



Melchior Grossek, *Grossek's Dance of Death, IV. Die Feldherren (The Commanders)*, 1923, paper, 8 3/4 × 7 3/4". From "Everybody Dies!"

"Everybody Dies!"

CARRIAGE TRADE

Last May, when the Covid-19 death toll in the United States was about to clear 100,000, the *New York Times* filled its front page with the names of victims and telling excerpts from their obituaries. "Rocket engineer in the early days of supersonic flight." "Brooklyn cabbie who found a home in Buddhism." "Enjoyed trying her luck in the casino." In lieu of maps or infographics, the editors opted to convey the scope of the disaster through the details—the habits, talents, and quirks—that made these lives unique. The project was a tacit acknowledgment of the news cycle's tendency to reduce human loss to a steady drumbeat of data, one that fails to relay its real toll. The problematic position of death as both a vast impersonal phenomenon and a source of visceral, individual tragedy lay at the heart of "Everybody Dies!," a stunning group exhibition at Carriage Trade. Gallery founder Peter Scott conceived the show nearly two years ago—before the pandemic swept the world and

the killing of George Floyd prompted, among other things, a global revolt against state-sanctioned murder and a mass reconsideration of how the media serves as an agent of empathy or indifference. Nearly all of the two dozen artworks and pieces of ephemera on display predated these events (some archival materials by more than a century), but the perspectives and evidence they offered on how we collectively address, sensationalize, and ignore death were more grimly relevant than ever.

Funeral Cortege, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California, a small black-and-white photograph by Dorothea Lange from 1938, greeted visitors to the gallery. In it we see the grief-furrowed face of a middle-aged woman framed within the oval window of a processional car. She returns our gaze, bent knuckles pressing into her lips and nose. Sunlight shines brightly on the chassis, suggesting the disconnect between her trauma and the indifference of the world at large. A similar effect was at play in the show's only pandemic-era work: *5/24/20, 2020*, a color photograph by Diane Nerwen that juxtaposed a laptop screen displaying the aforementioned *Times* page with an idyllic, insistently green forest in the background. Lest one grow too comfortable playing spectator to other people's losses, Sherrie Levine furnished each viewer who gazed into her *Black Mirror: 5, 2004*—a dark pane of mahogany-framed reflective glass—with an understated reminder that death is one of life's few guarantees. In these and other works, the exhibition gracefully shifted the emphasis from our tendency to externalize or abstract mortality to its inevitability. In *Unlucky, 2016*, a video by Bill Miller, the artist calmly narrates his experience of receiving an unexpected diagnosis of Huntington's disease as a cursor manipulates a hollow digital rendering of his face, swiveling it erratically against a white void. The unpredictable nature of death and the impossibility of truly preparing for it also pervaded a modern danse macabre by Melchior Grosse from 1923, in which Death in the form of a black skeleton catches victims unawares. In one print, the allegorical figure bounds after an airplane with a butterfly net. In another, it sneaks up behind a sentinel keeping watch atop a hill.

Everybody dies, but some people are more likely to do so in violent ways than others, and the exhibition made the social inequality underlying these odds a prominent part of its thesis. An etching by Francisco Goya from "*Los desastres de la guerra*" (The Disasters of War), 1810–20, depicts well-dressed men and their dates beside crumpled, emaciated