

BORDERCROSSINGS

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ISSUE NO. 163 \$15

M A T E R I A L





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1. TG Hamilton, *Séance laboratory photo equipment, both banks, 1929–1930*. Bill and Jean Wither Collection. On loan from the Survival Research Institute of Canada, Victoria. Courtesy Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo: Walter Meyer zu Erpen.

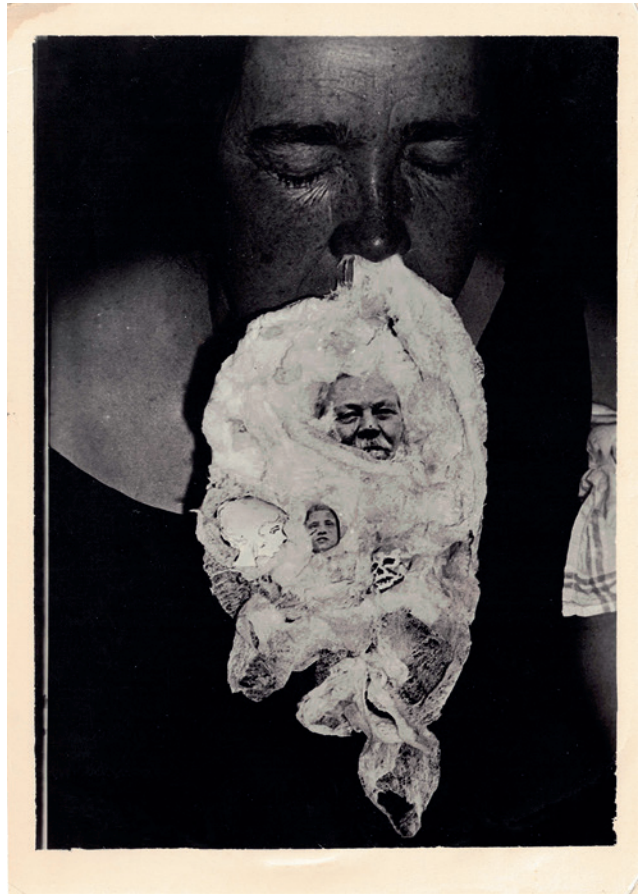
2. TG Hamilton, *Katie King appearance from medium Susan Marshall, 1930*. Bill and Jean Wither Collection. On loan from the Survival Research Institute of Canada, Victoria. Courtesy Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo: Walter Meyer zu Erpen.

3. TG Hamilton, *Lucy materializes with medium Mary Ann Marshall, 1930*. Bill and Jean Wither Collection. On loan from the Survival Research Institute of Canada, Victoria. Courtesy Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo: Walter Meyer zu Erpen.

4. TG Hamilton, *Second ectoplasmic appearance of Arthur Conan Doyle from medium Mary Ann Marshall, 1932*. Bill and Jean Wither Collection. On loan from the Survival Research Institute of Canada, Victoria. Courtesy Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo: Walter Meyer zu Erpen.



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5. Erika DeFreitas, *Teleplasmic Study with Dollies (Angie No. 5) (detail)*, 2010–2023, archival inkjet print. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg.

6. Installation view, "The Undead Archive," 2023, Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Courtesy Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo: Karen Asher.



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The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts

by Alison Gillmor



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Eerie, evocative, alluringly weird, “The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts” is a multivene investigation that hovers around a central subject: the Hamilton Family Fonds, a collection of photographs, papers and artifacts that document the séances and psychic investigations held between 1918 and 1945 at the Winnipeg home of Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, a prominent local physician, and his wife, Lillian Hamilton, a nurse.

Serena Keshavjee, a curator and art historian at the University of Winnipeg, brings together some of that archival material, which is held at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections, with the work of 25 contemporary artists. Related programming included talks, panels and performances, as well as the publication of a book of scholarly essays, *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg’s Ghost Photographs*, edited by Keshavjee (University of Manitoba Press, 2023). It’s a mountain of material, but the issues, after all, are literally life and death, with art and ideas that explore the strange liminal spaces between the material and immaterial.



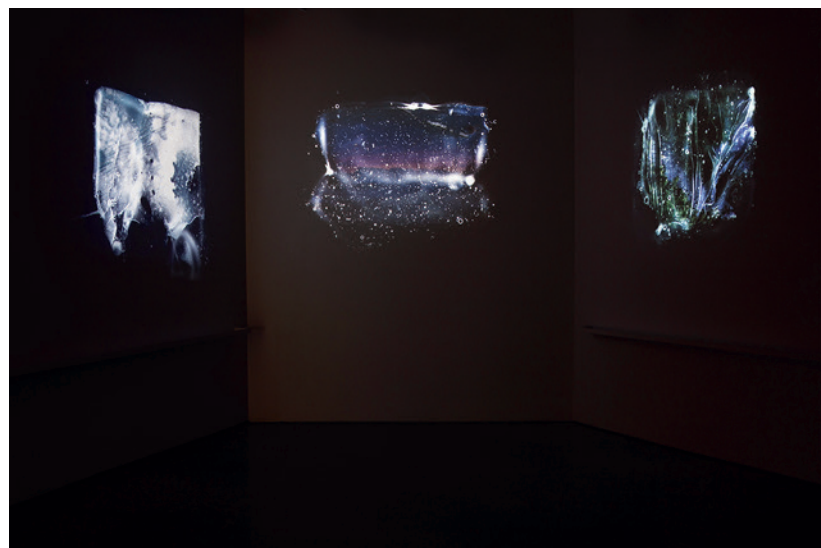
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TG Hamilton called his photos of mediums surrounded by ectoplasmic clouds “monstrously extraordinary,” and there is something mesmerizing about these images, which function in “The Undead Archive” as both important historical documents and influential works of visual culture. According to archivist Shelley Sweeney, one of the book’s contributors, the Hamilton Fonds are the most requested of the U of M Archives’ personal collections, drawing in both radical skeptics and true believers. Digitized in the early 2000s and made available online, the images have been used by artists, filmmakers, writers and social historians far beyond their home city.

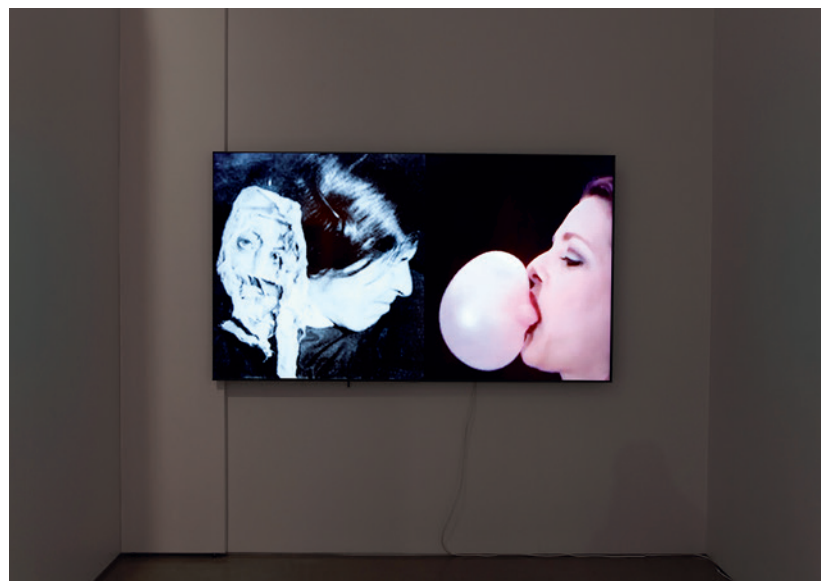
In these photographs, we see mediums—the Hamiltons relied on three working-class women, Elizabeth Poole, Mary Marshall and Susan Marshall—who seem at first reassuringly solid and ordinary. Their eyes, though, are closed or rolled back or staring sightless, and from their noses or mouths pour white gauzy webs. Sometimes small floating faces of the dead appear, sometimes a pale ghostly hand.

For many viewers, these photographs are manifestly fraudulent—quaintly incompetent collations of cheesecloth, cotton wool, crude cut-outs and plaster of Paris. For others, though, they are positive proof of life after death. That, perhaps, accounts for the images’ abiding interest—that they are read so differently by different viewers, both in the Hamiltons’ time and in our own. A puzzle of meaning and interpretation, they speak from one era of epistemological crisis to another.

As the Victorian world gave way to the changes of the next century, psychic researchers like the



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Photos: Karen Asher

1. Installation view, “The Undead Archive,” 2023, Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Left to right: Teresa Burrows, mixed media, *From One Century’s Pandemic to the Next* (detail), *We Want To Tell You That We Love You*, *Ectoplasmic Selfies*, 2020–2023.

2. Megan Moore, *Ectoplasms*, 2019, three-channel video installation (colour, sound, 20 m, 57 s).

3. Wendt + Dufaux, *Ectoplasmic studies*, 2021–2023, HD video (colour, sound, 4 m, 16 s). Collection of the artists.

4. Installation view, School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba. Left to right: Paul Robles, *Murmuration (Clump)*, 2022–ongoing, cut origami and hologram paper. Chris Dorosz, *Séance Room*, 2021–2023, acrylic paint on hung monofilament, wood support.

5. Paul Robles, *Murmuration (Clump)*, 2022–ongoing, detail.

6. Chris Dorosz, *Séance Room*, 2021–2023, detail.



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Hamiltons wanted to use scientific methods to establish the truth of discarnate spirits, relying in particular on the technological developments of photography. (TG Hamilton owned a roomful of expensive, state-of-the-art photographic equipment.) The resulting images might look like contrived hoke to many contemporary viewers, but even in 2023, we haven't really sorted out the question of how photographic images function as both subjective expression and objective evidence. Photography's spooky position between the immaterial and the material persists in our own time of digital manipulation and deepfakes.

The other factor in the photos' potent pull is emotional. Whether you consider the images fake or real, the sense of loss and the yearning for meaning that underpin the Hamiltons' paranormal project are undeniably authentic. The couple's interest in establishing the survival of the spirit after death intensified after the loss of their three-year-old son, Arthur, during the 1918 to 1920 Spanish flu pandemic. The Hamiltons and their circle were dealing not just with the aftermath of a deadly disease but with the shocks and dislocations of World War I and the effects of the Winnipeg General Strike, which had exposed deep economic inequalities and social divisions. Looked at through this lens, ectoplasm can be seen not just as a representation of the afterlife but as the manifestation of an anxious age. Again, that sense of crisis reaches across the decades to our own time, which happens to offer uncanny equivalents of pandemic, war and societal breakdown.

In "The Undead Archive," the link between the historical material and the contemporary artwork feels unforced and compelling. For Keshavjee, the Hamilton séances themselves can be seen as a form of interactive performance art: they used visual effects, music and sound, ritual and repetition. The 21st-century artists respond by playing up the spectacle of the séance, playing around with the sculptural malleability of ectoplasm, and leaning into the innate spookiness of photography, video and even virtual reality.

In *Séance Room*, Chris Dorosz, an artist based between San Francisco and Winnipeg, used shards of acrylic paint hung on hundreds of invisible monofilament threads to suggest that solid reality is in fact permeable and shifting. Inspired by Dorosz's own experience in the Hamiltons' house, the work responds to the presence of the viewer with a hidden, vibrating energy.

Estelle Chaigne, a French artist who works in performance and photography, designed temporary tattoos of spirit photographs that were applied to the backs of black-clad performers. These tattoos reference "dermographia," a form of automatic



skin writing that was used in some séances, but they also recentre and re-embody the role of the mediums, who in the Hamiltons' time were both essential and overlooked.

Keshavjee relates that the Hamilton séances began in the family parlour but eventually moved to a locked room upstairs, which TG called his laboratory. This relocation was representative of a larger shift within the Spiritualist and psychic research movements. Many practitioners wanted to take the process out of the realm of messy female emotion—grieving mothers searching for their lost children—and into the masculine sphere of rationality and rigour. Guests at the Hamilton séances included some of Winnipeg's most powerful men—lawyers, doctors, clergymen, politicians—while the mediums were working-class women, seen as mute, passive vessels, the female objects of the controlling male gaze.

Toronto-based Erika DeFreitas picks up on these issues in her large-scale photographic works. In

Teleplasmic Study with Doilies, the artist photographs herself with closed eyes, her mouth stuffed with the frills of riotously coloured crocheted doilies, made by the artist's Guyanese grandmother and mother. Here, this handmade "ectoplasm" becomes a signifier of women's invisible labour and silence.

Mediums often appeared to be in physical pain as they extruded ectoplasm, raising comparisons to the labour of birth and the spasms of hysteria. Montreal artist Megan Moore represents this action as an agonized externalization of internal meaning in her multi-channel video installation work *Ectoplasms*. The work tracks the close-up degradation of a photographic surface as it is burned by chemicals, releasing hazy, ephemeral clouds and floating, morphing shapes, in a process that is both destructive and hypnotically beautiful.

Other works call up the continuing spectre of colonialism. Historically, settler society has suppressed Indigenous spirituality, while appropriating, exoticizing or falsifying many of its aspects

Estelle Chaigne, *Surfaces sensibles*, 2022, digital prints. Collection of the artist. Courtesy School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba. Photo: Karen Asher.

for its own uses. (This tendency can be seen in the popularity in Spiritualist circles of so-called Indian spirit guides to the other world.) In *Journey to the Spirit Realm*, Winnipeg-based KC Adams, of Anishinaabe, Inninew and British heritage, honours Indigenous practices of death and mourning with the crafting of a clay spirit vessel, using traditional techniques. Adams also recreates a ceremony in which the smoke of a sacred fire rising to the sky helps guide the spirit homeward. She does this using virtual reality, placing each participant at the centre of an immersive three-dimensional space that exists within but somehow apart from the rest of the gallery. There's a mysterious quality to this technologically mediated experience. As photography might have seemed to the Hamiltons, VR feels like an uncanny fusion of science and magic.

Some of the works respond to the pandemic. During the COVID lockdown, Winnipeg artist Paul Robles's cut-paper images of birds, monkeys, snakes and fish multiplied on his studio's walls. He describes *Murmuration (Clump)* as a representation of his unconscious mind, an upwelling of family stories and folklore along with expressions of grief and trauma. In its whirls of intricate, expanding organic beauty, this work can resemble bursts of ectoplasm, but in the shadow of COVID, it also calls up clouds of airborne contagion or a virus replicating itself.

In *From One Century's Pandemic to the Next*, Teresa Burrows, an artist based in Thompson, Manitoba, makes the connections explicit, creating a triptych of female faces—herself, the Hamilton medium Mary Marshall and Dr Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, who became the face of the country's COVID response. Tam is caught at an awkward moment in this black and white image. With eyes raised and mouth slightly open, she resembles a medium offering oracular speech during the pandemic's early days of uncertainty. Another work, *Contagion*, creates a kind of religious shrine to Tam, using beading to re-create a rapid antigen test, flanked by ectoplasmic clusters of beaded COVID virus particles.

Some of the artists are just having fun with ectoplasm, with its endless plastic possibilities, its weirdly indeterminate nature. Science-minded psychic researchers viewed ectoplasm as a vital organic force or a kind of universal ether, but because it was excreted from orifices, it also had unexpressed and very earthy associations with mucus, saliva, feces, vomit. As Keshavjee notes, Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the hyper-rationalist detective Sherlock Holmes and also a devoted Spiritualist, described ectoplasm as “soft, jellylike and full of life.” Magician Harry Houdini, a ferocious debunker of Spiritualism, referred to séances as “flap-doodle

stunts” and labelled ectoplasm “revolting.” The 1984 movie *Ghostbusters* popularized the idea of ectoplasm as gross but also funny, a sort of slapstick punchline.

Winnipeg jewellery artist Tricia Wasney made an ectoplasmic ring, at once solid and of otherworldly delicacy, as an homage to TG and Lillian Hamilton. Teresa Burrows used glow-in-the-dark beads and vintage gloves to replicate ghostly ectoplasmic hands. *Ectoplasmic Studies* by Montreal-based artists Wendt + Dufaux worked the line between the pleasurable and the disgusting, the ethereal and the abject. With a thrumming soundscape and found footage, this ASMR-packed video (autonomous sensory meridian response) depicted the pushing pulse of materials—creamy, foamy, bubbly, slimy, gauzy—as they move and swell and transform. Sometimes the process is squishy and fun, like brightly coloured foam shooting out of a bottle. Sometimes it's repulsive, like gelatinous fatty ooze squeezing from a flaming hole. Sometimes it's the happy release of hundreds of balloons or it's the environmentalist dread of spreading toxic smoke or floating plastic rubbish.

The “Undead Archive” is a significant addition to the lore of “weird Winnipeg,” a haunting reminder of the esoteric undertow that runs beneath the city's official story. In 1923, Conan Doyle arrived in Winnipeg to deliver a lecture (illustrated by magic lantern slides, a suitably spooky technology) about the persistence of the spirit after corporeal death. He also attended a séance at the Hamilton home. He later wrote: “I came away with the conclusion that Winnipeg stands very high among the places we have visited for its psychic possibilities.”

The notion that Winnipeg is a kind of spooky epicentre of the continent has persisted, finding mythically eccentric expression in touchstone works like Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg*. It can be seen in both the dark strain of Prairie Gothic that explores submerged traumas and buried histories, and in a more comic mode that celebrates the inexplicable and the oddball. This investigation and exhibition look back over a century of strangeness, but with conceptually layered works and unusually enthralling background material, they also call up the ghosts that haunt us now. ■

Alison Gillmor is a freelance writer and educator based in Winnipeg.