

**It is now here
that I have
gathered and
measured
yes.**

Erika DeFreitas
May 4—June 8, 2019

**Glowing Objects and the Psychometric Interstice:
An Interview with Erika DeFreitas
by Jennifer Fisher**

In this interview I had the pleasure of speaking with Erika DeFreitas about her investigation of intuitive practices for her new photo-based body of work at Gallery TPW. Producing the work involved rigorous attention to subtle states of attunement. The process involved training herself to remain open to inklings that, as they emerge, might not be visible, and then identifying, distinguishing, discerning, recognizing, and creating with this knowing. Through this, she has developed a practice of reading the energies of objects and trusting feelings of being guided.

DeFreitas describes how, during a residency in a historic country estate in Scotland, she became drawn to experiment with psychometry: the touching of objects in order to intuitively discern details of their history, owners, or the emotions associated with them. How psychometric knowledge is produced is not scientifically understood, but was identified by the 19th-century Spiritualist James Rhodes Buchannan as the ability to read affective signatures or ethereal imprints of artifacts. Working with the auratic qualities of objects in the manor, DeFreitas began to read their energy, laying them out on a carpet, assessing their resonance as she generated a photographic series of arrangements. She describes a practice of “writing through the object”—a kind of

posthumous collaboration in which she opens to the entity of Gertrude Stein as both advisor and artistic muse.

DeFreitas' preternatural investigations have concurrently transformed her own intuitive capacity. Throughout these artworks, the presence of the artist's body in space and the relationships she introduces between elements remain crucial. In addition to working with the affective signatures of objects, she draws from the presence of the interstice, those "in-between spaces," whether observed in the arrangement of objects, the distances between performative agents, the relationality of gestures under a séance table, or the affective bonds of a mother and daughter. This charge of the interval—whether behind, in front of or beside objects—provides the energetic context of relation. Throughout these artworks, intuitive tactility, long marginalized in visualist culture, forms the axis of their production of knowledge.

—Jennifer Fisher

Jennifer Fisher: Do you consider yourself intuitive?

Erika DeFreitas: I'm always hesitant to say yes with absolute certainty. But since I was a kid, I have always been interested in this "otherness" that I felt was present around me.

JF: When did intuition begin to inform your work?



Erika DeFreitas, *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration.*, 2018. Images courtesy of the artist.

ED: Intuition has always been a key aspect of my art practice, but I started to access it directly in 2015 for a work I created for an event at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The work, *the brick and the mortar (that is sacred)*, involved an automatic writing/drawing process where I “collaborated” with Jean-Michel Basquiat. In 2016, Emelie Chhangur invited me to be a part of an exhibition she was curating entitled *Rehearsal for Objects that Lie on a Table*, which drew its curatorial proposition from Gertrude Stein’s 1922 play *Objects Lie on a Table*.¹ Emelie invited artists to produce arrangements that changed throughout the show. This experimental context inspired me to try to “collaborate” with Gertrude to understand her texts. I began to develop a kind of automatic writing process that I call “writing through the text.” Then, to confirm my findings, I “spoke” with Gertrude on the phone through a psychic medium.

JF: Can you describe your practice of “writing through the text”?

ED: I would sit at my computer and write until I felt like I’d lost myself in the moment. There were times when I would feel Gertrude with me. I would have to allow myself to embrace that awareness, as opposed to becoming skeptical. By allowing myself to write, I became enveloped in learning more about her. I believe that Gertrude shows herself in ways that tell me I need to keep going in a certain direction.

JF: Has this intuitive connection between you and Gertrude continued in this new work?

ED: It had been a few months since I had felt Gertrude with me and when thinking about creating this new body of work, I consciously thought that perhaps I wouldn’t be working with her this time around. This quickly changed when I started the process and she made her presence known.

When I was in Scotland for a residency at Hospitalfield,² my intention was to create new work for the TPW exhibition. When I first walked into the residence, which was a castle with period furnishings, they told us—a group of artists and writers—that we were free to walk around the home and make ourselves comfortable. There were artifacts everywhere. It was stunning.

Emelie had given me an article that you had written for *C Magazine* about psychometry.³ I had never heard about psychometry before. I would carry that article around with me, because I felt there was something here. During my time at Hospitalfield, I resolved to use psychometry to produce the work.

During the second week of the residency I was given permission to interact with the artifacts. Eventually, it felt right to document the objects that drew my attention and my interactions with them, creating the suite of



Erika DeFreitas, *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration.*, 2018. Images courtesy of the artist.

photographs called *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration*.

At one point, I took a break from photographing and went for a walk down a hallway and I noticed this little orange book on a shelf. I pulled it out and it was a book on Picasso. I brought it with me to add to my collection of objects. After taking a few photographs, I opened the book at random, and landed on a page with a portrait of Gertrude. That's when I knew I was on the right path.

JF: Your photographs depict the objects you found in the drawers. How did you work with arranging them?

ED: The photographs have a still life quality, but the process of arranging is a way of animating the objects. As I pulled the drawers out or removed items from a cabinet, I started interacting with them. Sometimes I would have to engage in repetitive actions—like organizing them—in order to understand what feeling I was receiving from the objects. During this body of work, I ended up shifting towards writing to the objects, describing my experience. For example, there was an agate brooch that made me feel incredibly anxious, as if nothing good would come of me holding it. I recorded my feeling that holding this brooch caused the woman who had owned it to not be pleased. At this point my reasons for feeling uncomfortable in this building were validated.

The items I worked with included different fossils, specimens of plants, a little scent bottle, a fan, and semiprecious stones that came from locations visited by the couple that had lived in the house. They had their own way of collecting, labelling, and displaying things. There was a porcelain figure that was in one of the cabinets. At the moment when I picked her up, I realized that what I'd been searching for in this building was a reference to my own body. That's when this feeling hit me: "I am not supposed to be here." I don't think the building was ever made with an intention of a black woman being in the space and freely interacting with the objects. I experienced palpable discomfort. Once I understood what it was, I became more confident in knowing that while I may have felt that I didn't belong there, my presence was important.

JF: Is the carpet in background of the photos from Hospitalfield?

ED: Yes. The rug is distinctive to this room.

JF: Using the carpet as a background brings its own history. It appears to be British and machine-made. But, if it were imported, it would bring associations of the rug trade's colonialist history.

ED: One day the Collections Manager showed me an assortment of plaster casts, fragments of sculptures. I brought one of the casts, along with some items I had on my desk in the studio to photograph. Working with

this particular set of objects, I realized that everything was, in some way, a part of the other. I began to see that the leaf that was sitting on my desk was reflected in the foliage depicted in the carpet, the pieces of bark echoed the paper and the pencil, and so forth. The carpet had a greater function than just serving as a background. So, with this layering I began to understand that somehow everything becomes one.

JF: So, in addition to "writing through the text," in which you connected to Gertrude, in your practice of "writing to objects" are you focused on describing the object or letting the words come through you?

ED: A bit of both. For example, after coming across a storage space, I found a few pieces of broken glass—some from chandeliers—that I needed to work with. In this case, I started writing by looking and spending time with the glass, then recounting what I was thinking or feeling in that moment. Sometimes I write what immediately starts coming to mind, rather than investing too much concentrated thought in my words. I wouldn't say it's as free as automatic writing, but there is definitely an aspect of it in what I do.

JF: How did Gertrude appear in relation to this new work?

ED: Well, I began to contact Gertrude about this new work more directly, when previously I felt like I had to communicate with her through the psychic medium. In

the past I tended to second-guess the process of direct transmission, but when I expressed this to Gertrude through the psychic medium, she encouraged me to follow my gut—not just with regard to the circumstances when I felt her with me, but to also trust my instinct with this body of work. This was such a significant moment for me because I knew that what Gertrude wanted me to understand was deeper than what I could adequately explain.

When I spoke with Gertrude, she emphasized the importance of doing my research at the library, using materials from the 1800s—Hospitalfield’s time period—rather than using my computer. When she mentioned that, it confirmed what I had already felt I needed to do.

There was a point while I was writing when it became clear to me that I needed to learn more about colour. I’ve always been interested in colour theory, but never familiarized myself with this subject matter. During my research after the residency, I came across Abraham Gottlob Werner’s *Nomenclature of Colours* (1814); a beautiful little book. Werner, a mineralogist, created this handbook of colour taxonomy for mineralogists, zoologists, and natural historians during an era of global exploration. I was struck to learn that the second edition of this book was updated with actual painted examples by a Scottish painter, named Patrick Syme, and that it was printed in Edinburgh. I took finding this book as a sign that I was on to something. I listen to those little things that others might attribute to coincidence.



Erika DeFreitas, *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration.*, 2018. Images courtesy of the artist.

Werner's descriptions of colour are beautifully poetic. I decided that as I was writing, I would use Werner's nomenclature to help me describe particular colours. I found an original copy in the library of the Royal Ontario Museum, here in Toronto. The colour swatches had been hand-painted and appeared to be hand-cut, and over time some of the colours had changed.

JF: With regard to the assemblages and the way that you're working with objects and putting them into relationships, do you consider this to be in some way curatorial?

ED: Not quite. Interestingly, Gertrude talks about arrangements and compositions. So the idea of the arrangement versus the composition is important, particularly in the work I've been making in the past few years.

JF: Do you distinguish the arrangement from the composition?

ED: The composition does not involve my hand in it. This contrasts with arrangements where I'm actually involved in activating each thing—they're never really still.

JF: So does the arrangement carry the presence of a body?

ED: Yes, however, I believe that the composition is not void of my presence.

JF: And compositions would be just the objects themselves, their photographic documentation.

ED: But it's almost like I never allow them to just be arranged, in a way.

JF: Yeah, you're always messing with them, aren't you?

ED: I am, but not always physically. How I view each composition can change based on new knowledge, so in a way, the arranging continues post composition.

JF: Are you going to be including the writing in the exhibition?

ED: I'm planning on making a little artist's book.

JF: Can you explain how the tactile aspects of psychometry operate in your work?

ED: After the Gertrude Stein exhibition and reading about psychometry through your article, some of the ways that I thought about my practice shifted. It struck me that psychometry played a role in how I collect things. I choose objects because they "glow," in a way. There's something about an object that will contribute to my feeling an urgency to share space with its energy. The tactile aspect is a crucial way for me to become closer to that energy—almost like it can seep into my body.

JF: I want to ask you more about your intuitive process in selecting objects. What happens?

ED: Years ago, I started to collect rocks. It's gotten to a point where there are rocks in my coat pockets, on window ledges in my house, in drawers; they're all over my place. I could be out for a walk and my attention would be drawn to a specific area. Eventually I would bend down and start running my hands through the rocks and it is as if I am letting myself merge with them, in a way. Then there will be that one rock that I fixate on. I realize that it probably looks the same as every other rock, but there's something—it gives off a feeling that I sense in the pit of my stomach.

JF: You're perceiving the rock and the feeling in your gut at the same time?

ED: Yes.

JF: Do you use this process when collecting other things?

ED: I use this process when collecting vintage Virgin Mary sculptures or coloured glassware. I love to go thrift shopping. When I'm lucky, there will be that one special thing that stands out. I've learned that I have to surround myself with things that actually mean something to me—that make me feel something in my gut or a heaviness in my chest.

JF: When at flea markets and thrift stores, what kind of objects attract you?

ED: Anything—most times I'm not looking for something specific. I love going into those spaces! I went to Paris last summer and the flea markets were amazing. There was one huge flea market I attended and it was hard to focus because so many things were glowing. One object I purchased was a viewing apparatus that consisted of an oval-shaped piece of metal attached to a carved piece of wood. The metal had a square shape removed with metal pieces welded along its sides, becoming a slot for a glass slide to be inserted and viewed. I had never seen anything like it before. I was afraid to ask what it cost because I felt like it was something I needed to be with!

JF: Have you experienced specific challenges in producing the new work?

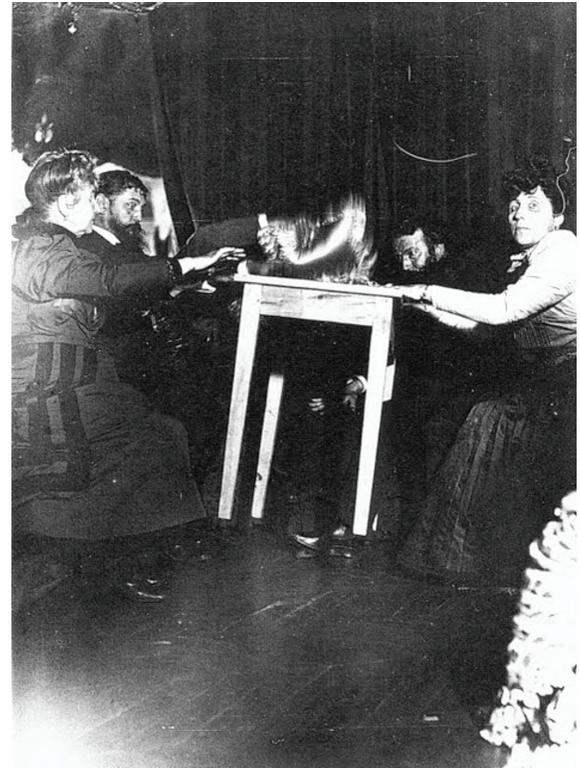
ED: Part of the challenge with the new body of work was to figure out how to put my intuitive process of working with these objects into a greater context. I started thinking about photographs of séances from the Victorian Era and wanted to focus on the objects present in these images. Regardless of how fabricated some of these events were, the objects must carry a particular energy! I collected 26 photographs of séances where tables were levitating for the body of work titled *A stammer inclined still* (2019) which I cropped to center the focus on the table itself.

JF: Why did you opt to mask the images within the circular format?

ED: As I started thinking about the work I wanted to create for this exhibition, I was often inundated with an image of myself drawing a circle, repeating this action over and over again. I don't rationally know why I kept seeing this or why this was an action I needed to perform. I decided to translate the circle to this work as a way of acting like a lens, but I also thought that perhaps it would help to clarify things for me.

JF: The need to draw in this way might comprise part of a mediumistic process. There are some fascinating examples of seemingly-distracted drawings done by psychics on television. Tyler Henry of *Hollywood Medium* typically scribbles as he receives messages from the spirit world. It's a device to get the entities to start flowing through him, a distraction from the thinking mind. Likewise, in her formal sit-down readings, Theresa Caputo of *Long Island Medium* will often doodle on a notepad. I find the drawings themselves interesting. Could your envisioning of the gesture of drawing the circle have revealed ways of treating the table images?

ED: For months I kept thinking about the circle and couldn't quite make sense of it. Then I began working with these images with the tables. I inscribed it in the circle as a way to ground it. What is visible is a digital image transfer, done with acetone. So the quality of the image isn't fully crisp. Sometimes the table is barely visible. I wonder where that table is now?



Hamilton Family fonds (PC 12, A.79.41), University of Manitoba Libraries. *Psychic Phenomena III, #1 - Telekinesis, Table Levitation*. Glass lantern slide, 1875.

JF: At a flea market!

ED: I know. It needs to be in my kitchen! [laughter]

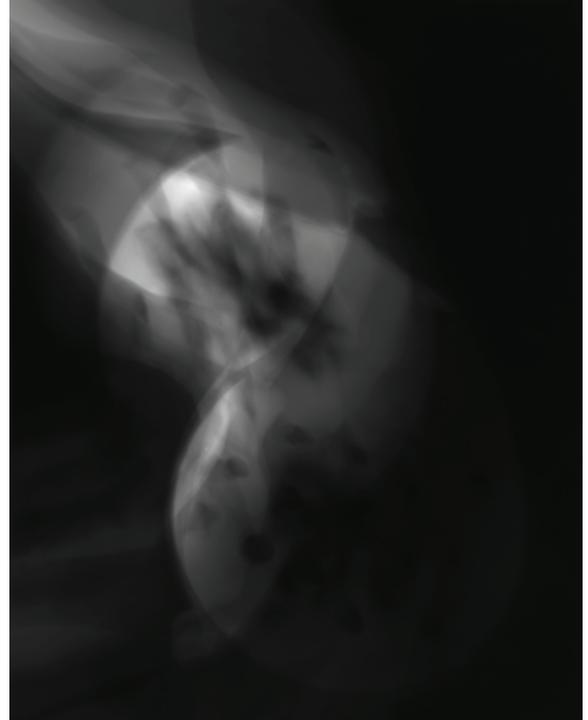
JF: The photogram series *May they or may they seize* (2019) appear to document glowing objects.

ED: I'm interested in auras and trying to understand them. I don't see them the way aura photography typically records them. What I became interested in was the question of whether objects have auras. When I sense objects glowing, my sense is that I might be attracted to its aura. So for this series, I worked in the darkroom with a performative gesture to create the photograms of different objects. There are ten. This experimentation was my way of seeing if I could capture the object's aura—or at least, if not the object's own aura, perhaps recording my aura with the object.

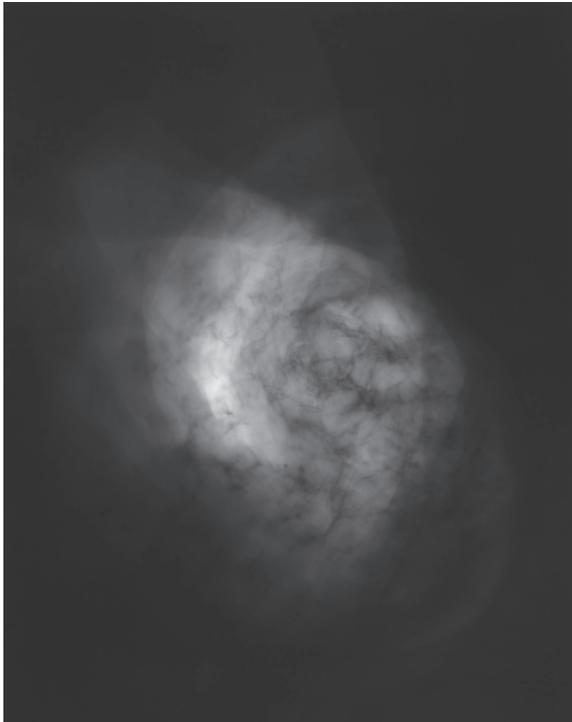
JF: The series *Everything repeats itself but all this has never ever happened before* (2019) draws from photographs of a famous medium Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918) which document her technique of secretly freeing her hand during a séance to produce particular illusions.

ED: From what I understand, she would actually release her hand to do some sort of trick or activate the table to move. Such antics offered an interesting layer to me.

JF: So she was a charlatan?



Erika DeFreitas, *May they or may they seize*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.



Erika DeFreitas, *May they or may they seize*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

ED: There was a lot of speculation around her practices. Skeptics, researchers, and scientists had begun to study her because of the séances she conducted and her ability to levitate tables and other objects.

JF: The séance table images are intriguing. You mentioned that some of these images are from the T. J. Hamilton Archive in Winnipeg.

ED: Some of them are from there. In 2010 I visited his archive at the University of Manitoba and saw these images in the scrapbooks he kept. His scrapbooks helped to highlight the relationship that exists between paranormal activities and the use of photography to document and record these events. Researching his archive was my introduction to the history of Spiritualism and paranormal activities in Canada.

JF: These images also show hand gestures that reveal the relationships between the séance participants sitting around the table.

ED: I'm definitely interested in the relationship of the hand to the object in the documentation of Victorian séances. Not so much because the hand might be altering the position of the object, but because the hand becomes the conduit between the body and the object.

I find it quite funny that it's almost like the tables become living things, too. The way they appear to float and move.

There's a sense of humour about such phenomena that I quite love.

JF: During Victorian times, the séance was a form of popular entertainment and parlour diversion that offered consolation by contacting dead loved ones. My feeling is that some of what happened in the séance was perhaps real, and some perhaps not. It's always in the zone of "maybe."

ED: And this ambiguity is where this series of photographs creates tension, especially in relationship to the other works in this exhibition: is this phenomenon real or is it not? This underscores the question of the hand positions and the possibility of trickery.

JF: You mentioned that you've always been interested in psychic phenomenon. Was there an originating moment? Can you recall anyone in your family who is sensitive?

ED: I think my Mom is incredibly sensitive, especially with respect to my grandmother. She passed, I think it was around three months after I was born.

JF: That would have been a tough time for your mother.

ED: I recall that as a child, my Mom would say things like "I can feel your grandmother with us." Comments like this didn't scare me or seem strange. In fact, it was normal to believe in the notion that there was a possibility of being sensitive to the spiritual or supernatural.



Erika DeFreitas, *Everything repeats itself but all this has never ever happened before*, 2019. Images courtesy of the artist.

JF: You and your mother collaborated in the performative re-enactment of séances captured in the photographic series.

ED: My Mom is often in my work. In this series, we recreated the gestures portrayed in photographs that sought to debunk Eusapia. I created two casts of my hand. I refer to these casts as my third hand, this hand that once existed but no longer does in the same form. I'm also interested in Derrida's notion of hauntology, addressing what is neither present nor absent.⁴ He writes about allowing oneself to embrace and become a part of a space of otherness, rather than try to come up with answers; this was important to me as I created this new work. Instead of having a third person involved, as there was in the original photograph, there was something interesting about having the cast of my hand play the third hand in these images.

JF: The Spiritualist séance evolved out of attempts to reach deceased loved ones. But your recent work doesn't seem sad to me. Do you think the aspects of loss you mention might have something to do with the fact that your mother was mourning her mother when you were a baby?

ED: A year or so ago I realized that a key component to my interest in thinking through loss in my practice comes from witnessing my mother mourn her mom.

JF: Do you consider yourself to be an empath in that you pick up the feelings of those around you?

ED: I'm an emotional sponge. I'm grateful, because I feel I can actually listen to and understand others. But it gets heavy at times. I can carry the feelings of others, sometimes without even realizing it.

JF: I understand that it can be a burden, but it can also serve an art practice. It's a gift, as well.

ED: I agree. I believe that it is a gift that allows me to do what I do. ■

¹ Emelie Chhangur, *Rehearsal for Objects Lie on a Table*, Arrangements by: Diane Borsato, Aleesa Cohene, Erika DeFreitas, Derek Liddington, Gertrude Stein, and Terrarea. March 18-April 30, 2016, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto.

² Hospitalfield is an art centre housed in a former country estate in Arbroath near Dundee. It is believed to be Scotland's first school of art and first art college in Britain.

³ Jennifer Fisher, "Psychometry and the Affective Artifact," *C Magazine* 106, Summer 2010, pp. 10-19.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge Classics, 1994.

Erika DeFreitas is a Scarborough-based artist whose practice includes the use of performance, photography, video, installation, textiles, works on paper, and writing. Placing an emphasis on process, gesture, the body, documentation, and paranormal phenomena, she works through attempts to understand concepts of loss, post-memory, inheritance, and objecthood.

DeFreitas' work has been exhibited nationally and internationally including at Project Row Houses and the Museum of African American Culture, Houston; Fort Worth Contemporary Arts; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita; Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery; Platform Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Winnipeg; and Gallery 44, Toronto. A recipient of the Toronto Friends of Visual Arts' 2016 Finalist Artist Prize, the 2016 John Hartman Award, and longlisted for the 2017 Sobey Art Award, she has also been awarded several grants from the Canada Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. DeFreitas holds a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto.

Jennifer Fisher's research focusses on exhibition, display practices, contemporary art, affect theory and the aesthetics of the non-visual senses. She is joint editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and editor of *Technologies of Intuition* (YYZ BOOKS). Fisher is a founding member of DisplayCult, a curatorial organization for creative and interdisciplinary projects in the visual arts. For details of projects please see www.displaycult.com. She is professor of contemporary art and curatorial studies at York University.

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