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Ghost Story

**Anna Eyler, Laura Findlay, Mickey Mackenna,
Sarah Sands Phillips, Angie Quick, Stanzie Tooth
curated by Blair Swann
October 28 – December 3, 2016**

Ghosts have always been a subject of storytelling. Appearing in folkloric traditions from around the world, in both written language, and visual communication, they have been called haints,¹ shades,² onryō,³ bhut,⁴ draugr⁵— as well as ghosts. The ghost story has evolved into a staple subject in literature, television series, movies, and art, both as simple entertainment as well as a complex metaphor to question ideas of truth and the unknown, the psyche and the scientific, the natural and the supernatural, life and death, and time and space. This exhibition, *Ghost Story*, examines how the selected artists engage with hauntings, spectres, and the ghost story – examining these themes within a range of media, both critically inquisitive and poetically personal. In this exhibition, they consider places that disrupt memory and history by looking at the ghost as a metaphor for things caught between presence and absence, real and unreal⁶ – representing a “crisis of space as well as time.”⁷

¹ Geordie Buxton, Ed Macy, *Haunted Charleston: Stories from the College of Charleston, The Citadel and the Holy City*, (Mount

² Ra'anan S. Boustan, Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 214.

³ William H. McCullough, Saburo Ōta, (太田三郎), Rikutarō Fukuda (福田陸太郎), eds., "Spirit Possession in the Heian Period", in *Studies on Japanese Culture* (日本文化研究論集), 1973, 356.

⁴ Britannica, Dale Hoiberg, Indu Ramchandani, eds., *Students' Britannica India*, Volumes 1-5, 2000.

⁵ Jacqueline Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 166.

⁶ Colin Davis, "Etat Present: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms" in *French Studies* LIX (3), 2005, 373.

⁷ Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?" in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1, Fall 2012, 19.

In her installation *Haint Blue (2016)*, Sarah Sands Phillips invokes the ghost story in its “dependence on physical place”⁸ adopting the blue colour thought to have the ability to ward-off spirits or “haints”⁹ in the southern United States. She painted in the gallery one of these painted southern walls, weathered and abandoned by time, in a re-interpretation of the haunted house. To French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the house is an “airy structure that moves about on the breath of time,”¹⁰ a place which is the “localization of our memories.”¹¹ Sands Phillips invokes hauntings as “what happens when a place is stained by time”¹² with an installation that explores the convergence of place and time in memory – and how it is the past that haunts the house. However, this is not the actual past, but a representation of it, mimetically built for us in the present. The walls drip with rot and age, the paint textured like wrinkles forgets lifetimes, with layers breaking open to expose distant voices, faded by calendars of morning light. But this is just a story told by Sands Phillips – a “past” rooted in the physicality of the house, where the artist stages an “encounter with broken time.”¹³

Angie Quick's work also considers time, exploring how it is accessed through the mind, in memory and fantasy. In her painting, *How to Whistle Through a Blade of Grass (2016)*, these fantasies and memories are stacked like worn lawn chairs, collected like discarded cans. They dissolve into a heaping shape of bodies without faces, without names. From her series *Interiors*, Quick's work channels these intangible thoughts into ghostly beings – they fill space, furnish rooms, and inhabit disjointed sexual encounters. Is this a daydream? A distortion? A fleshy fantasy or “phantom happiness?”¹⁴ –fading in from some imagined memory. She gives these apparitions physical bodies with flesh both sharp and mutable, painting visions of ghostly movement, frozen on the canvas' surface.

⁸ Frederic Jameson, “Historicism in The Shining”, 1981, visual-memory.- co.uk/amk/doc/0098

⁹Geordie Buxton, Ed Macy, *Haunted Charleston: Stories from the College of Charleston, The Citadel and the Holy City*, (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 84.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 54

¹¹ Bachelard, 1969, 8

¹³ Fisher, 2012, 19

¹⁴ Georgina Douglas Johnson, “Quest” in *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* (Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1918)

Mickey Mackenna poetizes the alteration of materials, in this case whittled wood and bent steel, with works that echo her manipulation process, suspending this action in mid-alteration. To her, “a ghost is only perceivable through the material that it comes into contact with”¹⁵ – they make themselves known “like the wind,” in “the unprovoked movement of a beaded doorway.”¹⁶ Her wistful sculptures contemplate these points of contact. In *Chokehold* (2016), wood and steel lean back easily against each other, the whittled wood stick suspended in place by the steel wire, resisting gravity’s pull downward. Her sculptural works create moments of stillness that rest in their physical tension. Mackenna’s work depicts conflict, a ghostly intervention, whose motivation we are not made privy, but are left to imagine.

Storytelling is a framework that allows us to speak to unknown forces, to things beyond our physical reality. Laura Findlay’s paintings tell stories of ghosts as forces in the earth, as the movements in the sky. Findlay’s *Paper Moon* (2014) hangs high above the gallery, haunting the space just as the actual moon haunts the night – a ghost walking proud in the tall shadows it labours to paint. In *Chile* (2016), a mountain range is somehow changed by a strange, wandering light – casting an otherworldly wash over the landscape. A phantom emerges from centuries buried deep in rock – whose cheeky, grinning *Face* (2016) gleams through a violent volcanic eruption. Casting characters of nature as mythologies, Findlay’s work examines the idea that “myth is a system of communication, that it is a message”¹⁷ In these paintings, the moon and mountain become messengers, communicating a history that exists outside of human time. They explore the supernatural through a musing treatment of the natural, whose stories “are not content with meeting the facts: they define and explore them as tokens for something else”¹⁸

¹⁵ Mickey Mackenna, in an email, 2016.

¹⁶ Mickey Mackenna, in an email, 2016.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 107.

¹⁸ Barthes, 1957, 107.

Anna Eyler's video, *How to Live Forever (Trimming the Myrtle-bush)* (2016), explores otherworldliness through simulation set in the Second Life (SL) virtual environment – evoking the “disappearance of space ... alongside the disappearance of time”¹⁹ inherent to haunting. In Eyler's work, indefinite yet geometric shapes are animated to squeeze, gyrate, and pulse in apparent discomfort within strange virtual environments that conflate natural, supernatural, un-natural. These characters are not quite ghosts – they are haunted, stuck inside some phantom place. In this universe, “the actual is surrounded by increasingly extensive, remote and diverse virtualities: a particle creates ephemera, a perception evokes memories.”²⁰ Here, they hum, hovering and whimpering captive in their cold cells – where “the circles contract, the virtual draws closer to the actual,” and “both become less and less distinct.”²¹ In this “erosion of spatiality,”²² they are kept – living out their lonely sentence, pacing through their endless time.

Stanzie Tooth creates portraits in the shape of her own loneliness, in her series *Moon People* (2016), made in plaster, pigment, and felt, she offers this series as stand-in portraits of herself, and what haunts her. The influence of a childhood lived in a “pastoral valley” backing “a dark, dense, tangled forest”²³ – a duality of setting resembling the ghost story as “the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy”²⁴ – is evident in her past landscape paintings inhabited by distant, creeping figures. But in this new series of work the landscape is seemingly erased – and these ghosts are more materialized. This shift from landscape to portrait finds these figures embodying a perceived absence, a negative space, emerging from a landscape compressed to grey and an imagined invisibility.

¹⁹ Fisher, 2012, 19.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *The Actual and the Virtual*, english translation by Eliot Ross Albert (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), 150.

²¹ Deleuze, 1983), 151.

²² Fisher, 2012, 19.

²³ Stanzie Tooth, in “Showtime: Stanzie Tooth Q&A”, an interview by Jess Bloom, Studio Beat, <http://studio-beat.com/art-news-blog/stanzie-tooth-inhabited-general-hardware-contemporary-toronto/>, 2015

²⁴ Henry James, *Ghost Stories of Henry James*, in the Introduction by Martin Scofield, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2001).

Considering the ghost story in these different ways, this exhibition explores how personal narratives intersect with a broader definition of haunting. The works offer a contemplative look into these narratives and definitions. They consider the difficulty of memory, history, and how the two blur in ways we might not fully understand, in ways that leaves behind traces that might be called ghosts. They look at how these ghosts inhabit physical space, how they blur definitions of time.

Time seems to wind down in the fall – turning things inwards and towards the past. The days are shorter. The air moves slower. The trees get tired and their leaves crawl graciously to their beds. In the hotter months everyone is buzzing electric from the fear of losing time. But the cold draws us in – into the warmth of the home, into the comfort of the mind, to “confer age upon our memories.”²⁵ Is this why Halloween comes at the end of October? It’s the time when we’re ripe to be possessed – ready to be haunted by ghosts of the past.

*“When the winter rains come pouring down on that new home of mine –
will you think of me and wonder if I'm fine?*

*Will your restless heart come back to mine –
on a journey through the past?*

*Will I still be in your eyes and on your mind?”*²⁶

²⁵ Bachelard, 1969, 41.

²⁶ Neil Young, “Journey Through the Past”, in *The Archives Vol. 1 1963–1972*. 1972.