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So, How Do You Feel About Ghosts?

Dana Sorkin

Connecticut College, dana.sorkin@gmail.com

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SO,
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT
GHOSTS?

Dana Sorkin
May 2016

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“So, how do you feel about ghosts?”

Honors Thesis 2015-2016

Department of Art

Connecticut College

Advisors & Readers

Professor Nadav Assor

Professor Andrea Wollensak

Professor Emily Morash

Edition _____ of _____

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To my friends, whose personal experiences both in believing and not believing in the paranormal showed me that this was always worth pursuing.

To my family, for your sense of humor and late night phone calls when I needed them most.

INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, I have had a fascination with all things terrifying and bloody. I love the adrenaline rush of watching a horror movie, putting your hands over your eyes in fear but still peeking through your fingers. As I've gotten older, I have realized that ghosts and ghost stories represent more than may first be expected. A ghost story is often times rooted in history, in social context, in the way we, as humans, see ourselves, and what we envision happens to us after our deaths. These stories, though dealing with the supernatural, are written by and about us, and therefore often reveal more about the writer and the listeners of the stories than they do about the ghost itself.

Initially, I believe it's important to define the word "ghost," and though that seems like it should be simple, I've come to realize that it is anything but. Because the study of the supernatural and all that it entails is a pseudoscience, there's no one true definition of a ghost. Many definitions state that a ghost is a form of energy that has gotten "stuck" between our world and the next; some claim that ghosts are strongly attached to where their body died, others say they are mere imprints of their former selves. It's a personal, inconsistent, and messy definition, which is what I enjoy most about it.

What interests me so much about ghosts, however, is that they are so much more than just spirits or balls of energy. A ghost can be a memory we try to forget, a secret we try to hide, a thought that continues to linger, someone who works in secret, something fake or fabricated, or a trace of

something that once existed. There are ghosts in the home, and there are ghosts in history. For as much material and fascination there is with supernatural ghosts, I think there can, and should be, an equal amount of interest in the ghosts we all experience; I want to tie these frames of mind together.

In preparing to begin exploring the topic of the paranormal, I worked on finding a wide variety of literature, movies, and artists whose work inspired me and provided a solid foundation on which to begin my own work. One of the very first pieces of literature I read is a work of short fiction titled "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. An important work of early feminist American literature, "The Yellow Wallpaper" inspired many of the themes that would later become central under the larger idea of the paranormal: domestic settings and disturbances, ideas of walls and wallpaper and what it means when they're destroyed by someone (or something), rationality and irrationality, and so much more.

Artists such as Kader Attia, and his use of small, fragmented pieces, were inspiring in their repetition. His piece *Ghost* (2007) was the first work of his that I was exposed to; in it, dozens (perhaps close to a hundred) of figures depicting women in the middle of prayer are lined in rows. Made of aluminum foil, these faceless individuals sitting quietly conjure up thoughts of community, routine, and, of course, ghostliness. Another one of his installations, *Untitled* (2014), is made from fragmented pieces of religiously themed stained glass. The piece has

elements of religion and fragmented memory, and brings to mind issues of subjective memories of communities and individuals.

Because of my interest in maps, I was recommended to listen to a specific episode on mapping, featured on Ira Glass's radio show *This American Life*. During this show, he discussed multiple different ways to map our world: through smell, through sound, through vision, and more. The first artist he interviewed (and the one that inspired me most) was Dennis Wood, whose book "Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas," Glass describes in one word: impractical. Wood makes maps of things we don't need or want, such as a map of the way wind chimes swing, or a map of the number of times police are called in an area. What makes these so impractical are the ways in which they're presented: the map of police calls shows dozens and dozens of scattered numbers with no apparent geographical place, and the wind chimes are shown multiple concentric circles. There are no labels, no keys, nothing to denote what is being shown. I was interested in the challenge of mapping something such as the paranormal, and more than being scientifically accurate and informative, I'm hoping to create maps that are unique to look at and convey the information in non-traditional ways.

In Werner Herzog's documentary "Cave of Forgotten Dreams," the Chauvet Cave in southern France is the main point of focus, the site of the oldest known cave paintings in the world dating back to nearly 32,000 years ago. Of

course, Chauvet Cave is an incredible place, and provides an unparalleled insight into the human experience tens of thousands of years ago. The production of the documentary is amazing too: Herzog had to receive special permission from the government of France to create this film, as the cave is closed to the public to preserve the drawings. What makes this film so inspiring to me, however, is much more than the topic covered, but the ways in which Herzog, as both director and narrator, weaves in stories of both the people in the cave thousands of years ago, as well as the stories of the individuals who work and do research in the cave today. This is a story as much about the cave paintings themselves as it is about the people who painted them and the people who study them. In thinking about the documentary art piece I later created, I wanted to spend less time considering the paranormal, and more time considering the people who work with it.

I am also interested in looking at the connections between ghosts and the home. Through both tangible materials and the notions of what it means to be "domestic," I want to explore what happens when the paranormal and the home come into contact. Literature has acted as a starting point, but my own experiences and notions of what it means to be domestic followed.

The following writing is broken up into chapters surrounding each piece of work I created, as well as a dichotomy that I used when making each piece. These dichotomies are us versus them, rational versus irrational, safety versus danger, imagined versus reality, and

inside versus outside. These dichotomies allowed me to streamline my thinking when creating pieces and coming up with questions, and though each section is headed with one, the overlap between them all is clear. "What's theirs isn't always ours," an experiment in print and image making, looks at ghosts in history, specifically through the lenses of Native American and European communities in the New England area. "The only places we'll let ourselves go" is a series of images that have been repetitively glitched, through both digital and physical means, and examines the idea of ghosts in the home. Through my experiences visiting homes as a member of the Thames Society of Paranormal Investigators the connections between the home and the paranormal in contemporary society became more apparent and more inspirational in my own work. I created a short film, inspired by the previously mentioned documentary "Cave of Forgotten Dreams," among others, looking at the people that make up the team. "An unremarkable evening" examines the irony of a ghost going through the repetitive motions of folding and putting away clothes. "The walls have a story to tell you" more literally uses the building blocks of a home by employing drywall and wallpaper.

“Who makes the rules governing the appearance of the dead to the living? By what mechanism can the dead be seen and heard by inhabitants of a world not their own?”

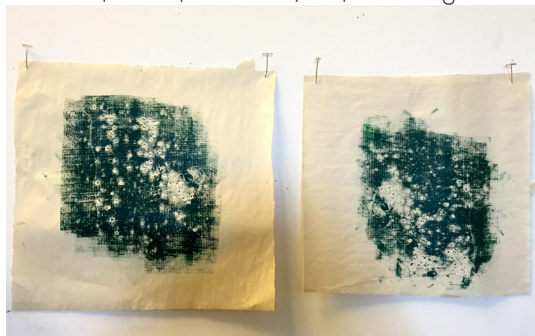
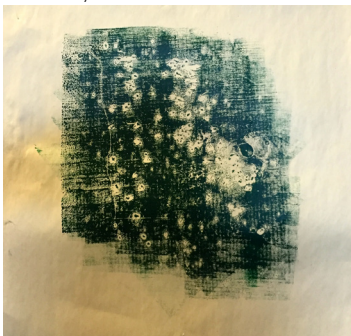
- PG Maxwell-Stuart, “Ghosts: A History of Phantoms, Ghouls & Other Spirits of the Dead”

US
VERSUS
THEM

Renée L. Bergland begins his book "The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects" with the first line, "For more than three hundred years, American literature has been haunted by ghostly Indians" (Bergland, 1). As a location, New England is especially important to this idea, being one of the oldest places Europeans and Native Americans historically mixed and mingled – both for better and for worse. Bergland goes on to say that, "First and foremost, the ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal. By writing about Indians as ghosts, white writers effectively remove them from American lands, and place them, instead, within the American imagination" (Bergland, 4)

As a child, I attended a sleep away camp in upstate New York, and was told a variety of ghost stories over campfires and in darkened cabins illuminated by flashlights. While my friends would shake and scream if a story ever got too scary, I was enamored with the

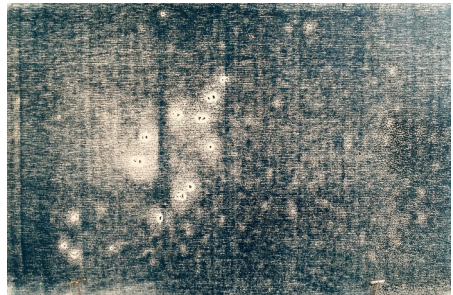
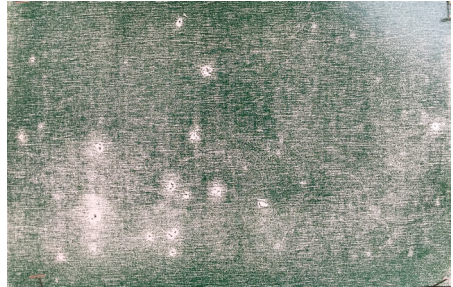
idea of beings beyond our comprehension (and, of course, the scarier the better). One story in particular stayed with me long enough that I told it to my own campers when I was a counselor years later. To summarize the story, a camper (not unlike any of the girls I was telling this too, I would always make a point to say) would go to the front office every day to pick up her mail. There, one of the staff members working complained to the camper about the office telephone. Every day at 3:00 pm the phone would ring, but when the staff member would answer it, the line would be dead. She asked the girl to leave the campgrounds and follow the telephone wire down the dirt road to see if there were any problems with the line's connection. On the day the girl snuck away from camp to help her friend, she followed the line nearly two miles down the road. She was about to give up and turn back, until she saw that the line had fallen from a telephone pole and lay limp on the ground,



Pictured: Early test prints of "What's theirs isn't always ours."

meandering into a clearing off the side of the road, where the end was buried beneath the dirt. The camper knew immediately that this was no ordinary clearing: it was an Indian burial ground. Emboldened by her discovery, she tugged at the telephone line, until the dirt fell, revealing the full skeleton of an Indian gripping the wire in their hand.

I don't think I'll ever forget the first time this story was told to me at a late night campfire, the way my friends shrieked and grabbed each other for comfort before being overcome by fits of laughter, and the way my mind followed the winding dirt road, waiting for a nonexistent telephone wire to have fallen inside a nonexistent clearing. Even years later as a counselor at the same camp, my mind would still wander back to that story on lonely moments when I would be walking back to camp down the same dirt road after a night off. I had never put much thought into analyzing this story, why it stuck with me so much, the context it was told in, and the way in which I told later on. But, like Bergland said previously, by portraying the Native American in this story as a skeleton with dark, telephone-interrupting intentions, the story had been removing this Native American from any realistic setting. What I grew up as seeing as a marginally frightening, relatively humorous, and easy to re-tell around a campfire ghost story was, in many ways, indicative of an incredibly problematic history of colonialism erasing



Pictured: Close up images of the final two prints of “Whats theirs isn't always ours.”

the history of genocide in New England, only to have these stories come back in unexpected moments, such as the naivety and innocence of a summer camp experience.

With this story, and the numerous others I have both read and heard, I considered the meaning of the word “ghost,” and the many other implications it can have. This has led me to consider ghosts as an inherently cultural experience, and that living in New England (as well as my experiences spending significant time in upstate New York) exposes you to overlapping

narratives of ghosts. For the piece "What's theirs isn't always ours," I was interested in examining these overlapping narratives through mapmaking. The two final maps compare traditions of viewing ghosts in the New England area, as seen by the Native American and the European communities.



Pictured: Detail of "What's theirs isn't always ours" installed in Cummings.



Pictured: Final two prints hung together in Cummings of "What's theirs isn't always ours."

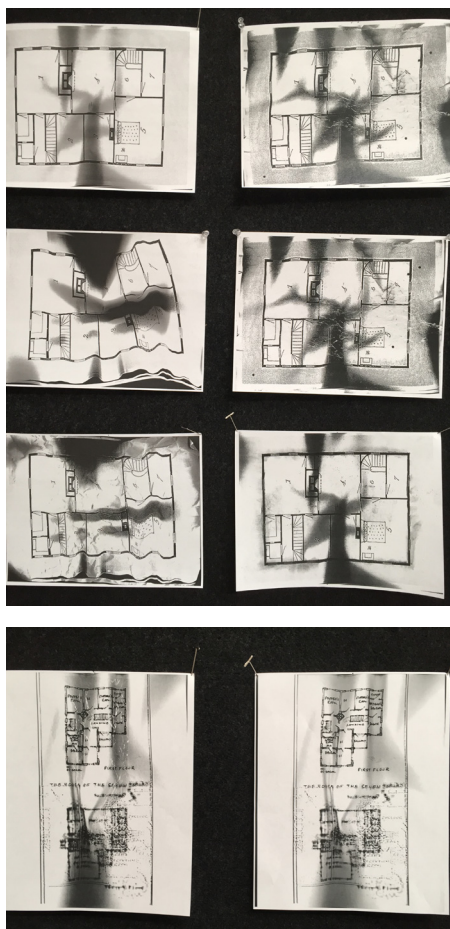
“But ghosts, it seems, will not leave us alone.”

- PG Maxwell-Stuart, “Ghosts: A History of Phantoms, Ghouls & Other Spirits of the Dead”

RATIONAL
VERSUS
IRRATIONAL

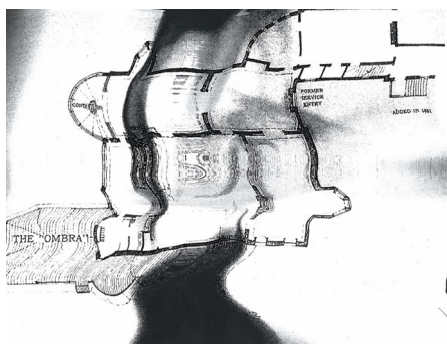
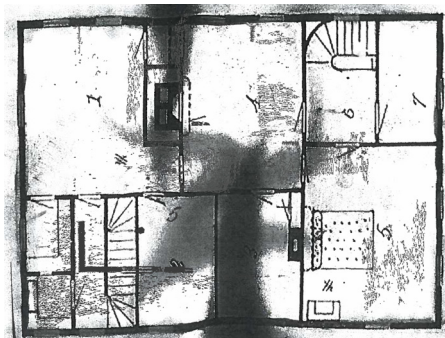
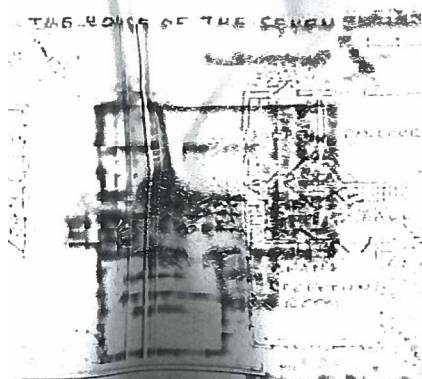
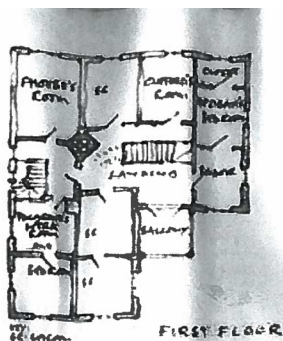
The home is supposed to be a place of safety, comfort, escapism, and relaxation. When this is corrupted, by whatever means, it can have devastating psychological consequences. Haunted homes are a mainstay in historical ghost stories and modern day hauntings; something is suggested to be inside of the home, living amongst the home's inhabitants, perhaps peacefully, but perhaps not. Owen Davies, in his book "The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts," attempts to give the phenomenon of a haunted home historical context. Young women, often servants in 16th and 17th century English homes, he says, were the ones to frequently invent stories of ghosts and hauntings in their homes. "Both possession and poltergeist activity can be read as ways in which adolescents can and did transform the supernatural into domestic power, radically altering the dynamics of household relationships" (Davies, 177). In a time when young girls were especially lacking in social influence, this was a way of reverting attention back to them, upsetting the pre-established notions of what it meant to live in the family home.

I believe, therefore, that it is important to view the idea of haunting in a social and domestic setting as also being a feminist issue. "The Yellow Wallpaper" focuses heavily on issues of the home and the social dynamics women have historically faced inside of it. Women have had a long history of living with limited privileges, especially when it



Pictured: In progress works from "The only places we'll let ourselves go"

comes to bodily autonomy, and this still happens in many places and in many forms throughout the world today. And many of these issues (among others, such as issues of domestic violence)



Pictured: The House of the Seven Gables from the series “The only places we’ll let ourselves go.”

are dealt with behind closed doors in the privacy of one’s home.

Growing up with a close friend suffering from mental illness, I saw first hand what happens when your home becomes a place of entrapment, instead of a comfortable and safe space. In my research, I also spoke to

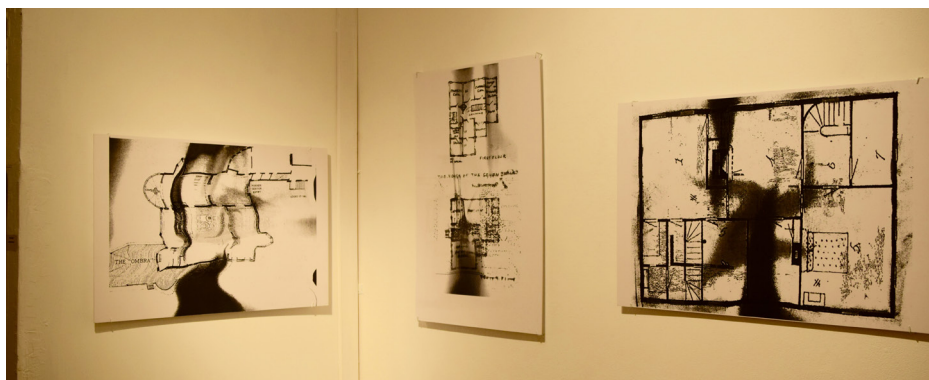
Pictured: The Lizzie Borden House (top) and Mark Twain House (bottom) from the series “The only places we’ll let ourselves go.”

people who told me stories of individuals living in homes they believed to be haunted, and at their worst they would purposefully seclude themselves within their home. If the ghost is in the living room, they would never again step foot there. If the ghost was upstairs, only the first floor became livable. What happens when the home, out of your control, becomes a prison? I became fascinated with this idea of the home becoming a space so foreign to the person living inside it that they no lon-

ger feel safe. What fascinated me even more, however, was that this feeling can often only be felt by the individual going through this experience. What may seem totally rational to someone becomes irrational to an outsider.

As with "What's theirs isn't always ours," I was interested in continuing to look at maps as a way of explaining and exploring the paranormal in the home, but also as a way of exploring what happens when a home becomes unrecognizable to the individual living inside. However, instead of creating my own maps, I used pre-existing floor plans - maps of the home and therefore of domestic spaces - of important cultural and historic locations within New England: The House of the Seven Gables, the Mark Twain House, and the Lizzie Borden House. All three have ghost stories attached to them, but equally as important to me were the

historical aspects of each home directly relating to New England. I was inspired by mediums such as spirit photography, which dates back to the 19th century and used double exposure to create a photograph that had one clear image and one blurry, distorted one. I created repetitive glitches in each floor plan, both through breaking the image's code on my computer, and by running the images through a copy machine while twisting, shaking or ripping it. After nearly hundreds of repetitions, I achieved three images that became so distorted only small moments of their original form peek through. I had little control over the glitches that were created, and the glitches seem to create new patterns and shapes each time they're viewed. In this way, I aim to question what is real in these images, and what, through the repetitive process of glitching, is made up.



Pictured: The series "The only places we'll let ourselves go" pictured hanging in Gallery 66 in Cummings.

"Ghost stories appeal to our craving for immortality. If you can be afraid of a ghost, then you have to believe that a ghost may exist. And if ghosts exist, then oblivion may not be the end."

- Stanley Kubrick

SAFETY VERSUS DANGER

With the history of ghosts and ghost stories of the New England region in mind, I wanted to learn more about individuals who not only believe in the paranormal, but chose to spend a large majority of their time working in the paranormal community. Striking a balance between working a job during the day and having a separate passion is a feeling everyone can relate to, regardless of what their job is and where their passion lies. I was interested, therefore, in learning more about the people who are a part of the paranormal community, where their interest in the paranormal stemmed from, and how they incorporate their passion for the paranormal into their everyday lives.

Through getting to know Connecticut College's Campus Safety Sergeant Shamus Denniston, I was introduced to, and later joined, the Thames Society of Paranormal Investigations (TSPI). I was interested in learning more about TSPI for a variety of reasons. First, the



Pictured: Screen grab from “Ghosts,” showing Shamus Denniston during our interview in Palmer Auditorium.



Pictured: Screen grab from “Ghosts,” showing Stephanie Sutera during the home investigation.

group has strong connections to both Connecticut College and the larger Southeastern Connecticut community. Besides Shamus, TSPI has two more Campus Safety officers in their team, Todd Radley and Harrison Fortier, as well as a recent graduate, Grant Kokernak '12. The team often uses Connecticut College as a kind of starting point; whether that is to carpool to investigations, or to conduct training sessions in Palmer Auditorium. Beyond this, however, I was especially interested in getting to know the members of TSPI because of the wide variety of experiences they all bring to the group. They work in numerous fields throughout Connecticut and Massachusetts, but they have all been brought together by their shared interest in the paranormal. They dedicate substantial amounts of their time to not only conducting investigations for clients' residential homes and businesses, but also to sustaining TSPI as a business and a brand, and are working to break more

into the larger paranormal community.

Though you can't unlink TSPI from ghosts and the paranormal, I wanted to create an art piece that was more focused on the members of TSPI as individuals, the ways in which they find balance in their lives, and how their past experiences have led them to be interested in the paranormal. Inspired by documentaries such as "The Cave of Forgotten Dreams," and David Gelb's 2012 documentary "Jiro Dreams of Sushi," I wanted to create a piece that was somewhere between an art piece



Pictured: Screen grab from the home filmed in "Ghosts."

and a documentary. Both of these documentaries present people in unusual circumstances; Herzog brings the viewer into the almost-entirely closed off Chauvet Cave in Southern France, while Gelb profiles Jiro Ono, an 85 year-old man from Japan who is considered to be the greatest living sushi chef. Neither are everyday occurrences nor jobs most people find themselves in, however they are both presented in ways that are relatable to the viewer. Herzog weaves in stories of both the people who lived in the cave tens of thousands of years ago with the lives of the contemporary researchers who work in the cave; Gelb masterfully depicts Jiro's drive, passion and need for perfection in crafting sushi, as well as the family dynamic between himself and his two sons, who are also chefs. Though not everyone is a researcher in a 32,000 year-old cave, a world famous sushi chef, or a member of a paranormal investigation team, certainly everyone can relate to issues such as

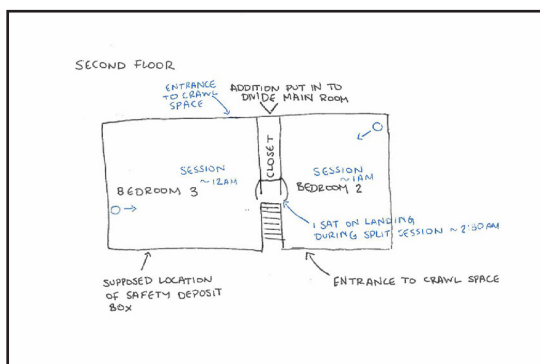
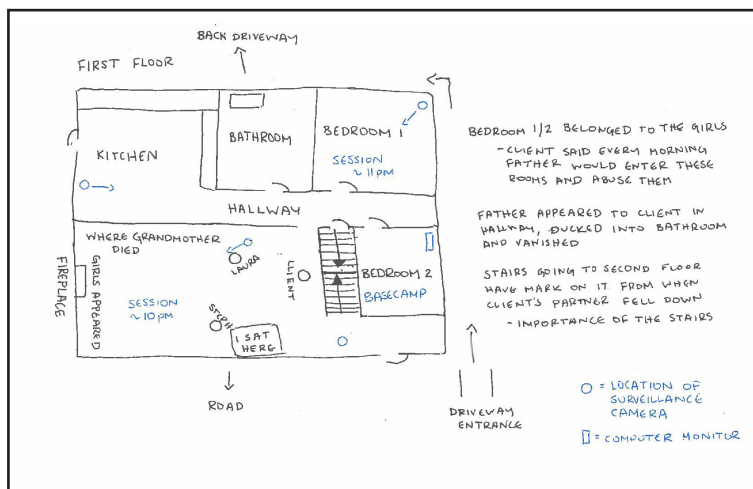
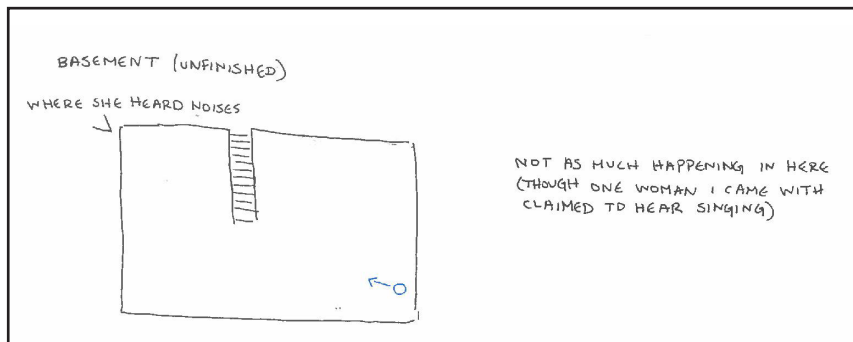


Pictured: Screen grab from a surveillance-shot for "Ghosts."

balancing family and work life, or striving for perfection in your passion. I aim to discuss these questions in "Ghosts.," the documentary-style piece brought forward by these considerations.



Pictured: Images of "Ghosts." installed in Gallery 66 in Cummings.



Pictured: Hand drawn maps from the home the team investigated while filming the documentary.

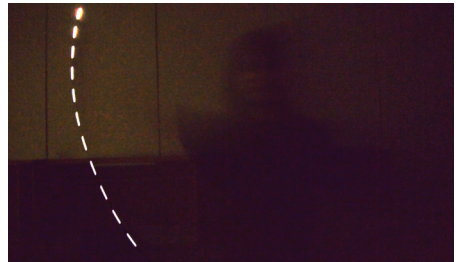
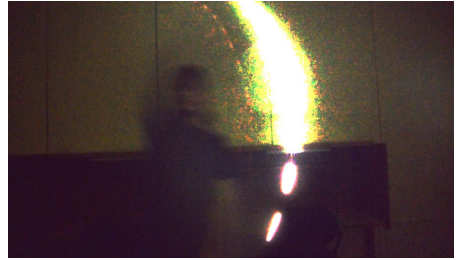
“One further consequence of this notion is that the living feel some continued responsibility for their dead, some obligation to fulfil their possible needs. Hence, graves are tended, prayers said, anniversaries observed.

- PG Maxwell-Stuart, “Ghosts: A History of Phantoms, Ghouls & Other Spirits of the Dead”

IMAGINED
VERSUS
REALITY

Through my time as an investigator-in-training with TSPI, one aspect of the paranormal world, as described by the investigators I talked with, took me by surprise: the investigators claim that ghosts often do simple, sometimes mundane tasks day in and day out. As if stuck in an infinite time-loop, they can repeat their days over and over again, for better or for worse. Thinking about my own daily routines, words such as “ordinary” and “boring” came to mind when reflecting on making my bed in the morning, brushing my teeth, tying back my hair, folding my clothes, among many others. The irony of a ghost going through these same routines seemed, if anything, humorous.

Maxwell-Stuart described this idea by saying: “Societies from very ancient times to modern have also had in common the notion that in some sense their dead form a community which is an extension of the living. They inhabit, as it were, a separate but connected country which the living may glimpse from time to time through the medium of individual and often familiar visitors: a mirror existence whose laws, customs, and modes of behavior are disturbingly like ours. Hence, ‘death is not the opposite of life but rather a weak form of it, and the dead, in however attenuated a form, retain many of their own distinctive features and characteristics which they had in life. No doubt they are shadows of their former selves, but still it is of their



Pictured: Screen grabs of early light tests for “An unremarkable evening.”

former selves that they are shadows” (Maxwell-Stuart, 11). Based on this description, ghosts can often be seen as retaining the individual qualities that they possessed when they were alive, perhaps not even realizing that anything has even changed.

One consistent question that has come up for me throughout this process was how do I literally represent ghosts in my artwork. Are they wearing a white sheet? Are they creepy? How do I show a ghost without being cliché? How do I even show a ghost at all, when they look like so many different things to so many different people – and to some people they may not even exist at all?



Because humans and ghosts are so intrinsically linked, it made sense to use a human form as the basis for the representation of the ghost. And, because it was my own routine I was questioning when creating “An unremarkable evening,” I felt that using myself and my own body as the form would be a way of self-reflecting on my routines, and my thoughts on the paranormal in general. Using a series of small LED light bulbs taped to my arms, chest and face, I recorded my movements by doing what is, to me, one of the most mundane actions one can perform in the home: folding and putting away laundry. The combination of the recorded lights, as well as effects placed on the video footage, gives the figure a ghostly, yet recognizable appearance and motion that we can all relate to.

Pictured: Images of “An unremarkable evening” projected in darkness in Gallery 66 in Cummings.



Pictured: Still screen grabs taken seconds apart from "An unremarkable evening" to show changes over time.

"BUT IN THE PLACES WHERE [THE WALLPAPER] ISN'T FADED AND WHERE THE SUN IS JUST SO - I CAN SEE A STRANGE, PROVOKING, FORM-LESS SORT OF FIGURE, THAT SEEMS TO SKULK ABOUT BEHIND THAT SILLY AND CONSPICUOUS FRONT DESIGN."

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

INSIDE
VERSUS
OUTSIDE

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the unnamed female narrator directly recounts her experience to the reader of moving with her husband John, a doctor, to secluded mansion. Suffering from an illness (possibly post-partum depression), she is forced to stay in her bedroom with the idea that doing nothing, disguised as relaxation, will improve her condition. Bored, lonely, and confused, she begs her husband to let her leave, but he insists she remain in the house. The room she stays in is covered in horrific yellow floral wallpaper, and as the story goes on she becomes more and more fixated on the yellow wallpaper, and eventually the woman she sees inside of it. Her mental state continues to diminish as her fascination and obsession with the yellow wallpaper increases. The story reaches its dramatic height in the last scene, during which John walks in on his wife tearing the wallpaper off the walls in a psychotic frenzy, attempting to free the woman inside. He faints, and falls to the ground,

Pictured: Close up of a wall panel from “The walls have a story to tell you.”



Pictured: The two wall panels from “The walls have a story to tell you.”

signifying the end of the story.

“The Yellow Wallpaper,” as stated earlier, touches on numerous themes, including the treatment of women, issues surrounding their mental and physical health, home and marital dynamic, and what happens when the real and the imagined come face to face and are no longer clearly defined. As the narrator continues to see a woman in the wallpaper, her interest in this imagined being becomes stronger than

her grasp on reality. One interpretation of this scene is that the narrator sees herself in the wallpaper and is attempting to free herself from the home which imprisons her, her husband who refuses to help her, and a society that allows for this all to happen.

My interest in walls combines the way they represent physical and emotional barriers, as well as domestic struggle and violence when they're destroyed. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story that is both seeping the ghostly echoes of mundane moments of every day life (that I wanted to get across in "An unremarkable evening"), as well as intense, dark moments of domestic violence and a lack of bodily autonomy for women. In "The walls have a story to tell you," I wanted to make a sound installation that, by using average sounds found inside any home, created a feeling inspired by the idea that houses can seemingly hold energy, and that the walls of the house have seen and experienced years of many inhabitants and what they bring into the home. The sounds include water rushing inside a pipe, footsteps inside a stairwell, a coffee grinder, and a toilet flushing, among others. On a constant loop in the background are general house and room tones, setting an obvious location of a domestic setting in a subtle way. Moments of quieter, understated sounds are followed by louder, closer sounds. The sounds bounce between walls, as if the walls are having a conversation you

are suddenly, unexpectedly, caught in the middle of it all.



Pictured: Full length shot of a panel from "The walls have a story to tell you."

CONCLUSION

Throughout this process, I have aimed to challenge myself to think critically and creatively about the meaning of ghosts, haunted spaces and the paranormal. I worked to explore the impacts and meanings of ghost outside of the typical horror movie setting, and into more nuanced locations such as history, the home, and even a bit into our own college campus. I aim for my work to be relatable to everyone, even if they don't believe in ghosts. Issues of the home, of walls, of history, of domestic routine and mundane irony are relatable to everyone, even if it's so subtle that it's hard to recognize.

I found myself both challenged and excited about the freedom that working on this type of project gave to me. I found that my work grows and evolves over time, and that the only thing I find harder than starting a piece is finishing it. The five pieces you just read about in this booklet and hopefully experienced first-hand in the show have each gone through numerous iterations and forms before reaching the finished state you see them in now.

Many people have asked if I believed in ghosts going into this project, and what my opinion is now that I've reached the close. To be honest, I wasn't sure if I believed in ghosts at the start, and I still find

myself questioning and searching for answers. I think both skepticism and belief are healthy and normal and good, and they walk hand in hand with one another. I love thinking about ghosts, talking to people about ghosts and hearing their experiences with them. In many ways, I have viewed this thesis for me as a way of learning to ask questions I've always wanted answers to, but never found the courage to ask in the first place. I have come to realize this project as a year-long listening exercise, usually starting with "so, how do you feel about ghosts?" This project, as much as it was about ghosts, is even more so about people, about their childhoods, their interests, their experiences, and their beliefs. And that's what I'm really interested in.

In the end, when it comes to ghosts, the only thing I know for sure is that I'm still deciding for myself. And I think that's just fine.

COLOPHON

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