

Huw Davies Gallery  
25 May - 18 June 2017

## ***Suburban Spirits*** **Sean O'Connell**

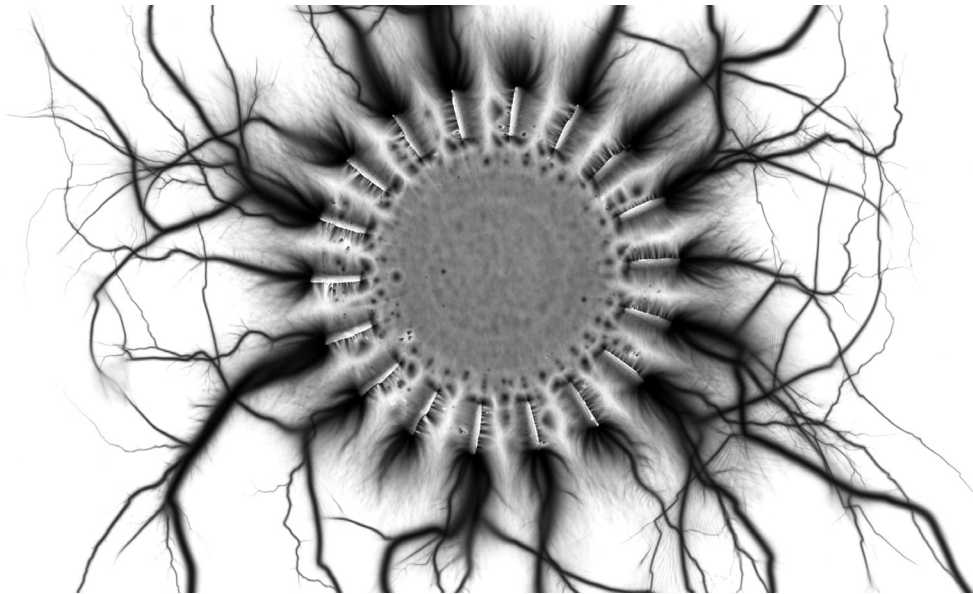


Image: Sean O'Connell, *Grandfather's milling tool* (detail), 2017, Arista Orthographic film, 10.0 x 12.5cm

Grief is a hard thing to describe. There is no right or wrong way to articulate it or express it in the creative act. However, what does become apparent within this dark, emotionally fraught subject is the loaded nature objects take on when they remain in this world, and the people we love have left it. These objects, which are now from the past, are in spaces that are no longer part of the present — stuck in a moment of time having no longer a specific function yet still charged with the history of a person.

Once we finally face the task of rummaging through all their stuff accumulated over all these years, there lies a harder task of deciding what to keep and what to discard. A conflict of value erupts from the labour of looking. So, what do we keep? Is it the books? The clothes? The jewellery? The record player? The furniture? Or is it the photographs?

It's the photographs. As the fascination that photographs exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. 'Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past.'<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sontag, S. *On Photography*, 1977. 71.

Supported by



**ED.**

**access**

A photograph can also be ontologically tied to reality as a reproduction. However, maybe there is something invisible, hidden behind the surface of the world something that cannot be objectively, technically recorded and photographed, something that only art, only the subjectivity of the artist could reveal?

This reminds me of a short text by Siegfried Kracauer, from 1927 entitled *The Photograph*. Kracauer takes a photograph of his grandmother as a young girl at the age of 24, a private photograph. It is a photograph of sentimental value, and he observes that this photograph does not bring back memories of his grandmother as it should. Instead, it but blocks them.

The photograph shows his grandmother's objective outward appearance, her clothes makeup and hairstyle. It shows what is impersonal and objective. Rather than recording her personality and subjectivity, the photograph actually makes visible the fashion of the time. The inner being of his grandmother is undisclosed by the photograph. Kracauer writes:

Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today. We are contained in nothing and photography assembles fragments around a nothing. When my grandmother stood in front of the lens she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. Yet instead of my grandmother the outside aspect alone is immortalised.<sup>2</sup>

It was this aspect, and not the grandmother, that was eternalised by the photograph.

A shudder often runs through the viewer of old photographs. What could be its cause? Is it that these photographs do not make visible the truth of the original, but only the spatial configuration of a moment in time? It is not the person who appears in his or her photographic portrayal, but the sum of exterior items? The person disappears in their photographic portrayal.

For Kracauer, every photograph is merely a general inventory of a detritus of fragments or details that lacks an inner being. What arises on the photographic surface is indescribable as its meaning cannot be photographed as the meaning in a sense is invisible. A need of an interpretation is to be made manifest.

As the photographs of his grandparents from the past potentially block his memory, there still lies an energy that lingers with the objects Sean O'Connell has kept from his grandparent's house. Here, types of energy are tracked that are either electrical, magnetic, acoustic, light, or x-ray radiation oscillating within the confines of the photographic print. The mundane artefacts of his family life are scientifically probed in search of the ghosts that lie hidden within. What is revealed is an alternative method to memorialise the relics of the past.

Chelsea Hopper, May 2017

*Chelsea Hopper is a curator and arts writer living and working between Canberra, Melbourne and Perth*

---

<sup>2</sup> Kracauer, S. *The Photograph*, 1927.

## **Sean O'Connell | Artist Statement**

In *Suburban Spirits* (2017), Sean O'Connell explores the memories and energetic imprints of his family home. Imaging objects from his grandparents who owned the house, repairs hidden deep within its walls, and the ephemeral traces of spirit and voice, layers of force and presence are recorded directly onto photographic film. The images reveal the people that once inhabited this space, through the traces of what they left behind – mentally, physically, and energetically – imprinted into the architecture and its matter of plaster, wood and steel. The images are directly recorded without camera, through carefully controlled electrical discharge into objects placed over large format film, x-ray bursts through walls, laser deflections of audio across mirrors, and point-source photograms. The combined use of these processes blurs the edges of science and photography, and reveals the potent vibrancy of matter. Original film images are presented here backlit in wooden boxes, revealing their detail, for intimate inspection.

## Sean O'Connell | About the artist

Sean O'Connell has recently completed his Doctorate at Sydney College of the Arts under Mikala Dwyer, exploring processes to image the underlying energetics of matter. His work ranges across photography and video, sometimes employing installation, sound, and kinetic art, and drawing upon the mechanical jewellery he has been creating for over 15 years.

His work has won awards both here and abroad, and O'Connell is represented in public and private collections, including the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia.

---

## Image List

1.	<i>Grandmother's Kitchen Scissors</i> , 2017, 20,000 volts DC across Ilford Ortho film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
2.	<i>Grandfather's Loupe</i> , 2017, x-ray image on Industrex T200 radiographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
3.	<i>Ball Ring Explosion</i> , 2017, 35,000 volts DC across Fuji Astia 100 colour slide film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
4.	<i>Grandparent's Wedding Rings</i> , 2017, 30,000 volts DC across Rollei ATO 2.1 film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
5.	<i>Bedroom Door</i> , 2017, x-ray image on Industrex T200 radiographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
6.	<i>Grandmother Singing Happy Birthday</i> , 2017, 532nm laser deflected by audio across Fuji CDU colour slide film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
7.	<i>Grandmother's Katoffelpuffer</i> , 2017, 650nm laser deflected by audio across Fuji CDU colour slide film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
8.	<i>Ball Ring Arcs</i> , 2017, 45,000 volts DC across Arista lithographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
9.	<i>Ball Ring Cloud</i> , 2017, 30,000 volts DC Negative across Fomapan 100 black and white film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
10.	<i>Grandmother's Fairy Tale</i> , 2017, 532nm laser deflected by audio across Arista lithographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
11.	<i>Mill Tool Lightning</i> , 2017, 120,000 volts DC across Arista lithographic film, 51.0 x 51.0 x 12.0cm	\$2900
12.	<i>Grandmother's Kitchen Scales</i> , 2017, x-ray image on Industrex T200 radiographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
13.	<i>Backyard Pebble</i> , 2016, 20,000 volts AC 600Hz across Arista lithographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
14.	<i>Backyard Weeds</i> , 2017, 800Hz volts AC 2000Hz across Fuji CDU colour slide film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
15.	<i>Frangipani</i> , 2017, 30,000 volts AC 800Hz across Fuji Velvia 100 colour slide film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
16.	<i>Great-Grandfather's Hammer</i> , 2017, magnetic filing photogram over Arista lithographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
17.	<i>Plumbing Repair Hidden in the Wall</i> , 2017, x-ray image on Industrex T200 radiographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
18.	<i>Grandfather's Milling Tool</i> , 2017, 40,000 volts DC across Arista lithographic film, 22.0 x 22.0 x 8.0cm	\$1600
	<i>Suburban Spirit catalogue</i> , 2017, 42 pages	\$40

## Public Program

Join Sean O'Connell, Sabrina Baker and Ioulia Terizis for an artists in conversation event on Sunday 18 June at 2pm in the Huw Davies Gallery. Free event. All welcome.

---



Image: Sean O'Connell, *Ball of Wool*, 2017, 45kV AC 800 Hz across Rollei 25 orthographic film