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The artist who tried to capture death

The video art boundary-pusher Jordan Baseman discusses his beginnings in sculpture, his controversial methods and the tragedy that lies behind his new show, Deadness.

WARNING: contains images some may find distressing

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Still life ... an image from Jordan Baseman's Deadness (2013). All photographs: Courtesy the artist and Matt's Gallery, London

Jordan Baseman pauses, his gentle voice breaking the tiniest amount – which is the sort of detail you would notice in a candid [Jordan Baseman film](#). "He died five years ago this 4 July, and I didn't see him because he was in Chicago. He had an autopsy because he suffered a sudden death. I guess because I didn't see him, I was left to wonder a lot about it."

Baseman is talking about the death of his younger brother, and how such a close

personal loss directly influenced the choice of subject matter for his latest work, Deadness – a study of embalming that opens at Matt's Gallery this month.

Baseman is an artist who deals in other people's stories. He takes them, chews them up and transforms them into something else. He is the artistic equivalent of literature's unreliable narrator: a story told by Jordan Baseman is not the story he was told, and not the story that was expected. But unlike his literary equivalent, Baseman usually provides evidence to support his retellings of other people's lives.

His chosen technique is the interview, conducted over several sittings, which he then chops and changes into a final piece of film. Many are simple, straight-to-camera talking heads, a form familiar from TV; some, like Deadness, are installed with a visual track of still images. "I would describe what I do as experimental portraiture," Baseman says. "They're all portraits, but they're really self-portraits – it's just that I'm not there."



His use of a technique normally associated with journalism raises ethical questions: how

complicit are Baseman's participants in the way their stories are used? How does he reconcile his concern for their feelings with the desire to produce compelling art?

"All the participants have seen my work prior to taking part," he says. "I'm totally up front. I think of it as creative non-fiction. They offer up a situation, then the context changes radically. The participant has got to be OK with it, because it's their life I'm hijacking for my own means. It's a mutually exploitative situation: they have a reason to participate and I want them to."

For Green Lady, recently shown at Index Gallery, Baseman presents the audio interview of a woman talking about her mother's death alongside an unconnected series of images shot on Super 16mm film.

The final film is an emotive story narrated by its subject with jarring, dispassionate clarity. Baseman's use of a collage of semi-abstract images adds to the sense of detachment; perhaps this distance is necessary for Baseman's technique to flourish.

In Deadness, Baseman counterpoints the cheery testimony of John Troyer, from Bath University's Centre for Death and Society, with a procession of snapshots of the dead photographed in their coffins. While Troyer declares that "one of the reasons early photographers could work so well with the deceased was that they didn't move", the viewer's eye is drawn to quirky preparations for the afterlife – the number of corpses wearing glasses; the grim visages of undertakers caught on camera, angels of death at a stranger's funeral; a shovel stuck in the mound of earth behind a baby lying in a casket propped up in the snow. That quirkiness soon gives way to unease: this unrelenting parade of the dead is gruelling. Baseman acquired the photographs in online auctions, a fact which heightens our sense of intrusion as viewers.



If this is ethnography, it is flawed: the work is too manufactured. But the predetermined nature of Baseman's work is what makes it interesting art, taking it beyond the realm of the observational and into the performative. Baseman says that all the participants in his films – from the two men with the failed Thornton's chocolate shop to the chroniclers of Soho's underbelly and Jump!'s Steve "Krusher" Joule – are pleased with the results. But for the audience, they prove unsettling viewing, provoking a sense of complicity. Is his art cruel?

"I think it's OK to say it's cruel," he says. "It has cruelty within it. Sometimes it's a little close to the heart of something, and that's what makes it a little cruel. Some of that is from me, some is the situation. Pointing the camera at people is a difficult thing in real life."

Baseman was born in Philadelphia in 1960, and studied fine art in his hometown and at Goldsmiths College in London. He paid his way through college in Pennsylvania working in an emergency psychiatric shelter that he describes as "Stephen King meets Ken Kesey", a place where "there were people who had murdered and people who were trying to get clean all wandering around or playing ping pong".

Despite working with video and film at college, he moved into sculpture after graduating, finding success, showing at the Saatchi Gallery with works such as Surrender (1995), an array of cherubs and human teeth, and The Cat and the Dog (1995), described in the deadpan manner of artists' labelling as "Skinned cat and dog with modelled heads".

But one day, during a residency at Camden Arts Centre, he decided he'd had enough of sculpture. "A gallerist came along and said, you know if you make 10 of them I can sell

them all. And I was generally not having a good time, so I stopped. I woke up and thought: I'm not doing this any more. I'll make films."

Since Green Lady, Baseman has made [Tokyo = Fukushima](#), which received its British premiere at Index, Deadness, and [The Last Walk](#), a tremendous shaggy dog/self-immolation story narrated by the artist [Stuart Brisley](#). But now, Baseman says, he is done with death. "I'm stopping that now. I'm deathed out. It's depressing."

From death he's moving into crime, and is currently looking for interviewees with experience of crime. Baseman finds his participants through a variety of routes, from chance encounters to introductions to placing adverts in local newspapers and magazines.

And what do the adverts say?

"Got a story to tell? Call Jordan."

- Deadness is at [Matt's Gallery](#), London, from 29 May to 21 July.

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