GLASGOW TAG CONFERENCE – LAYLA RENSHAW – A HIGHLIGHT

Glasgow TAG

A highlight of the conference, for me, was Layla Renshaw talking about photographs of the excavation of remains of victims of the Spanish civil war.

The context is that of the growing application of forensic archaeology to investigate mass graves in Bosnia, Iraq, Argentine, Spain. To identify. To pursue justice. To achieve some closure for victim's families.

Layla has been studying the way these investigations are being photographed – new genres, new iconographies of death and memory. A new genre of family protraiture.

A woman sits at a table facing the camera, looking directly at you. She gently touches a photograph with one finger. It is in black and white, of a man, taken in the 1930s. It is at an angle to the viewer and you canâ€™t make out many details. The color of the photograph is raw, oversaturated – newspaper color. She remembers this man. It was her uncle.

When we were in Sicily in 1999, part of the excavations of Monte Polizzo, Cliff (McLucas) and I were fascinated by the images of victims of the 1968 Belice valley earthquake. The cemetery at Gibellina has a number of marble faced mausolea that record a name beneath a photograph. They seem to have been printed on the stone itself and were the most evocative of portraits.

Ruderi di Gibellina – in memory of the earthquake of 1968

Another image from Layla – of an archaeological trench and the excavation of a skeleton, and sitting at the back of the trench, a member of their family today, looking on …