

ROBERT
ZOTT

LAUREATE
OF THE
CEMETERIES

PROFILE BY LAURENCIA CIPRUS /
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROBERT ZOTT





"Gaunt Writer Cutting Cocaine" — Hope Cemetery, Worcester MA 12-30-21



Straggler - "Rock N Roller" — Various Locations 06-16-23



"Goldsmith Smith, Whiting White" -- Lake View Cemetery, Ithaca NY 09-18-23

Singer-songwriter Sarah Dunn sums up the adventure in her single "Ghost of You" on her soon-to-be-released CD.

"I'm looking for a picture by Robert Zott Showing me the gravestone of what's all my fault I'm walking through, the cold, the ghost of you..."

I also took a walk with Zott a few calendar flips back to experience his lens at work. Ever since, we kept on moving. How did I go from someone who cheated death, cemeteries, and cracks in the sidewalk to signing up for this epic Joseph Campbell odyssey, chasing the holy grails of gravestones?

Pure irony. Zott and I connected to talk tombstones inside the deep end of the Covid pandemic. It was the time when death was the punctuation of every sentence. Spitting into the wind to talk cemeteries with the brilliant stranger who arrays impeccable shots of gravestones with a bone-dry wry wit? This was just daft enough to make perfect sense...I had to spit. Over coffee and social distance in the ghost town of a Barnes and Noble, Robert Zott proffered a copy of *The Tombstone Photographs*. Its compact, stark brilliance from cover to cover cut through the dystopian brain fog of the time. Zott later quipped, "We had to maintain a 6' distance back then. Six feet was already established in the cemetery neighborhoods – only vertically." Lightbulb. This is art at its finest, with a story to tell. How to grasp the soul of its equally fine madness? Let the games begin.



"Ink" -- Lake View Cemetery, Ithaca NY 09-18-23

“ROBERT ZOTT’S SURVEYING OF GRAVEYARDS TO FIND TOMBSTONES WITH STARTLINGLY APPROPRIATE NAMES ON THEM IS A FASCINATING AND INCREASINGLY WELL-KNOWN OBSESSION.”

– THE NEW YORK TIMES



First Appearance in The New York Times -- On April 23, 1995, "The Death of Color" -- the first tombstone piece -- appeared in a review of The Connecticut Art Annual at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center, juried by Eugenie Tsai. There were 74 artists in the show.

Zott explains the genesis of his genre, beginning in 1995 with the first piece, "The Death of Color." "It was a one-off project. I wanted to make a visual statement describing my color blindness. I borrowed a 35mm camera with zero idea of what to do with it. There were two main dials on the camera. I set one, then slowly clicked through each interval with the second dial, shooting tombstones bearing single last names, also common English words. This unwittingly became the first of *The Tombstone Photographs* to evolve over the next twenty-five years." Zott tracked down each of these stones-- scattered across multiple local cemeteries, all within a five-mile radius of home. White, Green, Gray, Gold, Brown and Black. "Thirty-six shots of each stone – both the sloppiest negatives and some of the best images I've ever created."

Each image was shot in grayscale – conveying the nuances of each value and a glimpse behind the artist's colorblind lens. The gallery view takes you there. He intentionally curated the images in a grid pattern to echo the geometry of a cemetery. The series of impeccable silver gelatin prints landed



"The Death of Color" — This was the first tombstone piece created in 1995. I don't put dates on the others since many took years to create and they're all from a single body of work.



The Fudge Stone -- "NO FUDGING ALLOWED! This is an example of a great tombstone that I cannot use. Hidden below the surname are the genealogical details for six people, obscured by dirt and lichen. I've lived by the rule of no other details except the surname for nearly 30 years and had to painfully pass it by. FUDGE!"



Straggler "Church Bell, Street Horn" — Various Locations 02/22/22



Boring - Druid Ridge Cemetery, Pikesville MD

in a museum show, and The New York Times took notice – as did the patrons who clamored for more of this visual wordplay. The series of experiments evolved into a book that was finally published in 2020. Each chapter heading in this first volume is a mile marker in a developing creative process: Orientation, Properties of Light, and Black Comedies & Cautionary Tales. This represents years of treks to countless cemeteries around the country – literally taking names.

Each road trip adds to a staggering database of names to pull from. As he trained his eye to spot the most unlikely, words in each successive work drop jaws: Cocaine. Askew + Tipping. Burger, Fries + Soda. The wry, Good + Studint. Let's address the ghost in the room that always whisks through at Robert Zott's exhibitions: none of these images were manipulated, Photoshopped, or messed with. Simply, an artist's lens takes it all in and tells a story.

The best example of Zott's thought process is illustrated in the book *The Tombstone Photographs* with his piece, *There Goes the Neighborhood*. "A tombstone bears the single last name BAKER. It provides no given names, no dates of birth and death, no epitaphs." The moment this name – borrowed for a lifetime – now stands



"Bon Voyage!" This was my first sentence based on the Sally, Dick and Jane readers.

alone, it returns to the lexicon. The baker in the town and his wife – Joe Baker, Mary Baker – once they are dead, so is the reference to the individual. Only the occupation remains. It returns to a neutral meaning.

Over the next twenty-five years, Zott created the beginnings of a new visual and syntactical language – looking at surnames as words separate from the soul resting beneath the tombstone. His process of shifting them into statements visually separates the name from the human who had borrowed it for their lifetime. This is a new conversation.

But is there a dark side to this passion? Some say early childhood exposure to standout experiences with funerals or graveyards at any point in one's life are possible reasons why someone may find themselves becoming a taphophile – one studying cemeteries and tombstones. The artist muses, "My father's death when I was seven was my first time in a graveyard. Since then, I find these places comforting and not macabre at all."

His sense of calm became clear with our road trip to Worcester, MA. Zott had moved past photographic experimentation into poetics with his development. Stone Poems shifted wordplay into lyricism, and the artist was now thinking and working in color. With coffee, snacks, and windshield wipers keeping time, he laid down hard and fast rules for this flavor of vision quest. "1) Poems will be compiled from the findings in one single cemetery. 2) The stone cannot bear any additional information other than the last name 3) There needs to be a word – or set of words – to create an ignition point. There is no poem when there isn't any arc."

We drove through the vastness of Hope Cemetery in Worcester, MA, in 2021. This is one of the largest cemeteries in the New England Region. After leaning into the process of searching for several hours, patterns emerged. There were actual neighborhoods. Tombstones reflecting clusters of Greek, Armenian, English, Jewish, German, Muslim, and Italian communities became evident. Walking slowly through the manicured grass and soaring trees, language telegraphed off of the chiseled words. I experienced the COCAINE tombstone with my own eyes. Zott does not make this stuff up. This tombstone eventually morphed into the Stone Poem, Gaunt Writer, Cutting Cocaine. After lunch at a local greasy spoon, we found KLUNK and YATTER to add to the database. What was a mystery at that meeting was now crystal clear. I was an official acolyte.



Stone Poem - "Eager Tongue, Lick Loveless" - In Memoriam Cemetery, Wallingford CT 11-18-2020



Stone Poem - "Sparks Strike Glass Hull" — Fairview Cemetery, West Hartford CT 11-27-21



"Bon Voyage" at Artspace Studio Hartford.



The installation shots were taken at my former studio Erector Square, New Haven. The shot of "Bon Voyage" was taken at my current studio at Artspace Hartford.

Looking back at the earlier works, Zott calls them 'stragglers' – the results pieced together from various cemeteries. Now, meter, cadence, and rhyme are in this next generation of the work. Punctuation is implied. Think of the visual syntax of poet e e cummings. Zott is an equally evolving singular voice. The late Vivian Raynor of the New York Times summed it up beautifully. "Robert Zott is an 18th-century polymath."

The quest continues. 2023. Zott checks in from a fleabag motel with spotty cell service. Hurricane Lee screams past the East Coast of New England on an unpredictable course. He's heading to Lake View Cemetery in Ithaca, NY – the final resting place of the city's most famous scientist, Carl Sagan. After navigating eight hours through the deluge, Zott is waiting for first light and betting on a stiff wind to dry the tombstones. He gathers the names available in the cemetery, and two stones with the name Whiting and one bearing Fish suggest an emerging nautical theme. There is a thread. In the morning, the gamble pays off.



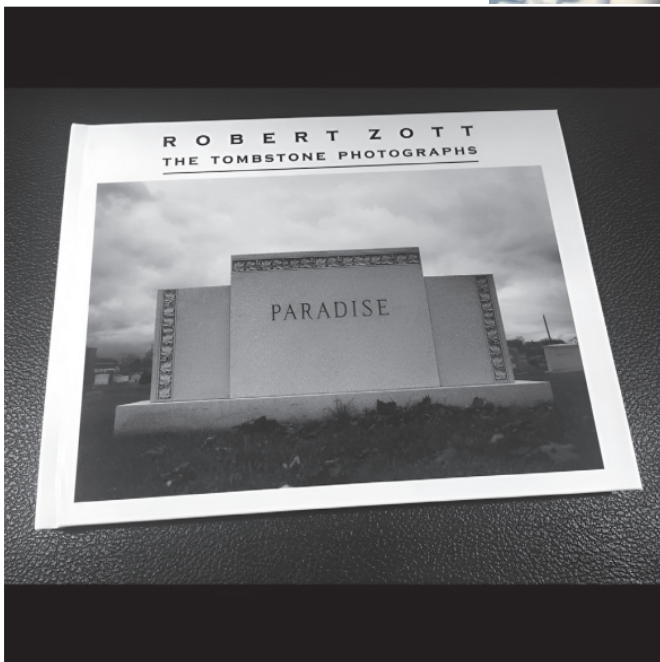
Waiting for the Shadow to Move - View from the car as I waited for the shadow to move on the Boring tombstone. It took hours ...

The grass is extra green, the sun is glorious, and a new poem emerges.

"Robert Zott's surveying of graveyards to find tombstones with startlingly appropriate names on them is a fascinating and increasingly well-known obsession." the late William Zimmer, the New York Times. Since William Zimmer experienced Zott's work in the 1990s, the artist's syntax has expanded exponentially. He is now incorporating the use of abbreviations. His discovery of initials on the markers delineating individuals within family plots further broadens the lexicon. They reanimate in common abbreviations such as "B.S. and L.O.L.". Additionally, he recently incorporated markers defining the perimeter of a plot with a single-lettered stone. One appears in the artist's new work, Rock N Roller.

Nearly thirty years ago, Robert Zott experimented with a single idea, a camera, and a last name on a stone. Infinite road trips later, it is an art form. His second volume, Stone Poems, is published this month and available through the artist's website. The artist invites the viewer to visit a cemetery to participate in this fascinating game of names.

Experience the work at www.robertzott.com and on Instagram @#robertzott.



Clockwise: Photographer Robert Zott , A Visit to West Cemetery, Manchester CT., The Tombstone Photographs Book Cover