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And all things
hushed. Yet even
in that silence
a new beginning,
beckoning,
change appeared.

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The poetic and musical tradition of the elegy arises from a sense of lamentation, but also a questioning of life's mysterious forces. Each of the six artists in *These Days: Elegies for Modern Times* proposes his or her own visual elegy to the complex times in which we live, heightened by an almost revelatory sense of possibility and hope.

The title of the exhibition takes its inspiration from the Jackson Browne song *These Days* (made famous by Nico's beautiful 1967 rendering): "These days I seem to think about/ How all the changes came about my ways/ And I wonder if I'll see another highway." As today's world shifts around us in startling ways, it is not surprising that many artists have taken up the form and sensibility of elegies with renewed interest.

Rainer Maria Rilke is well known as a poet of elegies; however, it is one of his sonnets, quoted here, that seems most fitting to this exhibition. Commencing with silence, it goes on to call out for a new beginning. This poem, together with the work presented in this exhibition, is infused with deep longing, but also with new proposals for what will be in the complicated days ahead.



These Days: Elegies for Modern Times



George Bolster

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← *Reckoner* 2009 Mixed media

St. Peter's Halo 2008 Pencil, silver, pen on maple wood veneer

La Vierge Et l'enfant Et Son Dior 2008 Ink, jewelry, pen, vinyl on maple veneer

Death Killer 2008 Ink, jewelry, paint

Jesus 2008 Ink, customized jewelry, paint

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George Bolster's work begins with religion, or, more precisely, the culture surrounding religion. In his work, Bolster examines just how religion and culture inform one another, creating new hybrids. Through meticulous drawings on plywood panels, Bolster recalls Renaissance religious iconography, including luminous portraits of Christ, Saint Peter and the Virgin Mary. However, Bolster blends religious with contemporary cultural ecstasies, depicting Jesus as a tattooed rock star upon the cross, or infusing rap music lyrics into his gothic-inspired sculpture.

For *These Days*, Bolster created a new installation called *Reckoner*. Viewers of Bolster's work first enter a typical white cube gallery environment, only to step through a threshold and see the museum transformed into a chapel for the 21st century. Once inside, the environment is all-encompassing, including walls covered with antique mirrors and iron filings, a painted ceiling, sculpture and sound. The iron filings slowly rust at the base and along the sides of the already obscured mirrors, hinting at reflection. The centerpiece of *Reckoner* is an elaborately drawn ceiling panel depicting the Reckoning or return of Christ at the end of the world and the casting of good and evil. Figures on the ceiling include martyred saints such as Joan of Arc who was burned at the stake, Matthias who was stoned to death, and Bartholomew who was flayed alive. Suspended from the Apostles is a sculpture of a narwhal, which serves as an allegory for Christ. The stigmata of Christ connect to the wounds of the crucified apostles through flowing red ribbons, symbolizing the sacrifice and blood of the apocalypse.

Accompanying the painted and sculptural elements is a soundtrack of the Radiohead song *Reckoner*, an atmospheric piece of music that states: "Reckoner/ Take me with you/ Dedicated to all you/ all human beings." One can imagine that this is the pleading at the end of days, the hope for salvation. It is at this point that viewers may notice one last component of Bolster's work, the element that reaches beyond the walls of the gallery and touches them. Small drops of water descend from the ceiling as each saint weeps in the face of cataclysmic loss. Bolster's work laments the loss of belief while demonstrating a fascination with faith in a time when both of these things seem to be tenuous.



Chris Doyle

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← *Apocalypse Management (telling about being one being living)* 2009
Video animation with sound design by Joe Arcidiacono

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Chris Doyle's *Apocalypse Management (telling about being one being living)* references religious paintings and, more specifically, Mannerist and Renaissance frescos of *The Last Judgment*. These iconic scenes represent the judgment of every human who has ever lived on earth, which, according to *Revelations*, takes place after the rising of the dead and the resurrection. Doyle is particularly interested in the panels depicting hell as they relate to extreme weather and war scenarios that are ever present in our daily media.

Apocalypse Management (telling about being one being living) is a mash up of sorts, merging New Testament narratives with contemporary disaster imagery. Added atop this imagery is a cacophonous soundtrack that vacillates from classical singing and groaning to heavy metal guitars. The animated video begins with a landscape and its inhabitants in the aftermath of disaster. The particular cause is unclear, but whether natural disaster, act of war, or environmental nightmare, the scenario of devastation portends a state of emergency for which we are reminded to be ready.

Doyle's animation begins with a complex scene reminiscent of something out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting with falling buildings and piles of rubble. One would think all is lost, but then a man emerges from the rubble and starts to move lyrically like a dancer, and then he sings. No words are discernable but his song seems to lift the man up out of the rubble, allowing him to transcend struggle. Throughout the course of the five-minute piece various vignettes come alive, where the wounded, lost and dying sing and dance their way out of destruction. By turning a site of hideous disaster into an almost operatic dance, Doyle suggests hope for the lost, along with a sense that the end is *not* here.

Towards the end of the video loop, Doyle's animation becomes fully alive as all the figures sing and dance together, creating a cacophony of struggle. This writhing imagery engulfs our field of vision, placing us in the rubble along with the singing damned. This elegy to disaster does have a bright side, for while it makes palpable the impossibility of preparing for cataclysmic events, it endlessly strives for recovery.



Robert Taplin

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← *Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)* 2007–09
Wood, polychromed resin, lights, plaster, plexiglas

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Robert Taplin's *Everything Real Is Imagined (After Dante)* consists of nine sculptures, each referencing scenes from Dante's *Inferno* as modern allegories of political strife. These sculptures tell a timeless story of the quest to understand life and death, heaven and hell, and human culpability.

Taplin's story begins as Dante's does with the uncertain sense of reality. *Thus My Soul Which Was Still In Flight (The Dark Wood)* depicts Dante rising from bed. This tableau is simple; however, it sets the tone for Taplin to present Dante as a modern-day everyman. In the second work, *She Turned Away (Beatrice Sends Virgil to Dante)*, Dante in plain clothes sits head down at a table accompanied by two ghostly figures: Virgil, who will guide him through hell, and Beatrice, Dante's love. There is a sense of despair in Dante's posture, a sense that the journey will not be easy.

Taplin's works become more complex, as does the third canto of Dante's *Inferno* which brings Dante and Virgil to the River Acheron to cross into the First Circle of Hell. The text accompanying *Across The Dark Waters (The River Acheron)* reads, "And so they go forth over the dark waters before they arrive over there a new crowd gathers over here." (Canto 3, v. 118–120). Taplin takes this scene and turns it into a metaphor for the current refugee crisis, representing people trying to cross the waters into another terrain, unknowing, like Dante, of what awaits them.

This ghostly aura brings Dante through Limbo into the Second, Third and Fourth Circles of Hell, which depict images of starvation in *Recognize Me If You Can (The Third Circle)* and riots in *One Nation Rules (Fortune)*. Again, the dioramas here are made contemporary, recalling recent media imagery.

The final two sculptures of Taplin's cycle depict Dante clinging to life while mourning the fall of civilization. *Get Back! (The River Styx)* shows Dante narrowly escaping a fall into the River Styx. And *We Went In Without a Fight (Through The Gates of Dis)* is accompanied by the text, "We went in without a fight and I, who was eager to see what was within such a stronghold, as soon as we were inside, cast my eyes about and at every hand I saw a great plain full of torment and pain" (Canto 9, v. 106–111). Here Taplin's Dante stands as witness to a city destroyed, mourning both life on earth and what may wait below.



Micah Silver

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← *The End of Safari* 2009 Mixed media Voice and some text: Yvon Bonenfant

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The End of Safari begins with Yves Saint Laurent. However, this is not an elegy for the iconic fashion designer; rather it uses his 1968 safari-style jacket to launch an investigation into the realm of fantasy as an intersection of imagination and history.

Saint Laurent's Safari Jacket, his 1967 African collection, and subsequent distant-culture-based designs signaled a shift in the manifestation of cultural fantasy. This lineage of fantasy can be traced to travel writings from Herodotus (~430 B.C) and Marco Polo (1254–1324) to authors of the 1500s, in which distant lands, their citizens, customs, and creatures were fantastically imagined. Many of these writings did not come from firsthand experience; rather they were based on secondary sources or hearsay. At their core, these writings were fanciful imaginings that linked fantasy with exotic otherness. Saint Laurent shattered this myth of fantasy by showcasing its artifice, openly acknowledging that he never visited the places that inspired him, choosing instead to deal directly with myth-making.

Silver uses this "idea of safari" to create an environment which brings forth the tenuous boundaries between the West and other areas of the world, revealing how the role of fantasy has transformed over time. "*The End*" here refers to the hypothesis that there no longer exists a safari-like fantasy space that can be used to perceive the "other." Yet these dated seeming fantasy spaces continue to manifest themselves. For example, in Dubai, you can find a Disneyland-like culture of indoor ski slopes, high-end shopping centers, and museums. However, there are also tens of thousands of Indonesian workers living there, existing as a silent "other" on the outskirts of this mega-rich hotspot. Dubai's built environment, much like its predecessor of Las Vegas, posits itself as a realization of a type of fantasy, but it is one that exists independently of any indigenous imagination.

For *The End of Safari*, Silver has created a simulated fantasy environment where the synthetic and the real merge. The convoluted history of fantasy unfolds in the form of an elegiac libretto performed by a fictional Yves Saint Laurent (played by UK-based extended vocalist Yvon Bonenfant) accompanied by audio environment, with the use of several unique forms of sound diffusion. Sound emanates from the objects in the room as well as the room itself, like a type of ventriloquism. The result is a space that transports the viewer from the museum into a fabricated environment, addressing the conflicted loss of fantasy.

Sam Taylor-Wood

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A Little Death 2002 16mm film/DVD projection

Prelude in Air 2005 35mm film/DVD projection

Ghosts VI Ghosts IX Ghosts XI 2008 C-prints

Escape Artist (Primary Colours) 2008 C-print

← *After Dark (With Flower) After Dark (Trapdoor)* 2008 C-prints

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Bringing together death, life and absence, Sam Taylor-Wood's work has always been imbued with a sense of lament, from her *Crying Men* series (2002) which depicted male actors caught in moments of vulnerability, and her *Suspended Self Portraits* (2004) in which the artist appears to be floating effortlessly in space, defying gravity, while at the same time enforcing a sense of emotional gravitas. A selection of Taylor-Wood's work, including both discrete projects and those from different series, is seen in *These Days*, exploring ideas of longing, decay, lamentation, and renewal.

In *A Little Death*, Wood filmed in time lapse a still life, fit for any painter, of a dead hare and a peach. Over the course of the video we see rot and decay as insects descend upon the animal. However, the peach remains strangely intact. Historically, the fruit is a symbol of virtue or immortality as evident in 16th- and 17th-century northern European vanitas paintings. In the video *Prelude in Air*, a lone cellist mournfully plays a Bach prelude. His instrument has been erased, evoking a stark sense of loss. In both videos, as in life, vitality and mortality battle one another without a clear victor.

Taylor-Wood's two new photographic series, *Ghosts* and *After Dark*, examine distinct cultural icons. In *Ghosts*, Taylor-Wood takes inspiration from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* by photographing the moors near Top Withens in Yorkshire, England. These landscape images, shot in the harshness of winter, invoke Bronte's themes of desire, thwarted love and suffering in their depictions of bleakness. Accompanying these photographs are two images from the *After Dark* series, which depict clowns in dilapidated postindustrial settings. There is a battle here between the seemingly cartoonish images of the clowns and their dark surrounds. These are not just "sad clowns"; rather there is a sense of misery and danger imbued in these images counter to the idea of joyous performance.

Lastly, in *Escape Artist (Primary Colours)*, Taylor-Wood depicts herself hovering above ground with a single colored balloon tied around each limb. Her body sags in the middle showing the pull of gravity as she tries to achieve weightlessness. Though the act of floating is not as effortless as in her *Suspended Self Portrait* series, there is still a sense of belief in the ability of those party balloons to lift her up. With this simple gesture, Wood moves beyond death and lament to hope.

Pawel Wojtasik

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Below Sea Level 2009 Panoramic video with sound by Stephen Vitiello
Panoramic technology and creative consultant: Gian Pablo Villamil

← *9th Ward Bridge* Chief Howard Miller of the Creole Wild West
Spanish Moss in the Bayou Gauche Lake Pontchartrain Causeway
Uncle Lionel Baptiste Sr. and Benny Jones Sr. in front of Benny's FEMA Trailer, Treme
Oil Rigs at the Mouth of the Mississippi 2009 Light boxes

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Below Sea Level is a fully immersive environment in the tradition of 19th-century cycloramas, which were panoramic paintings spanning 360 degrees that often portrayed important historical narratives. In Pawel Wojtasik's technological update, viewers enter the thirty five-foot diameter, twelve-foot tall cylindrical structure and, once inside, experience an unbroken circular vista of moving images, a visual panorama composed of a revolving, watery landscape within which, against all odds, the vibrant culture of the city of New Orleans thrives.

Below Sea Level engages viewers in the contemplation of elements, natural and man-made, that make New Orleans and the surrounding area such an essential site. Wojtasik's work emphasizes water as the lifeblood of the city, and uses its fluid properties to link video and sound, history and the present, the Mississippi delta environment and our interventions in it. The wetlands around the city are one of the fastest disappearing coastal areas on the planet, eroding at a rate of one football field's worth of land every 45 minutes. Wojtasik presents this disappearing landscape punctuated with dead and moss-covered trees in stark contrast to the vibrancy of the city. Within this shared landscape are intimate portraits of people of New Orleans. For example, Mardi Gras Indians are seen diligently sewing elaborate costumes for Mardi Gras; a Cajun fisherman surveys the bayou; and jazz musicians perform in the street as well as in the confines of a FEMA trailer, which sits next to a house being renovated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The connections here are palpable from the eerily quiet waters surrounding the city to the life that goes on within.

Accompanying this imagery is an all-pervading soundscape by artist Stephen Vitiello, in which sounds of water, whispers of city life, chanting of Mardi Gras Indians, murmurings of Dixieland, and echoes of other musical traditions entwine. Images and sounds gradually change, evoking cycles of destruction and regeneration. These interwoven sounds and images encompass a range of themes: celebration and mourning, water and land, turbulent history and an uncertain future.

Below Sea Level is a visionary reflection on New Orleans as a site where the convergence of influences, both environmental and cultural, have the potential to define our present and anticipate our future. The piece is not specifically about Hurricane Katrina—rather it contemplates an acute sense of impermanence inherent in the New Orleans location, while reveling in what writer Tom Piazza states as its inhabitants, “elegant and defiant affirmation in the face of mortality.”



MASS MoCA

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This exhibition is made possible with support from Artist's Resource Trust, a Fund of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation; Evelyn Stefansson Nef Foundation; Culture Ireland; and USG. Additional production support for Pawel Wojtasik provided by the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), Troy, New York.

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These Days: Elegies for Modern Times is on view at
MASS MoCA April 4, 2009, through February 28, 2010

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Curated by Denise Markonish

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All works courtesy of the artist, except: Robert Taplin, courtesy of the artist and Winston Wachter Fine Arts, New York; and Sam Taylor Wood, courtesy of the artist and Jay Joplin/White Cube, London.