

NADINE BARITEAU

AU REVOIR

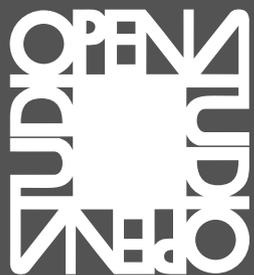
Nick Novak Fellowship Exhibition



OCTOBER 16 - NOVEMBER 21, 2015

Artist Talk: Friday, October 16, 6:00-7:00 pm

Opening Reception: Friday, October 16, 7:00-9:00 pm



OPEN STUDIO

**Contemporary
Printmaking Centre**

IMAGE: *Au revoir* (lighthouse installation detail), 2015, 850 screenprints on paper.

SONYA FILMAN

**THE WATCHFUL EYE AND
THE TENTATIVE HAND**

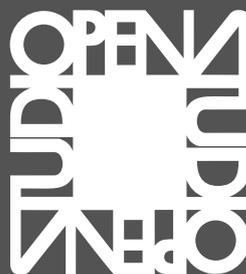
Don Phillips Scholarship Exhibition



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OPEN STUDIO

**Contemporary
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IMAGE: *A Measure of All Possibilities* (detail), 2015, screenprinted book 13.25" x 19" (folded).

Custom-made:

Making and Remaking the Medium

By Amy Luo

In contemporary art, the medium as a discursive category is in a somnambulant state. It hasn't been so hotly debated since the 1950s, when the term was reinvigorated by an emergent fixation, both in theory and practice, on medium specificity. Associated most closely with art historian Clement Greenberg and abstract painting, the concept of medium specificity followed the reductive logic of formalist modernism; it sought to pare down practices of the superfluous and contingent, to strip bare the medium's essence. Effectively, the "medium" was reduced to the physical properties of the support, the painting to the flat canvas. This restrictive stance was deposed, however, with the postmodern critical turn in art, which brought about a tide of resistance against the supposed autonomy of artistic mediums. In the years that followed, medium-promiscuity became the order of the day. Conceptualism, the preeminent shapeshifter, not only shirked any attachment to traditional categories of medium but dissolved the artistic sphere in general, assuming such mass-cultural forms as billboards and pamphlets. Today, the mixed-media installation and multi-media work are *de rigeur* at any international biennial of contemporary art, alluringly suggesting a post-medium age.

Given the reign of medium-heterogeneity in contemporary art, are there ways of revisiting specific mediums that feel current and provocative? Sonya Filman and Nadine Bariteau's solo exhibitions at Open Studio—created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship and Nick Novak Fellowship, respectively—offer surprising responses to this question. Their new bodies of work, while very different in practice, both complicate the term "medium," calling forth art historian Rosalind Krauss's view of the medium as a palimpsest rather than a singular unity. In an effort to rearticulate medium-specificity in postmodernism's wake, Krauss proposed that any medium is not reducible to its physical properties, but rather consists of a "layering of conventions" in relation to the material and technical support.¹ In Filman's *The Watchful Eye and the Tentative Hand*, the visual conventions of spirit photography are dissected, exposing the discursive formation of the

photographic medium in its infancy. In *Au revoir*, Bariteau's use of screenprinting rearticulates the medium, revealing the performative potential of its replicative seriality. Both artists engage with traditional artistic technologies with renewed curiosity, adumbrating the medium's supposed boundaries only to redraw them.

Sonya Filman: The medium, interrogated

In *The Watchful Eye and the Tentative Hand*, Sonya Filman takes her research-based practice into the territory of the photographic medium in its formative years. In her work, Filman has frequently examined the power of images within set conventions of representation, from mug shots to family albums to mental hygiene films. Her latest body of work hones in on photography at the turn of the century; taking the pseudo-scientific Spiritualist movement as an entry point,



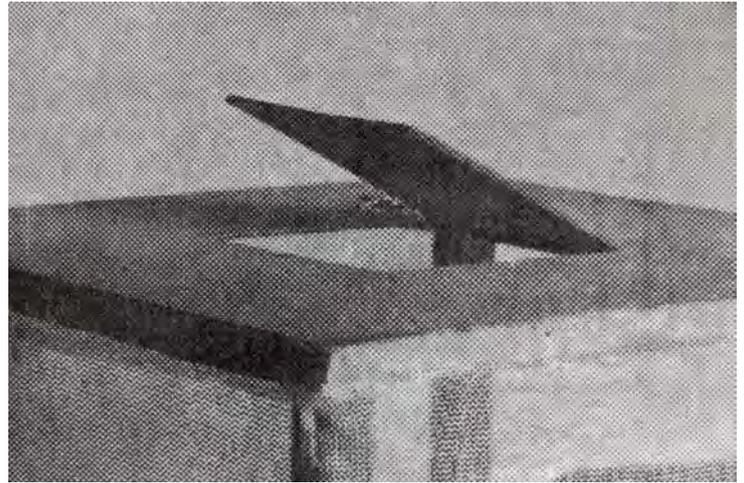
The Observer and the Shroud, 2015, Lithograph on Grey Kozo paper, 8" x 10"

Filman parses the discursive formation of spirit photography, illuminating its relationship to shifts in the broader cultural status of the photographic medium.

Spiritualism, as a religious movement, peaked in popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and the United States. The movement was founded on the belief that souls of the deceased can communicate with the living, typically through a human "medium" acting as a conduit between the spirit and the material world. While spiritualism was initially concerned with mental phenomena, séance gatherings increasingly turned to demonstrating physical phenomena supposedly produced by spirits, such as levitating and materializing objects. Toward substantiating these claims, Spiritualists leveraged photography to serve as visible evidence of such physical occurrences. Then still a relatively new technology, photography thus gained significant heft in the movement's efforts to attain legitimacy. Early spirit photography in the nineteenth century exploited double exposure technique to produce portraits of the living sitter accompanied by a ghostly figure. With the invention of "ectoplasm" in the first decade of the twentieth century, spirit photography adopted new modes of address; in particular, these updated conventions of representation emphasized physicality, a shift that both exploited and bolstered the rhetoric of indexicality within early conceptions of photography.²

Filman's work pulls at some of these entwined threads of indexicality, physicality, and testimony. The installation *Comparable Instruments* presents screenprints of two photographs from the early twentieth century culled from the artist's research: a "Pugh" control table used in Spiritualist experiments to investigate the levitation of objects, and an oxygen tent, a medical tool that maintains precise control of the patient's environment. While these two apparatuses are used for different purposes, for Filman both are "controlled micro-environments" that signify scientific rigour and objectivity.³ In seeking legitimacy, Spiritualist demonstrations and image production consistently invoked the language and methodologies of science. Writing on the pseudo-scientific vernacular of Spiritualism, Karl Schoonover argued that to "meet the expectations of an increasingly science-savvy

public, twentieth-century spirit photography needed both to reference contemporary science and to mimic its methods of investigation and data collection."⁴ Spiritualism thus entailed a paradox, making claims to both the supernatural and the scientific.



Comparable Instruments (detail), 2015, Installation.

The two screenprints in *Comparable Instruments* are accompanied by several sculptural elements. Made of crumpled tarlatan hardened with resin, these viscerally contorted forms are made to resemble ectoplasm, a material substance supposedly excreted from the orifices of mediums during Spiritualist demonstrations. While these "excretions" were in reality merely props made of cheesecloth or gauze, they indicate the movement's increasing fixation on the physically tangible. In contrast to early conventions that figured the spirit as ghostly and immaterial, later spirit photographs of ectoplasm production emphasized the materiality of what was impressed on the image.⁵ This emphasis reflected the contemporaneous discourses that cohered around photography, which was increasingly thought of as a "mechanical extension of human sight"—a technology that reflected the physical world as it exists, while capturing what is too fleeting or otherwise imperceptible to the human eye.⁶

The bookwork *A Measure of All Possibilities*, which adds a fitting tactile touch to the exhibition, further explores ideas around physicality and mediation. Like *Comparable Instruments*, the

screenprinted bookwork juxtaposes the scientific with the spiritual: a photograph of a doctor and a nurse performing an electrocardiogram unfolds into a photographic documentation of a medium in a séance, her hands held by two sitters. The bookwork also presents an excerpt from psychical researcher Paul Tabori's 1986 text *Companions of the Unseen*, which details the careers of various mediums and the scientific scrutiny around their séances. Describing the "Pugh" control table we encountered in *Comparable Instruments*, Tabori methodically stresses its imperviousness to human manipulation: "It is physically impossible of any sitters to raise this inner table from its upper surface...and is incapable of being opened except by an upward pressure."¹⁷ This painstaking analysis of physical forces, together with the photographs, suggests the privilege of the physical—both in its tangible and visible forms—as a source of knowledge and as an ideal that shaped the way photography cohered discursively as a medium at the turn of the century. In emphasizing photography's physical connection to the world, the technology's mediatory role was suppressed toward claiming a hyper-immediacy supposedly more reliable than human vision. Filman's work illuminates this constructed nature of mediums and thus too its openness to be remade.

Nadine Bariteau: The performative potential of print

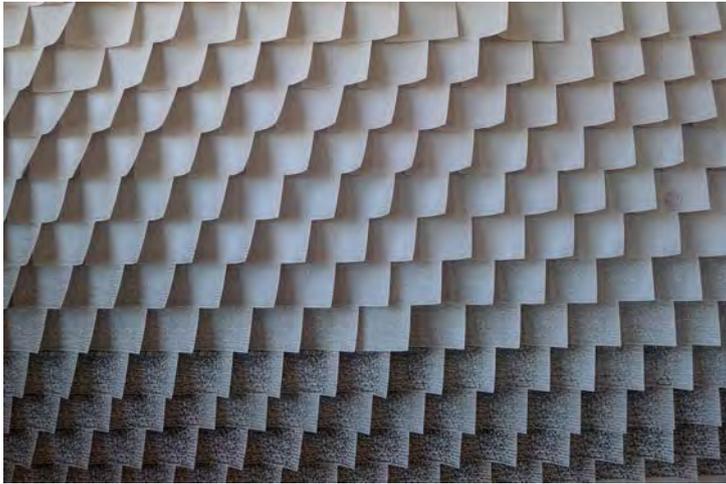
In *Au revoir*, Nadine Bariteau revisits screenprinting as a reproductive method in our Xerox age when "print" in art has now expanded to encompass myriad digital technologies from ink-jet printers to photocopiers. In employing the screenprint, Bariteau explores the untapped particularities of the replicative seriality of this printing technique that differentiate it from digital technologies. When screenprinting first came into popular use in Europe in the late nineteenth century, the process was principally tied to commercial purposes, such as textile printing and advertising. In the 1950s, Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist brought screenprinting into prominence in the fine art sphere; yet because at the core of Pop was a preoccupation with the vernacular of advertising and mass culture, despite the screenprint's admission into the fine art sphere, the technique was employed for the way its process and aesthetic signified the commercial. In *Au revoir*, Bariteau dissolves these conventional associations. Her engagement with the screen print instead animates the latent performativity in its process, the passing of time in its seriality.



Au revoir, 2015 video stills.

The exhibition's central immersive installation consists of a large, ten-foot tall wooden cylindrical structure with a single light bulb pulsing at the top, comprising a shorthand for a lighthouse. A hand-carved rope pattern adorns the outside of the structure, while inside, its entire surface is covered by hundreds of screenprints on letter-size paper, sheet layered upon sheet, fish scale-like. The screenprints all bear the same message handwritten by the artist numerous times over: "au revoir au revoir au revoir." For Bariteau, this repetitive bidding of farewell constitutes an active negotiation with her own experiences of grief and trauma following a recent car accident in which the artist lost her mother. In the work, the temporal processes of mourning and healing are translated into reiteration and repetition: "au revoir au revoir au revoir," page after page.

Repetition in Bariteau's installation suggests not so much maniacal compulsion as laborious dedication. The hundreds



Au revoir, 2015, installation detail.

of neatly overlapping prints were produced over the course of a month's time, spanning multiple sessions in the print studio. Unlike newer "multiplying technologies" like digital printers, the manual process of screenprinting is intimately tied to the body and its labour in time. This massive accumulation of prints entails the performance of the same bodily actions—pouring the ink, pulling the squeegee, lifting the screen—hundreds of times over. To invoke the term "performance" is to stress the particular salience of these bodily actions to the work as a whole, an aspect that is also suggested in the accompanying video; not reducible to mere repetitive procedures of production, the printing process is as constitutive of the final work as the visual and material aspects of the prints on display.

In this way, *Au revoir* evokes the latent potential for performance in printmaking. In contemporary art, performance is generally understood as live action, but paradoxically it often lives on in more enduring forms like photographic or video documentation. Rather than locating "the performance work" in solely the action or alternatively the documentation, art historian Jonah Westerman has suggested thinking about performance "less as a thing in itself" and "more as a spatial situation" that "joins form to experience."⁸ This more pliable conception of performance offers a generative reading of Bariteau's work. In her installation, the formal repetition of the display of replicated prints reiterating "au revoir" is reinforced by the bodily actions of the production process, each component

existing in reference to the other. At the nexus of the visual display and the physical production, performance emerges.

The pulsing light at the core of *Au revoir* forms a poetic anchor to the work's negotiation with repetition and time. Leisurely blinking on and off in repeat, the programmed light forms a marker of passing time while also evoking the inhalation and exhalation of breathing, its temporality both linear and cyclical. The repetition of something again and again can move us forward with time; somewhere between this time and the next, mourning transforms into healing.

Make it new

Filman and Bariteau's distinct bodies of work find resonance with one another in their exploratory approach to medium. Filman's research-based work parses the varied forces converging in the formation of the photographic medium in the early twentieth century. Bariteau's installation, grounded in personal experience, subverts the screenprint's conventional associations by animating the medium's affinity with performance. Both bodies of work illuminate the "inner plurality" that Krauss stressed in her updated conception of the artistic medium.⁹ They suggest that the medium is not dead, but ripe for rearticulating and reinventing.

Endnotes

¹ Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. p. 53.

² Schoonover, Karl. "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography." *Art Journal* 62.3 (2003): 31.

³ Filman, Sonya. Email message to author, July 28, 2015.

⁴ Schoonover. p. 36.

⁵ Schoonover. p. 33.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tabori, Paul. *Companions of the Unseen*. New York: New Hyde Park, 1968. p. 108.

⁸ Westerman, Jonah. "Between Action and Image: Performance as 'Inframedium'" Tate, January 20, 2015. Accessed August 25, 2015. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/between-action-and-image-performance>>.

⁹ Krauss, op. cit.

Artists' Biographies

Born and raised in Montréal, **Nadine Bariteau** works in printmaking, sculpture, installation and video performance. Her practice is concerned with ephemerality as a defining feature of the natural world. Bariteau is a graduate of Concordia University (Montréal) and obtained her MFA at York University (Toronto). Her work has been exhibited in Canada and abroad, and is included in private and public collections such as Foreign Affairs Canada and the National Library of Québec. She lives and works in Toronto and is the 2014-15 recipient of Open Studio's Nick Novak Fellowship.

Nadine would like to thank the Toronto Arts Council; her friends who helped her in her creative process, especially Leah Ataide; and finally her mother Lucille who was and still is an inspiration.

Sonya Filman is a graduate of the University of Toronto and Sheridan College, where she received an Honours Bachelor of Arts, and an Advanced Diploma in Art and Art History. Incorporating printmaking, photography, drawing and sculpture, Filman's work interprets authoritative and strategic modes of representation, such as medical documents, family albums, mental hygiene films, and written testimonials. Combining appropriated images and texts with her own photographs and drawings, Filman explores the ideologies that influence these documents. She lives and works in Toronto.

Sonya would like to extend her thanks to Lisa Neighbour and Jillian Booth for their continual support; to the Open Studio community for their kindness, guidance, and assistance; and to supporters of Open Studio, whose generous donations make the Don Phillips Scholarship possible.

Writer's Biography

Amy Luo is a Canadian art writer and professional. She is the 2014 winner of the Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize, and her writing has been published in *Canadian Art*, *Magenta Magazine*, and *Hart House Review*, among others. She is currently an MA candidate in History of Art at University College London.

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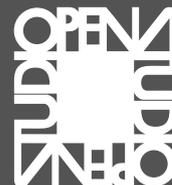
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