

At the end of life, a few items remain

by Jürg Zbinden, NZZ, July 2, 2017

Everyday things preserve the memory of the deceased. Tina Ruisinger keeps them sober, yet more impressive in her photographs.

The most important thing in life is good health. A profane realization - as profane as life and death are sometimes. From the beautiful and successful, the intelligent and the talented, and not least of all, to the ordinary person, we all must die one day. How, when and where, we do not know in advance

While the thought of one's own death is often suppressed, it is different from the memories of those we have irretrievably lost: the parents, the partner, brothers and sisters, friends or - most terribly – one's own child. In 2004 Tina Ruisinger's grandfather died when he was almost 97. Six years before, his wife had passed away, necessitating the move from a large private house to a small apartment in a retirement home. After his death, the clearing out of the his miniaturized life in the retirement home began, and what remained of the his personal belongings could be fit into in a carrier bag.

The question of "what remains?" has been the subject of the Zurich photographer Tina Ruisinger ever since. What remains, what remains to me, what remains of me?

History of the key

In 2002 Tina Ruisinger's first book appeared in German and English. The book, entitled "Faces of Photography", was also the last volume of Edition Stemmler, which reveals the history of outstanding photographers of the analogue age. A total of fifty portraits, including Gisèle Freund, Robert Frank, Lillian Bassman and a special tribute to Ted Croner, (as well as many others), with short texts and interviews, culminate in an impressive iconic gallery.

Ted Croner became Ruisinger's mentor and good friend. When the photographer, celebrated for his night pictures of New York in the forties and fifties, died in 2005, he left her his camera. But, now, it is an ordinary old key which provides the most vivid memories of her friend. The key, labeled and wrapped with tape, opened the elevator door leading up to his studio.

The story of the key is, at the same time, the key to understanding the things that Ruisinger photographed during the last ten years for her latest book project "Traces". It is a book with

pictures of objects left behind by the deceased. These objects have a greater emotional than material value for the survivors. The photographs, on the other hand, evoke even more intimate images and memory of the deceased. Like the key of Ted Croner which Tina Ruisinger presents on a simple wooden background..

"Traces" rhymes with "Faces", whereupon one can make a rhyme. Once again, there are fifty people whose loss is reflected through 77 still life photographs of their loved ones' objects. There are no faces of the departed, as the memory of the faces of the deceased belongs to those who knew them.

Faces of memory

Not one of the square format photographs is a voyeuristic view. They are almost in the tradition of the New Objectivity, where photography takes an equal position alongside painting.

The fact that survivors agreed to publish their personal memories in a book required a cautious approach. Through the death of a close friend of the photographer, who died forty years young of cancer and left two small children, contacts slowly developed with people who had experienced a similar fate.

"It would be inconceivable for me if you died before me and left me with everything"

Between the sets of photographs there are short expressions of the bereaved. They are, to a certain extent, in free space. One or another of the quotations can be linked to an image, but not all. They stand for themselves: a string of pearls on a black background, next to an arm with a tattoo. I said to him: "It would be inconceivable for me if you died before me and left me with everything." "I had a need to open the window wide. Something is happening; something is quite easy, although it is so hard."

A poetic text by Nadine Olonetzky and an essayist contribution by Petra Zudrell round off the work. Realizing such a project seems to be a matter of impossibility, for photography has to fight against a flood of guide books and criminal romances. It is thanks to Tina Ruisinger's ability and conviction that such a tabooed topic has found such acceptance.