FITCHBURG ART MUSEUM EXPLORES MORTALITY AND REMEMBRANCE WITH “AFTER SPIRITUALISM”

Words By Daria Semco

A tiny table set on a pedestal is covered in figurines of weeping Santas. Above it hangs a cutout cowrage, an ornate skull usually associated with the Day of the Dead, this time cleverly composed of Christmas imagery: a black bow around its nose bone is replaced with a cheerful Christmas tree. To the right, a row of tea lights—typically Christian votive offerings to saints or other divine figures—narrates true near-death experiences, ranging from almost faintly falling off a Watar World ride to nearly setting the house on fire at age five after discovering the pleasures of lighting a match.

This is the view of St. Nicholas Shrine, an installation by Rhonda Ratray that greets the visitors entering “After Spiritualism: Loss and Transcendence in Contemporary Art,” an exhibition curated by Lisa Crossman at the Fitchburg Art Museum. The shrine is adorned in silk and surrounded by electric candles. The shrine is adorned in silk and surrounded by electric candles. In Christian tradition, spirituale paintings are meant to serve as proof of miracles and convey divinity. Here, the atmosphere of celebration makes it hard to take the visitors’ dances with death completely seriously. They have created the tale and, retrospectively, we as viewers and they as narrators contemplate it with humor. The work exposes how close we are to their terrifying experiences, even if we don’t want to acknowledge it. Just like us, they live in a largely mundane world that transformed the Christian St. Nicholas into the canonized Santa Claus.

“After Spiritualism” explores the ways contemporary artists conceptualize death, loss, and acts of commemoration, both personal and collective. It also features works by artists who practice Spiritualism and Spiritualism (spiritualismo, a syncretic variation of Spiritualism common in Latin America) and who draw on themes of the afterlife and the spirit world. It is worth noting that the show does a wonderful job of staying relevant on a local level: all but one of the featured artists are based in New England or New York, as the Learning Lounge, though separate from the show, delves deep into the local history of Spiritualism and its ties to the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements. The exhibition consolidates the topics of postmodern portraiture, post and present, rituals of mourning, and the growing revisionist movement of monuments and memorials by thoughtfully grouping the works into three distinct displays.

St. Nicholas Shrine opens the “Sacred Spaces” section. Opposite, Maria Marden’s installation transforms the space into what appears to be a Baroque arrangement:

A round vintage table is set in a corner, surrounded by four wooden stools; the walls are covered in a bright geometric pattern loosely resembling an assortment of tarot cards. On the table stops dispensed cards rest a small chest, white on the walls, images of a sunflower (the emblem of Spiritualism) and a color wheel overlap the pattern. The background of the work’s title, Rough House / Bauhaus, links the iconic German art school to the Rough House, a shed built of flowering bone branches in Lily Dale, New York, where the first detainee message service was held. Challenging the prevalent perception of Bauhaus as rational and restrained, Marden points to the overlooked history of the school’s engagement with the occult as told by Elizabeth Otto in her book Haunted Bauhaus. This installation is interactive and invites the viewer to explore the wonders of a stereoscope, an optical device for viewing three-dimensional images and an artifact of nineteenth-century magic, which also sits on the table. The stereoscope metaphorically unites Bauhaus and Spiritualism, two disparate movements that are almost always viewed through separate lenses. This is indicative of the way Marden herself understands artistic practice in an interview with Lozzy Pirci Hedrick, she stated that she views art as a “spiritual practice and search for some sort of next level or truth through form.”

A separate, diminutive room lends itself well to the mesmerizing installation by Allison Marquez, 

In the Presence of Absence, displayed as a small devotional space. A traditional Cuban dress, hung in the main corner, appears weightless among potted palm trees; the floor is covered in pink petals and the soft light emanating from nearby led screens makes them almost appear as stained glass windows. In her projections, sepia photographs of the artist's ancestors are placed alongside images of extinct species while Cuban monuments are arranged against a bright backdrop resembling meteorology charts tracking hurricane that have devastated Cuba in recent history. One can read it as a looming threat of climate change that will affect innumerable lives and species, or as an act of resistance against letting these collective and personal memories fade to black.

The "Ritual and Transformation" gallery opens to a display of photography and multimedia works by Julia K. Gray and Rose Marasco. Gray adorns reproductions of found postcard photographs from the late 1800s and early 1900s with appliqué and sequins, breaking human mortality as far as gone from view. Viewed from a distance, Postmortem: Margaret looks almost abstract, and conceals the faceted subject of the photograph with bright patches of flowers. Time is an important element of the work: by being presented these caskets that took hours to embroider, the viewer is invited to consider just how discomsolate such sights truly are. Rose Marasco’s Diaries series explores the potential of found objects differently; she photographs pages of old diaries, mounts them in found vintage frames, and adorns them with leaves, fruits, and other objects significant to the diaries’ content. The results are beautiful compositions that reconnect the thoughts and days of anonymous women at the beginning of the twentieth century. There is a lot of sympathy for her subjects, and she asks the viewer to consider how, within this century, the piece of our lives has accelerated and left us with little space for still and tranquility.

"Historical Hauntings" is the last and most astonishing gallery to visit, but one that creates the most stirring dialogue. The sounds of John Brown Songs overflow the space. Concealed by Laylah Ali as a web project, the work invited participants to record themselves while singing versions of the folk song "John Brown's Body" to the accompaniment of a guitar or as a solo. The original song narrates the story of John Brown, the abolitionist who was hanged in Virginia after an uprising. While his methods are questioned by historians today, Brown became a symbol of liberty during the Civil War, and the melody was connected with lyrics by Julia Ward Howe to create "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Played on loop, this simple tune is inescapable and permeates one’s mind long after the visit.

In the center of the gallery, Brian Knep’s Deep Wounds invites the visitor to walk across two white rectangles made of polished glass. Each step activates two data, a relationship type, and two places—for example, "1844. Clarksville. Tennessee. 8 October, 1862. Perryville." This data denotes the graduation year and death dates, states, and battles of Harvard graduates who chose to fight for the Confederacy and whose names are absent from the university’s Memorial Hall, where the names of Harvard's Union fighters are honored. By framing these men as brothers, researchers, and friends, Knep points to our common humanity and offers hope that by acknowledging the past fully and moving on we could open the path toward reconciliation. To the left of Deep Wounds, three large-format paintings by Keith Morris Washington from their Within Our Gates series immerse the conversation on the power of memory. Substituted Site and Memory in the American Landscape, the paintings slowly explain the horrifying events that served as a subject for each work. At first glance, they depict merely a field, a forest, a suburban landscape; the compositions are fragmented into several rectangles painted either in black and white or at a different focal length, as if viewed through a prism. However, each is accompanied by a newspaper article telling of a lynching that took place at the site, which has since been built over or abandoned.

Washington amends the year of each lynching, accentuating discomfort—we would like to believe that the events belong to another era, but what if they happened not so long ago? This series generates toward the absence: by neglecting to mark the events that once took place, we are ignoring the pain of the victims of mob violence, as well as the extremes of racism. This leads to the debate on which stories are obliterated and which live on, and how these choices inform our understanding of history.
"After Spiritualism" was originally conceived as an exploration of loss and how our response to it has evolved. The idea came to Lisa Crossman several years ago in a conversation with Sarah Montross, who curated "Visionary New England," a show at the deCordova Museum that explores mystical and utopian practices that informed New England's culture in the nineteenth century. The two shows, as well as "Recruiting for Utopia: Print and the Imagination" at the Fruitlands Museum, were all organized in collaboration with one another, and in sum contend with post and present ideas of utopianism and Spiritualism.

The Learning Lounge adjacent to the exhibition provides an opportunity to learn more about Spiritualism and, more importantly, to be surprised by its rich local history. It is baffling to learn that one of the first spirit photographers resided in Boston and in 1889 portrayed Mary Todd Lincoln as embodied by the spirit of her husband, Abraham Lincoln, and that the First Spiritualist Temple can still be viewed today at the corner of Newbury and Exeter streets. The Lounge also offers a glimpse into how rituals of mourning have changed: it displays a wreath made of hair and a post-mortem ambrotype of an infant, both common Victorian tokens of loved ones that would be perceived by many as unsettling today, if not outright morbid. When asked whether she thinks we have recently witnessed a revived interest in Spiritualism and mesmerism—"I'm thinking of the movies Personal Shopper by Olivier Assayas and Planetarium by Rebecca Zlotowski, both released in 2016, and of last year's major retrospective of the work of Helen of Klint at the Guggenheim—Crossman says she thinks there has, "I think that the tension and uncertainty in the world right now are leading to greater consideration of spiritual themes, their histories, and present practices through a variety of forms, including the visual arts."

"After Spiritualism" does more than simply enable us to see how artists are exploring the topics of loss and transcendence. By allocating part of the display to visitors' notes and stories of loss, it validates our experiences and provides the space for discussion and healing. Some of these stories may bring us back to the memory of losing a first pet or remind us of an acute feeling of loss of a loved one; they resonate with our shared fragility and search for transcendence, common across generations, cultures, and religious beliefs. //

THE EXHIBITION CONSOLIDATES THE TOPICS OF POSTMORTEM PORTRAITURE, PAST AND PRESENT RITUALS OF MOURNING, AND THE GROWING REVISIONIST MOVEMENT OF MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS BY THOUGHTFULLY GROUPING THE WORKS INTO THREE DISTINCT DISPLAYS.