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“DANCE OF DEATH WITH MAIDEN”:  
THE VISUAL GRAMMAR  
OF THE DEATH AND THE MAIDEN MOTIF:  
BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN AND ASSUNTA ABDEL AZIM MOHAMED

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the allusions made by Austrian artists Birgit Jürgenssen and Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed to the historical genres “Dance of Death” and “Death and the Maiden”. I examine in particular Jürgenssen’s series “Totentanz mit Mädchen” and “Untitled Polaroids” (also known as the “Death and the Maiden” polaroids). I raise the significance of her titles and argue that she is *dancing with the genre*, in effect with art history itself. Then I consider Mohamed, 43 years Jürgenssen’s junior. I propose her as an heir of Jürgenssen. I argue that one of the reasons both artists allude to the two traditional genres is in order for the work to address the nature of art itself.

KEYWORDS: Dance of Death, Death and the Maiden, Birgit Jürgenssen, Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed, art-photography

STRESZCZENIE

W tym artykule omówiono odniesienia i aluzje w twórczości austriackich artystek Birgit Jürgenssen i Assunty Abdel Azim Mohamed do historycznego gatunku „Tańca śmierci” i „Śmierci i dziewczyny”. Badam przede wszystkim serie fotograficzne Jürgenssen „Totentanz mit Mädchen” oraz „Untitled Polaroids” (znane również jako polaroidy „Śmierć i dziewczyna”). Uwydatniam znaczenie tych tytułów i twierdzę, że artystka tańczy z całym gatunkiem, a w efekcie z samą historią sztuki. Dalej rozważam twórczość Mohamed, 43 lata młodszej od Jürgenssen. Typuję ją na spadkobierczynię Jürgenssen. Twierdzę, że jednym z powodów, dla których obie artystki nawiązują do tych dwóch tradycyjnych motywów historii sztuki, jest to, że mówią w swoich pracach o samej istocie sztuki.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Taniec śmierci, Śmierć i Dziewczyna, Birgit Jürgenssen, Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed, fotografia artystyczna

The visual grammar of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Dance of Death and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Death and the Maiden art motifs is such that they have the ability to adapt, to be “memes”. Their ability to carry meaning remains even with changes in form. The dialogue nature of the Dance of Death, an invitation and reply couched in

the fiction of a dance, is a flexible, binary structure – and still survives. But both genres have simple, binary structures, both are flexible. This proves useful for artist Birgit Jürgenssen (d.2003), an artist concerned with identity, and in particular the identity of women artists; and for Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed (b.1993), who is, in ways relevant to this paper, an heir of Jürgenssen's. Jürgenssen's "Dance of Death with Maiden" series indicates by its very title that what this feminist performative artist dances with is the *motif* itself. She reworks its dual elements, and what Maike Christadler has called its triangular shape (the gazes between Death, Maiden and viewer) (Christadler 2011: 106–7). In Jürgenssen's version of Death and the Maiden, there are two Maidens – one which belongs to the motif; the other the artist herself.

Mohamed's Death and her Maiden are interchangeable: her living characters "exchange identities" with the Death-figures. She studies her peers' relationships with death; identifies "Thanatos", "Death the Seducer" (titles of hers), a self-destructiveness in the Maiden of the motif. Her grammar is binary and plays with received signs to produce a painful moral comedy.

Poetics scholar Winifred Nowotny observes that "in poetic structures a constituent itself intricate brings out, when married to another, the potential of both" (Nowotny 1991: 98). The two genres have a binary nature, allowing meaning to be produced and changed. The two artists bring together the verbal and the visual, and connect the two in the syntax of their work.

## THE DANCE OF DEATH AND DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

A painting of 1510 by Hans Baldung Grien is probably the first Death and the Maiden painting. Hartmut Freytag (1993) says the Dance of Death, "requires the cooperation of image and text [...and] is determined by the dialogue between the dying and Death; [...] the *Danse Macabre* defines itself as didactic poetry" (Schwab 2011: 364). The visuals rely on the words. In Dance of Death murals and in printed versions the verses beneath the images of dancing pairs were vital. But the Death and the Maiden motif appears either, as in Baldung Grien's drawing of 1515, with no words, or with few words ("The hour is come"; "All mankind's beauty is destroyed by death", etc.) and is essentially a visual motif not dependent on words. Winfried Schwab points out two things: in the Death and the Maiden works, "if one were to adopt Hartmut Freytag's definition [of the Dance of Death] it would become necessary that forms of expression other than text replace the missing didactic messages of captions and rubrics", and that in Dance of Death paintings, "the combination of 'image and text' does not just offer a warning about man's death in general. They [Dance of Death cycles] also characterise the dying and judge their lives up to the moment of death" (Schwab 2011: 365). The key

word here is *judge*. Schwab means that the figures in the Dance of Death have their attributes, their characteristics: and for these they are judged.

The Maiden on the other hand, (in for example, Hans Baldung's paintings, or in Hans S. Beham's later prints of 1547 and 1548), is not judged in the same way. In general in the Death and the Maiden genre there are references to vanity and the communication of admonitions to live a pure life – but she is a different kind of figure. When the Death and the Maiden motif strips the clothes off the woman, it also strips out the characteristics of the figure – her attributes, her behaviour, by which her life is judged. The sins of the Pope, the Duchess, the Moneylender, the Bishop, the Artist are indicated by their attributes, in Dance of Death images. Her attribute is being a Maiden, a young woman, it is beauty, and it is the mirror, the symbol of vanity (although it is also important to understand that painters of these images also see the mirror as a symbol of art). This leaves her as an archetype of life itself, having only the attributes of beauty and fertility, representing the future. In the dichotomy *life and death* she is the life part of us, without other encumbrances of meaning. This is part of the visual grammar of the Maiden.

The Dance of Death has aspects of *folk* tradition, of "community art"; Death and the Maiden artists are making high art, an art deliberately full of ambiguous iconography. They are moving away from the moral lesson, and moving into pure psychology. Christadler and Stefanie Knöll talk about the triangle of Maiden, Death and viewer. There are different configurations of it. Christadler gives the example of a drawing by Hans Baldung of (1515)<sup>1</sup> in which the viewer – who is at this time always regarded as male – looks at the Maiden, she looks in the mirror and Death looks at us. Death and the Maiden is psychological; the Dance of Death, social.

It would be nice to say, as I have above, that the Maiden represents life, not morals. But there is a problem with this simplified view: the fact that Eve is evil, and that that is behind much of the thinking. Nevertheless, the idea of the Maiden as life does capture the difference between the two genres. Death and the Maiden has a lot more of a particular grammatical quality: ambiguity.

The new Death and the Maiden artists, who were essentially Renaissance artists, saw all this as allegorical about painting itself. Both genres have "real" characters and an imaginary Death character, giving both an "art about art" aspect. There is much play with mirrors, especially in Death and the Maiden.

Knöll even suggests of a 1524 work by Urs Graf, that Graf is trying to indicate "that art is in league with death" (Knöll 2010: 36). Art and death make life still. If she is right, it is not new as an idea and it is not only photography which can be seen in this way.

Christadler speaks of ambiguity between the morals conveyed, and the way the image subverts those morals: the erotic element makes a psychological difficulty

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Baldung Grien, Death and the Maiden, drawing, 1515, Kupfertischkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, KdZ4578.

for the viewer. “[T]he viewer is the only one authorised to interpret what he is seeing...he is the only one able to sublimate what he is seeing into the cognition of art.” As she says, “The corpse ‘looks’...out of the drawing at the viewer, thus involving him in the scene.” The viewer’s gaze

empowers him to enter the playground of shiftings between the ‘real’, the ‘imaginary’, the ‘moral’ or the ‘artistic’ keys of interpretation. The painting offers the metaphor of death in a ‘realistic’ portrayal of naked female beauty – and in an equally ‘realistic’ portrayal of horrifying decay... [T]he painting’s artistic qualities [are] its central theme... The mirror that the girl is studying herself in also reflects a self-referential play of signifiers: in her hand it is a moralising symbol of *vanitas*, whereas in the artistic discourse it epitomises the act of looking, analogising mirror and image. (Christadler 2011: 105–106).

A writer on Jürgenssen – Sigrid Schade, writing in the context of Jürgenssen’s “Totentanz mit Mädchen” – makes this art-about-art aspect clear when she says that Niklaus Manuel’s Daughter or Maiden (in the Bern Dance of Death of 1515–19) is “an allegory of painting, which has the power to voyeuristically expose or conceal something” (Schade 2009: 186).

There is disagreement about whether Death and the Maiden comes out of The Dance of Death or not. Knöll argues that it does not. “However,” Christadler glosses, “the two traditions seem to conflate and inspire one another”, and important here is that the two are intimately linked for the artists I am dealing with, are part of the same area of history.

### BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN

There are two series of works by Jürgenssen which place themselves within these historical genres: the “Untitled” polaroid series, also known as the “Death and the Maiden” series (1978–80) – and the “Totentanz mit Mädchen” series (1979–80), sometimes translated as “Deathdance with Maiden” but which I prefer as “Dance of Death with Maiden”. The “Untitled” or “Death and the Maiden” series shows an interaction between the artist and a life mask of herself painted with a skull death-image. It comprises 32 polaroid photographs. Annika Karpowski has seen a narrative sequence to the series. It is an excellent observation. It is a narrative which almost makes fun of the erotic ambiguity of the historical genre. The series may be seen as choreography, Karpowski says (Karpowski 2013: 25).

Most noticeably there is a love scene between Jürgenssen and her “death-mask”. As Karpowski organises it, this spans numbers 12 to 32 in the series. It has a humorous aspect, as well as appearing to make reference to a number of previous Death and the Maiden works in which the two protagonists apparently embrace with mutual willingness. (Many date from the 20<sup>th</sup> century: See Knöll 2010, throughout.)

Karpowski also emphasises the medium – the immediacy of the polaroid photograph and its uniqueness. This is important in view of the connection of photography and mortality made most famously by Roland Barthes, but earlier by Benjamin, who connects it with the endless reproducibility of a photograph from its negative (Barthes 1981; Benjamin 1968). A polaroid has no negative. For Karpowski this brings a deliberate new difficulty into the theoretical history. The polaroid, fixing a particular moment, evokes both death and life. This relates to the fundamental elements, as they have always been seen, of Death and the Maiden; it connects the medium of photography and the Death and the Maiden genre (Karpowski 2013: 53–60). Elisabeth Bronfen remarks, in the context of Jürgenssen's work, that "the photographic image is specifically a work for and against mortality" (Bronfen 2009: 94).

Many artists have made "Death and the Maiden" works. But Karpowski is right in arguing that Jürgenssen's Death and the Maiden has a different, a new, tenor. It is happier than most. We might even call it an "anti-Death-and-the-Maiden" piece – not a term previously used, but there are other works one might adduce this moniker to (for example, Robert Budzinski's woodcut set, "The Triumph of Life: also a Dance of Death", 1948).

Jürgenssen is in one part of the series looking out at us. Or at herself: we sense the camera being held at arm's length (see Karpowski 2013: 15). If the genre is about art, this is the artist exercising power over the "gaze" problem – as in the "Dance of Death with Maiden" photographs, the remote shutter release is visible. Karpowski argues that the "innocence versus decay" of the traditional Death and the Maiden do not apply here – the series operates in opposition to the usual aspects of the genre, she says. (Karpowski 2013: 42). One reason for this is that the series concentrates on addressing the idea of the artist (artists in general and Jürgenssen as exemplary) – and most significantly the artist's identity *in the face of art history*.

Moreover, this is a person coming to terms calmly with her mortality. This is her life mask, and if it represents her and her art, and if, as art historians say, the genre has to do with representation, with art itself, then this is Jürgenssen's very identity she is relating to: therefore the affection she shows her mask is not misplaced. Jürgenssen was used in her art to being a representative of woman as woman – she redefines the role by taking control of it.

In terms of her own mortality – the image "Self-portrait with the Ship's Cat" (2002) is significant. It is likely this photo-piece was made after her diagnosis with an aggressive cancer. There may be some irony in the photo (it has comic elements) but her demeanour is calm, content. This looks deliberate. And there is evidence from reports by her partner Hubert Winter of an apparently calm approach to an illness she must have known threatened her life (Winter 2010). She died the following year, aged 53. The works I am discussing date from over 20 years earlier.

Jürgenssen's interest in masks arose from her own ideas about the self, but also under the influence of Meret Oppenheim. "In Meret Oppenheim, Jürgenssen

saw something of an imaginary artist-mother who affirmed and further fueled her imagination” (Schor 2009: 50). Oppenheim had a huge interest in masks, making them and wearing them publicly. Bice Curiger gives details of a mask called “Scarred”, which “consisted of a sweetly smiling woman’s face, which M.O. held on a stick in front of her own face, while she herself wore a skin-tight gauze mask on to which were sewn thin coarse strips of raw meat. At the strategic moment she would remove the stick mask to reveal her ‘scarred’ face” (Curiger 1989: 261). (No date is given for this mask, but it seems to date from after she joined “Group 33”, which was in 1937.)

### GENRES – THE MOMON

One exceptionally astute commentator on genres is Francis Ponge, the French poet. In *Le Savon (Soap)* he discusses in relation to aspects of his own book the notion of the *momon*. In light of what he explains about it I would like to suggest that it is useful to consider Jürgenssen’s two series as *momons*. About this somewhat obscure genre Ponge says the following:

A momon is a masquerade, a sort of dance done by masked figures, ending with a challenge delivered by them. Its radical is the same as in mummery. One ought to be able to so name, by extension, any work of art including its own caricature, or one in which the author was to ridicule his means of expression. The *Waltz* of Ravel is a momon. The genre is peculiar to periods in which rhetoric, dying, examines itself (Ponge 1969: 33).

It is this we find in Jürgenssen’s “Totentanz mit Mädchen”. What art rhetoric was dying in 1979? Not just that of Modernism, but more locally, the rhetoric of a macho Austrian art and art scene. Moreover, the 1970s saw a re-examination of art history from a feminist perspective (see Nochlin 1971; Parker and Pollock 1987). Jean Wirth describes the Death and the Maiden artists he writes about having “a common desire to overthrow the established order” (Wirth 1979: 13). The implication is that the motif lends itself to such a use. On Jürgenssen’s feminism, Natascha Gruber writes: “Asked the question, if she identified as a feminist artist, Jürgenssen would say: ‘regarding the awareness raising, analysis and deconstruction of prevalent theories and representational systems – yes’” (Gruber 2010).

Roman Gerold in “Clothing in the Dance of Death” writes of how clothing indicates power and loss of power. He writes of how “a macabre investiture [of Death as the Pope] is insinuated” in Manuel’s Bern Dance of Death, and of “the establishment of Death as head of the church”. “Play with the rules of clothing always brings the social structure into question”. “The Dance of Death is a genre which of its nature can be called critical of society.” “The motif of equality is integral” (Gerold 2010: 20–36). Jürgenssen dances with the Dance of Death because she was committed to a certain kind of “social criticism”. In the Dance of Death

male and female become equal, not just social classes. In her two series she seems to present herself as having an equality with Death. If we see her Death figure as representative of a genre, her equality with this makes more sense.

### JÜRGENSSEN AND THE SYNTAX OF THE DANCE OF DEATH

Its grammar makes The Dance of Death the most fundamental trope in a cluster of death-genres. Johan Huizinga: "The idea of the death-dance is the central point of a whole group of connected conceptions" (Huizinga 1955: 147). He also says that its Death figure is not a personification of Death but a mirror. Jürgenssen seems to have seen that both genres represent an "art about art", that art itself is a part of their subject matter and form. What I have called their "meme" quality has to do in part with this. They have a relationship with photography in having "reproducibility as a mode of being"; "the possibility of *being reproduced*" – as Cadava (quoting Samuel Weber) terms the Benjaminian idea normally rendered in English as "mechanical reproduction" (Cadava 1997: 42). This, in my view, is how Jürgenssen would have seen them. Jürgenssen was well-read in critical theory and would have been aware of Walter Benjamin's theories as they relate to photography.

To return to the binary, mirror aspect of the genre: in Rebecca Reynolds' interpretation of Freud, the feared doll or double is *oneself* and immortalises the self by leaving it as an idea. But it is "a figure for a split". This is precisely the Death figure as Huizinga describes it: "The indefatigable dancer is the living man himself in his future shape, a frightful double of his future person. 'It is yourself', said the horrible vision to each of the spectators" (Huizinga 1955: 147). Reynolds:

Related to the uncanny are fears or concerns regarding the difficulty in distinguishing animate from inanimate, real from imagined, original from copy, repetition, or double. The feared but familiar double might be another person or object (e.g. a doppelganger, a clone, a life-like doll, anyone with whom the individual identifies a little too closely) but more often it is none other than the individual himself – the stable "I" that we accept and invest in as our self, though one is not reducible to the other. This representation of the self under the sign of the "I" – like representation in general – supposedly serves as a triumph over both material decomposition and symbolic fragmentation. The individual dies, but the "I" is the immortalisation of the individual as an *idea*. However, the double is by definition a figure for a split, a figure signifying that something which was once whole has been divided (Reynolds 2017: 6).

It is precisely the calm confrontation of this "double" which writers such as Karpowski, Schade and Futscher have noted in Jürgenssen's two series. For Karpowski the mask is Jürgenssen's alter ego or doppelganger, who "confronts her with the face of death" (Karpowski 2013: 21).

Susanne Warda and Susanna Greer Fein also write of this binary “mirror-point...between the realm of the Living and that of the Dead” (Warda 2011: 95). And Gerold speaks of the Death figure “as ‘another self’”. The doppelgänger motif and the mirror motif are connected, he says. And “many Dances of Death have understood themselves as mirrors” (Gerold 2010: 29). So true is this, that Stephen Perkinson in the catalogue for the exhibition “The Ivory Mirror” in Maine (still on as I write – June 24–November 26, 2017) argues that the mirror is the fundamental image or motif in late Medieval and early Renaissance death imagery (Perkinson 2017: 13–80).

#### TOTENTANZ MIT MÄDCHEN / DANCE OF DEATH WITH MAIDEN AS TITLE

Titles were important to Jürgenssen. Many of hers use word-play. And forty-five percent (143 out of 340) of the titles in Schor and Solomon-Godeau’s monograph are “Untitled”: Jürgenssen was very aware of the effect of titles, or of having no title (Schor and Solomon-Godeau 2009). This can be emphasised in light of her statement that, “My work emerged from an exchange between literature and daily life. It was impossible for me to draw without keeping a piece of literature in mind” (Burger 2015: 142). In her “Bath” series “Ophelia” becomes an image of Ophelia when we read the title (Schor and Solomon-Godeau 2009: 216).

The series known as Jürgenssen’s “Death and the Maiden” polaroids has in fact no title. Each item is designated “Untitled polaroid”. Karpowski argues that it should more officially be granted the title “Death and the Maiden” (Karpowski 2010: 72). The photographs differ significantly from traditional Death and the Maiden images, and perhaps Jürgenssen knew that “Untitled” would signal her awareness of the ambiguities of the “Jürgenssen” take. The other series, however, always had a definite title, given by the artist, and significant: “Totentanz mit Mädchen” – “Dance of Death with Maiden”. In most cases individual photographs are designated, “Untitled (from the series, ‘Dance of Death with Maiden’)”. It is a longer series, of between 60 and 70 photographs. It overlaps with other related works. It consists of a number of separate but related sets or series. One comprises nine photographs, another 14, another forms part of the installation “10 Days – 100 Photos” of 1980–81, and so on.<sup>2</sup> (Jürgenssen, incidentally, never exhibited a work twice.) No one, as far as I know, has remarked on how unusual the title is. And it is not a title, as far as I can find out, ever used for any kind of artwork, except by Jürgenssen.

There is no such thing as a “Dance of Death with Maiden” motif or genre. I want to argue that the title suggests that she is *dancing with the genre*, dancing with art history. Jürgenssen’s work is complex, open to possibilities. “As a woman

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Natascha Burger of the Estate Birgit Jürgenssen for these details.

artist, [her] artistic formation took place in an unapologetically masculinist, if not misogynist environment" (Solomon-Godeau 2009: 244). The "Death" figure or mask is an image of her, cast from her face. A Dance of Death is already an artistic production. Jürgenssen's is "traditional art genre with real woman". It is as if she were on stage (looking somewhat like a ventriloquist) or as if an art historian or ethnologist were doing research as an "embedded participant". Her interest in ethnology is well known and the idea of the photographs (black and white, like old research documentation) as an ethnology on the genre itself, makes sense of the most puzzling images in the series, in which she appears in what looks like North African dress, holding both the skull-mask staff and a staff with a black figurine or doll, which wears, like her, a headdress. She was fascinated by and committed to anthropology and ethnology. She knew the difficulties of "studying" other peoples. The doll-staff resembles staffs designating roles in African societies – linguist, dancer, leaders of ceremonies.

Some of these images have colour. It is laid on over the black and white image. In one there is a marbling effect covering a more or less random part of the image, giving the dress a pattern which might in the West be described as "ethnic". If she is, like an ethnologist, embedding herself in a genre, the pieces make perfect sense. And it is as if she recognised the macho, somewhat perverse nature of images by Manuel and Baldung and Beham and Graf and wanted to go back and in some way undo them. She is taking control of both medium and content. And there is a connection with her interest in Surrealism:

They [the "Totentanz mit Mädchen" photographs] open up that quasi-mythical or archaic space which Jürgenssen was working towards in other series during this period [late 1970s and early 1980s]; it is a space which was evoked by the Surrealists – above all in relation to contemporary ethnography, the aesthetic concepts and methods of which BJ herself supports (Futscher 2007: 4).

#### CLAUDE CAHUN AND THE DUCHESS

A curious aspect of the "Totentanz mit Mädchen" photographs is relevant to a discussion of Jürgenssen's address to art history: the issue of the painted-on nipples. These are circles painted onto the clothes the artist wears. A number of interpretations have been proposed, but there is an obvious reason for them – they are a homage to Claude Cahun, another artist Jürgenssen admired and who also dealt with gender identity and used her own body and photography. In her series "I Am In Training Don't Kiss me" (1927) she has similar round nipple shapes on her clothes.

There is another art-historical point I think worth proposing. If Jürgenssen researched the Dance of Death she would have come across the Duchess from the "Großbasler

Totentanz” (originally a mural of 1440). The Duchess survives as a fragment, now in the Basel Historical Museum, from the original wall (destroyed 1805). She has very noticeable nipples. Matthäus Merian’s celebrated print version in 1649 emphasises them, using etched dots, and in Büchel’s version of 1753, the emphasis seems even greater.<sup>3</sup> (Utzinger 1996: 83–85). When Anton Sohn made his ceramic version (1806 onward, based on Merian) he included nipples in the mould and applied a colour glaze. The Duchess is a well-known figure in Dance of Death history and features on the cover of the major study by Hélène and Bertrand Utzinger. What is especially interesting, and Jürgenssen may have known, is that she was painted over the Bishop: she was introduced by Hans Kluber during his 1568 restoration. He disposed of the Archbishop, painted a new Bishop over him, and painted the Duchess over the old Bishop. He introduced more secular women. Jürgenssen might well have been struck by this. The point is that references to art history are evident in Jürgenssen’s “Dance of Death with Maiden” and “Untitled”/“Death and the Maiden” works.

In my reading, the Maiden is Jürgenssen – accustomed to showing herself in her work as a representative of women, or to present an identity question. But a question has to be raised: whether the mask, not the artist, might be the Maiden in her photographs.

We can say, about of the “Untitled”/“Death and Maiden” series, that Jürgenssen is dancing with the Death and the Maiden motif. So we might call these her “Maiden with Death and the Maiden” series – making two Maidens – the one in the genre, and her. This accords with Jürgenssen’s usual way of analysing roles through art. In the “Totentanz mit Mädchen”/“Dance of Death with Maiden” pictures the mask to some extent represents the genre, but the entire artwork is also the genre. But to convey this she needs her stage-prop dancing partner: a thing like a shepherd’s crook, and shaped like a spine (a trope-shape of Jürgenssen’s) topped with a life mask, a death mask: her double, her sister.

#### ASSUNTA ABDEL AZIM MOHAMED

Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed was born in 2003. Her earlier works are large caricature-like ink drawings of groups, representing parties she has attended in Vienna. They have a frieze-like quality, like Dance of Death paintings; she is influenced by these and by Death and the Maiden imagery. Her Death and her Maiden are interchangeable: in her “Dance” “the characters exchange identities with those of the skeletal Death-figures”, she says. This interchangeability of Death

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<sup>3</sup> The Duchess: Großbasler Totentanz, Büchel, 1773. Cabinet des Estampes, fol.18. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel. Kupferstichkabinett. Inv. 1886. 9. Skb. A 102. (For the Queen, the same reference.)

and Maiden is, as we have seen, an element, albeit under a different aspect, of Jürgenssens's series. Both artists use wry humour, marking them out from much Death and the Maiden imagery of previous decades (see again Knöll's *Frauen – Sünde – Tod*, 2010) – although of course the original Dance of Death works rely on humour. Mohamed's work differs from Jürgenssen's in being directly satirical. She is fascinated by Baroque and 19<sup>th</sup> century art and made "Death as Seducer" (2013) in response to Alfred Rethel's "Death the Strangler – The first outbreak of cholera at a masked ball in Paris, 1831" (1851). She studied Romance Studies, then print and illustration. She has a particular interest, as Jürgenssen had, in Surrealism.

Mohamed's figures "exchange identities" because they are unhappy with their selves. She studies people (not ideas of identity using images of herself, as Jürgenssen does.) Her Maiden is self-harming. This is "high" art with a "social" or "folk" aspect. The way she uses clothing – which shows characteristics, attributes, behaviour – is especially important because it indicates that she is *combining the two genres*.

"We all want to party when the funeral ends" is a world-turned-upside-down – the coffin-bearers are dead, the corpse is alive. A woman sits up in a coffin borne by skeletons. Mohamed says she has awoken "as if from a dream", aware of her mortality. In many of the drawings a figure looks out, as if over the viewer's shoulder. The man in "Can I bleed enough to fill up what the engine takes" "stares expressionless into nothing", Mohamed says. Her drawings have a complex iconology, the result of a plethora of cultural references but also the result, the artist claims, of the impossibility of fully understanding people or events. Her work exhibits a *horror vacui*: it is crammed with incident. This befits a literary taste for Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, among others. This debt to the literary Jürgenssen and Mohamed have in common. And it helps explain their attraction to the Dance of Death and Death and the Maiden.

Mohamed's figures almost all face us. They seem to be at an endless party, a round or line dance, somewhat as in Dance of Death works, though her viewpoint is high: the influence of film and of music video playing out formally in her work. In terms of visual grammar, she follows the pattern Christadler picks up on in Wirth: "the development of the Dance of Death tends to isolate the couples who in the *first* place all belonged to a long procession of dancers" – Death and the Maiden being, for Wirth, "one of the very effective pairings that develop a life of their own" (Christadler 2011: 105). The early, busy party images with large numbers of figures gave way to images of pairs. According to Wirth and Christadler, the artists who "isolate the couples", then move on to book illustrations, which is a way of formally making "a more dramatic and individual story" between Living and Death figures (Christadler 2011: 105–106). This is what Mohamed seems to be doing with her new drawings – and with her sets of prints, including her "Ex Libris" book plates of 2015–17.

Each pair of figures represents two people locked into a strange relationship, like Death and the Living. This returns Death and the Maiden from *psychological* to *social*. One figure in each pair alludes to death. (Her "Maidens", incidentally,

can be male – and one aspect of her work which makes her an heir to Jürgenssen and comparable artists, is its ambiguous portrayal of gender.) Mohamed has pointed out that in “Can I bleed enough...” the T-shirt showing an advertisement for “Necromania”, (a porn film by Ed Woods – “the worst film director of all time”) makes us “see the figure in a certain light.” That is, he represents Death. Death figures are indicated in various ways. In “Living a healthy life” the male figure puts something in the woman’s drink, although “she seems to be feeling the effects already” – as if awareness of mortality were an illness, and catching.

Mohamed is attracted to the satirical in Dance of Death works in a way that Jürgenssen is not. But Wirth’s description of the Death and the Maiden artists’ “desire to overthrow the established order” (Wirth 1979: 13) is relevant to both. “Practically every point of this study dedicated to the macabre involves us in the domain of iconographic innovation and of a rupture with tradition” (Wirth 1979: 166). The two artists I deal with here demonstrate the adaptability and formal and aesthetic potential of the two genres.

Mohamed studied the Baroque revival of late medieval death imagery and saw how this decorative art might serve deeper ends. As with Jürgenssen, the performative aspect of both genres is vital. Jürgenssen once said she photographed herself because she was too shy to perform. Death is a musician in Mohamed’s drawings, as in early Dance of Death works. She does not perform to camera like Jürgenssen but we can connect the influence of music video with the idea the original Dance of Death works were influenced by real performances, an idea much disputed but backed by the evidence of decrees. Hélène and Bertrand Utzinger discuss the acceptability and unacceptability of dances and performances on church property and list papal and church decrees prohibiting them (Utzinger 1996: 228). The list begins with the decree of Council of Vannes of 465 and continues through six decrees until we reach that of the Council of Basel of 1435, which is significant because the Basel Dance of Death was painted in 1440, which suggests a connection. “These orders were reiterated in the most formal manner” (Utzinger 1996: 228). The Basel painting was, very likely, a replacement for real dances. Both Mohamed and Jürgenssen would be fascinated by such a detail.

If Jürgenssen sleeps with Death, as Karpowski observes, or sleeps with a *death-genre*, then the Living in Mohamed’s drawings flirt with death. But while the idea is similar, its content is different: Mohamed’s images are full of pain. Every kind of death is there, and seemingly, every kind of response to it.

## CONCLUSION

Wirth’s conclusion to his study of Death and the Maiden is significant: “There remains an image empty of precise meaning, capable of gathering all kinds of meanings and of guaranteeing none” (Wirth 1979: 173). The somewhat “Symbolist”

nature of the motif Wirth here describes, its openness, its ability thus to be – as I have said of the Dance of Death motif – a “meme”, makes it, for Jürgenssen, a valuable vehicle for series which mix definite ideas with ideas which are open or unresolvable.

Christadler writes that the “conflation of life and death, of imaginary and represented, is intrinsic to the imagery of the *Danse Macabre*” (Christadler 2011: 128). Mohamed and Jürgenssen have understood the art-about-art nature of the genres they enter, and exploited it. Writing in a different context, but echoing Wirth’s perception, Nowotny devises a “formula” to describe “literary symbolism”. She calls it ugly (“repellent”) but useful: “contextual manipulation of verbal objects so as to suggest importance in these objects and to bring about an accretion of different meanings for them by exploiting the indeterminacy of their status” (Nowotny 1991: 179). In a literature-influenced visual realm, this “indeterminacy” of “symbolic” objects is what both Mohamed and Jürgenssen exploit.

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