

# GRIEF AESTHETICS: IN CONVERSATION WITH BORDER PATROL

Words by  
Betsy Willett



John Sundling, *Untitled*, Installation  
View, Highland Memorial Cemetery,  
2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.

For me, malls and cemeteries both conjure images of emptiness. These spaces tingle with the energy of former occupants: the nervous teenager meeting a date at the mall or the grieving family at the gravesite. Both spaces appear to be public, and yet, are governed by a private infrastructure that determines who can enter the space and when. Since its inception in 2017, the curatorial collective Border Patrol has been exhibiting art in repurposed spaces while gesturing to the space's original use. The collective first took over a dentist's office in Portland, Maine, in 2017, and since then have exhibited highly conceptual exhibitions, performances, and events.

This summer, the group received the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation Project Grant, which prioritizes "unconventional approaches to art making, critical dialogue, collaboration and new models of community interface." Border Patrol has used this grant to create *RIP*, a project that showcases a series of photos at the Maine Mall and the Highland Cemetery, both of which are located in South Portland, Maine. *RIP* highlights "the relationships among art, extinction, loss, grief, death, advertising, ceremony, and private property."

The group chose the two sites of this project, the cemetery and the mall, because they also share qualities like transience and human necessity. Malls and cemeteries spend much of their time empty. At the same time, they are teeming with emotion, desire, and greed. The American mall, once a suburban epicenter for shopping and teenager hangouts, is in steep decline. In 2017 alone, 6,400 stores closed in the United States, and many of the once busy megabuildings have more vacant storefronts than working ones. Cemeteries are not immune to the forces of commerce; burial plots have become increasingly and exorbitantly expensive. The invisible private corporations that own and operate these sites have become increasingly apparent during the run of Border Patrol's exhibition: cemetery staff repurposed a flower installation by John Sundling for a neighboring funeral, and the Maine Mall removed a work just 5 days after it was installed due to its political nature. Lizania Cruz's work in the Maine Mall features a letter to president Donald Trump from an undocumented flower worker accompanied by

a bouquet of dead and dying flowers. When Border Patrol inquired about why the work was removed, management responded: "malls want to provide a stress free environment where shoppers can temporarily escape the controversies of the outside world."

*RIP*'s site at the Maine Mall food court features photographs by Brian Doody, Bingyang Liu, Greta Rybus, and Lizania Cruz on a rotating ad display from July through September 2019. In the Highland Memorial Cemetery, *RIP* occupies a grave site and commissioned a temporary floral installation by John Sundling as well as a performance by Vanessa Anspaugh and Asher Woodworth based on the funeral procession. Poet Imani Jackson created a memorial for the site's grave marker, that will remain on permanent display once the project is completed.

Through a series of phone calls and e-mails, this interview was developed as a collaboration between the three co-directors at Border Patrol.

Lizania Cruz, *Miguel to Donald Trump*. Installation  
view, Maine Mall, 2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.



(this page) John Sundling, *Untitled*, Installation view, Highland Memorial Cemetery, 2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.

(opposite) Brian Doody, *Untitled (Tree)*, Installation view, Maine Mall, 2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.

**Betsy Willett:** Can you tell me about Border Patrol, how you function as a collective, and how the collective came into being? What roles do each of you play within the group?

**Border Patrol:** We (Meg Hahn, Elizabeth Spavento, and Jared Haug) describe ourselves as a curatorial collective. We each have independent studio and curatorial practices in addition to the work we organize and present as Border Patrol.

Broadly speaking, we focus on the relationships between contemporary art and corporate aesthetics. We use architectural and linguistic cues to inform our programming, no matter where the work is sited.

For example, we used the gallery's architectural history as a former dentist's office to highlight the relationships among contemporary art, office aesthetics, and bureaucratic structures, whether overtly as in the case of Sandra Erbacher's exhibition, *TIIC*, or in more subtle ways as in *Flavor Profile*. For *RIP*, we are interested in the aesthetics of the mall and the cemetery and the ways that they convey ideas of death.

We strive for a non-hierarchical structure, so all of us share equal responsibility in the conception and implementation of each project that we produce. We make our decisions through long conversations and unanimity. While we are united by an aesthetic language and philosophy, we each bring a different focus. Very loosely, Jared often brings a Marxist point of view, Elizabeth a community-based one, and Meg a fondness for materiality and formalism, but the context of each show really drives the conversation. Typically someone will initiate a dialogue with the rest of the group, ask a question or just have a great idea, and the other two offer support. Elizabeth and Jared established Border Patrol in early 2017, and Meg joined the collective about six months later. It was an organic partnership.

**BW:** You are known in the Maine and greater Boston community for having a gallery space, and your current project, *RIP*, is a bit of a departure from the work you've shown within your gallery setting. How did the *RIP* project begin to take shape?

**BP:** We have always conceived of Border Patrol as being a fluid entity, at least internally. To us, it's shorthand for both our collaborative and the gallery we once occupied. Conceptually, we believe that *RIP* is a continuation of the work that we were doing in the gallery.

One day, Elizabeth got a brochure in the mail for purchasing ad space on one of the illuminated directories sprinkled throughout the Maine Mall. We began looking into it seriously and felt it was a way to place public artworks directly in front of viewers. Our gallery space was on the third floor of an old building with minimal signage, and we wanted to reach a broader public. It felt like the right opportunity.

Around the same time, the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation in Rockland, Maine, announced they were launching a one-time project grant. The application process allowed us to fully flesh out programming for *RIP* and further construct its conceptual background. We were absolutely delighted we got the call saying that we received funding.

What we learned in the process became the foundation for *RIP*. We couldn't stop talking about the narrative histories in America that still haunt us today. We were inspired by conversations around ancestral memory and its relationship to indigenous history as well as discussions about reparations and ways of confronting climate disaster. These narratives required us as individuals to hold space for death, violence, burial, and rebirth. We felt the need to create space for these conversations to take place on a larger scale, to engage various publics in small acts of communal healing. The mall shared a lot of formal characteristics with the cemetery, and at a certain point we decided to incorporate both sites for the project.

**BW:** Maintenance is part of both operating a gallery and buying a cemetery plot. Can you talk a little bit about the transition from having a physical space to creating a public project like *RIP*? What is it like to give up some of the curatorial control and to make the work truly public?

**BP:** We maintain tight curatorial control over the project while attempting to be discreet and inconspicuous within both contexts. On one hand, *RIP* makes artworks visible in ways that Border Patrol couldn't, simply by being in a highly trafficked area of the mall. On the other hand, the works adhere to the language of advertising already in the building, and people walk right by without noticing it. As a public art project, *RIP* is embedded within a framework where visitors can easily overlook it as an aesthetic project and instead read it as part of the landscape or architecture of the places it inhabits. The same principle applies to the way we use language to talk about our work. *RIP* can be either a powerful evocation or an empty consolation depending on the context.

The cemetery plot that we purchased was motivated by aesthetic choices, too. We wanted to create ephemeral and permanent public monuments on the gravesite itself and to use the adjacent land for performance-based work. We picked a site that was easy to locate for future cemetery visitors and allowed for respectful distance from established graves on the grounds.

While researching cemetery plots for *RIP*, we quickly discovered that real estate prices below ground mirror those above. As a result, we were priced out of Portland. We contacted and met with several local cemetery municipalities who were unwilling to work with us. They either misunderstood or disagreed with our framework and could not get past the fact



that what we were proposing was outside the scope of typical cosmetic maintenance. We finally found a good fit with Highland Memorial Cemetery in South Portland, where the Maine Mall is also located. We purchased the plot and now have a deed for a coffin-sized slice of land in the cemetery. This one-time fee also includes regular upkeep and maintenance by cemetery staff.

As for the mall, we rent space in the food court on a monthly basis. The kiosk requires little maintenance, outside of printing and installing the image. Overall, both locations require frequent communication with participating artists and staff at each site, which we would consider our biggest investment.

**BW:** *RIP* has multiple components in multiple locations. Can you tell me about how they work together to "address the politics and aesthetics of grief"?

**BP:** We see the mall and the cemetery as sharing many cultural connotations and formal qualities that are essential to the narrative of *RIP*. The mall directory, with its broad slab-like structure standing vertically as an anchor in its surroundings, can easily be read as an illuminated gravestone or memorial. Its role as a vehicle for advertising in the mall also calls attention to the ways in which capitalism relies upon continual obsolescence in the production of unfulfillable desire—the death of retail space and emergence of dead malls across the country are two examples of this. In the cemetery, *RIP* focuses on the materials that reinforce grieving aesthetics. Flowers allude to life's ephemeral status, while





Greta Rybus, *We believe we come from nature and when we die we return to nature*, India, Installation view, Maine Mall, 2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.

stone addresses notions of legacy; it expresses a future that extends far beyond the span of a human life.

Both the mall and the cemetery function somewhere between public and private space, a border we believe is both political and performative. With the decline of public spaces in general, our collective was interested in uncovering the overlooked places where people can gather in a ritualized fashion. Of course, the distinction between the concept of a “public” and a group of individuals occupying space together becomes clearer as we continue the project.

**BW:** The two sites of this project, the cemetery and the mall, both share qualities like transience and human necessity. They are spaces that hold many emotions—grief, desire, greed—yet spend a lot of the day and night empty. Can you talk about why you chose those sites and how they activate the work you are presenting?

**BP:** We identified these spaces because they both are sites of collective action and ritual. Our generation is facing a lot of death: cyclical financial crises, a mass extinction event, the historic undead as our generation debates issues of reparations, etc. We are interested in the ability of collective aesthetic rituals to excavate repressed or buried events, stories, acts, and histories, and hold space for healing to occur.

**BW:** Can you talk about how you chose the artists that were on view?

**BP:** For the mall, we were concerned with the ways in which photography plays a role in the grief process—as a means of remembering, as effigy, as altar—and how photography functions within a retail context. We were specifically interested in the ways that the images could convey a relationship to landscape, another way of linking the mall interiors to the cemetery.

We wanted to work with materials already at home in the cemetery: stone, words, flowers, bodies in movement. This led us to artists who already incorporate such materials within their daily life and works that were inconspicuous in their surroundings. For example, John Sundling is a Maine artist and set designer who makes a living as a florist. Flowers play an important part in funerary ceremonies, acting as temporary sculptures to the dead in service of the living. The cemetery is also a place where ritualized processions play a part, which inspired us to involve performative elements. Maine artist Vanessa Anspaugh will be enacting a piece which explores the procession as a site for the collective expression of grief and as a form of dance.

**BW:** The images created for exhibition in the Maine Mall Food Court are quite haunting. Can you talk about the photographs that have been on view there?

**BP:** We were drawn to Brian Doody’s work for its emphasis on ideas of memorial and remembrance, shrouded figures within cold landscapes, the celebration of working-class aesthetics, and its foregrounding of queer/non-binary genders. As Brian so succinctly states, their work “shines a light on the people and places often left in the dark.” Their image of a lone tree obscuring a mausoleum evokes the unspoken reverence found within the cemetery landscape.

Bingyang Liu’s image demonstrates the ways in which cemeteries and funerary rituals across cultures

maintain similar characteristics. His image depicts fake money burning in front of a grave marker. The temporal relationship of stone to the human body; burning as a means of returning to the earth; allusions to economic death; the foregrounding of inscription and ancestral heritage—these aspects are often found in both Western and non-Western funerary rites.

Many of these themes are also explored in *RIP*’s third photograph by Maine photographer by Greta Rybus. Her image depicts two young men dunking an elder in water as part of funerary rites in India.

**BW:** When you are in the mall experiencing *RIP*, the atmosphere is more sterile than being outdoors in a cemetery. How do you hope people experience the work here?

**BP:** After Elizabeth received the brochure about purchasing ad space in the mall, we called the advertising company, Smartlite, and have been in touch with a representative ever since. He was receptive to our idea from the beginning and has even allowed us to occupy more than one space at no additional cost. We’re really just inserting a non-commercially driven model into the pre-existing advertising cycle.

When we think of sterile environments, we think of hospitals, offices, and art galleries. We don’t see the mall as a sterile place, particularly since *RIP* occupies ad space on a rotating display in the food court entrance. Due to our location, *RIP* unexpectedly confronts viewers and shoppers as they enter the building or sit down for a meal. We hope shoppers register our images as different from other ads throughout the mall. When an image isn’t trying to sell you anything, what remains? What forms of desire arise in the absence of commodified space? What types of looking are demanded by one of our photos versus a regular advertisement? We are always asking questions.

**BW:** Much of your work as curators involves linguistic play or distortion. Do you have a background in this field? What about the wordplay interests you?

**BP:** None of us have a background in linguistics, but as curators, we have the ability to manipulate the language and display tactics within each exhibition.

That being said, we are always looking to politics for cues as to how language might be molded and twisted. We reserve for ourselves the same privilege that governments insist upon—the ability to name something into existence. The Department

of Homeland Security, for example, was named after the September 11th attacks. The word “homeland” draws a very specific territory outlined by a sense of belonging. The word “security” is employed to make one feel safe. What the name hides is a history of personal violence (as is displayed at the border with ICE detention facilities) and digital surveillance. When naming Border Patrol, we wanted to use the same tactics to make visible the fact that borders are performative, ritualized, permeable, and enacted. We did this before the 2016 election, and afterwards the name took on a different meaning. *RIP* emerges from this desire to play with language.

**BW:** Are there any other projects on the horizon? Are there any ideas you hope to explore as a collective?

**BP:** We are always generating ideas, but our ability to keep pace with producing them is another question. With *RIP* and the move away from a gallery space, our collective continues to highlight the productive tensions that exist between the work we select and the non-neutral spaces they occupy. Our flexible structure remains, as does our ability to execute ideas and projects how and when we see fit. //

Bingyang Liu, *Burned “Paper Money” in Front of the Grave*, Installation view, Maine Mall, 2019. Photo by Joel Tsui.

