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HOME&DESIGN

Ghost images

An exhibit at PAFA seeks not just to channel Thomas Eakins' spirit, but also to get it to take up his original brush and palette and paint.



Thomas Eakins, top, in his Chestnut Street studio in 1891 or 1892. At right, a photograph by Eakins of Blanche Gilroy (1885).

By **Samantha Melamed**
STAFF WRITER

A century after the death of revered Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins, he'll return to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts starting this weekend to draw again.

Maybe.

If it happens, it will be with help from Troy, N.Y., artist Fernando Orellana, who has installed a ghostly artist's studio called *His Study of Life* at the potentially haunted Morris Gallery at PAFA.

The studio is staffed by robots designed to respond to paranormal activity — and fitted with Eakins' own brushes and palette from PAFA's vault — as well as nude models, and, maybe, the spirit of Eakins himself come back to sketch in the institution that forced his resignation in 1886.

"Eleven brave souls have signed up to wait to be rendered by the ghost of Thomas Eakins," Orellana said Tuesday as he began wiring devices fitted with electromagnetic, temperature, and infrared sensors. "This is the machine that will do the work — if a ghost decides to use it."

If anything could revive Eakins' spirit, it would be the season of Eakins about to begin at PAFA.

After Orellana's installation-meets-seance, the museum will open *Thomas Eakins: Photographer*, the first exhibition in nearly 20 years of photographs by the artist known for paintings of rowers and for *The Gross Clinic*. It includes

See **GHOST** on D3

PAFA's Jennifer John and Fernando Orellana set up Eakins' paint box in their quest to conjure his spirit.

DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



Seeking the spirit of Eakins

GHOST from D1

images of Eakins, his friends and family, his teaching process, and his then-daring photos of nudes.

Finally, in November, the museum will host a performance and exhibition by Cassils, a gender-nonconforming artist from Los Angeles who makes work that, like Eakins', confronts the human figure head-on. Cassils, whose own body has been sculpted through exercise and diet, will pummel a 2,000-pound pile of clay for the Dec. 2 performance, illuminated only by the camera flash; it's a statement on violence against transgender people and on portrayals of the human form.

For PAFA contemporary art curator Jodi Throckmorton, the connections between the artists are easy to trace.

"Eakins was really forward-thinking in the way he was using photography to get at ideas about gender and sexuality," she said. "I thought about who is doing that now, and I couldn't think of anyone better than Cassils."

But first up is Orellana, who has been channeling the paranormal in his art, or trying to, for four years.

He first approached making ghost-powered machines as a design challenge: "How do you make interactive art for someone without a body, and who might not, without a brain, be able to learn?"

He began buying items from estate sales to include in the works; he figured such objects would provide a familiar interface for a specter.

But Eakins, his first celebrity collaborator, came with a different set of restrictions. For one thing, he had to build his robots and then, at the last minute, fit in the artifacts.

So, on Tuesday morning, registrar Jennifer Johns wheeled a



The artist Cassils is part of the Eakins celebration. Cassils

cart into the gallery and carefully opened an archival cardboard box. With gloved hands, she removed Eakins' paint palette and slid it into one of Orellana's machines. He sighed with relief when it fit neatly beneath the colored LED lights that will — in the event of ghostly temperature, light, or electromagnetic fluctuations — "mix" colors according to Eakins' specifications.

Another machine will, should the spirit move it, open Eakins' weathered wooden paint box.

To complete the setup, a leather armchair that Eakins owned — and that appears in many of his paintings — has been placed on a turntable so the artist could, theoretically, position it according to his preferred composition.

It just might work. There have been reports of unusual activity at PAFA, Throckmorton said: Screens tucked away at night had moved by the next day. "Though," she said, "that could

be the Broad Street Line."

But — although the display will include video of the machines functioning, and drawings made by the robot from Eakins' photographs — there may not be a lot of action to see at the Morris Gallery. Orellana has not, to his knowledge, successfully channeled a ghost yet.

"This stuff is not for the public. It's for the dead," Orellana said. "If [ghosts] come, they come."

Whether Eakins' ghost shows up or not, artists and students are invited to sketch the models; they'll be in poses found in Eakins' nude photographs, sitting and taking breaks on Eakins' schedule.

"It's like coming in and having Eakins teach a drawing class," Throckmorton said.

Although Eakins' classes tended to be a bit more action-packed.

"He was really at the forefront of teaching practices in his day, especially when it came to rigorous use of modern technology



PAFA's Jennifer Johns gets robots ready. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



Fernando Orellana readies robots at PAFA. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer

like photography," said Anna Marley, curator of historical American art at PAFA.

He was progressive — in his choice of students, including women and African American artists like Henry Ossawa Tanner, in his teaching style, and in his subject matter.

"Thomas Eakins posed nude with his students, which was controversial in the Victorian

era and certainly would be controversial today," Marley said. "He was let go from PAFA in the 1880s because he pulled the loin-cloth off a male nude model in a class of female students."

His photographs reflect that progressive spirit in a variety of ways. Most important, he worked with Eadweard Muybridge on his watershed motion photographs, made at the University of Pennsylvania. There are also full-frontal nudes, considered provocative at the time.

About 60 of Eakins' photographs will be on display starting Oct. 19.

"What's really astounding about these photographs is how modern and still shocking and intimate they feel today," Marley said. "And they are still having an impact on artists."

She draws a direct line from Eakins to Cassils' work exploring gender, sexuality, and their impact on perceptions of the human body.

"This is something Eakins was pioneering in his photographs," she said. "It was controversial then, and it's still controversial today."

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