more impressionistic lines to capture the fleeting moment.

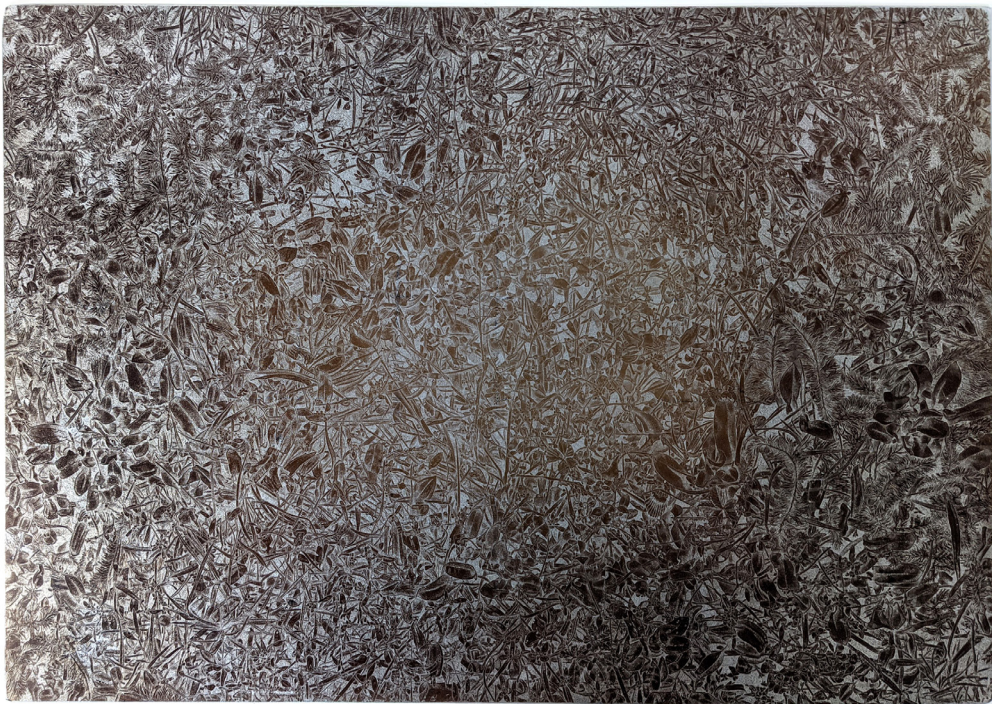
## PILGRIMAGE AND PERMANENCE

In her essay 'Defining the place of burial: What makes a cemetery a cemetery?' Julie Rugg considers pilgrimage and permanence as two defining conditions of a cemetery: the ability of mourners and others to visit the site and the site's ability to act as a permanent monument to grief. Pilgrimage and permanence are also the two themes I address in this project. The pilgrimage occurs in my visits to different graves, in some instances as a mourner and in others simply as an interested visitor. In the same way that some pilgrims might perform a pilgrimage multiple times over their lifetimes, I also revisit my cemeteries, always observing how they might have changed since my last visit. My memorials are my attempt at permanence, but in actuality, they are just a record, a witness statement of a particular moment. They will never appear again to me or others as I have seen them.

## REFERENCES

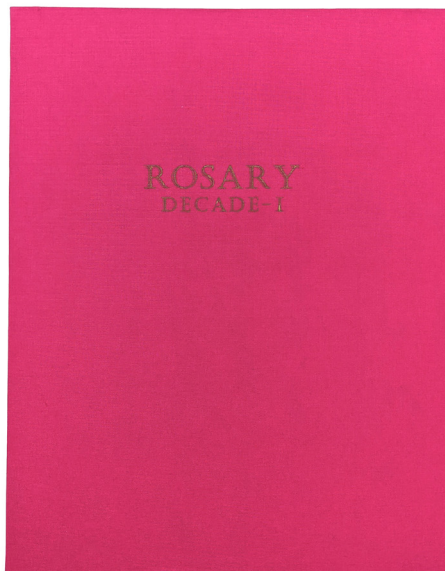
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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: Kathryn Poole - Ford II, Etching, 2022  
Figure 2: Kathryn Poole - Ford II, drawn hardground plate



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Figure 3: Kathryn Poole - Ford II, etched hardground plate detail  
Figure 4: Kathryn Poole - Rosary: Decade I



Figure 5: Kathryn Poole - Rosary 10

Figure 6: Kathryn Poole - Rosary: Decade I, spread





Figure 7: Kathryn Poole - Duke Street Cemetery  
Figure 8: Kathryn Poole - Potential Energy I, drawn stone



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Figure 9: Kathryn Poole - Potential Energy I