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Life after death

William Schaff and Meredith Younger's "Bearing Witness" at 186 Carpenter

By **GREG COOK** | December 11, 2013

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RELIQUARIES Younger's 'Moloch and Artemis.'

"In our culture in general, we have all these twisted ideas of how you're supposed to deal with death," Meredith Younger said when I visited "Bearing Witness," a poignant art installation and a shrine to the dead — a friend, an aborted baby — by the Providence artist and her collaborator here, William Schaff of Warren, at 186 Carpenter (186 Carpenter St, Providence, through January 30). It's one of the best shows of the year.

The roots of the exhibition are revealed in a binder on a table near the door. Inside is a March police report from Indianapolis recounting officers called to investigate a report of 39-year-old man "found deceased inside."


"He was a musician, but he drank himself to death, sadly," Schaff says of his friend. "An incredible musician."

The binder also includes a copy of Younger's form from a Providence clinic for a "medicated abortion" last spring.

"I was supposed to go home and take these pills and flush it all away," Younger says. "So I collected the blood and thought about it.

"I feel totally comfortable in the choice," she adds. "The sadness in the piece is for me not the decision itself. The partner, the father, is somebody I really love. It's just a shame that it wasn't the right time. I already have a 14-year-old and I'm adopted, so I feel like I can talk about it from all sides."


Twin child-faced ceramic goddesses by Younger stand at the center of the gallery. They serve as reliquaries for blood from the abortion. *Moloch*



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has horns and closes her eyes as she holds up a broken sphere. A fire burns in a lamp in her pelvis. Younger says it's about "what you sacrifice to meet your own ends." To the right, *Artemis* has antlers atop her head. Her eyes are open and she holds lit candles in her hands. A green leafy plant sprouts from her belly. "Everything is made whole in her," Younger says.

Along the wall at the left is a Schaff screenprint of two skull-headed figures stabbing each other in the gut with a banner that reads, "With much wisdom comes much sorrow — the more knowledge, the more grief." Two studio desks are filled with drawings and skulls. An old typewriter sits on Younger's desk with a sheet of paper in it which reads, "What can I say without first touching the earth with my hands? — Pablo Neruda."

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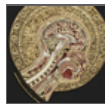
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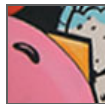
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ICONIC The shrine at the heart of the installation.

The heart of the installation is an elaborate shrine in a corner with an icon hovering at the center made from a rusty shovel that's been turned into a winged angel amidst a wreath of baby's breath. Hands reach out from behind. One offers an apple to a cardboard foal nursing from a skull-headed horse; the other fires arrows at a skeletal bird across the room. Crystals dangle from the ceiling. Rough wood planks serve as a backdrop to it all. And fake flowers bloom along the floor behind lit votive candles. The shrine combines Schaff's fire and brimstone Christian imagery, inspired by medieval and Byzantine Catholic art, with Younger's engagement with pagan spirituality.

Along the wall at right are three smaller shrines featuring tin can lanterns suspended from tree branches, dioramas (a man in the clouds, paramedics lifting a body into an ambulance near a giant dog that's become mountains) and arrangements of curious things on shelves (a threatening rattlesnake, fake flowers, a crucifix, bullets, bones, a bird wing). Tacked among all this are cards from funerals — "Eunice Schaff/February 9, 1918-August 31, 2013," "In Memory of William Judd Schaff/February 21, 1943-January 31, 2000," and so on.

Younger and Schaff both have a strong goth streak — skulls and death and graveyard flowers. Goth is a tricky style, thrillingly cool and dark, but it can also feel like just playing at notions of death.

Schaff's funeral prayer cards root the duo's intriguing images and sculptures and accumulations of fascinating things in real loss. And the struggle to make peace with those losses. Somehow Schaff and Younger also honor the love that makes the loss so damn hard. Or as Schaff says, "to find the joys that still exist even amidst the losses." There's a sense of grief, but also warmth.

Jori Ketten, who runs the gallery, has done superb matchmaking in bringing Younger and Schaff together — two top local artists combining to temper their weaknesses and achieve beyond their individual powers.

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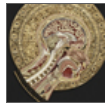
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