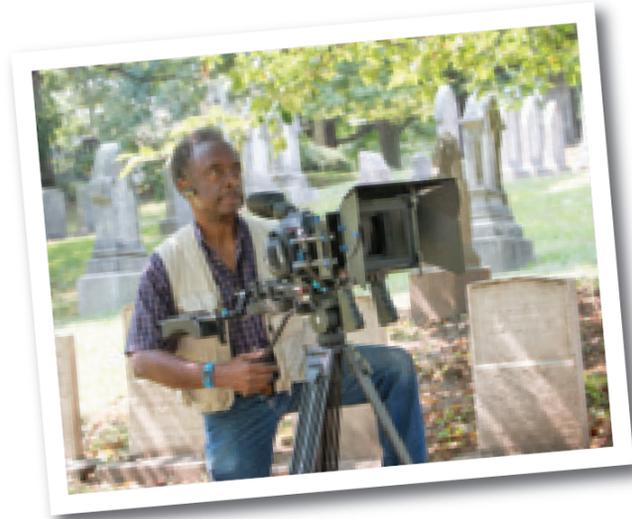


History

By Steve Cronin

finding art at Mount Auburn



Multimedia Artist Enjoying Residency at Historic Cemetery

As a young courting couple, Roberto Mighty's parents enjoyed going to the cemetery and reading poetry to one another. Now, more than six decades later, their son is using a cemetery to inspire a creative expression of his own.

Since 2014, Mighty has been the artist-in-residence at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mighty combines film, music, spoken word and photography to memorialize and celebrate the stories found among the cemetery's more than 98,000 interments – and he doesn't just focus on the many famous people buried at Mount Auburn.

The Boston artist tells the tales of everyday people interred at the cemetery – people with fascinating stories that might otherwise be overlooked.

There is Peter Byus, an escaped slave who found freedom and success in Massachusetts; Frank Ernest James, a young boy who died in 1863 and whose monument is a statue of a child clutching a book; and Gerald R. Dagesse, a member of the Boston Gay Men's Chorus and part of one of the first legally married same-sex couples in the state. Dagesse died in 2008.

To tell the personal stories he finds so compelling, Mighty spends "countless hours in the cemetery, but even more hours researching the backgrounds of the people I am

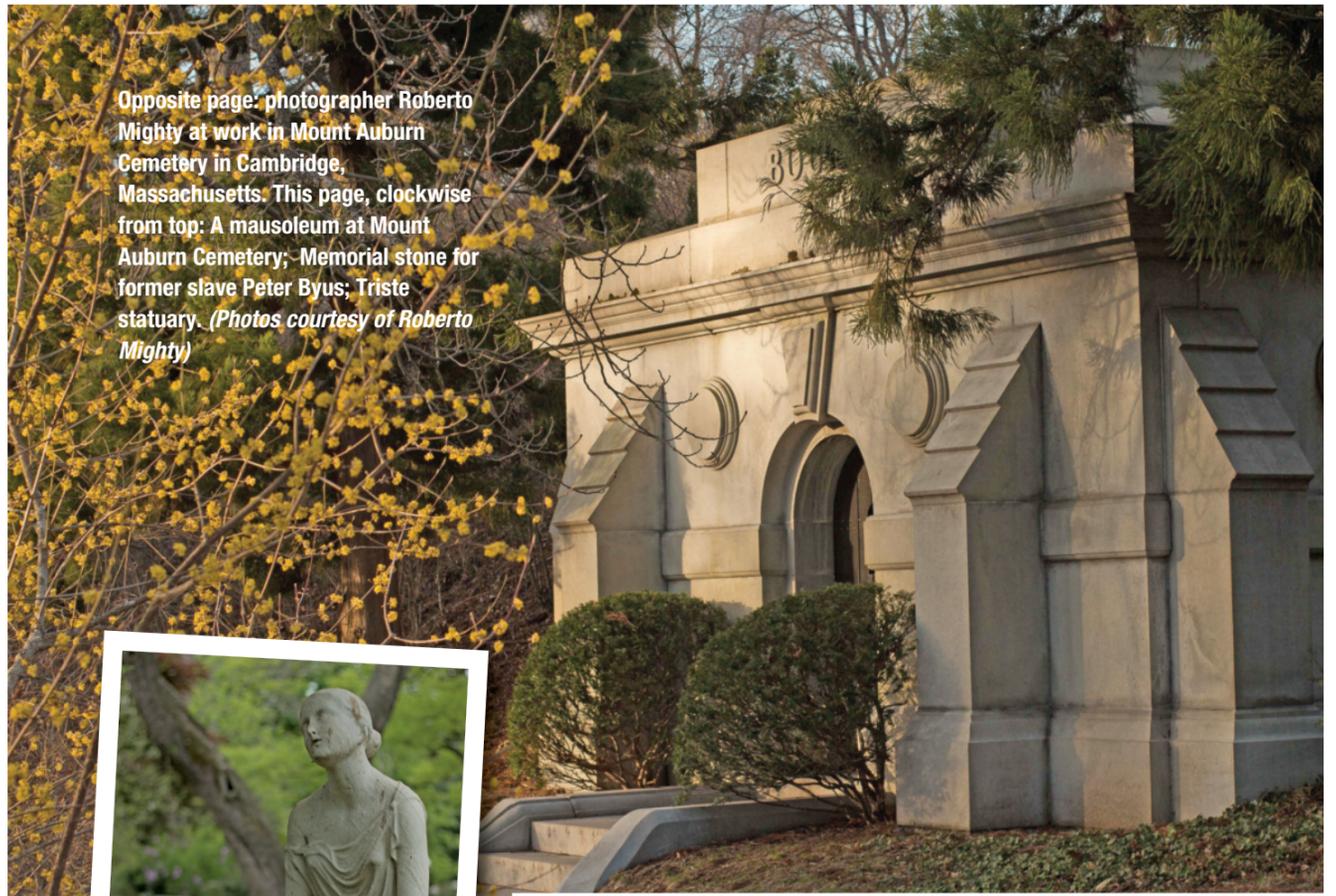
profiling."

Talk to Mighty and it's clear the artist has developed a heartfelt connection with people he is memorializing.

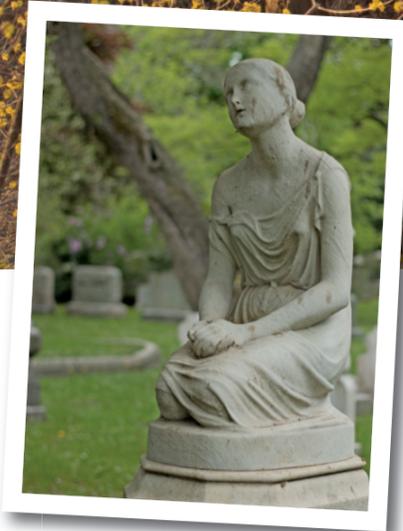
"The essence of a cemetery is to commemorate the dead. I like to think my project commemorates them in a different way, a new kind of way," the artist said.

Mount Auburn is an island of nature and solitude in one of Massachusetts' most-heavily populated areas. Much of Mighty's Earth.Sky project celebrates the 185-year-old cemetery's natural setting and the tranquility found there.

"There is a tradition in my family of thinking of cemeteries as beautiful places, and Mount Auburn is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been in," Mighty said. "It's extraordinary. You think of yourself as being in a city, then you walk through a gate and suddenly you are in 175 acres of rolling landscape."



Opposite page: photographer Roberto Mighty at work in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This page, clockwise from top: A mausoleum at Mount Auburn Cemetery; Memorial stone for former slave Peter Byus; Triste statuary. (Photos courtesy of Roberto Mighty)



Mighty, 60, brings a lifetime of varied experiences to his project. When he was younger, he built a recording studio where he produced radio commercials and radio theater. His career has also included producing TV shows and commercials, as well as directing audiobooks. Actors he worked with on the audiobooks lend their voices to his films about the cemetery.

It is one of the people interred at the cemetery who is responsible, in a way, for Mighty having his residency.

Mount Auburn named Mighty its artist in residence after receiving a \$92,000 grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Service to document and restore about 30 of its significant monuments.

One of those projects included the restoration of a monument to Amos Binney, co-founder of the Boston Society of Natural History. Binney died in 1847. His monument, carved by Thomas Crawford, is considered a national treasure. Mighty was charged with documenting the restoration. (*The Binney monument was profiled in the September 2015 issue of American Cemetery & Cremation.*)

When the work was completed, cemetery officials did not want to see Mighty leave.

"We decided that it would be great to have Roberto extend his work at the cemetery," Bree Harvey, vice president of cemetery and visitor services at Mount Auburn, said. "We wanted to give him more of a blank-slate opportunity to create his own series of videos that would encapsulate the spirit of Mount Auburn."

In August, the cemetery received an additional \$5,000 in grants, allowing Mighty to extend his work.

Mighty is enjoying his time at Mount Auburn, the first garden cemetery in the nation. Opened in 1831 with help from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, Mount Auburn was intended to address the health concerns associated with overcrowded city churchyards. Designed like a park, the cemetery includes horticultural displays, rolling hills and water features in addition to an impressive assortment of grave markers and memorials.

long program featured 10 “digital tone poems” that combined images of the landscapes with readings and recordings of ambient sounds from the cemetery, including bird calls, cricket chirps and lawn mower noise. The images were projected onto the architectural surfaces of the chapel, melding Mighty’s work with the very bones of the cemetery building.

Mighty was hoping for an immersive experience for visitors, a goal he thinks he accomplished. He plans on doing a similar, but larger, program when his residency wraps up in May 2017. The Mount Auburn project

said. “I have come face to face with a coyote. That was pretty exciting. You know you are not looking at Rover. There is a sensation of great concern.”

He recalls an encounter with an owl, where he felt the bird “was communicating with me.”

“I’m not a birder, but that is the feeling I had,” he said.

Working alone at night among nearly 100,000 headstones, Mighty does not feel spooked or afraid. He does, however, take seriously his obligation to the dead and to their loved ones who visit the cemetery.

“I am well aware when I am working that there are all kinds of ideas of where you should step or not step,” he said. “It’s not that anyone is looking over my shoulder as I work, but I am aware I am in a cemetery, and to the loved ones of the people who are buried there, it is sacred ground.” He added, “When I am working, I might see there is a spot I need to be at to get the best angle with a lens, but if it is a sensitive spot, I won’t stand there.”

Working so much in the cemetery, Mighty has developed an affinity for the people he is profiling in his project.

One of his deepest connections is with Byus, the escaped slave whose monument features a man kneeling amid his broken shackles.

After escaping from Virginia, Byus settled on Beacon Hill and became a tailor. When he died in 1867, Byus left money to finance a search for his brother, who was still a slave, and to buy his sibling’s freedom. The search was unsuccessful, and the remainder of Byus’ estate went toward his wish to support “the uplifting of the negro race,” Mighty said.

Stories such as Byus’, or those of Dagesse or Edward T. Damon, a Harvard medical student who died in 1859 while caring for smallpox patients, show “a nobility in humanity that I find breathtaking,” Mighty said.

“An escaped slave, a gay man, a deceased physician – they are all together in this one place,” he said. “We are able to find the common thread that is their humanity.”

Mount Auburn officials have let Mighty guide the project wherever his inspiration took him, Harvey said.



The beauty of Mount Auburn posed problems for Mighty, who did not want to merely duplicate the work of the hundreds of amateur and professional photographers who have already found inspiration at the cemetery.

“There are so many photographers, filmmakers and people in general with cameras who spend a lot of time taking photographs of beautiful things,” Mighty said. When he shoots something with his camera, Mighty said, he’s not as interested in capturing its beauty as he is “interested in capturing the meaning behind it.”

That effort was on display in May, when Mighty had a preliminary exhibit of his project in the cemetery’s Story Chapel. The hour-

isn’t the only thing Mighty is working on. He was recently among the 11 artists the city of Boston selected for an artist-in-residence program.

Mighty is a frequent visitor to the cemetery. He has his own key and prefers to visit in early mornings and late evenings, when he doesn’t have to worry as much about any of the cemetery’s 200,000 annual visitors straying into his frame.

But even when he is the only human walking the cemetery, Mighty knows he is not alone. The park-like setting attracts its share of wildlife, and the artist has had several late-night and early-morning encounters.

“I am well aware I have a variety of company from animals – coyotes, wild turkeys, hawks and owls,” he

Notable Names at Rest

Opening in 1831, Mount Auburn Cemetery was the first garden or rural cemetery in the United States. Over almost two centuries of existence, Mount Auburn has served as the final resting place for a host of notable people. Here are some of the people interred at Mount Auburn:

Edwin Booth (1833–1893), actor

Nathaniel Bowditch (1773–1838), founder of modern maritime navigation

William Brewster (1851–1919), ornithologist

McGeorge Bundy (1919–1996), presidential Cabinet official

Dorothea Dix (1802–1887), hospital reformer

Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), religious leader

Edward Everett (1794–1865), speaker at dedication of national cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Fannie Farmer (1857–1915), cookbook author

Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), architect

Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944), illustrator

Curt Gowdy (1919–2006), sportscaster

Winslow Homer (1836–1910), artist

Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910), author of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”

Henry Cabot Lodge (1850–1924), politician

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), poet

Bernard Malamud (1914–1986), author

Clement G. Morgan (1859–1929), founder of the NAACP

Francis Parkman (1823–1893), historian and author

B.F. Skinner (1904–1990), psychologist

In addition to graves, the cemetery also has a memorial to Col. Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, who was buried with his troops following their 1863 assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina.



© Roberto Mighty

Opposite page: A hawk perches on a monument in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Above: Flowers amongst the gravestones. (Photos courtesy of Roberto Mighty)

While Mighty is not the first artist to be inspired by Mount Auburn – the place has been the subject of paintings, poems and photography since the day it opened – this is the first time cemetery operators have taken the proactive step of commissioning a piece of artwork about the site, Harvey said.

The cemetery plans to show the work as a Web exhibit. It is also working to create a mobile app that would allow visitors to experience Mighty's work while on site.

"The bulk of our audience has a deep appreciation of this place. That is the exact audience that will find interest in Roberto's work," Harvey said. "Even casual visitors can certainly appreciate and find beauty in what Roberto has done."

Working in Mount Auburn has gotten Mighty thinking about how Americans handle death, both in comparison to other nations as well as to other periods in time. He thinks modern Americans aren't



The artist at work. (Photo courtesy of Roberto Mighty)

given the time they need to mourn over the deceased's body before it is "taken away and dealt with professionally."

If the project has changed Mighty, it has made him more appreciative of the artistic possibilities of cemeteries.

He is in no hurry to wrap up his

time at Mount Auburn. But Mighty is already looking ahead to doing similar projects in other cemeteries. He's investigated cemeteries in Japan, India and even Chernobyl in Ukraine.

"I want to do more of these. I want to spend a lot more time in a lot more cemeteries," he said. •