Cremation Sensation

Blood feuds and the ash trade cross national borders

January 1, 1997 By Barton Lidice Benes

Cremation ashes can be brought into Sweden only if they are inside the container provided by the crematorium, which must be a zinc-lined box constructed according to the guidelines adopted by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 1973. Britain and the United States don't care about the zinc, but ashes must be in the crematorium-supplied box and accompanied by a death certificate. The United States requires the death certificate to state the cause of death.

How would I know such things? You see, I was invited by the Stefan Andersson Gallery to make a sculpture in Umea, Sweden. The piece included the cremated remains of my friends James Barden and Noel McBean, who were lovers. I didn't want to ship the ashed over because I was afraid they'd get lost.

So I decided I had to carry them with me, in two giant coffee cans. But the coffee cans would set off the metal detectors, and I didn't want to have any hassle, so I came up with the idea of mixing the ashes together and putting them in a plastic bag. They would eventually be together in a large hourglass sculpture.

Mixing them together evoked a strange feeling, sort of like watching someone have sex. It felt very private.

I also took their death certificates with me, in case of any problems. Anyway, leaving the United States at Newark Airport, my bag was X-rayed. "Stop that bag. Open that bag!' the officer commanded. She could see, in the X-ray, a bag of powder and thought it might be cocaine or some other drug.

I told her the bag contained ashes, and I had the death certificate to prove it. But how do you explain you have two people mixed together? That's a lot of ashes for one person to be carrying around. So I handed her one of the death certificates thinking that will make everything easy, and she said, "Call Security!"

That's when I got nervous and broke into a sweat. "Take it out and put it on the table," she said, referring to the ashes. I told her to have some respect; I wasn't going to take thse ashes out in front of everybody, with people going through the x-ray machines. It wasn't right.

I asked if we could go somewhere more private, so they took me behind the machines and called someone else, probably her boss. This woman comes in and pokes her finger into the bag, wiggling it arround in James and Noel's ashes. Like she was feeling for something.

And then she held her finger, complete with ash residue, up to her nose and took a sniff. "Oh my God, she's going to taste it," I thought. Which was immediately followed by the thought that I hope she does so I could casually say, "Oh, James died of AIDS and he had hepatitis."

But she didn't taste it. She did tell me it was smart to put the ashes in a plastic bag, rather than a metal can. If it were a metal can, it could have caused more problems. They're forbiddent to open metal cans because they might be bombs.

You would think I would be used to these kinds of problems by now. The last time I went to Sweden, it was for a show called "Lethal Weapons" at the Anders Tornberg Gallery. This show featured 30 different pieces, ranging from a Molotov cocktail to a squirting lapel flower, all made with my own HIV positive blood. There was also a wall of ribbons made from the cremation ashes of my friend Christopher's sister Brenda.

After the exhibition opened in Sweden, the health authorities put a ban on all sales from the show. It was on TV, radio, in newspapers, then CNN, Reuters, you name it. And I freaked out. I wasn't prepared for all the hullabaloo.

I was nervous because I had written "mixed media" on customs papers. Fortunately, Swedish customs didn't pursue it, but the health authorities did. They said, "People can look at it, but the art can't leave the gallery." We had to get a lawyer, go to court and have doctors testify. You would not belive the hassle, all because some bureaucrat thought people might get AIDS from my art. I asked my friend Dr. Susan Krown to write a letter to the court for me. She said, "What are they going to do, eat the art?"

We went to court and won. We had an immunologist, a virologist, an infectious diseases doctor, all kinds of people testify. But they required we take the exhibition to a hospital, at the university in Lund, and put it in an oven to heat it. I am not kidding; this was supposed to kill any bacteria or live virus. Two hours at 160 degrees. One piece, made of wax, melted.

After that, they returned the work to the gallery and allowed the pieces to be sold.With all that publicity, the gallery was packed and sold lots of blood! The woman who runs the alcoholic rehabilitation center bought "Absolut Benes," a vodka bottle filled with my blood, to hand in the center's lobby. A hospital bought an atomized filled with blood to hang in its infectious-diseases clinic.

Another show went to Prague, brought over by the Czech AIDS Foundation, which is called Together Against AIDS. I didn't want to go through all the hassle again. And I knew Czech customs could be awful. So I called a doctor I knew from the Czech National Reference Laboratory for AIDS.

She wrote a letter for me to carry through customs. I wasn't going to take any real blood, just syringes and all kinds of goofy stuff that makes people nervous. I figured it was easier to have my blood drawn once I got there, then fill the pieces. When I got to Prague they never even opened my suitcases. They are more concerned with what goes out of the country than what comes in.

The letter said I was bringing syringes to be used for art, but they wouldn't be injected into myself or anyone else. I went to the AIDS clinic and the old nurse drew my blood and filled water pistols, atomizers, squirt flowers and other items with it. It was like Kafka. I had no idea what she was thinking-she just did what I asked. I was an artist, so I guess that made it OK.

I made one mistake. I forgot them to ask to put anticoagulant in the blood, so it turned out all lumpy. Whie I was in the country, I went to Kunta Hora, where my family is from. The interior of its famous church, even the chandeliers, is made entirely out of human bones-tens of thousands of them. These were bones of the victims of the plague in the 14th century. Not surprisingly, my cremation pieces didn't upset anybody. The Czechs have always used dark humor as a weapon against oppression.

Most recently, I had a show in England that got lots of press. A Tory councilor tried to get it closed down, not because of a public-health fear (like in Sweden), but because they thought it was horrifying and sick and would morally corrupt children. Blood was just too frightening (even thought this is the country where they "blood" the first person with a kill in a fox hunt, by smearing the fox's blood on his or her forehead). I also heard that the British soccer fans throw cremation ashes on soccer fields.

A lot of religions don't like cremation at all. Some Christians, for example, think that to be cremated was to say, in effect, that you do not believe in the Resurrection and the Life. My lover wanted to be cremated, but his mother refused, because she said, "When the Lord comes back, he's got to be able to come out and meet Him." I told my mother that I want her ashes to be mixed with mine; I like that symbolism. She said they might not allow it because that would be incest.

The first cremation piece I ever did was Heidi, my friend Joseph Lovett's German Shepherd. I made dog biscuits out of her. I also sold a piece made out of cat ashes to my friend Michael Vollbracht. That piece actually burned up a second time, when he had a big fire in his apartment.

I have held back on selling pieces made from human cremation ashes. I have ethical problems with that. I would only sell a cremation piece if it went to a public collection, not a private one, and then only if the proceeds went to an AIDS organization that had helped the cremated person when he or she was alive.

I sell the blood pieces, though. That's my own blood. And I've got to make a living somehow.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.