



Georgiana Houghton  
*The Eye of the Lord* c. 1860s  
courtesy of the Victorian Spiritualist Union

BELIEVE NOT  
EVERY SPIRIT,  
BUT TRY

THE SPIRITS

Monash University Museum of Art

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Georgiana Houghton  
cover: *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ 1862*  
courtesy of the Victorian Spiritualist Union

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## BELIEVE NOT EVERY SPIRIT, BUT TRY THE SPIRITS

Marco Pasi and Lars Bang Larsen

This exhibition takes as its departure point the art of forgotten Victorian-era Spiritualist Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884), and features contemporary and historical painting, sculpture, video and photography that both explore and adopt Spiritualist practices and methodologies. Georgiana Houghton, born in the Canary Islands in 1814, spent most of her life in London. She received some formal training in art as a young girl, but gave up her artistic practice in 1851 when her younger sister died. In the early 1860s, after she became acquainted with spiritualism, she began to produce a series of “spirit drawings” as a medium. She claimed that the spirits, who were calling her the “Holy Symbolist” and had announced a great spiritual mission for her, were guiding her hand when drawing. The result was a stunning series of pencil drawings and watercolours that were very different from both the mainstream and the spirit art produced at the time. She developed a visual language where all figurative elements gradually disappeared, leaving complex patterns of lines, shapes, and colours. All her works had a specific meaning, which the spirits also communicated to her. In fact, she used to write long texts describing and interpreting the drawings on the verso. However, no visible objects could be recognised in most of the pictures. They were, in a word, “abstract” *avant la lettre*. In 1871 she rented an art gallery in London and exhibited 155 of her works, which she saw as an important message to humanity, both in a spiritual and in an artistic sense. She took great care in preparing the exhibition and the catalogue, personally welcoming visitors and engaging in conversation with them about the meaning of her revelations. From a commercial point of view, though, the exhibition was a failure that almost ruined her. In the following years, she still continued creating her drawings and later also began to collaborate with photographer Fredrick Hudson, with whom she produced a series of spirit photographs, a particularly fashionable practice at the time. Her experiences with Hudson and spirit photography were later presented

in her 1881 book, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings*.

Houghton’s drawings were born out of a powerful experience of religious communion, in which she felt an immediate connection with what she called the “unseen world.” But her works (many of them preserved in Melbourne, at the Victorian Spiritualist Union) are remarkable for us today especially because they represent the result of a unique research anticipating the development of abstraction in the twentieth century by artists such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, or Malevich. Houghton seems on the other hand to present interesting analogies with Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), who was also a medium and began painting abstract works under the perceived influence of spiritual entities around 1907. After being rediscovered in the 1980s, af Klint is now internationally appreciated as a crucial figure of twentieth century art. However, Houghton developed her complex aesthetic practice at least *forty* years earlier than af Klint and – unlike the latter, who never showed her spiritual art publicly – was keen on presenting her work in a mainstream artistic institution such as a commercial gallery.

On the rare occasions in which Houghton’s drawings have been presented to the public after 1871, they have been usually included in the context of art brut, or outsider art. It is important, however, to keep in mind that there is a much broader context in which her artistic work can be understood and appreciated. The creative process that was at the basis of Houghton’s practice poses very interesting questions that have to do not only with art history, but also with psychology, philosophy, and with gender and religious studies. At the same time, these questions can be used to make Houghton’s works engage in a conversation with other artists of the past, and also with artists of today. This is why the present exhibition doesn’t only take Houghton’s works as its subject matter, but places contemporary and historical works in dialogue with one another to let hitherto unarticulated elements of Houghton’s work emerge and become visible. For instance, the problem of agency and dissociation that seems to be at the core of Houghton’s practice was also one of the defining aspects of Surrealism, and can be found again in a number of contemporary



Georgiana Houghton  
left: *The Many Mercies of the Lord* 1864  
right: *The Strength of the Lord* 1864  
courtesy of the Victorian Spiritualist Union

artists, such as Matt Mullican and Susan Hiller.

In this way, contemporary artists reach out to a dimension of Western art and thinking that has often been marginalised by twentieth-century historical accounts. Where an institutional context was problematic for the work of Georgiana Houghton, contemporary artists have the benefit of working from within an art system. However the practices and cultural history of the occult in many ways remain a tainted reference, also for artists who work with it today.

No doubt the motivation of contemporary artists to work with Spiritualism and mediumistic practices differs greatly from that of Houghton, who lived in an entirely different historical and religious context. Mullican, for instance, relates paranormal phenomena not to the existence of higher entities but to uncharted activity of the human brain – an aspect of cognition, in other words. Other artists in *Believe not every spirit* present their research in the cultural history of Spiritualism, investigate its technologies and morphologies, or employ channeling and automatism as creative procedures, without necessarily engaging with the metaphysical doctrines that were so meaningful for Houghton.

The occult embodies a sensual imaginary that tests the limits of the visible. One can call the culture of the occult a non-visual culture: It describes a withdrawal from the regime of visual identification, and, from a contemporary point of view, defies the easy exchange

of images in our world of proliferating screens. It is clear from the works in the exhibition that spiritualistic phantasmagoria may be used to inquire into the materiality of things and objects, because it offers a vocabulary and a dramaturgy for the imperceptible. It is concerned with strange, affective appearances, and detects relations between bodies where there doesn't seem to be any: every shake of the table during the séance becomes a signifying micro-drama; every shudder of the medium becomes an intelligible gesture. Hereby we can forge connections to non-human realms and, ultimately, to the fact of death.

The title of the exhibition is a quotation of a quotation. It is originally from the First Epistle of John (4:1), and is quoted by Houghton in her autobiographical book *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*.<sup>1</sup> The reference to the biblical verse, which was not uncommon in spiritualist literature, is an indication of the anxiety that communication with the other world could cause in mediums such as Houghton. In the end, whatever the ultimate source of such communication may be, this exhibition shows that it was well worth “trying” the spirits and pluck, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s words, the “strange and beautiful flowers” of heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance. Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, first series, London: Trübner & Co., 1881, p. 5.

