



Death left as a friend

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This report explores the author's use of puppetry to confront their fears and thoughts on death. Through the creation of three puppets - *Marcus, Mack* and *Paddy* - the author seeks to face its doubts and befriend them.

Drawing from literature and personal experiences, the report discusses the challenges of puppetry and its relation to the textile field, including the relationship between the maker and puppet, nuances of performance, and therapeutic aspects. The project culminated in a live performance, paving the way for future explorations of mortality and existentialism.

Keywords: puppetry, puppets, performance, death, textile, textile art.

“Puppets always have to try to be alive, [. . .] An actor struggles to die on stage but a puppet has to struggle to live.” (TED, 2011, 02.19).

One: the Puppet

A four armed pink man screams silently reaching as the love he desperately wants keeps falling away from him; a knitted man smokes and drinks the day away waiting for a train that will never hit him; gnarled wooden arms and fingers extrude from a floating plastic guard dog that shelters the man beneath it.

All my life I have been intrigued by storytelling. I have spent years making worlds and creatures, their lives starting on paper or canvas but since I started my art education I have let them take a step further and come to life. The three creatures described above are some examples of my efforts to bring the world of my imagination into this one; *Fredrik*, *Jago* and *Rolf* are all puppets made to help me in different ways. *Rolf* was my first, barely moving but creating a safe space to hide in. *Jago* was the first put to film, he guided me through a tough time and to de-escalate. *Fredrik* was the first to help others understand me, he showed what I could not tell.

Puppetry as a storytelling device dates back at least to the 5th century BCE in Greece and can be found all over the world (Speaight, 1999). It is an incredible language and it communicates with us almost as well as other people, having the potential of evoking similar responses and emotional reactions as any other type of performative art (Allain & Harvie, 2006. p.198). Fettig (1996/1997) puts it well saying;

Puppet theatre communicates not only with words and plot but often through little gestures, a silence, the use of light, the death and resurrection of a sculpted figure or the manipulation of space. Puppet theatre has its own language, its own dramatic rules and the more I get to know them, the more I prefer to let myself be surprised. (p11)

When I make my puppets I imagine what the thing growing in my hands is. What will its stiff hands gesture when I move it? What emotions will it show with its face? How will its body speak the words I can't say? I work with my hands and simple tools to sew, cut, paint, glue, pull and bind them together. This close and intimate workstyle connects me with them and through this intimacy is born a connection and a shared personality between us. They are my children, siblings, friends and part of me.



Fredrik and Adam, BA Exam 2022

My art is based on stories, telling them, reading them, watching them and acting them out. The acting most often comes with a tinge of fear, being the centre of attention makes me all nervous and sweaty but it also excites me and gives me such a rush of adrenaline and joy.

My slowly growing family of creatures come to life for many different things, some have a purpose from the beginning and a set path; their theme is known before they are born. But some are made with no thoughts and in the making they begin to show that they have their own story to tell or they rebel against what I thought they would be.

I use my puppets to tell you what I can't put into words, things I have a hard time telling myself. They help me talk about existential questions with comfort and safety.

Acting with them distracts me from feeling watched or judged as much as when it is just me, they are the focus, they help me relax and breathe. They ease the social situation and make light of it. My puppets are more natural comedians and actors than I have ever been. Currently the live stage still scares me, but with every new face it's less frightening, with every new body I feel them tugging on my wrist telling me; *it's okay, we are here with you, let them see you too.*



Two: the Maker and the Act

I mentioned that my puppets are like a family to me and that is true almost to a possessive degree. In previous projects when I have needed assistance to move them or have given them to others to act with I can feel jealous and judgmental. *That's not how my Fredrik would move, this is not what he would do!*

The close kinship I create while making them is what I see as my biggest strength, but also as a near crippling weakness in certain situations. Assuming just because I made them that I control them sounds like the words of an overbearing parent. I need to let them grow their own personalities and let them be changed by the person holding the reins. It is not a different *Fredrik* I see, it's just a different part of him, another side of his personality I did not know yet. In this project I know that I will require other people to help me and at the time of writing this I have four people lined up to bring my new collection of friends to life.

Acting with puppets can be a very strange challenge as I have noticed myself and with my helpers, what do we give to the performance outside of movement? While at a showing of the puppetshow *Oxytocin* that premiered at Backa Teatern in Gothenburg, October 18th 2023; I was happily surprised. Since my start with puppetry I have received the question of how much of the actor behind the puppet can be seen? I have always felt that the presence of the puppeteer is inescapable unless there is some elaborate construction or viewpoint to hide them. Luckily watching *Oxytocin* was the reassurance I needed.



Oxytocin press picture, October 2023

The puppeteer is in full view at all times, you see their hands moving along the arms, legs and heads of the puppets, grasping onto small grips or putting their hand over the puppets to help it hold something. At no point was I taken out of the performance by this, the puppeteers' focus was at all times on the thing in front of them, always looking where the puppet would look or down to make sure movements went as planned. I looked away at times to see how the actor behind was emoting and always you saw them mirror the expression of their puppet.

Smiles, scowles and tears were plain on the actors faces, while the puppet of course had the locked facade of a made object. But the emotions still shone through as clearly as with the actor behind. The puppets' movements steal the focus, even if it's a simple construction we are drawn towards the moving figure and the puppet naturally becomes the actor.

I will not hide behind my puppets worried what people will think of me, I won't need to, you won't be looking at me at all.



Rehearsal for examshow, February 2024

Three: Death and Finality

Endings always come to me with the bittersweet feeling of wanting more. At the end of my grandmother's life I had a similar feeling; I should have gone to the hospital and said goodbye, I should have visited her more, I wish she could see my art now, what if we had one last trip to the stores together, one more ice cream on the balcony. At her funeral I was a weeping wreck, holding it together just enough in moments to help my mother with the funeral lunch. The situation left me raw and scared, no matter how peaceful a passing and no matter the thoughts of it "being her time" and "she's not in pain anymore" I was still terrified of the looming shadow of mortality that appeared with her coffin.

Death has always scared and fascinated me, when I was younger this fear was alleviated some by my faith and the thought of the afterlife. Surely things can't just end as quickly and as simply as turning off a light. Death can be cruel or kind, timely or sudden. We can't escape it however we try to fight it. Like Thor wrestling with Elli, the personification of old age, we all fall to our knees eventually (Gaiman, 2017, p.153.) As time passed and age and perceived wisdom took the place of the faith of my youth, belief became something to be mocked and pointed at; full of flaws and contradictions. In Sweden's predominantly atheistic society death is just an end, we will just rot and disappear. Unsurprisingly this didn't fill me with confidence but bitterness, anxiety and fear. After the funeral things started to change, discussions around death felt as lacklustre and final as the act of dying; It just happens, it's a part of life. I couldn't just let that lie, anxiety and dread started to fill me and the cocksure attitude of early adulthood made way for looming concerns about mortality.

I have used my puppets to help me communicate and confront subjects I have had difficulty speaking about. In this project it is no different. My fear of death and the ever approaching end of consciousness is a broad subject to tackle, I have looked mostly to poetry in the years since I started to rediscover a fleeting sense of faith and a want for/doubt in the hereafter. A very well known example of poetry on the subjects of love, loss and grief is Edgar Allen Poe.

Poe (2016) has written several poems about death; *Mask of the Red Death*, *Annabel Lee* and *The Raven* just to name a few. His works hang over me like his signature bird as the most influential artist for the project. In his gothic and macabre literature I find a sense of calm, he took his pain and his grief and channelled it into truly beautiful works but it's hard to say if he ever found a true sense of relief or contentment through it.



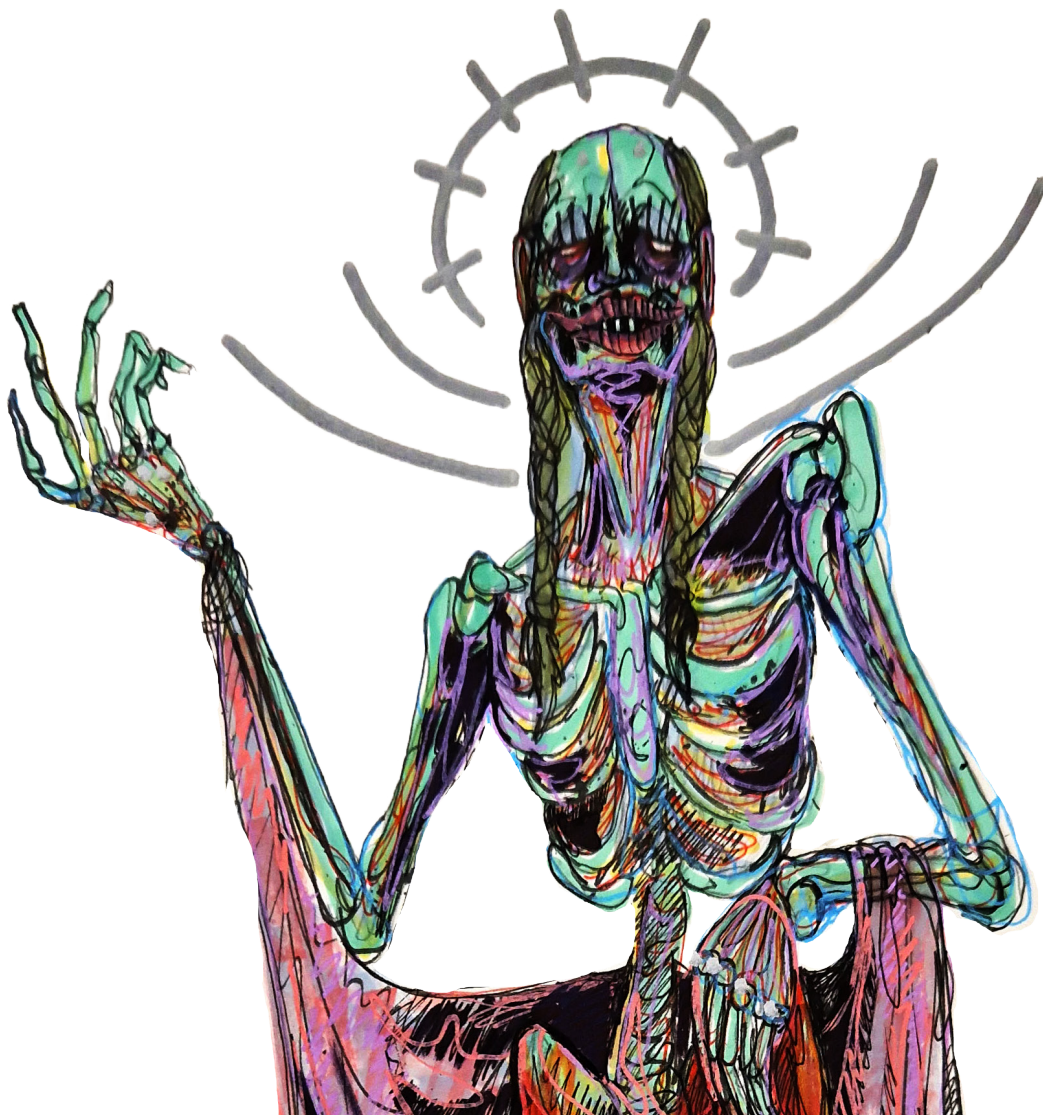
Masque of the Red Death -
Edgar Allan Poe

A much more personal example is what I call my “comfort poems”; two short recordings of poetry that help me sleep, focus and bring me out of panic attacks.

Both of these are heavily centred around the subject of someone who has passed on, in *If tomorrow starts without me* (Mandra Kept, 2019) we can hear the soothing tones of Tom O’Bedlams voice as he reads out the poem sometimes attributed to David M Romano. The poem comes from the perspective of the recently passed, wishing that the mourner would not cry at its graveside but understanding the pain of a loved one’s loss. Even so the person passed on reminds them that they are always there, never far away from their heart.

The poem *Do not Stand at my Grave and Weep* (Illneas, 2019), sometimes attributed to Mary Elizabeth Frye, comes from a similar perspective; the dead reassures the mourner that they are all around them now, they are not dead, just part of a bigger whole. In these I find an old sense of surety I once held so close with my faith, the knowledge that the ones we lose are never really gone. This belief is still there for me because as long as we remember someone they are alive within us. But still this does not ease my fear.

This leads me into my drive for this work, to find and confront death in my life through puppetry and performance. Through these living and dead sculptures perform the meetings I am most afraid of; to give myself a grim reaper that might meet and comfort me at the end. To figure out how I make puppets come alive while portraying death?



Four: Coming alive

Part of the charm of working with hand sewing is the time it takes, most of my time working on this project has been just sewing centimeter by centimeter while sitting at my desk, listening to music or watching films on my phone. Most of all I've just been thinking to myself; this project has not become what I thought it would be. That's not to say that I am unhappy or disappointed in what I've done, from the moment I started to build the frames of the puppets I was in love with them. They are the most ambitious puppets I have ever made.

But how is it textile art? How do I relate to my chosen educational field?
This line of questioning is mostly one I have avoided for the last few years or answered simply; my puppets are made of fabric; ergo, they are textile works. Couldn't it be that simple? I use the methods and the materials more as frameworks for my creatures and my stories, as that is what my work is about; telling a story.
One textile artist that I look to often is Kristina Skantze (*Kristina Skantze*, n.d.), her way of letting her sculptures grow to find their own character while also taking the space around them as they are made. Similarly, when I sculpt the characters through textile and other materials it gives me that extra time to think and realize who they are and what they want to be. It will continue to be an important part of my process going forward, even though I still might have a hard time calling myself a textile artist.



The Family, 2022 (Kristina Skantze n.d.)



Work in progress - joints and frames



Work in progress - foam and structure

In puppetry there is a thing often referred to as sympathetic movement (Adam Savage's Tested, 2016, 02.02), it emphasizes the importance of the subconscious emotional triggers of the puppet. We all have these things we don't fully control that add a relatability and complements our movement and moves us away from the uncanny valley. Things like hair, clothes and even our breathing that makes small uncontrolled movements that shows that we are *alive*.

When you control a puppet some of these things can come naturally, your breathing can move its body in tandem or the small twitches and stretchings of your hand make the puppet look like it is shifting for comfort, but not all of these things need to be planned or acted out. I wanted to add details not only for the importance of sympathetic movement but also to add a hint of their character. For the largest of the puppets, *Mack*, that movement and appearance is very heavily inspired by the *Masque of the Red Death's* (Poe, 2016.) titular character of the *Red Death*.

The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. [. . .] His vesture was dabbled in blood — and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror. (p327)

Both *Mack* and *Paddy* are meant to embody different reminders of death that the audience and *Marcus* meet throughout the performance, in *Mack* that embodiment is more obvious. He is tall, skeletal and clad in a tattered and ragged outfit; his long skirt dragging behind him gives him a spectral appearance. Even though he is reminiscent of a classic grim reaper I still wanted him to be able to be playful and sassy. In addition to Poe's poem he took inspiration from Drag Queens and their culture to fully give him life, making him a magenta toned specter that can be both threatening and ridiculous in the best ways.

Paddy was my want of a happier end. Instead of being ferried off by a hooded shadow, what if you felt a paw at the end of your bed? His appearance and his acting was based on the *Padfoot*, an imposing big black hound, that could be heard and sometimes seen walking outside the doors of dying persons (Encyclopedia Mythica, 2007). Like *Mack* he was not only meant to be a terrifying psychopomp but also a comfort, thus he got a more colorful houndlike appearance. His ears were made to move to signal his mood and his tail hangs loose to give more emotion to when he shakes. He was a part of the night sky that walked down to greet and eventually comfort the newly departed.



Work in progress - sewing and detailing

Marcus was somewhat simple, he is me. In the beginning he was just some unnamed dying man, but as the puppets came together he naturally became my surrogate in the performances and as such copied my appearance. But he took steps to become his own. While painting the fabric I ended up with a more surreal color by accident, making him less lifelike and more of his own person. Even though he portrayed me he still wanted to be his own person. To connect him more with the theme of death he also got my grandfather's name. Someone I miss very much even though I can't remember him, Marcus.

Though these three were made for just one performance they have all become such versatile creatures in my mind and I can't wait to see them act together again or in new plays and performances.



Work in progress - sewing and detailing



Work in progress - painting



Mack



Paddy



Marcus

Five: Two Candles and a Bed

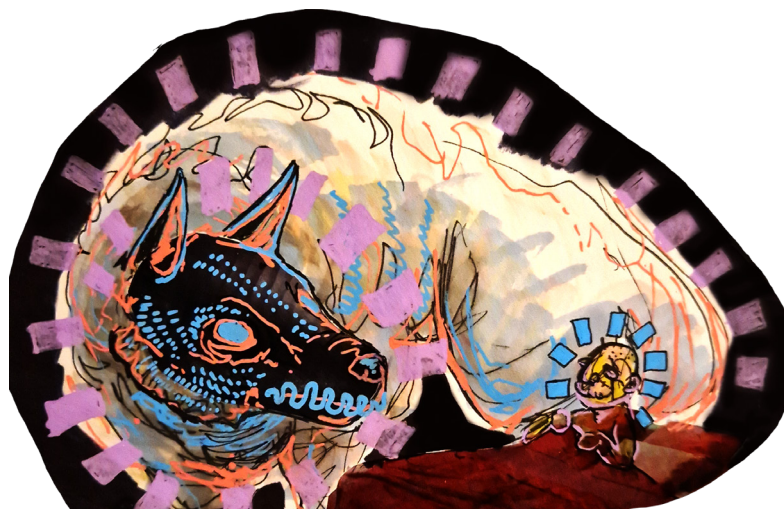
“I think a wise man thinks of death as a friend if that death comes later [...] rather than on the first day.” (Channel 4 News, 2013, 03.44).

At the start of this project I never thought it would become a live performance, the idea was to make three or four puppets that I would perform with each alone and record for documentation and examination. *Mack* and I would dance until I fell down, *Paddy* would greet me at my bedside in my last moments and *Marcus* was supposed to walk between graveyards while carrying his own casket.

As the project went along it became harder to separate them into their own field, they were all based on ideas and worries I had on death but alone they became less performative and more of just a spectacle. I would like to say that one day I just woke up with the idea to bring their stories together, or that the words all of my tutors that have been pushing me since my bachelors education to perform finally seeped in but it just happened naturally. Their stories needed each other, they would give a broader context to the work and lift each other up to be the best they could be, they wanted to be together.

Combining all of their stories brought the additional challenge of finding actors and actually writing a play, unlike the work for the BA exam where I worked more with intuition and improvisation for their performances this project carried more weight.

The struggles I have accepting death as a part of life are very connected to the loss of my grandparents as mentioned earlier, and I wanted the audience to feel that weight in the story of the performance, but I am not a writer in that regard. I enjoy writing short stories and making adventures for roleplaying games and the like, but I have never put that on stage and that step was worrying. But as I sat down to figure it out it flowed out naturally. Just a few days before I had gotten the support of a few friends to help puppeteer and perform with me, and when I showed them the then half finished puppets and talked about the ideas I had the pieces just started falling into place. After about four hours of writing I had a script to work out from and for most of the rehearsals and the two shows it stayed mostly the same. A few changes to make dialogue more natural and stage direction easier but all in all the story was already formed. I again took inspiration from the myths and poems that I had read. Gongs follow certain lines of dialogue like the bell chimes remind the partygoers of their mortality in *Masque of the Red Death* (Poe, 2016.) and *Paddy's* approach is announced by howls and heavy steps like the padfoot (Encyclopedia Mythica, 2007). But most of the dialogue that *Marcus* speaks in the show is just me openly monologuing to the audience about my thoughts on death. The script took on a more therapeutic and self-referential role than anticipated and for being the first I have ever written I am satisfied with my effort.



What I thought would be an even bigger struggle was the rehearsals and the acting. I expressed my fear for the stage earlier and all of a sudden the project had gone from acting alone with the puppet in front of a camera to performing live and renting a stage at Teater Jaguar here in Gothenburg. The turn was so sudden but subtle that I didn't even realize how nervous I was until I went to check out the location and signed the contract. At that time me and my actors had already rehearsed together for about a month and I spent all the remaining time working away trying to finish the puppets enough for the show. Even as I made posters and social media posts to advertise the show and to get enough tickets sold to break even, I didn't fear the stage as much as instead I was filled with nervous excitement to see everything come together. I think what also brought on this calm was the support of my actors, there were never any dour faces or angry words even as the day for our show crept closer and closer. They gave critiques on how certain scenes should feel, how actions could be shifted, making sure my dialogue was heard and gave their readings and projections of the puppets personalities their own life. And all the way through they were kind, considerate and uplifting of my ideas and made sure that my message and my story shone through. I could not have done this without them and frankly I would not wish to have done it any other way, even when I was shaking on stage and had to swallow my nerves I felt sure of myself and what I had made because they were next to me.

Thank you Lu, Josef and Amanda, you made my story come to life.



Pictures from the performance
-video linked before reference list-

Six: What we are to one another

After the show I felt almost empty, not only from pushing myself to perform and standing on stage for the first time in 20 years, but from the wave of effort required to get all the different parts together. This project is not just something that has been brewing in me since last spring but a culmination of seven years of continuous art education.

With the performance only spanning two shows on one day at the end of March I still had things to do, there were still conclusions to come to and a presentation to hold. But now after all that has come and gone too I still feel empty, but not in an entirely bad way.

This is the end of my education, the death of my institutional schooling if you will, and I feel an emptiness I cannot describe in any other way than loss. I never expected to end up here, doing this, but somehow it's fitting that I first went down the artist path because of therapy and I end up working with a self therapeutic project. I cannot say if I have answered all my questions about death, the puppets did give the story life and death was confronted, but it left more as an acquaintance than a friend.

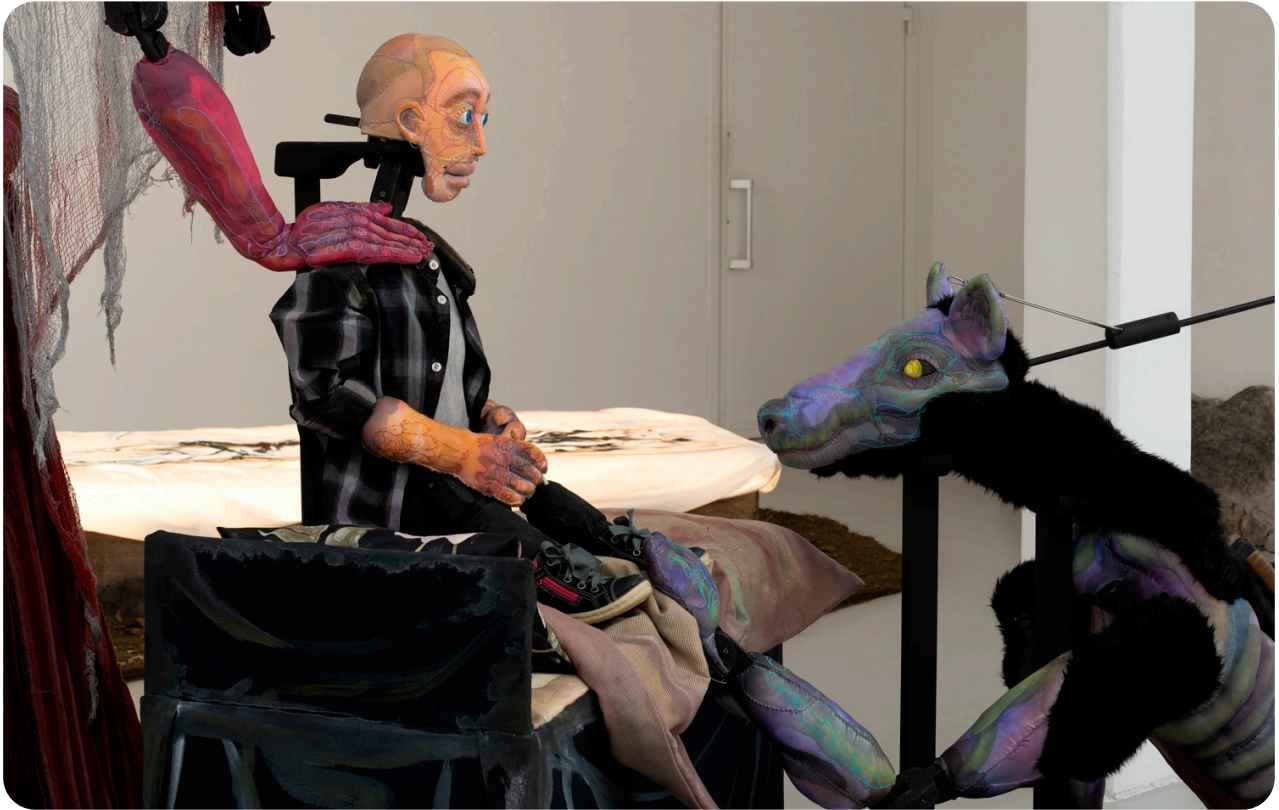
What has become clear through this process though is my desire to continue examining my relationship with death, I would like to bring in others perspectives on it to further try to discover what role it has right now. In this life it's impossible to avoid death, it's in newspapers, in our phones and televisions, in our daily life. Is there even a comfort to find in the subject? I want to take my handmade family with me to further explore this and other morbid subjects, I am like Edgar still a gothic at heart.

My biggest revelation though is that even though it scares me a bit, I've found that I like to be seen. My puppets and the love I have for puppetry have finally brought me out of my shell and have started to make me the storyteller I've always wanted to be.

Thank you to Marcus, Mack and Paddy. Welcome to the family, welcome home.



Puppets at exhibit,
Galleri Thomassen 4-12 May 2024 - photo by David Eng



Puppets at exhibit,
Galleri Thomassen 4-12 May 2024 - photo by David Eng



Marcus and me

Performance: *Death left as a Friend*

<https://youtu.be/SikcXZqX36E?si=6u7bY7vTg0vJHd32>



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