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Howard Fried: The Decomposition Of My Mother's Wardrobe at The Box

Paris is often referred to as the City of Light, but at the end of the nineteenth century, it was also the entertainment capital of the world. The city offered boulevard culture, museum exhibitions, Lumière Brothers film screenings, and over-the-top panorama displays; yet amidst all the multi-sensory and crowd-pleasing attractions, one popular Fin-de-Siècle spectacle remains shockingly unique: public visits to the city morgue.



Howard Fried. *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the Artist and The Box Gallery. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

Better than a wax museum, the Paris Morgue displayed "real" dead bodies, made safe for viewing consumption by the anonymity of the corpses on display, along with the physical mediation of a large glass window. Presenting curious viewers with a direct, yet staged, representation of death, streams of eager spectators—up to 40,000 in a single day—lined up to pass before its windows.

Currently on display at [The Box](#) in Los Angeles (the new entertainment capital of the world), [Howard Fried's](#) new work, *The Decomposition Of My Mother's Wardrobe* (2014-2015), also bestows a peculiar kind of mediated confrontation with death. To be clear, those suffering from an acute morbid curiosity would be better served rubbernecking the next



freeway accident, but while any gruesome aspects of death are thankfully absent, the presence of death, manifested through absence, is laid bare.



Howard Fried. *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the Artist and The Box Gallery. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

Exhibited behind a viewing glass in a small room at The Box, approximately 260 articles of clothing, culled from the wardrobe of the artist's late mother, are neatly arranged according to garment type. Overcoats, sweaters, party dresses, high heels, fuzzy slippers, and purses make up a colorful assortment of polyester, polka dots, florals, and knits. All are hung on industrial clothing racks, the kind that might be used in a coat-check space. Each article is fastidiously labeled with a numerical tag, the clothing hung like specimens awaiting testing in a forensic lab. There is a cold detachment in this presentation, almost a feeling of looking into a police line-up or execution chamber.

Projections of personality are common in a consumer-driven culture, and it's difficult to avoid the trap of inserting a type of person into the displayed wardrobe. Of course, for the artist, these garments have a different kind of significance, one of time and memory. For the rest of us, there remains a reminder of how clothing is intimately involved in life. For now, the glass partition exaggerates the difference in relationships, between the artist's position of connectedness to the garments, and the viewer's physical and experiential separation. However, à la Howard Fried, all of this is about to change.



Howard Fried. *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the Artist and The Box Gallery. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

A sign-up sheet was available at the exhibition opening for the next stage of *The Decomposition Of My Mother's Wardrobe*. A questionnaire asking the volunteers' eye color, car color, and general preferences in colors and patterns will be sent out, and answers will be processed by an algorithm which will offer a selection of "online shopping style" images of items in the wardrobe; participants will be invited to choose one. Each item thus becomes a unique artwork, with a label listing the artist's mother's name, Howard Fried's signature, and the name and date of the piece. After the individual artworks are distributed, a "celebratory event" will be announced, and participants will arrive wearing their selected articles of clothing.

The final caveat is that each participant must also take several pictures for the artist. According to the artist statement, instructions include, "Take a picture out of a window in a room adjacent to the room where the garment is usually kept... or take a picture of your least favorite piece of furniture in that room farthest from the garment." The resulting images, along with other collected information gathered from the process of the project, will then be used to construct yet another algorithm, that will be used to determine a new series of compositions.



Howard Fried. *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the Artist and The Box Gallery. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

While some might recoil at the thought of distributing their own deceased family member's belongings, underlying the whole project is an (admittedly twisted) sense of tenderness, love, and remembrance. A list of names now clamors to take part in the decomposition process, transforming the wardrobe from a heap of unwanted clothing into coveted artworks.

For over four decades, Fried has had a significant influence on the production of conceptual art in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. His works are routed through calculated processes and systems that layer and complicate ideas related to psychology, decision-making, conflict, control, cognition, and the avant-garde. Decomposition can be understood as a state of rotting or decay, but also a process of un-composing. In visual art or music, composition refers to the structure of a piece, the arrangement of elements. It's the formula—the device—to transmit meaning. Fried has set up a score, but like a composer that can't control a musician's interpretation, a certain element of chance enters into the work by adding participants. Carefully orchestrated yet unpredictable, the project has no predetermined solution, only possible actions.

Howard Fried: *The Decomposition Of My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014-15, is on view at The Box in Los Angeles through January 10, 2015.

