



## External Space

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### ***Catching a Ghost***

Christopher Garland

September 15 – November 30, 2015

Christopher Garland's *Catching a Ghost* uses humour and the aesthetics of ghost hunting reality television to reimagine the private expulsion of negative or destructive feelings and behaviors in domestic space. Themes of privacy, ideas of home, and shifts between public and private identities are explored in *Ghost* as well as recurrently throughout Garland's broader artistic practice.

Though Garland works primarily in photography, *Catching A Ghost* is thematically in tune with his body of work; as early as 2009 (*Back Home: Diary I*, 2009-2011) Garland has used his body to explore identity within domestic and public spheres. *Back Home* is a series of photographs that chronicle Garland's presence in his hometown of Belleville, the photographs range from an intimate bathtub shot to a glimpse down a sterile Wal-Mart aisle.

*Catching A Ghost* is formatted like security footage; two rows of three split screens, without audio, surveil the rooms and hallways of the artist's domestic space. Garland performs as the ghost, wearing nothing but a white sheet, white sneakers and a nondescript white mask over his face. His nudity rejects the clothed formality of the public sphere and marks a shift into intimate, private space.

In the first seconds of the video, centered in the bottom middle frame (perhaps providing a moment of symmetry before the chaos), Garland stares directly into the camera and performs a quick, disarming shrug. Capturing a ghost so wholly unobscured would

certainly provide the money shot for any of the ghost shows Garland drew inspiration from, but rather than lionizing the poltergeist, this moment is used to deflate the unknown, familiarizing the unfamiliar — the ghost is caught and doesn't seem to mind. As Garland says, "When alone in one's own space, there is no hiding"<sup>1</sup>.

The tone-setting shrug gives way to a nine-minute-long tantrum. The ghost floats from room to room, violently rummaging through and displacing the artist's property; he is haunting himself. The performance mimics classic tropes of supernatural mayhem: lights are flicked on and off, kitchen cupboard doors are flung open and closed again, items are pushed off walls and thrown to the ground. Nothing is left undisturbed in the ghost's wake.

Garland's movement between screens provides the piece with a dance-like quality, an almost rhythmic ebb and flow of chaos and rest. The uninhabited frames (though eventually in shambles) surround the mayhem in a tranquil glow. Each movement and motion of the ghost is as unrestricted and expressive as a private emotional outburst.

Despite the comedic qualities of Garland's simple childlike costume and occasionally gleeful performance, the rampage generates a sinister atmosphere. To witness this pristine domestic space ransacked by a masked figure elicits an uncomfortable, negative visceral reaction. It is precisely that negativity, expressed in the safety of private space, that Garland is drawn to. He says in the write-up of his *Swallowing The Key* (2015) series:

"In a public sphere we censor our negative feelings, behaviors and impulses in order to improve society and avoid creating chaos within it. These consequences are not as great in a private sphere, and so here these feelings can be explored and played with."

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Garland, Artist's website (*Swallowing the Key*, 2015), Web. Sep 8, 2015. <<http://www.christopher-garland.com>>

And Garland is certainly playing. Though he performs without shame or hesitation in his expression of negative, destructive inclinations, this is clearly a controlled exercise; no permanent damage is done to any of the spaces.

*Catching a Ghost* ends as Garland walks, in the same brisk and unflagging pace he has maintained for the entire performance, past the kitchen and beyond the scope of the camera lenses. For the first time we are left with six still frames. The ghost's presence has been memorialized by little more than an open fridge and assorted debris strewn about the floors and surfaces of Garland's home. Perhaps the ghost's confident exit stride suggests he has seamlessly transitioned back into the public sphere, without any indication of the goings on of the last nine minutes.

*Ghost* appears to argue that our private spaces are the perfect venue for catharsis, a controlled zone in which we may pour our innermost frustrations, allowing us to re-enter public life calmed, refreshed, and ready to behave politely. Perhaps, in a perfect world, it would be simply therapeutic enough to chuckle at an artist in a white sheet throwing a tantrum. Laughter is a physiological reaction signaling joy, relief or safety in moments of potential danger or unease<sup>2</sup>, it is even correlated with a higher pain threshold<sup>3</sup> — like a ghost haunting himself, exploring discomfort in comfortable space.

- Hallway Jones

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<sup>2</sup> Gervais, Matthew. Sloan Wilson, David. "The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humour: A Synthetic Approach". *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, December 2005, Vol. 80, No. 4

<sup>3</sup> Dunbar, Robin. "Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold." *British Academy Centenary Research Project*, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. Sep 12, 2011.