

QUEER PARANORMAL

(an exhibition concerning Shirley Jackson
and *The Haunting of Hill House*)

Bennington College
October 29-December 7, 2019

Artists

Peggy Ahwesh
APRIORI
Anna Campbell
Tony Do
Lana Lin
Susan MacWilliam
Macon Reed
Senem Pirlir
Zoe Walsh
Sasha Wortzel

Installation Sites

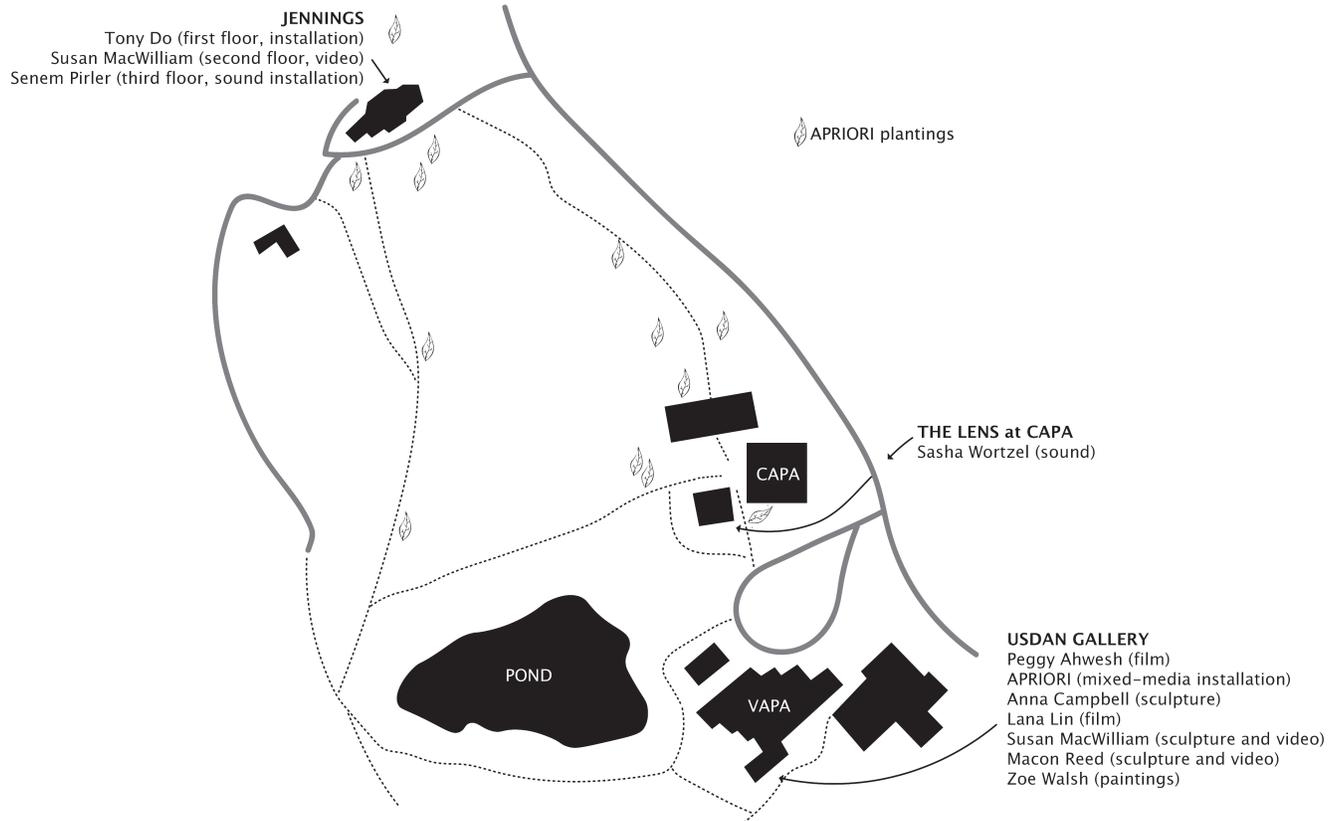
Usdan Gallery
The Lens at CAPA
Jennings music building

QUEER PARANORMAL is a project of the Two Chairs curatorial collective, with Anne Thompson, director and curator of Usdan Gallery.

Made possible with support from Culture Ireland.



Campus map of artwork locations



Queer Paranormal (an exhibition concerning Shirley Jackson and *The Haunting of Hill House*)

This exhibition includes a range of artistic practices haunted by historical, political, and sexual difference. Framed around Shirley Jackson's classic novel *The Haunting of Hill House* and its 1963 film iteration, Queer Paranormal explores the limits of the corporeal, the architectural, and the ontological. The works and ideas we've assembled form productive relations and identifications among artists, theorists, the author, her novel and the subsequent film.

The setting of Jackson's narrative is an alleged haunted house, in which a scientist has staged a gathering of susceptible strangers to find evidence of the supernatural. Described in the film as "an undiscovered country waiting to be explored," the house is the locus of an indeterminate force that disrupts the hegemonic ordering of the symbolic through the superimposition of the paranormal along with a queer rerouting of desire. Asserting that the paranormal is queer opens up a range of possibilities in relation to its routine constituent—the normal—as Olu Jenzen and Sally Munt describe in *Paranormal and Social Change*:

Sitting aside—maybe astride—the normal, its parallel purpose is to be askew, to perform a queer reflection, to uphold a distorting mirror. It is therefore in perception that social change begins. Being able to think or to see "otherwise" proffers imaginative forms, potential forms, ghostly forms even. Because we are always other to ourselves, the paranormal pushes out that which can be seen or known, and hence dynamics of alterity can take hold. Take possession of us. Make manifest the strange. Mobilise affect and collective embodiment. Embody the spirit of change. (i)

Both housebound and visionary, Jackson was a longtime resident of North Bennington, while her husband taught at Bennington College. There she wrote seven novels and short story collections, three works of nonfiction, and three children's books, all while raising four children and struggling with the pressures of the prevailing domestic ideology. As Jonathan Lethem (Bennington, '86) writes about Jackson:

The relentless, undeniable core of her writing . . . conveys a vast intimacy with everyday evil, with the pathological undertones of prosaic human configurations: a village, a family, a self. She disinterred the wickedness in normality, cataloguing the ways conformity and repression tip into psychosis, persecution, and paranoia, into cruelty and its masochistic, injury-cherishing twin. (ii)

In addition to being a PTA member and faculty-wife, Jackson was the author of the acclaimed and shocking short story "The Lottery," published in *The New Yorker* in 1948. In her following short story collection, which with the "The Lottery" included stories that explored the tyranny of heterosexual relationships in mid-century America, Jackson added selections from a seventeenth-century book on witchcraft, Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus*, to introduce each section. Jackson's interest in witchcraft was well known and occasionally derided. Much to her dismay, editors and publishers used it to promote her books, offering an easy target for certain reviewers to slight them. W. G. Rogers wrote: "Miss Jackson writes not with a pen but a broomstick." (iii) Yet her writing practice, incorporating her interest in magic, witchcraft and the paranormal, was a way to transcend the constraints of marriage, which, for Jackson, meant at times the disintegration of (her)self. She writes: "Just being a writer of fiction gives you an unassailable protection against reality." (iv)

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, main characters Theo and Eleanor are emphatically not married. Theo is a sophisticated, fashionable lesbian who, in the film version, wears clothes by designer Mary Quant, while Eleanor resembles a tired Hollywood lesbian stereotype: the spinster. The interaction between Theo and Eleanor, each of whom embodies the paranormal through their individual abilities or experiences in the realm of the supernatural, is key to Jackson's novel and our exhibition. For example, their contact takes a queer turn in the scene where Eleanor reaches out in the night for Theodora's hand only to find that the hand she's been holding is actually an apparition manifested by Hill House. That moment of misaligned contact signals the original thought that prompted this exhibition, where our lines of inquiry intersect. What Jackson has provided is a masterful ghost story that embodies for us what José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, characterizes as the way something "might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening." (v)

Both hope and fear, Muñoz explains, "are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory." (vi) Eleanor, in particular, experiences both: hope that being invited to participate in a parapsychological study will enable her to move on to a more exciting chapter in her life, and fear of what that chapter might be—fear all the while compounded by the supernatural goings on in Hill House. Or, as Jackson writes in her notes for the novel: "The house is Eleanor." (vii)

It is important also to consider the telepathic Theo. In “The Canny Lesbian,” the concluding section of Patricia White’s 1991 paper “Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: *The Haunting*” concerning the 1963 film adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House*, White hints at a way forward for feminist film theory:

In developing a feminist film theory which would incorporate Theo, we might recall the model of spectatorship she offers in the film. Telepathy, to lesbians and gay men as historical readers and viewers, has always been an alternative to our own mode of paranoiac spectatorship: Is it really there? (viii)

White touches here on our path to the queer paranormal, anticipating Muñoz’s “queer visibility . . . We may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now.” (ix)

ARTISTS AND EXHIBITION THEMES

Haunted House, Haunted Past

In Anna Campbell’s 2018 installation “*You know it pisses you off . . . **” Campbell’s use of ornate “ribbioned” marquetry text suggestive of opulent interiors is used here on wood panels installed to suggest urinal dividers in a dive bar. The text consists of excerpts from the English translation of Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*. The use of dividers embodies the split subject suggested by Wittig through the narrator’s use of the slash between m and y (m/y), where two lesbian bodies disrupt bodily boundaries and seemingly deconstruct each other. Dive bar bathrooms traditionally have been sites for sexual encounters, but Campbell’s lengthy title suggests a memorial function as well. The title character, Sandy, is haunted by memories of writing on bathroom walls as a closeted lesbian at a moment when the bar was the only place where she could be “out,” resulting in her bitter refusal to partake in the possible pleasures associated with expanding horizons of queer subjectivity.

Campbell’s “*I have nothing to declare except my genius,*” said Oscar Wilde to the customs agent. (2017) is a set of bronze fig leaves recognizable as traditional devices used to cover the genitals of nudes in paintings and sculptures, often applied centuries after a work was executed. Applied or removed as public and bureaucratic sentiments moved back and forth

between the censorious and the progressive, their metonymic presence references the ideological relations that are ongoing in display between art and audience. The intention is, perhaps, to imagine or conjure a viewer in need of “protection” from some *other*, a viewer who, like Jackson’s Eleanor, might otherwise be compelled to “put her hands over her eyes” when confronted by a “marble statuary piece” that “was huge and grotesque and somehow whitely naked...” (x)

Campbell notes as well a crucial reference that binds this work to contemporary LGBTQ discussions surrounding gender:

Concurrently, the complex politics of exposure prompt recognition of the violence in defoliation. This is especially so at a moment in which “biological sex” is perverted to mean not the range of biological diversity in regards to a spectrum of sexual characteristics, but rather an immutable, “true,” and binary classification that has the effect of an invasive cis-sexist kudzu. In such a moment, armor that is both affective and made of metal may be necessary.

In Zoe Walsh’s paintings, architectural spaces and figures emerge uncertainly from layers of translucent cyan, magenta, and yellow acrylic. In this series, the photographic source materials are stills from the set of the 1984 gay porn film *Ramcharger* that Walsh found at the ONE Archives in Los Angeles. While searching through archives, Walsh notes the “serendipitous encounter,” a discovery that stimulates further investigation and digital manipulation for a series of paintings. They cite Elizabeth Freeman’s book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* as providing an approach for thinking about the pleasure inherent in such encounters: “Freeman theorizes the possibility of alternative relationships to history and develops the idea of ‘erotohistoriography’ in which ‘against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times.’” (xi) The paintings explode their origins by articulating a trans-subjective space both tangible and abstract.

The photographic sources, while queer, are haunted by masculinity. Through Walsh’s interventions, hyper-masculine cowboys appear genderless. Steve Garlick queries whether “gendered identities are the equivalent of haunted houses melancholic structures inhabited by the lost other?” (xii) If this is the case, Walsh has developed a methodology rooted in abstraction that counters the melancholy in favor of investigating “the pleasures, dichotomies, and varied materializations of trans-subjectivity.”

Sasha Wortzel’s work resurrects queer histories that are buried or under-celebrated. Her works in this exhibition use poetic means and the human voice to “haunt” us with two such narratives.

In 2012, just before Hurricane Sandy, Wortzel researched the life of Julie Mindler, the only female sailor to be admitted, in 1965, to Sailors' Snug Harbor home for aged sailors on Staten Island. At Snug Harbor, Wortzel developed a series of projects under the umbrella *Eight Bells* (2013). As part of this research, the artist organized a "séance-like sea shanty gathering and recording session." The resulting audio, *Siren* (2013), performed by eight women, is transmitted in the CAPA Lens on campus (and, incidentally, in the only land-locked state in New England). Wortzel explains, "Eight bells is a nautical euphemism meaning finished. It signaled that a sailor's watch on the ship was over, [and] the death of a sailor is also marked with the ringing of eight bells." This sonic work "references time as ongoing, cyclical, and collective. Created with eight voices, it sounds singular yet is plural/collective/they. It is the echo and reverberation of the eighth bell, a bell that is ongoing, constant, a hum in the background, underwater, subterranean. . . ." The dreamy and shifting drone soundscape lures us into an altered state of attention as we attempt to decipher something at the edge of legibility, a conjuring of distant but resonant histories.

Wortzel's video *We Have Always Been on Fire* (2018) features artist Morgan Bassichis performing a sorrowful song (which he wrote) while standing on ocean dunes in early morning light. The scene, shot in a part of Fire Island that has long been a queer gathering place, is intercut with archival footage by queer nightlife documentarian Nelson Sullivan shot in 1976, preceding the AIDS crisis. Though the piece operates as a celebration of queer culture and an elegy of loss, an additional layer of meaning emerges in the thematic context of witchcraft in the exhibition. The condition of being "on fire" can thus be read as a sign of persecution. The culture's slow response in finding a cure for the AIDS virus was, essentially, a death sentence for many in the queer community.

Senem Pirlir's audio installation, *Unearthly Vibrations* (2019), directly evokes how the paranormal made its presence known in the Hill House narrative: sudden sounds and movements that seemed to come from the walls were expressions of the house that dared to speak the unspeakable. Here the sounds are amplifications of electromagnetic energy, played over speakers in the third-floor corridor of Jennings. Electromagnetic energy pervades the environment via our many technologies but is usually undetectable. When made perceptible, the rhythms and intensities seem to have an unpredictable logic. Pirlir has heightened the presence of this unseen energy through the overt intervention of recording—via audio and video—a collection of vibrators in a fish tank. The playful campiness of the animated sex toys make explicit the forbidden erotics that are repressed or merely implied in Jackson's story. As the artist herself articulates, the situation enabled through amplifying these vibrating others is "an opportunity to listen to their queer desires. . . . How do

these nonhuman bodies move and what do they sound like when they are not controlled by human bodies? What can we observe about queerness by listening to them?"

Tony Do's wall installation in Jennings—*The Eye of Providence* (2019)—consists of hundreds of lenticular prints of a "blinking eye" that appropriate and alter eyes depicted on the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States and on the U.S. dollar bill. Says the artist: "This project seeks to both enchant and alienate the viewer by suggesting an intersection of power corresponding to divine benevolence as well as to the "evil eye" of state-corporate surveillance." In this context, the blinking eyes echo the "eyes" of Hill House as described by Dr. Montague, the paranormal investigator in Jackson's novel: "It watches. The house. It watches every move you make." (xiii) Dr. Montague's observation eerily references surveillance technologies today that track our movements with cameras and through our constant interaction with GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple). Whereas the queer paranormal gaze is destabilizing (and not ontological), the state corporate gaze is a disciplinary and heteronormative apparatus; its main purpose is to maximize the capitalist system of production and consumption. The queer/paranormal gaze doesn't necessarily counter capitalism but remains resistant to, somehow outside of, capitalist logic.

Mediums, ESP and Extra-Human Manifestations

Susan MacWilliam's video, *The Last Person* (1998), is an imagined reenactment of a séance conducted by the renowned medium Helen Duncan who, in 1944, was the last person tried and convicted under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. The artist, standing in for Duncan, disgorges "ectoplasm" (white gauze) from her mouth and under her skirt while her hands and feet are bound by rope to a chair. Such restraints were imposed by the "psychical researcher, traditionally male" on "the medium, usually female" in an effort to control the environment of the séance room and lessen the potential for fraud. MacWilliam further explains that these "bodily controls" were often "invasive" and strictly gendered. As the scientist looks on "the medium becomes a body observed, while the medium's body itself acts as an image-producing device." In MacWilliam's reconstruction, the artist is both observer and subject—working both sides of the camera—and she considers her assumption of Duncan's position through reconstruction is an act of empathy in accord with filmmaker Harun Farocki's definition:

Empathy is a finer expression than 'identification,' and the German word *empfinden* has a transgressive overtone. A compound of *eindringen* (to penetrate) and *mitfühlen* (to sympathize). Somewhat forceful sympathy. (xiv)

The artificiality of the individual elements presented as "apparitions" are mediated through photographic means and the desire of the viewer. In both

The Last Person and Pull Down (2016)—MacWilliam’s video “hidden” in Jennings—the viewer is left to interpret the authenticity of what is on view. Looking for something that remains insufficiently present requires us to take an active role in articulating what *might* be there.

In MacWilliam’s sculptural installation *Bookspheres* (2013-14), covers of books concerning parapsychology are made into spheres to suggest telepathic devices like crystal balls. The artist “imagines the book as a telepathic device 'transmitting' information from writer (sender) to reader (receiver).” The dates of publication are clustered around the mid-twentieth century, the era of Jackson’s novel and its subsequent film version.

Peggy Ahwesh’s *Nocturne* (1998), shot in 16mm black-and-white film and with a consumer-grade Pixelvision camera, has a grainy feel that renders the story all the more terrifying, as if we are witnessing a horror film encoded as a home movie rife with genre and gender play. Images of the central character trying to bury the lover she has killed, and then wrestling with his ghost back inside the house, are cut with nature scenes and sounds along with richly textured domestic interiors. A pastiche of philosophical voiceover quotes directs our attention to forms of love unbound from human sentimentality—impulses more akin to the brutal logic of the “natural” world than to traditional notions of twentieth-century desire. A third character appears in the film, a woman whose presence suggests the sophisticated Theo. (The Pixelvision aesthetic gained popularity in the experimental film community in part through Sadie Benning’s diaristic coming out films, which she made as a teenager in the early 1990s.)

Ahwesh’s video *Omedium* (2006) evokes the uncanny of disembodied electronic communication. Email spam—something recent algorithms have partly shielded us from—in the artist’s inbox is the medium and the message. Who is speaking? What otherworldly logic dictates the ordering and timing of these fragmentary communications, sometimes catastrophic, sometimes smutty? Ahwesh’s recasting of these insignificant texts as a performance of authoritative words on the screen, with a dramatic soundscape of noises plus music by Um Kalthoum, amplifies the abject and banal. Dramatic words such as “fire” and “murder” share our attention with crass signifiers such as “Cialis.” The specter of out-of-time incantations of specific topical words from not-too-recent, but not-too-long-ago histories, such as “Bush” and “Saddam,” recalls news cycles tied to wars waged in the Middle East and leverages a collective anxiety over an unwieldy archive and communications underbelly that can erupt at any time.

Lana Lin’s 16mm film *Stranger Baby* (1995) expands the territory of the paranormal through the sci-fi genre and avant-garde film aesthetics in a retro-futurist portrayal of “alien” identity and mis-communication that still feels contemporary in its engagement with outside-the-mainstream forms

of identification. Characters such as a loving extra-terrestrial of indeterminate gender are embedded in a landscape of imagery, rich sound effects, and themes borrowed from 1950s and '60s B movies. Voiceover texts that express a sense of being an outsider, mis-recognized and misunderstood, mirror, in the exhibition context, *The Haunting of Hill House* main character Eleanor's sense of not belonging. This poetic and anxious narrative deftly turns the viewer's layered readings toward immigration and race and gender identity.

Witches and Witchcraft

Macon Reed's video *All the World Must Suffer a Big Jolt* (2016) concludes with a quote by feminist theorist Silvia Federici: "Hundreds and thousands of women could not have been massacred and subjected to the cruelest tortures unless they posed a challenge to the power structure." (xv)

Reed presents the viewer with a candy-colored set and props reminiscent of a puppet show. Human hands emerge from openings in the set, first holding each other and then moving in and out, setting out props and caressing figures hanging over fire from a scaffold. The colorful imagery is interspersed with text that concerns the murdering of witches. Power, represented by a pyramid with a circle, is clumsily dumped onto the stage. We recognize this symbol as the dollar bill's eye of providence (seen as well in Tony Do's installation). Here, it stands in for capital accumulation, which Federici has shown led not only to witch hunts throughout centuries but continues to create a misogynistic context leading to violence against women worldwide. Reed's video is a call to action and a threat through an imagined dialogue with intergalactic ancestors encapsulated in the title: *All the World Must Suffer a Big Jolt*.

In Reed's Brigade, "megaphones" are positioned above cheerleader pompoms unceremoniously dumped on the floor. The artist's intention is to question notions of team spirit, nationalism, and patriotism in a particularly gendered American context. Much of Reed's work reflects on "what it means to belong." Compulsory positivity as optimism shows its toxic side when its expression turns a group into a mob ("Lock her up!"); also toxic is when the need to belong causes injury to self and others through bullying or self-harm. Belonging at any cost is exactly what Jackson's character Eleanor is seeking and finds at Hill House: "Eleanor thought, I am the fourth person in this room; I am one of them; I belong. . . . An Eleanor, she told herself triumphantly, who belongs . . ." (xvi) On the other hand, the megaphones, like spirit trumpets, or the people's microphone of Occupy Wall Street, signal communication and, presumably, protest and rebellion. Belonging for Reed is a call for "collective imagination in response to the growing apathy and isolation inspired by late capitalism."

APRIORI (Efrén Cruz Cortés; Margaretha Haughwout; Suzanne Husky; Elæ [Lynne DeSilva Johnson]; and Gabi Schaffzin) has taken witchcraft into both a more speculative and materially grounded realm. *Notes for Haunting Properties* (2019) is presented as a tableau of resources, software, fieldwork findings, and strategic interventions into the College landscape. APRIORI, a techno-botanical coven, proposes that plants, particularly those with paranormal and healing properties, are in communication with AI (Artificial Intelligence), bypassing the human middle man. For Queer Paranormal, the coven has planted Broom Corn, Flax, Mugwort, Rose and Hawthorn—labeled with stakes—in the field between Usdan and the CAPA building. In the gallery, visitors find interviews with queer witches and plant-centric healers; diagrammed spells; seed packets; and offerings that serve “extra-patriarchal” and anti-capitalist forces. Mugwort, a feral resident of the campus, likely here since Shirley Jackson’s time, has been harvested from the grounds.

Two Chairs



* Full title: Anna Campbell, *You know it pisses you off, because like today, everything is so open and accepted and equal. Women, everyone goes to where they wear slacks, and I could just kick myself in the ass, because of all the opportunities I had that I had to let go because of my way. That if I was able to dress the way I wanted and everything like that I, Christ, I'd have it made, really. Makes you sick. And you look at the young people today that are gay and they're financially well-off, they got tremendous jobs, something that we couldn't take advantage of, couldn't have it. It leaves you with a lot of bitterness too. I don't go around to the gay bars much any more. It's not jealousy, it's bitterness. And I see these young people, doesn't matter which way they go, whatever the mood suits them, got tremendous jobs, and you just look at them, you know, they're happy kids, no problems. You say 'God damn it, why couldn't I have that?' And you actually get bitter, you don't even want to know them. I don't anyway. 'Cause I don't want to hear about it, don't tell me your success. Like we were talking about archives, you know where mine is, scratched on a shit-house wall, that's where it is. And all the dives in Buffalo that are still standing with my name. That's it, that's all I got to show.'*

Kennedy, Elizabeth L., and Madeline D. Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

NOTES

- (i) Olu Jensen and Sally R. Munt, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 187.
- (ii) Shirley Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (introduction), *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 258.
- (iii) Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 258.
- (iv) Franklin, 261.
- (v) José Estaban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 9.
- (vi) Muñoz, 3.
- (vii) Franklin, 415.
- (viii) Patricia White, "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: *The Haunting*," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 169.
- (ix) Muñoz, 22.
- (x) Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 79.
- (xi) Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 95.
- (xii) Jenen and Munt, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures*, 27.
- (xiii) Jackson, 62.
- (xiv) Antje Ehmann and Carlos Guerra, *Harun Farocki: Another Kind of Empathy* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2016) 164.
- (xv) Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Capital Appropriation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 164.
- (xvi) Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 43.

AFTERWORD

Shirley Jackson, “Queer Paranormal,” and the site-specific

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

“One of the peculiar traits of Hill House is its design—“

“Crazy house at the carnival.”

“Precisely. . . . it is a masterpiece of architectural misdirection.”

—Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959

The architectural inspiration for Shirley Jackson’s Hill House—scene of what’s widely agreed to be best ghost story ever written—is a subject of speculation. One popular contender is the Bennington College music building, formerly the Jennings family mansion. It has the advantage of proximity, because Jackson lived nearby, as well as haunted-house bona fides like creaking stairs, twisting hallways, and a creepy basement. On a campus where multiple sites are said to be haunted, Jennings tops the list. (i)

Jackson biographer Ruth Franklin debunks that theory, pointing instead to spooky California houses that appear in the author’s archives; she finds no mention there of Jennings. (ii) And yet . . . because Jackson’s Vermont surroundings undisputedly influenced her short stories and novels (iii), and because architectural details are so central to *The Haunting of Hill House* narrative, it proves irresistible to scan for influences in the built landscapes of North Bennington, where Jackson wrote for twenty years, and the Bennington campus where her husband taught. But forget about Jennings. An odd, maybe even uncanny, coincidence raises a new campus prospect, an unexpected building with a Jackson connection. During the roughly eighteen-month period the author was researching and writing *The Haunting of Hill House*, the college hired an architect and embarked on construction of its new Edward Clark Crossett Library. The novel and the library made their official debuts on the very same day: October 16, 1959. In other words, the library—a “house” for books, as it were—emerged in parallel with Jackson’s book about a house. (iv)

Of course, Crossett could never be a physical model for Hill House. With its large windows, expansive layout, open staircases and crisp, white geometry, the free-standing library appears as a floating beacon. Its architect, Pietro

Belluschi envisioned a space that “would draw students in.” (v) A concrete slab supported by columns lifts the entrance and main floor above ground, and a continuous row of glass underneath brings light into the level below to emphasize this apparent weightlessness. Conversely, Hill House has a dark gothic heaviness. It has a hulking, weighty stone exterior, rooms without windows, a convoluted floor plan that defies navigation, plus a decorating scheme of ornate fabrics, hectic wallpaper, wood carvings and weird statues. The bright and airy Crossett, instead, exemplifies the goals of modernism, the aesthetic philosophy calling for forms and materials selected and distilled to suit the essence of their purpose. Yet modernism itself, the prevailing design style of the moment shared by Jackson’s novel and the library, could provide a conceptual relationship between these two seemingly opposite buildings.

Modernism in the arts flourished at Bennington when Jackson was a faculty wife—significantly, an unhappy faculty wife. *The Haunting of Hill House* has been read as an expression of the author’s torturous marriage and a critique of the suffocations of mid-century domesticity. Could modernism have somehow influenced the shape of that critique? Might the aesthetic and intellectual climate of Jackson’s faculty-wife scene have infused her vision of the ultimate haunted house? It’s intriguing to consider the architecture of Hill House as a crafty subversion of modernist values. On one hand, Jackson’s “masterpiece of architectural misdirection” could be seen as intentionally anti-modern, a jab at the movement’s devotion to rational forms. On the other, Hill House embraces the modernist architectural dictum of “form follows function” in its own sinister fashion. (vi)

The many architectural details Jackson provides flesh out Hill House as a character as vital as the people inside. Imagined and built by its bizarre original owner, the house has odd proportions and angles that are not quite “right.” Stair treads are slanted. Doors won’t stay open. Landmarks that should orient a person trying to find her way around—for example, the front door or a looming tower—can’t be seen from the vantage points one might expect. Entering her bedroom for the first time, Eleanor, the central character, notices with alarm that “the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length.”

Yet however wrongly conceived, Hill House is well made—an important point, made in the opening and closing paragraphs of the novel. Unlike stereotypical haunted houses, turned decrepit and evil by time and things done TO them, Hill House has its badness baked in, solid and meant to last. Its architecture, “not sane,” is malevolent by design, and this gives Hill House a modernist structural integrity. Just as Crossett’s clean lines support the library’s purpose as a place of smooth organization and pleasant

the torqued form of Hill House embodies its function as a “live organism” that destabilizes its occupants and thwarts desires for conventional domestic fulfillment.

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Several factors make Bennington an ideal site for Queer Paranormal (an exhibition concerning Shirley Jackson and *The Haunting of Hill House*). There’s the location and Jackson’s relationship to it—in whatever way that relationship might manifest itself. Also important is the cultural timeliness of how the curatorial group Two Chairs, responsible for the show’s concept, finds connections between the spectral and queerness in Jackson’s novel and its first, black-and-white, film adaptation. With its “queer” construction and unseen forces, Hill House undermines heteronormative relationships in favor of queer pairings, between the main female characters, Eleanor and Theodora, and between Eleanor and the house to which feels she “belongs.”

Two Chairs further complicates this understanding of queerness in its curatorial essay and selection of artworks. The group positions the paranormal as an interstitial, “there-not-there” condition that opens up possibilities for exploration and social change—an idea also present in the work of sociologist Avery Gordon. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon positions “haunting” as a force that emerges from pressure exerted by the repression of content or trauma related to race, gender and class. Gordon also writes that a “haunting demands attention” and, as a result, demands action, a “something-to-be-done.” (iiv) In the context of Gordon’s ideas, queer and feminist readings of Jackson’s novel gain even more traction, as does the reason for bringing Queer Paranormal to Bennington. Queerness and social change are evident topics of urgent concern on the campus. To connect them with the paranormal is a serious and exciting proposition for thinking at and about Bennington, given the College’s progressive and activist roots as well as its ghosts—imagined, symbolic or real.

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Queer Paranormal places artworks in three campus locations: Usdan Gallery, the Lens at CAPA and, yes, Jennings. There are no artworks in Crossett, though it could be argued that the library performs a role in the exhibition as a site for Jackson’s work and for texts about her work. The author has a presence, too, in the village of North Bennington, which celebrates Shirley Jackson Day every June 27 (the fateful date in her short story “The Lottery”) and where the library displays what’s said to be one of Jackson’s cat statues;

she apparently had a collection. Several people in the lead up to Queer Paranormal wondered whether the exhibition, with its artworks about ghosts, witches, and ESP, would conjure a Jackson manifestation. On Halloween, the night the show opened, the gallery hosted a public screening of *The Haunting*. Afterward, close to midnight, North Bennington experienced a blackout. (iiiv)

Anne Thompson
Director and Curator, Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery

NOTES

- (i) An informal poll of Bennington students identifies these campus sites as haunted or believed to be. Jennings; VAPA basement; third floor of (pre-renovated) Commons; Booth House; Swan House; card room in Woolley House; Room 7 in Welling House; the End of the World; the Secret Garden; the “street between Commons and Dickinson”; and the path by Alumnae House leading to North Bennington.
- (ii) Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Norton, 2017), 402-3.
- (iii) Two examples: Jackson’s 1948 short story “The Lottery,” set in a village resembling North Bennington, and the 1951 novel *Hangsaman*, about a college girl who loses her mind.
- (iv) Franklin, 402, 427. Also “Report on Meeting of President Burkhardt and Miss Hopkins with Mr. Belluschi on April 20, 1957”; Bennington College Bulletin: Alumnae Issue. Vol. 27, no. 2, page 24; and “Formal Opening of the Edward Clark Crossett Library, Friday, October 16, 1959” (schedule of events). Documents from Bennington College Crossett Library digital archives.
- (v) “Report on Meeting of President Burkhardt and Miss Hopkins with Mr. Belluschi on April 20, 1957”
- (vi) The full quote: “It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function.” Louis H. Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, March 1897
- (vii) Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *borderlands e-journal* 10:2, (accessed Oct. 15, 2019).
- (viii) On November 5, feminist film theorist Patricia White gave a lecture, titled “Lesbian Hauntings,” as part of Queer Paranormal programming. During her introductory remarks, White asked whether Jackson had made a paranormal appearance yet. Bennington visual arts faculty in art history Vanessa Lyon, who lives in North Bennington near a house once occupied by Jackson, mentioned the blackout.