

What evolved into this thesis started over a year ago as a research project. I was interested in green burial, a modern grassroots movement to bury people in a more environmentally friendly way, far more environmentally friendly than conventional burial or cremation. After understanding more about the American funeral industry and our society's culture of death and dying, I became more interested in other sites of intervention- the most important being death care. Death care can be defined as the physical and emotional care given to a dying person, as well as the care after they're dead such (as preparing the body for burial.) Death care has radically changed in the last 150 years from family- and community- based to funeral home- and hospital- based. This has influenced our culture of death, and at this point we see life and death as opposites, erasing the richness and value that exists in the space between life and death. Another node of research worth mentioning is the influence of Christian tradition on American funeral norms. This makes practicing other religious traditions more difficult, especially for Jewish and Muslim funerals.

Over the course of the research, I was trying to tie up all of these threads- green burial, death care, and religious traditions. But, intervening in human death care and funeral rituals seemed difficult because these conventions are sensitive and slow-moving. I began to notice that people kept telling me about their pets dying. Eventually, I got the hint that people were having very different experiences with their pets' death and dying than with their human family members. In many ways, the death care practised on pets is more akin to the family- and community-based death care practised on humans over a century ago. Pets die at home, and oftentimes are buried in the yard in some homemade coffin or shroud. Oftentimes, this was essentially a 'green' burial. Moreover, there are generally fewer already established conventions around pet death and funerals. There is a budding pet cremation market, though, which suggests that consumers are more and more interested in spending more on their pets' dead care.

The project shifted from thinking about human coffins to thinking about pet coffins. Pet death acts as a surrogate for human death experiences, and I wanted to take advantage of the death care already being practised on pets to normalize this behavior with a coffin product. Because there are few established conventions with pet deaths, there is less fric-

tion introducing novel and seemingly provocative death care experiences. The long-term goal is to reintroduce this same death care to humans with a human coffin.

Based on the research, the thesis became about product design and entrepreneurship. I have a new prototype of a pet coffin to present to you today. It's design is simple and it is completely biodegradable, making it compatible with green burial and attractive to Christian, Jewish and Muslim consumers because it follows these religions' human burial traditions. Most notably, it is designed to require the pet owner to 'close' the coffin by tying the quilt top to the wooden base. This action is an act of death care, and meant to bring the person closer to their dead.

I'd also like to bring in some more sculptural work around death that I've been working on since the pandemic hit. I have found it really useful in challenging the uniformity imposed on death practices and coffin design by the funeral home industry. Most death products seem to be designed with white, middle class straight consumers in mind. Death is a universal experience but very different for different people. With the Shroud of Bill T. Jones piece, I wanted to connect with, think with his distinct relationship with death influenced by his blackness and queerness, based on his essay "Last Night on Earth" in conjunction with Christina Sharpe's *The Wake*. The Shroud currently exists as a pastel drawing, a medium that is inherently fuzzy and atmospheric. I think that pastel introduces a level of abstraction that makes a more subtle and open statement. In this way, it is more of a memorial- something that touches on the experience but that invites the viewer to bring their own memories and thoughts to the piece. As a white artist my understanding of Bill T. Jones' experience with death is limited, and thus, I think it is much better to create a memorial. Thus far, there is not a direct connection or outcome from this sculptural work on the product design yet. But, it has definitely pushed my practice and made me rethink the world I am constructing.