

# Works from the *Dead Inside* Series

ALI CHERRI

## **DEAD INSIDE: BEHIND THE LIVING FORM**

*Basit Kareem Iqbal and Rajbir Singh Judge*

Against a white background, watercolor images of the dead. They lie in repose with their faces turned away. Fish, foxes, fowl—some lie askance, their legs or wings akimbo, as though they were fleeing or flying before they fell. Others were evidently caught: their legs bound, their bodies tagged, perhaps stuffed. All these bodies are centered against the same blank screen, absent a setting or location. Scanning this set of figures stripped of context or plot, you remark upon the varied compositions of their limbs and their serial arrangement—some birds aligned vertically, in profile; squirrels and foxes straining or stretched horizontally; fish diving or placed askew. A gestural impression: gesture is “a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography,” Giorgio Agamben writes, “as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics.”<sup>1</sup> You remark their vibrant colors, all the brighter for their stillness. Death appears equivocally among these images: an interruption of life, the realization of life, perhaps a line of flight.

Even the title of Ali Cherri’s *Dead Inside* raises the problem of locating the end or loss of life, the border between life and its other side. If death is borne “inside” life, as the exhibit’s French title *La mort dans l’âme* intimates, then what do these watercolor images represent? What is the emergence of death from within life, or death as the realization of life, in the absence of its location? What form of loss is this, without qualification or context? Displaced onto the immediacy of the blank background, subtracted from their situations, these images refuse the rendering of loss within the terms of narrative reason.

Yet this displacement and subtraction, in the images’ tracing of gesture and form, is no palliative to desire. The blank space conjures memories of a planet full

of life. Feathered forms staged as specimens out of place are urged within that shelter of memory; once within, they assign retrospective meaning to their prior image. That disarticulation (from the page) neatly coincides with a desire (for flight). A new context blooms in the space around death. You imagine the birds in the sky—but they remain tethered, in life and death, to an anthropocentric fate. The demand of *Dead Inside's* displaced and subtracted images is assuaged—but new confrontations emerge, for that replaced context also seeks its own ground. In speculating at the border of life and death, such substitutions reflect what Freud calls “narcissistic self-preservative instincts,” activated as the division between inside and outside simultaneously frays and holds.<sup>2</sup> In these “many bewildering and obscure processes,” a declaration of loss like *Dead Inside* effects a ripple across time. Thus Laura Ogden says that “loss is ongoing,”<sup>3</sup> as you see when you look at the watercolors yet again.

“Let us look again at this splendid being from which beauty streams,” writes Maurice Blanchot. “He is, I see this, perfectly like himself: he resembles *himself*. The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow.”<sup>4</sup> The dead in *Dead Inside* now offer an image of death-in-life, through the precise composition of their limbs and wings and the vibrancy of their fur and plumage. And soon, passing from image to image, that form and color is everywhere. “It is where we are apart from it, where there is nothing; it is an invading presence, an obscure and vain abundance.”<sup>5</sup> Death begins to wander.

Can that wandering death be put to work, instrumentalized for life once more? Elizabeth Povinelli observes that it was “the discovery of a force of life in dead matter, or life in the remainders of life”—coal, industry, power—that led to the world we inhabit today.<sup>6</sup> You would need to be *rational* to instrumentalize death; you would need to identify specimens; you would need to “bring uniformity, consistency, and coherence to the presentation of a clearly defined domain of natural objects.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the series of images initially affirms a taxonomic order of things: first fish, then birds, then mammals. But this hierarchy soon breaks down, attesting to the “invading presence” of wandering death: a dead fox among the birds; a fallen robin, its leg splayed, next to a squirrel. The genres do not hold, and the forms begin to blur. *Dead Inside* then presents broken automobiles, witnesses to other deaths. These crashed cars offer nonsubjective depictions of the events inside, confirming, in the end, the ineluctability of the end. Human bodies do not appear, but including these vehicles in the series establishes an inhuman continuity between the rusting hulks of metal and the earlier scaled, furred, and feathered frames. The scientific opposition of life and death is undone, turned to the obscure possibility of the shadow of form. Death has now come to attack “the possibility of a *dwelling place* even for us who remain.”<sup>8</sup>



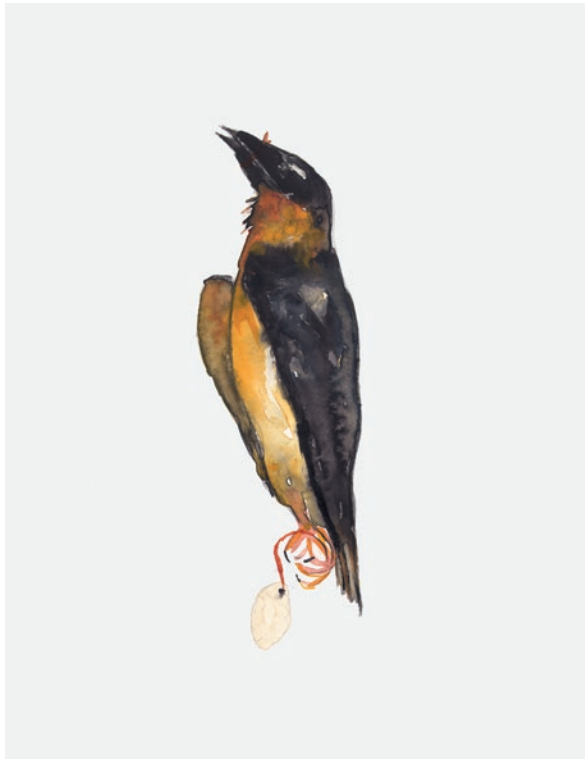
FIGURES 1–2. *Dead Inside* series.



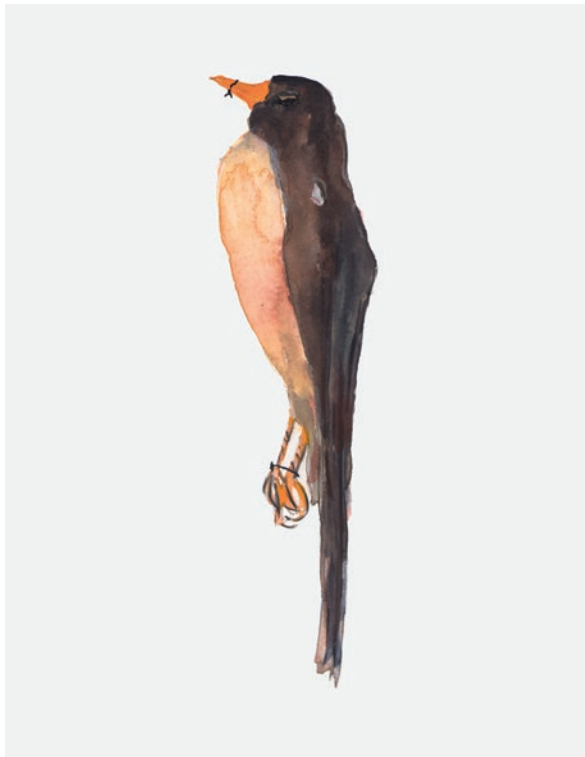
FIGURES 3–4. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 5–6. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 7–8. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 9–10. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 11–12. *Dead Inside* series.





FIGURES 13–14. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 15–16. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 17–18. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURES 19–20. *Dead Inside* series.



FIGURE 21. *Dead Inside* series.

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**ALI CHERRI** (b. 1976, Lebanon) is a filmmaker and visual artist based in Paris. His work explores the links between archaeology, historical narrative, and heritage, paying particular attention to excavation and the relocation of cultural objects into museums. He was the 2021 artist in residence at the National Gallery, London, which resulted in the exhibition *If you prick us, do we not bleed?* He is the winner of the Silver Lion Award of the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale.

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#### Notes

1. Agamben, “Marginal Notes,” 79.
2. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 60–61.
3. Ogden, *Loss and Wonder at the World’s End*, 6.
4. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 257.
5. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 258.
6. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 167.
7. Lesch, “Systematics and the Geometrical Spirit,” 75.
8. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 259.

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