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news

Psychics and Spirits Haunt East Village's 'Strange Powers' Show

July 24 (Bloomberg) -- What New York building of a certain age doesn't have its ghosts? "Strange Powers," a group exhibition organized by the art-nonprofit Creative Time, shoves more than the usual spirits into a creaky old building in the East Village. The organizers even claim that the brick townhouse may be haunted.

The claim is a showboat gesture, less earnest than enticing. But just in case, artist Miranda Lichtenstein kindly brought in a psychic healer, Sondra Shaye, to ghost-wash the space before the exhibition opened. A photograph of Shaye at work hangs on a wall; she stands relaxed but focused, her eyes closed and palms open. (The photograph will later be replaced by a video of Shaye's cleansing.)

All of the works either document similar transformations -- recording auras, drug trips, spiritual pilgrimages -- or (even more fun) enact psychic change on the spot.

The psychics and healers clearly think they are in communion with invisible powers. But the 21 artists included, for the most part, engage the occult coyly, leaving the work of figuring out the limits of belief to viewers.

Sophie Calle takes the instructions of a psychic as her road map in a video journey through France. Ultimately, a text message from a distant relative with a similar name to a town she visits convinces her that the experiment was worthwhile. It is a thin, unpersuasive thread, but the spectacle of Calle's blind trust in the psychic makes the video entirely engrossing.

Scary Dark Room

Faith -- in the otherworldly and in the invisible in general -- is at issue. A completely dark room summons the ghost of artist James Lee Byars, who died in 1997; he created "The Ghost of James Lee Byars" while he was alive. Entering the room begins a trust game. Deprived of sight, there's no way to know who or what you might bump into. Bodily borders disappear in this simple but extremely effective magic trick.

I am a skeptic. I don't believe anything is true unless it can be seen or proved. But I was loath to linger in the dark room or in front of a small square of black paint that had been cursed by the exhibition curators, Peter Eleey and Laura Hoptman. Artist Douglas Gordon sent them a letter instructing them to "do something evil." They tried to get a witch or psychic to curse the paint for them, but all refused to participate in black magic. So they did it themselves.

Charmed Circle

And when artist Peter Coffin drew a chalk circle around me, I automatically hopped quickly out, anxious to avoid any kind of unnatural luck, good or bad. (Less cautious visitors can ask a gallery attendant to encircle them if Coffin is not there.)

The art on view exposes the superstition that lies under the skin of skeptics like myself. It is strangely powerful indeed to be moved by art like this -- not to tears or to joy, but to doubt. Much contemporary conceptual art, let alone art about the supernatural, can seem like an elaborately staged fraud. But by openly engaging a desire to believe, works such as Calle's and Coffin's are touchingly honest and accessible.

In courting the absurd, the works in ``Strange Power" offer a respite from total logic; they are deeply escapist. But escape from worldly pressures into haunted realms is, temporarily, a welcome tonic.

``Strange Powers" is on view through Sept. 17 at 64 E. Fourth St. Information: (1)(212) 206-6674 or <http://www.creativetime.org> .

``Euan Macdonald: Healer" (2002), a video portrait of an eerily staring psychic, is also running on the NBC Astrovision by Panasonic Screen in Times Square every 59th minute to the hour.

(Carly Berwick is an art critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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