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Review

The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts. Gallery 1C03, Winnipeg, MB

BRETT LOUGHEED

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The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts. Gallery 1C03, Winnipeg, Manitoba, September 7 – November 10, 2023; University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, Manitoba, September 21, 2023 – April 21, 2024; School of Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, September 21 – November 10, 2023. Curated by Dr. Serena Keshavjee.

BRETT LOUGHEED

University of Winnipeg Archives



FIGURE 1 *Installation view of The Undead Archive, Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg. Photo by Karen Asher.*

The University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba jointly kicked off the spooky season this past fall with the launch of an expertly curated exhibition featuring artistic impressions of séance photography uniquely displayed alongside the archival material that served as its inspiration.

The Hamilton Family Fonds at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections is widely recognized as one of the premier archival collections of psychic research in the world. The records document the experiments of Dr. Thomas Glendenning Hamilton and Lillian Hamilton, who applied the scientific method to their studies on the existence of life after death – specifically whether “personalities could survive corporeal death and, given the right circumstances, communicate with our world.”¹ The photographs in the fonds purportedly document psychic phenomena, séance participants in deep trance states, and the existence of ectoplasm, which the Hamiltons believed to be the foundational element of life – a mouldable substance like potter’s clay that could bridge the physical and spiritual worlds and facilitate communication between the two.² Ectoplasm can be seen emanating from the orifices of mediums or floating above them, often taking shape in the form of faces, gloved hands, or words – photographic evidence of spirits communicating with the living.

The Hamilton Family photograph collection is one of the most widely used and referenced research collections at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections. Brian Hübner, in his doctoral dissertation, traces the ways in which the Hamilton photos have been used in film, popular print-based works, scholarly works, and art. He claims that scholars or artists reusing these records in the creation of new works communicate their own meanings upon them, often “moving outside accepted uses and meta-narratives.”³ He goes on to argue that each reuse of the material adds a new, inextricable layer of meaning to the original records that will persist and must be reckoned with by all future users.⁴

1 Serena Keshavjee, introductory didactic panel, *The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts*, 2023, Gallery 1C03, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

2 Keshavjee, introductory didactic panel, *The Undead Archive*, 2023, School of Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

3 Brian Hübner, “‘The Ghostly Shadow’ in the Archives: An Archival Case Study of the Creation and Recreation of the Hamilton Family Fonds at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections” (PhD diss., Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2020), vii.

4 Hübner, 148.



FIGURE 2 Top row, left to right: T.G. Hamilton, *Ectoplasm with image of Raymond Lodge* from medium Mary Ann Marshall, October 27, 1929; T.G. Hamilton, *Amorphous mass* from medium Mary Ann Marshall, March 24, 1929. Bottom row, left to right: Manuscript automatic writing in pencil on six loose sheets of paper (numbered 1 through 6); T.G. Hamilton, *Katie King appearance* from medium Susan Marshall (detail), November 12, 1930; T.G. Hamilton, *Finger through ectoplasmic mass* from medium Mary Ann Marshall, November 12, 1933. Photo by Karen Asher. Source: All items in this photograph from Bill and Jean Wither Collection, on loan from the Survival Research Institute of Canada.

The latest person to engage in meaning-making with the Hamilton Family photographs is University of Winnipeg history of art professor Dr. Serena Keshavjee. Keshavjee is the curator of an ambitious multi-site, multi-format art exhibition featuring and inspired by the Hamilton Family Fonds titled *The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts*.⁵ The exhibition comprises

⁵ Keshavjee has also recently published a companion book, which is also reviewed in this issue of *Archivaria*. Serena Keshavjee, ed., *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2023).



FIGURE 3 Erika DeFreitas, *A Teleplasmic Study with Doilies (Angie No. 5; detail)*, 2010–2023, archival inkjet print. Collection of the artist. Source: Photo courtesy of the artist.

archival records displayed alongside contemporary responses to the records, from a series of artists, in three separate venues. This collection of artists and their work, curated by Keshavjee, adds further meaning to the original photographs through artistic commentaries. Keshavjee's enthusiasm for the project and the source material is evident and infectious. The exhibition is brimming with energy (psychic or not).

At the Gallery 1Co3 venue, Keshavjee centres photographs of ectoplasmic manifestations from Hamilton medium Mary Marshall⁶ in vitrines and adorns the gallery walls surrounding them with multi-media art installations. The artists attempt to recreate ectoplasmic materializations using various formats while adding contemporary commentary to their work. Estelle Chaigne creates stereo-

6 These photographs were contributed by the Survival Research Institute of Canada and appear to be duplicates of photographs from the Hamilton Family Fonds.

scopic prints of a recreated séance on glass, while Grace A. Williams recreates a similar scene in her video installation. Shannon Taggart purports to commit the actual conjuring of ectoplasm to film for the first time. Ectoplasm is recreated in beautiful textile forms such as crocheted doilies, woollen felt jewellery, and glow-in-the-dark beaded gloves by Angela DeFreitas, Tricia Wasney, and Teresa Burrows, respectively. DeFreitas's grandchild Erika DeFreitas engages further with her grandmother's creations in a series of photographs in which she mimics Mary Marshall's expression of ectoplasm by simulating this with doilies that emerge from her mouth, eyes, and ears (apparently without ever seeing the Marshall photographs for reference – spooky!). Keshavjee notes in a didactic panel that, by emulating the medium, who was most often female, these female artists “call attention to the sometimes-exploitative use of female mediums by scientists, restricted gender roles in the 20th century, and the persistent surveillance of women by the camera's lens 100 years ago and continuing today.”⁷ Burrows's work is also featured in a mixed-media installation featuring images of herself, Mary Marshall, and Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, all wearing similar deep trance-like expressions and connecting the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic that influenced the Hamiltons' experimentation⁸ with the recent COVID-19 pandemic – a theme that repeats throughout the exhibition.

The material on display at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections showcases archival records that highlight lesser-known elements of the Hamiltons' séance experimentation, including the early adoption of flash photography in recording the séances; the composition of the séance laboratory in their home; the international reach of Dr. Hamilton's research; and the women involved in this research, including Hamilton's wife and daughter, Lillian Hamilton and Margaret Hamilton Bach, and mediums Mary Marshall and Elizabeth Poole. These records provide insight into the roles of technological advancements; the scientific method; and the compassionate and powerful, yet previously unheralded, feminine influence on these experiments. Again, contemporary recreations of imagery from the Hamilton Family Fonds accompany the historical record. Irene Bindi, Aston Coles, Celia Coles, and Martin Finkenzeller painstakingly recreated the conditions of the Hamilton séance laboratory

7 Keshavjee, Introductory panel, *The Undead Archive*, 2023, Gallery 1C03, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

8 The Hamiltons' son Arthur died in 1919 of influenza. This incident is said to have been instrumental to the Hamiltons' desire to communicate with the dead.



FIGURE 4 *Introductory vitrine at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections installation evoking the séance laboratory at Hamilton House. This installation includes materials from the Hamilton Family Fonds as well as the textile artwork *Our Lady of the Ectoplasm*, 2020–2022, by artist Teresa Burrows, Czech glass beads and cheesecloth stitched on fabric. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Karen Asher. Source: Courtesy of the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba.*

and recorded their reactions to the “psychic phenomena” occurring in front of them. The resulting photos are displayed alongside the Hamilton photographs they are intended to replicate. A scene from *My Winnipeg*, a film directed by Guy Maddin with his collaborators Evan and Galen Johnson, highlights the filmmakers’ unique cinematic spin on séances held at Hamilton House. And Teresa Burrows’s exquisite beadwork, adorning a black velvet cape displayed in a showcase window, presents a shockingly accurate representation of the head of Mary Marshall.

The exhibition further engages artistically with the Hamilton Fonds photographs at the third venue, the School of Art Gallery, where few archival records accompany the artistic expressions, save for a display dedicated to Dr. Hamilton’s psychical research library. The works of artists featured at this venue demon-



FIGURE 5 Sarah Wendt and Pascal Dufaux, *Ectoplasmic Studies*, 2021–2023, HD video (colour, sound, 4:16). Collection of the artists. Photograph by Karen Asher. Source: Courtesy of the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba.

strate the global impact of the Hamilton photograph collection on artistic representations of spiritualism. Through a simulation of a séance involving a medium resembling Mary Marshall, Northern Irish artist Susan MacWilliam's video installation asks its audience to consider the role of the camera in psychic research.⁹ French photographer and artist Estelle Chaigne has reproduced Hamilton's photographs of mediums as temporary skin-transfer tattoos and adhered them to the backs of women, creating a series of photographs that comment on the gendered labour involved in these experiments. Video installations by Canadians Sarah Wendt and Pascal Dufaux and American Jodie Mack use found footage and stop-motion animation, respectively, to create playful

⁹ This wasn't MacWilliam's only contribution to the exhibition. Her entry into the 2009 Venice Biennale, *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*, which explores the ectoplasmic manifestation of the name of a French psychic researcher during one of the Hamilton séances, was also on display at Gallery 1C03.

simulations of ectoplasmic manifestations that use everyday materials – such as mucus from a sneeze, a wad of bubble gum, children’s slime, and other household items – in commentaries on capitalism and the camera’s role in spiritualist photography.

The installation at this third venue also emphasizes rituals of grief and bereavement in the work of artists Teresa Burrows and KC Adams. Burrows, whose work is featured in all three venues, further engages with the Hamilton photographs as tactile objects, this time through digital prints on fabrics in colour palettes symbolic of spiritual and cultural bereavement practices, which honour her late mother. In a virtual reality installation that reflects on Indigenous spiritual customs and beliefs, KC Adams, a Manitoba artist of Anishinaabe, Inninew, and British heritage, allows the visitor to assume the role of someone preparing for a loved one to enter the spirit world. The grief experienced by survivors of the COVID-19 pandemic is also evident in the work of Paul Robles, whose intricate hanging paper designs, assembled during the pandemic, are reminiscent of ectoplasm and recall imagery from the Hamilton photos.

Through its various simulations of séances and ectoplasmic manifestations, the exhibition succeeds in breathing new life into the Hamilton photographs. It is particularly effective in resurrecting the reputations of the mediums involved in these experimentations, who were previously disregarded as uneducated and unimportant and relegated to supporting roles in the Hamiltons’ story. Visitors to the exhibition gain new understanding not only about the prominent roles played by the mediums, Lillian Hamilton and Margaret Hamilton Bach, in the séances at Hamilton House and the formulation of this photograph collection but also about how the labour and significance of these women were systematically marginalized in previous accounts. Visitors also learn about grief and the impacts of pandemics; the hidden influence of technology and the camera operator’s bias in the creation of photography; the changeable nature of scientific fact and methodology; the wonder, awe, and communal experience of participating in a séance; and the ethereal beauty of ectoplasm. All these new layers of understanding must now be applied to the original photograph collection in our continual reinterpretation of the collection’s meaning.

As archivists, we are taught that we cannot fully comprehend a record without knowing the context of its creation. By presenting artistic works alongside the original archival material that inspired them (the context of their creation), *The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts* not only respects this context

but also creates additional layers of context by which future generations might understand the original material. Like ectoplasm taking the shape of figures from the past and yearning to speak to people in the present, these new layers of understanding provide a bridge that allows records from the past to communicate new truths to the users of today.