

## Living with Ghosts

ZOMBIE ZONE: I'M NOT AN EXPERT, BUT I HAVE TO WONDER IF SOMETHING REDEEMING COULD BE FOUND AS  
A WALKING, LIVING DEAD PERSON. I DON'T MEAN FLESH FALLING FROM BONES DEAD, BUT RATHER A  
VIBRANT, DEATH POSITIVE, EVERYTHING AROUND ME IS COVERED IN DEATH SO I SHOULD ACCEPT THIS AND  
BE OKAY WITH IT KIND OF THING. NO?

Tricia Middleton, text from a 'sign painting',  
*The Call is Coming from Inside the House 2010-11*

It's a commonplace of contemporary life that we inhabit a world of ghosts. Vapors of subjectivity haunt images and records, disembodied voices emerge from symbols and signs, passwords and avatars, apparitions lurk behind the 'likes' and 'dislikes' of on-line chatter: we don't really exist in the here and now so much any more, but in the there and then of our hyper-extended, virtual states. It's not a new phenomenon. We've been haunting material life since mechanical writing turned the bodily expressions of the hand into a limited choice of type fonts. The advent of photography merely made our ghostly appearances more performative and ritualistic. It didn't invent the half-life condition. Indeed, the media theorist Friedrich Kittler read Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as an allegory for the value of data mining; the un-photographable, undead evil finally conquered by surveillance and tracking.<sup>1</sup> Our spirit selves have clearly multiplied since then and the apparent gap between phantom world and material world, mind and matter, is much more emphatically pressed.

For over a decade now, Tricia Middleton's art has endeavored to summon the spirits of the material world. Each differently, her works explore the anima of matter, which is not to say she fetishizes things. Rather, her works reflect on the dynamic relationship of ideas and the forms they take: how values are projected onto and engendered by the objects of the industrial age and equally, how they are reflected and effected by the processes and practices of their production. Charting the passages and pathways of such transformation, Middleton's phantasmagorical sculptures and installation works mold amalgams of found objects and detritus, Styrofoam, dollar store *tchotchkes*, cotton balls, dust and candle wax into evocative *mise-en-scène*. With *The Call is Coming from Inside the House* (2010-11), the artist turns her focus from the material consequences of the production process to the

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Kittler, "Dracula's Legacy", *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays*, ed. + introduction by Jhn Johnston, Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 1991.

material consequences of ideation, from the ghosts of the objects of commodity culture to those haunting intellectual life.

Comprised of a series of towering, 'mountain' sculptures and fifty-odd 'signs', set at opposite ends of an atelier-like room, *The Call...*, like Middleton's earlier work, is built from junk. The 'mountains' are formed from the remains of other artworks, what the artist calls 'studio run-off': literally, the dust and debris of her art making, mixed with candle wax, cotton-batting, glue and sparkle dust, among other, now predominantly turquoise things. The 'signs', the ostensible outputs of this site's production, are also made of repurposed materials, in this instance the junk of consciousness: received ideas mixed with quite a bit of colloquial speech. Hand-painted in the artist's own, gothic *light* 'house' font, fragments of political and aesthetic philosophy, the thoughts of great thinkers, predominantly German, and mostly dead—Kant, Nietzsche, Engels and their heirs—are set into an effluvium of fleeting thoughts and creative allusion; it's studio run-off of another type.

Quieter manifestoes for a new aesthetic international,  
Penned by a simple receptacle of many echoes.  
AVAILABLE NOW. PRICED TO SELL.  
Tricia Middleton, text from a 'sign painting',  
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Bridging the language of the manifesto and that of the prose poem, the signs address the state of politics and economics, of the politics and economics of the art world, of ethical and aesthetic judgment and the capacity to care for the self in late-stage capitalism. By turns comic and tragic, outrageous, pathetic and wise, variation in content is matched by change in expressive tone. Hence, the force of any one issue or sentiment, or the clarity of any singular perspective is blunted by the presence of so many voices and sounds. By extension, the coherence of political speech and the possibility of political action are dulled too. That the works are installed *dans l'atelier* suggests that the political objectives of the contemporary laborer-cum-artist-as-producer are likewise compromised. It's quite a gloomy scene.

THE MOUNTAINS ARE SILENTLY JUDGING YOU.  
Tricia Middleton, text from a 'sign painting',  
*The Call is Coming from Inside the House 2010-11*

In juxtaposition, the mountainous sculptures at the back of the atelier initially bring to mind the piles of historical wreckage that Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' saw gathering at his feet as modernity's storm of progress blew him into a future to which his back was turned. Indeed, this would be the angel's view of history. But for the artist and worker the piles of wreckage are both the refuse of history and the results of her own ideation as it is shaped by the history she has inherited and can now change. We are the makers of history and we must make of it what best we can.

Like. Comment.

**the pillows are actually a little too puffy for me.**  
Tricia Middleton, text from a 'sign painting',  
*The Call is Coming from Inside the House 2010-11*

Cheryl Simon, October 2011