

Daylight rubbery: the cemetery stalker who turns celebrity gravestones into art

Joanna Moorhead

Mon 13 Feb
2023 03.00 EST



'I talk to the dead person while I'm working, tell them what I'm doing' ... Scott Covert, who currently has his first British show. Photograph: Scott Covert

Scott Covert isn't where he should be for our interview. "He's probably in a graveyard somewhere," sighs his PR. Cemeteries, after all, are this artist's stomping ground. Covert makes work out of tombstones.

When he shows up, we talk about the last graveyard he visited: Edgwarebury in Edgware, London. Its most famous resident is the singer Amy Winehouse, who died in 2011 aged 27. Her gravestone, like many Covert goes to see, was festooned with flowers left by well-wishers. Covert did what he always does: he took out a piece of canvas and an oil stick, then made a rubbing of the words on the stone. The previous day, he had visited Bunhill Fields in Islington, making a rubbing of William Blake's tombstone on the same canvas. "They're both poets," he says. "I'm going to put them side by side."

This is Covert's art: he travels the world, especially his native US, in search of the graves of the famous and infamous, the great and the notorious. There's a Warholian feel to his oeuvre: he likes to say it's pop art meets abstract expressionism. Covert, who has been plying his craft for more than 35 years, is in Britain for the first-ever show of his work here. Entitled *C'est La Vie*, the show is at Studio Voltaire in London, its gallery walls lined with individual grave rubbings arranged to resemble a vast mausoleum. And what a collection of people are remembered here: Bette Davis, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlton Heston, Humphrey Bogart, Max Factor, Farrah Fawcett, Patsy Cline. Everywhere you look, there's another big name recalling another big life.



A Warholian feel ...Covert's rubbing of James Dean's gravestone. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Sometimes, as with this selection, Covert creates a single name on one piece. Other times, and most interestingly, he juxtaposes names on the same canvas. With Winehouse and Blake, he's bringing people together in death who he thinks might have liked to meet. Other times, he's motivated by a sense of irony: Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, executed in 1953 after being convicted of spying for the Soviet Union, are placed alongside Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Conservative publisher Andrew Breitbart, meanwhile, shares a canvas with Gianni Versace's murderer Andrew Cunanan.

Covert, 68, grew up one of four kids in a Catholic family – his brother is a priest – in New Jersey. He dates his fascination with death to when he was eight and at his grandfather's funeral. He can still remember how the body looked, lying in a dark brown casket, wearing a navy blue suit. After that, Covert decided he wanted to be a mortician. "But instead," he says, "I became a wild child in New York. It wasn't easy growing up gay in New Jersey: I moved to New York in 1973 and I went dancing every night and I made friends."

Although Covert studied art a bit, mostly he focused on what he thought he wanted to do: acting. But playing parts brought an uncomfortable realisation: he hated it, hated being looked at, hated being the centre of attention, hated working with other people. Instead, he bought some human skulls from a pharmaceutical company, then painted and gold-leafed them. Death, by now, was closing in: this was the 1980s and Aids was at full pelt. "My friends were dying around me," he says. "I'd wake up every morning and examine my body for the first signs of Kaposi's sarcoma."

In 1985, he visited the grave of one of his heroes, Florence Ballard, a founding member of the Supremes. "I've always loved the Supremes," he says. "I'd sing along. My brush was the microphone. Florence was the tragic one: kicked out of the group, alcoholic, dead at 32." He took a rubbing of the words on her gravestone, and when he showed it to his friend, the actor Cookie Mueller, she said: "Quit acting, hun. This is what you should do." His life since, he says, has been a tribute to Ballard: "I want her to know she was loved." His Instagram account is called The Dead Supreme.



"Death Makes Living More Interesting"

These days Covert can do his research online, but in the early days it was more complicated. "I'd spend days in the New York Public Library, going through obituaries and finding out where people had been buried. Then I'd call the funeral home, tell them I was Liza Minnelli's assistant – 'That's assistant with a Z!' – and explain that Liza wanted to visit the grave, and could they tell me where it was?"

But if the internet has been a huge help, another trend has been a disaster. "It breaks my heart when I hear someone has been cremated and their ashes scattered," he says. Paul Newman, his favourite actor, was one, Janis Joplin another. And then there was the news that the Paris graveyard where Oscar Wilde lies had decided to cover his stone with a transparent barrier, because so many fans were kissing it. "I felt as if he'd died all over again."

Covert always records the name and the dates on a gravestone, occasionally finding something else to include. Sometimes, it's religious: US actor Barbara La Marr's grave says, "With God in the Joy and Beauty of Youth", while Jayne Mansfield's notes, "We Live to Love You More Each Day." Andy Gibb's uses one of his song titles ("An Everlasting Love") as do those of Frank Sinatra ("The Best Is Yet to Come") and Sonny Bono ("And The Beat Goes On"). Meanwhile, Florence Lawrence, who died in 1938, is immortalised as "The First Movie Star".

On a more lighthearted note, while tracking down another grave, Covert came across the words "I Told You I Was Sick" on the stone of BP Roberts, who died in 1979. "Roberts wasn't a celebrity and other people have this on their stone," he says. "But I believe this was the first time those words were used on a monument."

Like many who choose to work around death, Covert is clearly someone who enjoys life, but isn't afraid of death: "It makes living more interesting." Now that he is in Europe, he's making all sorts of plans: he wants to go to Morocco for novelist Jean Genet, and can't wait to get to Switzerland for artist Paul Klee. Before that, however, he is heading for Derek Jarman's grave in Kent and is planning to go to Paris but he doesn't want me to share whose grave he'll be seeking, as sometimes the authorities try to stop him. That happened at the Winehouse grave.



Morbid fascination ... the rubbing from writer Edgar Allan Poe's grave. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

"Someone who worked there came over and said: 'Do you have permission?' He said: 'It's disrespectful.' But I'm not hurting anything. I always leave the grave tidier than when I arrived. And while I'm working I talk to the dead person. I tell them what I'm doing." Often, he says, the only way to work is as speedily and as surreptitiously as possible, in case he is asked to leave.

The farthest Covert has travelled in search of a gravestone was Cairo for the Shah of Iran, Moscow for Khrushchev and a tiny village in Switzerland for Richard Burton. His favourite cemetery is Woodlawn in the Bronx. Full of impressive sculptures and huge monuments, it's the final resting place of Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin and Miles Davis.

He knows where he'll end up: a cemetery by Lake Michigan, where his family has a plot. And if anyone wants to make a rubbing, he says, they can go right ahead. "I'll definitely have something rubbable on my stone."