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Review

Breathe: Making the Invisible Visible

Fay Ballard and Judy Goldhill
Freud Museum, London

Dr Elizabeth Pimentel de Çetin and Carly Robinson



THE EXHIBITION *BREATHE* RAN BETWEEN 16 MAY AND 15 JULY 2018 AT THE FREUD MUSEUM, LONDON. *Breathe* represents a penetrating and sensitive exploration of childhood loss, mourning and memory, located within the intimate setting of Freud's former family home. Through their art, Fay Ballard and Judy Goldhill upset the sedateness of the Freud Museum. Using photography, film, drawing and personal memorabilia, the intangible, foggy presences of their lost loved ones — their parents — become palpable. Ballard and Goldhill breathe new insight into the pain of mourning, the wonder of making, and the desire to know another who has been lost to them. Curated by psychoanalyst Caroline Garland, *Breathe* charts Ballard's journey to hold on to memories of her mother whom she lost at the age of seven to pneumonia; and Goldhill's search for her father, who died of polio when she was a baby.

20 Maresfield Gardens was Sigmund Freud's home, where he lived and worked with his daughter Anna in the final year of his life. Walking through the front door, you feel as if you are stepping into a family home. It has an atmosphere of peace and stillness, which is immediately echoed in Godhill's photographs of silent skies and instruments of scientific observation. These photographs draw you upstairs to the sunlit landing, where Anna Freud and her mother once sat taking tea. Family connections are mapped throughout the spaces of Freud's family home, situating the work of Ballard and Goldhill as deeply personal investigations into the lives of their lost parental figures. The work of both artists in *Breathe* speaks of trauma, but it also represents a search for meaning in, and amongst, the debilitating landscape of loss and longing, emotions vividly portrayed through their preoccupations with identity, temporality and space.

Undoubtedly, this creative work would resonate especially with those who have lost a parent. Navigating loss through creative production is a way of reshaping the self as part of the process of grief and mourning; Ballard and Goldhill have used their respective art forms to explore this theme, creating thought-provoking pieces of art as well as forging a path to their own healing and self-discovery.

Ballard's and Goldhill's pieces are hauntingly beautiful and evocatively framed by a myriad of feelings: fear and anger at abandonment; unnameable sadness; despair; and hope. Here, *to breathe* refers not to the monotonously necessary act of taking in and expelling air, but of creation, and of living. If life is to be lived, the mourner must then strike the painful compromise between grieving, hoping and, finally, closure, in order to become reacquainted and engaged with life after loss. Breathing as the creative life force becomes the act and agency behind visual representation of the past through the traces of loved ones – Fay's mother and Judy's father – that are no longer there.

Ballard incessantly rehearses the act of disappearance and dissolubility, through meditative drawings that encrypt and conceal the object of her desire, her mother. They speak to what 'can't be avoided', explains Ballard, marking the moment when she, the mourner, drawing from her own, and *upon* her mother's, memory, dissolves them into the image.¹ The inventory for *Memory Box: Drawn from Memory* (2012) is alive with words like *girdle*, *pom-poms*, *dolls* and *tiger tails*: all 'favourite' relics of a childhood past (Fig. 1).



Figure 2. Fay Ballard, *13 September 1964 (2)*, 2016. Exhibition image courtesy of the Freud Museum.

Drawing objects from her family home, evoking memories of her mother and depicting more banal domestic compositions such as windows, doors, mirrors and light fittings, all as stand-alone or broken fragments of a family home, there is a profound sense of trying to piece together parts of a life lost. Ballard admits that following the death of her mother, while her father became both parents to his three children, communication about the lost mother and wife was silenced. Ballard describes how: 'In his fictionalized memoir 'The Kindness of Women,' my father describes the wall of silence around my mother which built up amongst us like an unspoken pact as we struggled to survive'.²

The work signifies the visceral poignancy of the significant life-changing catastrophe that is the loss of a parent at such a young age. Describing it as a 'violent collision,' Ballard returned to this dried-up river bed in 2015 to retrace her steps from 1964, and these drawings show this earth shattering shift across space and time. This rupture of stability leads onto more abstract meditations as Ballard sketches her delayed process of mourning as a series of circles entitled *Enigma 1-4*. Unsure of their meaning, Ballard embraces the creative process as a methodology for dealing with this deep-seated grief and creation as a free-flowing expression of being set against the absence of her lost mother.

Judy's art encompasses the wide spectrum of grief and longing for her father through photographic and video forms. The placement of photographic sequences throughout the house links into the expression of a journey as you move through different spaces and temporalities. In the dining room the photographs of an abandoned iron lung present not only the loss of her father, no longer present in the coffin-like apparatus which once kept him alive, but also the practical artificiality of forcing breath into a body already predisposed to death.

At the bottom of the stairs a display of personal archives documents the transition of Judy's father from German child to British citizen, together with carbon copies of his own youthful poetry, offering up a tangible trail of identity from a person absent yet still very much present through the remnants of this

archive and the life breathing through Judy herself. The trail of photographs of star and skylines meandering up the stairs engenders a philosophical mode of thought as we look skyward to contemplate the link between a father and daughter lost in a temporal shift. As Judy observes, 'As I contemplate the inky black sky in Suffolk, together with my camera fixed on its tripod, I wonder if the light I am receiving coincides with that moment in the past captured by the photo of my father cradling me in his arms'.³

Goldhill was too young to know her father when he died, and her memories are pierced by the 'sea of graves' strewn along the path she has frequently taken to visit his grave with her mother and sister. Her father spent his last months encased in an iron lung – 'mute and immobile' – following a collapse and, subsequently, an emergency tracheotomy. The memories others share with Judy of her father become the scattered fragments of Harold, as his illness becomes the touchstone of her memories of him. The photographs Harold took, the poems he wrote, or the building he designed as an architect contribute to the poignancy of her loss. This trauma is captured in the photograph *Iron lung, Slip End, Hertfordshire*, which shows a long ivory sarcophagus interspersed with windows illuminated from the inside, at once constricting and frightening, yet strangely intimate. The sounds of the iron lung resonate in the video *Pneuma* playing next door in Freud's study, which explores the sensory images of gently flying fabric combined with the sounds of the wind, the faint clunk of mechanical breath, and the meditative repetition of piano keys.⁴ The mesmeric images of this breathing fabric are also shown high above the shelves of Freud's library and give an impression of life still breathing through his ideas and work (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Judy Goldhill, *Spiration, Suffolk*. Courtesy of the Freud Museum.

The search for Goldhill's father extends from the material tracings of his identity to the metaphysical aspects of a father's soul. The process of his becoming reveals a boy in Germany who wrote poetry, which the viewer can appreciate first-hand in *Poem written by Harold Ellern, 1927*. Another work, *Registration card for Harold James Ellery* (National Archive, Kew) reveals he came to be anglicised as 'Harold', to become the husband, father and avid photographer, re-imagined and longed for in Judy's mind. This journey, as Judy discovers, is not finite. He is 'star dust', connected, through the breath of life, to the universe.



Figure 4. Judy Goldhill, *Annular solar eclipse*, *Observing Room*, McMath-Pierce Solar Telescope, Kitt Peak, Arizona, 20th May 2012. Courtesy of the Freud Museum.

On Goldhill's journey the viewer can appreciate the lengths she has travelled to gaze through the McMath-Pierce Solar telescope, the largest solar instrument in the world in the North American desert (Fig. 4), or to capture a starlit sky in South America, as in *Large Magellanic Cloud*, Victor Blanco Telescope, Cerro Tololo, Chile, 2012 (Fig. 5). The photographs provoke wonder at the immensity of the cosmos and the relative smallness of the human being within it.



Figure 5. Judy Goldhill, *Large Magellanic Cloud*, Victor Blanco Telescope, Cerro Tololo, Chile, 2012. Courtesy of the Freud Museum.

An exploration of intimate relationships is the essence of Sigmund

Freud's work. Arguably, loss is a primal experience, a simple fact of life.⁵ In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), Freud characterises mourning as a healthy process of coming to terms with loss and describes melancholia as a pathology, a failed attempt to reconcile the psychic self to loss.⁶ The lost object, or the 'notional' loss of a concept, place, or ideal in the melancholic subject, is incorporated into the ego.⁷ The unresolved grief over the loss of the object is preserved as a burden that creates psychic struggles and an ambivalent identification toward that which has been lost, thus compromising the ego.⁸ Any loss evokes earlier losses, magnifying the pain. Love for the person or thing wars with feelings of denial and anger at its loss, leading to self-criticism, or self-denigrating behaviour.⁹

Freud characterizes this melancholic 'inhibition' as a puzzling phenomenon: the analyst is unable to understand its causes because the subject cannot *consciously* understand *what* has been lost.¹⁰ Unlike the mourner who has understood the loss and released the lost object, the melancholic preserves and internalises the loss in the unconscious and remains consumed by its return. The ego, 'poor and empty' sustains the loss in the present through acts of imitation. The past never becomes silent, but remains waiting to be played out in further tragedies.¹¹ Tragedy is an inevitable component of these works as the artists look for ways of relating to their lost ones: Ballard, in the drawing of the fan like the one she used to cool her mother in the last days of her illness; Goldhill, always searching, face hidden behind her camera as she positions it in the aperture of the iron lung which kept her father in his last days.

It is at this crucial moment, when the subject relives the pain of loss, that the feeling of rage becomes critical. Rage gives structure to the complex feelings involved in the process of recovery.¹² The object can never again be located in the external world, and in many ways, the search for it never ends. This is the moment when an impulse that can be seen as the injunction *to breathe!* arrests the mourner from becoming melancholic, otherwise congealed and paralysed through despair. What is wanting is renewed hope: a release to kick-start the process of internalising and externalising through experimentation, rehearsal, and finally, making visible through the work of art, not just the loss but the way in which the mourner has chosen to keep on living. In this way, the viewer participates in the artists' journey. This process of sharing brings the artists back from the experience of loss, because they have become detached from the pain long enough to share it, and then relate to it. They have released possession of this loss and created a microcosm of relics and memories for others, as much as for themselves.

Ballard and Goldhill mourn their losses, but they choose to release their mourning from the melancholic condition and engage with the processes of language, the image and the symbols of the lived world, by breathing new life into works that are dynamic and constitutive of life experiences, rather than static and fetishistic. Yearning and a further desire for learning, represented by Ballard combing her memories in search of her mother and Goldhill looking to a world beyond for her father, are the processes through which both artists establish a hold over what is lost. Even within the static medium of photographic representation, they both offer up a language of loss that is bound in a network of significations of the everyday, which they render beautiful through the power of texture. One can almost feel the gritty graphite on paper of Ballard's drawings, and sense the viscous darkness of Goldhill's star-strewn skies. This type of beauty has not 'unconsciously introduced the spectator into the concept beautiful', but rather is beautiful because of the meaning

constituted within.¹³ Through artifice, the artist has remade something from loss.

Beauty, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is testament to the way in which a melancholic subject is able to transcend suffering, on his or her own terms.¹⁴ Kristeva (1989) takes up Freud's argument, that the pursuit of beauty or happiness 'offers little protection against the threat of suffering', in order to debate issues of immortality, the ideal and overcoming loss, in what she terms the 'enigma of mourning' versus the 'enigma of the beautiful'.¹⁵ She further suggests that sublimation (as Freud also considers) may be a process to offset such loss.¹⁶ It may be that beauty is that which is not affected by the certain 'universality of death' and which helps the sufferer, or the mourner in the case of Ballard and Goldhill, to overcome their grief.¹⁷

Both artists use their creative forms and their interpretation of life's beauty to build up previously obscured pictures of their lost parents and in so doing, allow themselves to be built up anew with them. These creative practices not only offer a visual representation of the individual journey of grief and mourning but also connect the work to the theories of the museum's namesake and strengthen the lost link between parent and child in ways that only art can unlock. By tapping into subconscious feelings to offer release and to evoke the palpable tension of grief, creating art as part of the process of mourning enables Fay and Judy to continue with their onward journey whilst offering up their personal testimonies of survival. Through the processes of mourning, searching and creative expression, Ballard and Goldhill have breathed life and beauty into the objects that preserve the memories of their parents.

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Notes

- ¹ Fay Ballard, 'Searching for my Mother', in *Breathe: Fay Ballard & Judy Goldhill* (London: Freud Museum, 2018), p. 13.
- ² Fay Ballard and Judy Goldhill, *Breathe: Exhibition Catalogue* (London: Freud Museum, 2018), p. 11.
- ³ Fay Ballard & Judy Goldhill, *Breathe: Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 41.
- ⁴ Judy Goldhill, *Pneuma*, slideshow, <http://www.judygoldhill.com/work/Images/47/pneuma/slideshow/1/>, 2018, [accessed 21 September 2018].
- ⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Transcience', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 197.
- ⁶ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, pp. 203-205.
- ⁷ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: WW Norton, 1960), pp. 11-22.
- ⁸ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 207.
- ⁹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 206.
- ¹⁰ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 204. Nevertheless, Freud warns his readers at the outset that the clinical definition of melancholia 'fluctuates' and defies categorization (p. 203). Six years later, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud remained preoccupied with the still 'obscure' psychoanalytic understanding of melancholia. Nor is there complete agreement over the clinical causes and manifestations of melancholia; cf. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
- ¹¹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 206, pp. 211-212.

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- ¹² Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', pp. 209-210.
¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 3.
¹⁴ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: WW Norton, 2005), pp. 60-62.
¹⁵ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 62; Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 98.
¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*.
¹⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 98.

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- Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey (New York and London: WW Norton, 2005)