

Written by Dana Snow

*She felt the pressure to maintain her 'dignity' and to keep her grief silent, lest her visceral trauma depress anyone else[...] Coming to terms with her son's death wasn't an attempt to erase her fear of mortality – she just wanted to engage with death, to be allowed to speak its name.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Wisdom of Ruins* is a collection of materials that bear witness to unconventional grief and rituals of mourning. In this body of work, grief laps at the edges of time and realizes itself through material excavation. It exists beyond demarcation, shifting from ephemera, to meditation, to monument; speaking in a dying language. Grief does not keep quiet for the sake of politeness, but generously demands to be seen. It allows for others to see themselves. Featuring the work of emerging Toronto-based artist HollyJo, *The Wisdom of Ruins* weaves together threads of an unsilenced grief through ceramics, photography, sculpture, audio, and found materials.

The medieval Sicilian city of Salemi—both the birthplace of the artist's mother, and the site of a destructive 1968 earthquake—provides an alternative framework for publicly addressing grief. The town was destroyed by the impact of the quake, forcing a mass migration away from the area. In the mid-1980s, architects Roberto Collova and Alvaro Siza began public interventions to attract residents and tourists to Salemi. Rather than following the architectural tradition of *dov'era e com'era* (reconstructing exact replicas of damaged buildings) the duo created structures that allowed for the previous damage of the earthquake to be expressed. Rubble was cleared away and new public spaces were

adopted; the intact ruins standing within them as quiet witnesses to the historical trauma of a place and a people.<sup>2</sup> During a pilgrimage to Salemi, HollyJo was arrested by the temporal possibilities of these ruins. The unrestored cracks in public space unfolded to reveal cracks in time—a framework from which to consider the atemporal process of grieving her infant daughter.

Time involves itself with mourning in a non-linear way: rather than understanding the death of a loved one as a singular moment from which to distance oneself, grief comes in cycles and waves that create interstices with past trauma. Familial history becomes entangled in this dynamic. In “The Intergenerational Effects of Grief and Trauma,” therapist Kathleen Curzie Gadjos investigates the impact of unattended trauma from generation to generation, concluding that unprocessed grief creates a domino effect in later generations’ emotional and physical wellbeing. She notes that miscarriages and infant deaths are a major contribution to this deleterious domino effect: “These were disenfranchised griefs when they occurred and are banished/dismissed even from discussion later on[...] the individual and the family have ‘acculturated’ the loss to cultural norms—‘that was not important anyway, was it?’”<sup>3</sup> These cultural mores run deeper than family relations. HollyJo explains that she often felt the need to keep the experience of losing her daughter buried to be polite—to avoid the discomfort of the other participants in conversation. It was the open acceptance of trauma in the Salemi ruins—their position as timeless witnesses within a hybridity of past and future decay—that inspired HollyJo’s works. In *The Wisdom of Ruins*, each relic stands as a personal ruin for the artist, leaning into the familial histories that shaped her own experience, carving out space for them to

be seen alongside, and within, her own trauma. There is an undeniable truth in each ruin, a materialization that unearths a complex web of interpersonal histories, allowing for experiences of loss to speak.

Sicilian infrastructure and culture undergird *The Wisdom of Ruins*. Works such as *A Dying Language* and *A Dying Recipe* (both 2019) solidify not only the existence of HollyJo's daughter, but also of family tradition, joyful gatherings, and a transference of heritage after death. After the artist's grandmother emigrated to Canada in 1965, HollyJo's mother faced violent discrimination due to her darker skintone and her second-language English. She began to unlearn both the Sicilian dialect and all connections to her culture in order to allow for safety in assimilation. This experience layered into the artist's understanding of generational trauma, informing the way she engages with an inherited yet strange culture. During HollyJo's visit to Sicily, the artist found her dialect (inherited from her grandmother) to be jarring to other inhabitants. The words that had shaped her upbringing were considered old-world. The family's geographical distance from Sicily provided a temporal break from globalizing culture. The Sicilian language is considered "vulnerable" by UNESCO: due to economic decline in the area, a lack of media dissemination and no known orthography, it relies on oral tradition to survive.<sup>4</sup> With each death of a speaker, a marked loss emerges in the language. In *A Dying Language*, Sicilian recovers space outside time to uncover this loss, to unearth the details of a fading memory. The comforting presence of a nursery rhyme becomes a catalyst for viewing the exhibition, honouring loss by speaking through time to a suspended listener.

Existing outside of Western funerary practices, *The Wisdom of Ruins* offers a holistic approach from which to begin a process of bereavement and healing. HollyJo engages with the intersections of loss, trauma, ritual, and comfort to highlight moments of joy, belonging, and incredible love. Grieving motherhood, childhood, and inherited trauma, the works help to interpret the private space between repression and radical acknowledgement.

*The Wisdom of Ruins* is a part of the DesignTO festival, co-presented under *Dying*.exhibits; an exhibition series on end of life, inviting participants to think about their relationships with life and death as a process, encouraging heart-level conversations about difficult, often taboo topics. *Dying*. is a collaboration between the Health Design Studio at OCAD U and Taboo Health.

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017) 73.

<sup>2</sup> Felix Bazalgette, "Where it was—but not how it was': how the Sicilian earthquake divided a town." *The Guardian*, August 30, 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/30/where-it-was-but-not-how-it-was-how-the-sicilian-earthquake-divided-a-town-salemi>

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Curzie Gadjos, "The Intergenerational Effects of Grief and Trauma." *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 10:4 (October 2002): 309.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/105413702236514>

<sup>4</sup> "Sicilian." *Endangered Language Alliance*.  
<https://elalliance.org/languages/italian/sicilian/>