

Et al. etc. presents

## *Ghost Stories*

Anthony Discenza

January 18th - February 29th, 2020

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 18th, 6:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Keeping things simple doesn't come easily for Anthony Discenza. Over the past few years, the former Bay Area-based artist (now living in self-imposed exile in Western Massachusetts) has taken to weaving increasingly unreliable narratives around his practice. For "Ghost Stories," his third solo exhibition at Et al. etc., Discenza presents us with a suite of works allegedly made over the course of the past twenty-five years. The catch: none of these works have ever been shown. "Ghost Stories" consists of one-offs and outliers, idiosyncratic departures from the main roads of inquiry the artist's practice has followed. By bringing these works together, we're told, the exhibition is meant to function as a kind of alternate-history retrospective of Discenza's work—coordinate points of a path *not* taken.

Can one be one's own Doppelgänger? In Henry James's "The Jolly Corner," expatriate Spencer Brydon returns to New York City decades after departing for Europe. He has come back to claim his inheritance, the family mansion adjacent to Washington Square, now untenanted and empty. Over the course of the tale, Brydon—a thinly-disguised stand-in for James himself—becomes convinced the house is occupied by some mysterious presence and takes to obsessively stalking the place night after night in the hopes of confronting this phantom. Eventually Brydon gets his wish, finally coming face to face with the ghost, who turns out to be—spoiler alert!—himself. More precisely, the specter Brydon confronts is the image of *who he would have been*, had he remained on the path his family and upbringing had set him on—a strange case of haunting in the subjunctive. In typically Jamesian fashion, a sense of uncertainty hovers over the narrative: is the ghost objectively real, or merely a product of Brydon's mind? But the more unsettling question is, who is haunting who, exactly? Is there an "authentic" Spencer Brydon, and if so, which is the true one? Who, really, is the ghost?

A similar ontological blurriness permeates this exhibition. Are these works in fact what they purport to be, a set of old ideas finally being given a dust-off for a brief day in the sun? Or are they contrivances that somehow impersonate themselves—stand-ins deployed on behalf of an unreliable fiction? Yet unlike Brydon's ghost, the works are still *here*. They exist. Questions of their etiologies aside, they behave as exactly what they appear to be: a set of artworks in a gallery.

What, then, of these works? If this exhibition is in fact comprised of departures from Discenza's primary practice, they don't initially appear to be radical digressions. There remains an interest in appropriation and the use of found materials that can be readily located elsewhere in Discenza's work, as well as gestures towards ephemerality and disappearance. This feeling of incompleteness in the works—the sense of something left out—propels us on a restless circuit around some larger construction; a space intuited only along its edges.

It's here in this unseen space that something stranger and more unsettling begins to coalesce. Amidst the vectors traced between the components of the exhibition, we encounter hints of dystopian, even apocalyptic narratives that reveal a sensibility steeped in the tropes of fantastic and speculative fiction as much as those of contemporary art. Embedded—literally—within such seemingly dry formal gestures as *Boundary Anomaly* lurks a morbid contemplation of geologic time scales and mass extinction. Other clues are provided by titles: *The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories* nods to Pamela Zoline's 1967 story, in which the Second Law of Thermodynamics becomes an extended metaphor for the terrifying alienation of modernity. *Come, Now a Roundel and a Fairy Song*, with its evocation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perversely underscores the motif of the magic circle—a conceptual boundary enclosing enchanted and/or demonic forces—that reappears in different guises throughout the exhibition.

Discenza, who in the past has voiced criticism of contemporary art's over-reliance on complicated academic or research-based backstories to validate its activities, is at the same time clearly an ardent subscriber to the power of fiction, and to the idea that ultimately, a story may be all we have. *All* stories are unreliable, the not-entirely trustworthy conceit of "Ghost Stories" seems to suggest, and yet we must rely on them, because they are our only means for navigating reality. Artworks, themselves a particularly extreme type of unreliable narrative, have for this reason always functioned as ideal tools for the production of the complicated forms of storytelling to which we give such names as *interpretation*, *meaning*, and *knowledge*. Herein lies the paradox that haunts not only this exhibition, but perhaps all lived experience: there must always be a story, but none can never be *the* story.

- Lindsay Selwyn

Works in exhibition. Price list available upon request

*Boundary Anomaly*, 2002

Iridium oxide, spackle

Dimensions variable.

*Afterwards*, 1998

Digital countdown clock, duration of exhibition

*The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories*, 2007

One gallon containers of various liquid products

Dimension variable.

*Come, Now a Roundel and a Fairy Song*, 2019

Ultrasonic plug-in pest control devices

Dimensions variable.

*Study for an Activity*, 2010

Simulaids® Trauma Moulage kit

Dimensions variable.

*Composition in Red and Blue*, 2016

Flat-panel television, Webdriver Torso YouTube channel

*Economies*, 1996

Stack of weekly coupon flyers from local grocery chain, replenished weekly

Dimensions variable.

*Transitions*, 2019

Signal Protect Silver RF/IR shielding film

Dimensions variable