

FALL 2014

JASON DE HAAN: SPIRITS LOOKING AT THEMSELVES



What Do Our Reflections See?

by Dylan Nikolet, Critical Writing Award for Emerging Writers Winner

Jason de Haan's *Spirits Looking at Themselves* is from de Haan's own personal collection and was created in 2010. The work is made with two mirrors, one ordinary, and one that is described in the artist's statement as "haunted". This piece was a part of *From What Remains*, an exhibition curated by Blair Fornwald, at Dunlop Art Gallery from September 19th to November 13th, 2014.

Spirits Looking at Themselves is a conceptual piece. Two mirrors are placed opposite one another on the wall approximately fifteen feet apart, creating a mise-en-abyme effect. Upon looking at one mirror, the reflection of the opposite mirror reflects an image of the first mirror. The reflections of each mirror are visible in themselves and continue on in an infinite fashion. In order to look into the mirror and see the reflection of the opposite mirror viewers must place themselves into the foreground of the mirror. Therefore while looking at the piece correctly the viewers own reflections are replicated infinitely. de Haan proposes that one of these mirrors is "haunted". Both mirrors and their reflections are, however, indistinguishable from one another, making it impossible to tell the haunted reflection from the ordinary one. What exactly are we seeing in the reflection of these mirrors, and what does the notion of "Spirits Looking at Themselves" suggest about how we see ourselves, and how our surroundings survey us?

The suggestion that one of these mirrors is haunted really engages the imagination,



and it is needed to resolve any thoughts this work invokes. de Haan's strategy is simple. He simply plants the seed with the suggestion, emphasizing the individuality of each mirror. Thus, when viewing the mirror and seeing the opposing mirror and the infinite reflections within, one is left to try to distinguish one from the other. Although both reflections appear identical, the emphasis that each one features something distinct is now apparent. Are the individual reflections insight into the viewer and the different attitudes and guises we may convey on a day-to-day basis? One's own individual haunting feelings of anger, fear, and depression may be perceived no differently to the public than their feelings of happiness or contentment. From the public's point of view, usually one cannot truly know the mental state and feelings of other individuals without having insight. Without insight, perhaps people do not appear any different, no matter what their circumstances. But when the idea of haunting is introduced and the idea that one reflection can be different from the other, although they may appear identical, a shift in the paradigm is made.

A "haunt" can simply mean a place frequented by a person, an apt description for a mirror. We are not always in a mirror; we are only in it when we are looking at it. But when we are looking at it, it is not actually us in the mirror — just like Magritte's pipe is not a pipe. Magritte's playfulness with the literality of the words is very relevant in reading de Haan's work and his talk of spirits looking at themselves. What we see in the mirror is not physical, but is merely a reflection. Perhaps the reflection of ourselves can be related to a spirit, all of the qualities

that make us up but are not actually us. That is me in the mirrors reflection, but it is not actually me. de Haan is playing with the idea that everything that is being reflected in the mirrors is an illusion based on the truth. As we look into the mirrors we are seeing our reflection. Our spirit looking at us, seeing its physical self.

The simplicity of this work is what makes it successful. The idea of taking something simple like the mise-en-abyme effect and creating a divergence between the two reflections is brilliant. By using such simple concepts and ideas he makes the experience unique to each individual viewer. After trying to fully understand what the meaning was behind this work and trying to complete my ideas I finally realized that I was looking at it all wrong. I kept trying to relate myself to the work and the haunting of the mirrors, and then I realized that I was the mirror. I was the piece on the wall. Simply by standing in between an infinite number of ourselves, de Haan may want us to look at ourselves, and gives us ample opportunity to do so. And by doing so, he makes the viewer the subject of the piece. The name *Spirits Looking at Themselves* suggests we should look closer at our true selves as a whole. Instead of the rudimentary reflection of the mirror, de Haan is teaching you to see from a whole new perspective. And that perhaps we can relay this idea of seeing ourselves as a part of what is on the wall, to beyond the stretches a mirror's reflection.

CREDITS

JASON DE HAAN *Spirits Looking at Themselves* 2010, haunted mirror, mirror. Photo: University of Regina Department of Photography



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