



A selection of eerie salt-process prints taken in the Natural History Museum by photographer Alexandra Murphy for her project *Specere II: Fixing the Shadows*

DEATH BECOMES HER

Society postgraduate bursary recipient Alexandra Murphy explains her salt prints, and museums' and photography's morbid inclinations

For seven months Alexandra Murphy, who was last year's recipient of the Society's postgraduate bursary, spent the small hours lurking around the Natural History Museum in London. She was photographing some of the specimens on display, before the institution opened its doors to the public, while contemplating the biggest subject of them all – death.

This escapade is a suitably Gothic one, considering Murphy's interests. She is in the middle of a practice-led doctoral thesis exploring the relationship between museums and photography, both of which are 19th-century inventions. What is more, claims Murphy, both have a shared inclination to preserve things, whether objects or images, and thus to 'defy death'.

'Throughout all my research projects, I explore this relationship between photography and display, and what remains consistently evident is photography's metaphorical links with death,' Murphy explains.

What is more, the images, which Murphy shot on a Nikon D800, are converted into a digital negative and then printed using a salt process. Invented by Society founding member Henry Fox

Talbot, the salt process was the dominant method for printing from the 1830s to the 1860s.

'I used the salt process because it is a very fragile one,' she says. 'There are lots of mistakes that can be made in the process when trying to fix the image, to preserve it from demise, and I was interested in that precariousness.'

The final prints, which make up a project entitled

Specere II: Fixing the Shadows, will form a photobook and exhibition, both of which she aims to unveil next year.

Meanwhile, Murphy is halfway through her PhD and will continue to explore the relationship between museums, photography and death.

'I've started exploring other museums, focusing more on the exhibition spaces rather than the specimens themselves,' she says. 'I am photographing the museum's public and private areas, sometimes capturing visitors in the shots, as it is important to recognise how the architectural space is designed with the public gaze and private study in mind.'

PROJECT FUNDING
To find out more about the Society's bursaries visit rps.org/learning/project-funding

