

A TERRIBLE SIGNAL

FEBRUARY 11 - APRIL 1, 2017

MEGAN HEPBURN
DANIEL PHILLIPS
M.E. SPARKS
CAROLYN STOCKBRIDGE
JOSEPH STROHAN

CURATED BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

ON APPROACHING DARKNESS

In his 1941 science fiction novelette *Nightfall*, Isaac Asimov writes of a people who have never experienced darkness. The six suns of their planet keep life illuminated at all times. As the story opens, a group of scientists make a series of related discoveries: an archaeologist unearths evidence of a cyclical collapse of civilization; an astronomer discovers orbital irregularities of the planet around its primary sun; a reporter learns of a religious cult that believes the world will end in a darkness that unleashes a terrible conflagration. These findings are combined into a new theory, which suggests that once every 2049 years, due to planetary alignment, only one sun becomes visible in the sky. When this sun is eclipsed, the world is plunged into a brief and unfamiliar night. Perhaps, the scientists postulate, this darkness is so frightening to the people who experience it that they seek out any light source possible in a frantic attempt to drive it away, igniting massive fires that then destroy their successive civilizations. As Asimov's story goes on, the dreaded eclipse approaches, and the scientists attempt to prepare the people for the coming darkness. But as "the last thread of sunlight [...] thinned out and snapped,"ⁱ the stunned fear that grips the planet's inhabitants is caused not by the dark itself but rather by the sight of a never-before seen night sky, which is filled with millions of stars. The sudden confrontation with the universe's true scale is so terrifying that the people go mad, their planet plunges into chaos and civilization collapses once again.

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Most modern definitions of darkness are underpinned by a notion of privation: a lack or absence, whether of light, hope, or progress. This echoes the way scientists understand the sensation of black, which is generated by a lack of retinal information: a surface will appear black when it absorbs all the light waves in the visible spectrum that the human eye can discern. But while we register phenomena with our sense organs, the lack of information received by the rods and cones in our retina does not make it impossible to see black, because ultimately we perceive with our brain.ⁱⁱ This conundrum is echoed in the shifting ways that black has figured throughout the history of western philosophy and art.ⁱⁱⁱ The debate continues today: as the media studies and pessimism scholar Eugene Thacker asks in a recent essay, "what exactly are we seeing when we perceive black? Light, or the absence of light? And if the latter, how is it possible to see the absence of light?"^{iv}

Old English offered multiple words that could convey a sense of darkness: *heolstor* meant "hiding place" and evolved into *holster*. *Genip*, meaning "mist," survives in the Dutch phrase "in het geniep," which refers to secretive, underhanded dealings. *Scaeadu* meant "shadow." Unlike more modern definitions, with their emphasis on absence, these oldest terms are interesting in their suggestion of a presence that may be palpable, but not perceivable, or of information that is present, but not accessible. Like the night sky in Asimov's story, a lack of received retinal information—the experience of utter darkness—may in fact allow us to encounter the edge of something otherwise obscured by the light.

A Terrible Signal concerns itself with the recent work of five Vancouver-based artists—Megan Hepburn, Daniel Phillips, M.E. Sparks, Carolyn Stockbridge, and Joseph Strohan—who grapple in different ways with darkness, depictions of night, or the (non-)colour black. For these artists, operating in some cases at the very threshold of the visible spectrum, darkness describes not a lack or a void, but a presence or a portal: a proliferation of information so dense as to paradoxically produce a near total blockage of vision.

Daniel Phillips' multidisciplinary art practice is preoccupied with questions of vision, perception, and representational modes. His video work *The Flayed Man* (2015) might be understood as a study in what Thacker posits as "retinal pessimism."^{vi} A diminutive theatre, its space marked off by heavy black wool curtains, accommodates only a single viewer at a time. To access the work, one parts the curtain, enters, and sits, and is immediately enveloped in darkness. Projected onto the far wall of

the space, the video itself offers little retinal information, as the camera pans repeatedly round the confined space of a darkened bedroom at night. Within the video, Phillips employs a number of cinematic tropes (drawn in particular from the noir genre) that oscillate between sharpening and relieving our desires for meaning and narrative coherence. As the "story" unfolds, the paucity of the optical field gives way to something else entirely, as what we "see" is not the video, but the apparatus of our own vision at work.

Vision is also challenged in M.E. Sparks' *Pitch Apart* (2016). The process of its making was initiated, like that of all her recent large-scale paintings, as an exploration in observed reality. As Sparks applied successive layers of colour to the canvas, however, a dark form began to spread outwards from the centre of the composition, gradually overtaking the picture. Like Asimov's description of the quivering band of sunlight stretched taut in the final moments before eclipse, the tension in *Pitch Apart* is palpable, as vibrant slivers of activity—vestiges of the artist's initial marks on the canvas—remain visible around the painting's edges. The muscular, nearly pitch-black shape asserting itself in front of the viewer appears as some backlit object, whose true colour and surface texture is indiscernible, and whose identity remains hidden. Sparks' interest is not in abstraction itself, but in exploring devices that force her—and her paintings' viewers—to work differently. She describes these dark elements as obstructions. "I wanted to block myself out of the painting,"^{vii} she states, suggesting that her primary concern as a painter is to confound, rather than enable, discernment.

Much of Megan Hepburn's painting practice considers ways that the aesthetic and political conditions of late nineteenth century painting continue to underpin and vex current matrices of emotion and thought in visual art. She is attuned, not unlike Sparks, to the ease with which we are "caught" in the "visual trickery" of painting.^{viii} Her lyrical abstractions are recognizable for their luminescent, almost jewel-like use of colour. Over the months of her recent residence in Berlin, however, Hepburn noted a gradual darkening of her palette. She attributes this shift to the confines of her working conditions—she was painting in the same small space in which she lived and slept—and to a mounting frustration with what she describes as the stubborn opacity of colour. *Goat Hair* (2016), *Leave-taking* (2016), and *When this dance is done* (2015) each reveal a long, slow inquiry into translucency, where Hepburn's repetitive marks on the canvas paradoxically produce pools of colour so dark as to invoke what Hepburn can only describe as "a certain blindness."^{ix} It is fitting, perhaps, that Hepburn once analogized her artistic process as "being with events that my instinct would be to run away from or shut my eyes to."^x It might also be possible to read both Hepburn's and Sparks' desire to create dark blockages within their canvases as ambivalent responses to current debates about painting, particularly those that assert its "post-medium condition" and suggest its perseverance is grounded in the notion that it can attain agency as a quasi-subject.^{xi}

For Carolyn Stockbridge, black is not a colour but a frequency, a means of summoning, and a mode of communication. Also an abstractionist, she worked freely with colour until 2013, when she endured the loss of four loved ones in quick succession. In her grief, the artist methodically painted over her entire output of work in black.^{xii} Since that time, Stockbridge has worked nearly exclusively with black pigment. *Untitled (1.10.Pb9.CI77267/Pb11.Fe3O4)* and *Untitled (2.10.Pb9.CI77267/Pb11.Fe3O4)* (both 2015-17) are two of a series of ten monumental monochrome canvases, which are themselves part of a larger body of work, including sound recordings that capture the sonic pitch of black. At eight feet high and nearly seven feet wide, these paintings are expansive enough to step into. The result of successive layers of multiple tones of black applied with brush, grit, and squeegee, the canvases' thick, turbulent surfaces recall Robert Rauschenberg's early black paintings of 1951-53. Rauschenberg was working in the wake of first generation abstract expressionists, and intent on inventing a new pictorial language, one where there would be "much to see but not much showing."^{xiii} Stockbridge seeks a new language too: a meditative, even spiritualist one. Her works operate as thresholds or meeting grounds^{xiv} and, as one scholar infers of Rauschenberg's own, "[lead] the conscientious viewer to the point where darkness [makes] seeing difficult and [demands] the utmost concentration, where external stimuli [is] so rare that he or she [is] induced to substitute hallucinatory imaginings."^{xv}

"Much to see but not much showing" might also describe the photographs of Joseph Strohan, who shoots almost all his work out of doors, in near total darkness. He works with only analogue film, and without tripod or flash. Operating his camera at the very limits of its capabilities, he hopes to foreclose on the possibility of adding to the already vast lexicon of "photogenic" images.^{xvi} Strohan's practice is deeply informed by literature and, particularly for his ongoing *Night Walks* series (2014-17), by the poetic genre of the nocturne. Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Fall of Sleep*, a meditation on the ways that sleep resists philosophy

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(for sleep is the disappearance of the Self), is also key to approaching this series of pocket-scaled prints.^{xvii} Wandering the familiar streets of his neighbourhood alone, when most are asleep, Strohan attempts a paradox with a light-sensitive device, for as Nancy writes: "Night erases the relationship of light with shadow. Night obstinately brings indifference back into the different; it finds the previous world [...], the equivalence of hours no longer recorded by the unequal shadow of any sundial..." The viewer thus encounters a sequence of small, ink-dark photographic objects—as rich as they are resolute—whose surfaces betray almost no retinal information whatsoever but brim with the thrum of night.

The velvet surface of Strohan's prints, like the granular noise in Daniel Phillips' video, M.E. Sparks' and Megan Hepburn's dark obstructions and Carolyn Stockbridge's black portals, recall for me an essay by the late artist and critic Robert Linsley, who died tragically just this week.^{xix} Considering theoretical physics' recent discoveries about black holes and the potential resonance of these ideas with modern and contemporary art,^{xx} Linsley discusses what scientists call *the hidden region*, those parts of the universe remaining outside the limits of our knowledge. "We can have no idea what is going on in a solar system ten light years away because the radiation that carries that information has not reached us," he explains. "All the space between that distant star and us belongs to our hidden region."^{xxi} Linsley goes on to describe how the event horizon of any black hole is also the boundary of a hidden region. It is hidden for anyone at any location in the universe, and so "the properties of that particular surface are paradigmatic of the limits of all knowledge."^{xxii} Perhaps the dark work in *A Terrible Signal* also betrays this hidden region, and the unnerving fact that "the boundary of knowledge exists, yet can't be touched, measured, weighed or seen."^{xxiii} On the other hand, their dark surfaces might serve to shield us from the revelation of that knowledge, which may prove more terrible still.

NOTES

ⁱ Isaac Asimov, *Nightfall* (New York, 1941), 26. See http://mysite.du.edu/~treddell/3780/Asimov_Nightfall.pdf.

ⁱⁱ See Thomas Wilke, "Schwarz ist nicht Schwarz," in Thomas Zuanschirm, ed. *Die Farben Schwarz* (Vienna/New York, 1999), 17-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Louis-Bertrand Castel, *L'Optique des couleurs* (Paris, 1740); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (Germany, 1810), trans. Charles Locke Eastlake (England, 1840); Arnold Schopenhauer, *On Vision and Colours* (1816); Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: the subjective experience and objective rationale of color* (New York, 1973); Ad Reinhardt's writings on black, collected in *Art as Art*, ed. Barbara Rose (USA, 1991).

^{iv} Eugene Thacker, "Black on Black," *The Public Domain Review* (April 9, 2015). <http://publicdomainreview.org/2015/04/09/black-on-black>

^v I am grateful to my friend and colleague, the curator Jonathan Middleton, for bringing to my attention the lyrics of the Talking Heads song *The Overload* (1980), from which I drew the title of this exhibition.

^{vi} "Black is at once the foundation of all colour and, in its absence or emptiness, it is also what undermines the substantiality of all colour," Thacker posits. "If one is willing to go down this path, a retinal pessimism is not just about the non-colour that is black, but it is about the perception of colour itself. It is, ultimately, the suspicion that all colours are black, that all retinal activity is retinal inactivity. Retinal pessimism: there is nothing to see (and you're seeing it)." Thacker, *Ibid*.

^{vii} M.E. Sparks, in conversation with the curator, November 21, 2016.

^{viii} Megan Hepburn, in conversation with the curator, November 25, 2016.

^{ix} Hepburn, *Ibid*.

^x Hepburn, quoted in "A Week of Canadian Painting: Megan Hepburn," *The Editorial Magazine*, <http://the-editorialmagazine.com/?p=8487>.

^{xi} For a brief overview of some of these debates, see Isabelle Graw, ed. *Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas* (Germany, 2012).

^{xii} The practice of draping mirrors in black cloth following a death in the household has a long history across many cultures. The tradition is often described as a means to avoid distraction and vanity while mourning, but oldest explanations suggest it allows mourners to escape the horror of catching a glimpse of the evil spirits that can populate a home after a death, and which are only visible as reflections in mirrors.

^{xiii} Rauschenberg, quoted in Calvin Tompkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of our Time* (New York, 1980), 72.

^{xiv} Carolyn Stockbridge, in conversation with the curator, December 6, 2016.

^{xv} Stephanie Rosenthal, ed., *Black Paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella* (Germany, 2007), 31.

^{xvi} Joseph Strohan, in conversation with the curator, December 8, 2016.

^{xvii} "There is no phenomenology of sleep," Nancy attests, "for it shows of itself only in its disappearance, its burrowing and its concealment." Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (USA, 2009), 13.

^{xviii} Nancy, *Ibid*, 21.

^{xix} Robert Linsley, "Surface, No Support," *Fillip* (Issue 3, Summer 2006). See <https://fillip.ca/content/surface-no-support>

^{xx} The new scientific development that Linsley refers to is something called the Bekenstein Bound, which states that the amount of information inside a black hole is proportionate not to the volume it encloses but to its surface area. This discovery is utterly counterintuitive because, as Linsley explains, "it implies that what can be known about any space is limited by the amount of information present on a surface." With this finding, Linsley argues, "science unknowingly moved closer to art," as it "has led scientists to posit that all knowledge is tied in some way to a surface, but the location of this surface is not easy to specify." See Linsley, *Ibid*.

^{xxi} Linsley, *Ibid*.

^{xxii} Linsley, *Ibid*.

^{xxiii} Linsley, *Ibid*.

A Terrible Signal marks the seventh in a series of exhibitions and projects comprising *The Troubled Pastoral*. The series, conceived of by Mark Lanctôt and Jonathan Middleton, takes on a broad set of themes including pessimism, psychedelia, altered states and drug use, black comedy, science-fiction dystopia, class struggle (within the context of an increasingly marginal or absent middle class), the industrialization of food production, the ragged edge of suburbia, and various forms of visual, aural, or perceptual interference, including smoke, static, and electro-magnetic radiation. Also part of the series and concurrent with this exhibition is *Uncertain Reflections*, curated by Mark Lanctôt and Jonathan Middleton at Or Gallery in Vancouver and featuring the work of Ann Lislegaard and Neil Wedman (February 4 - March 11, 2017).

LIST OF WORKS

DANIEL PHILLIPS

The Flayed Man, 2016
single channel video, with sound
15:10

MEGAN HEPBURN

When this dance is done, 2015
oil on linen
80 x 70 cm

Goat Hair, 2016
oil on canvas
35 x 25 cm

Leave-taking, 2016
oil on linen
76 x 60 cm

M.E. SPARKS

Pitch Apart, 2016.
oil on canvas
122 x 122 cm
Collection of Sara Shafran

CAROLYN STOCKBRIDGE

Untitled (1.10.Pb9.CI77267/Pb11.Fe3O4), 2015-2017
oil on canvas
213 x 182 cm

Untitled (2.10.Pb9.CI77267/Pb11.Fe3O4), 2015-2017
oil on canvas
213 x 182 cm

JOSEPH STROHAN

Untitled 1-12, from the series *Night Walks*, 2014-2017
silver gelatin prints
each 20.5 x 13 cm

BIOGRAPHIES

MEGAN HEPBURN received an MFA from Concordia University in 2010 and a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2005. She was shortlisted for the RBC Painting Competition in 2015 and 2010 and won the Joseph Plaskett Award in Painting in 2010. Recent exhibitions include *Voices of Fire* at Galerie SAS, Montreal, *Murmerer* at Studio Baustelle, Berlin, and *Painting Enquiry* at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts. Hepburn lives and works in Vancouver.

DANIEL PHILLIPS is an artist living and working in Vancouver. He received an MFA in visual arts from the University of British Columbia (2016) and a BFA from the University of Victoria (2009). In the past year he contributed to Jonald Dudd 2 as part of New York design week and produced drawings for *Toast on Jam*, a painting publication out of Toronto.

M.E. SPARKS holds an MAA (2016) from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and a BFA (2013) from NSCAD University. Sparks was a 2016 RBC Painting Competition finalist as well as the recipient of the 2016-17 Nancy Petry Award (in partnership with the RCA and Joseph Plaskett Foundation). She is currently an artist in residence at Institut für Alles Mögliche (Berlin, Germany) and will be attending GlogauAIR Residency Program (Berlin, Germany) and Arteles Creative Residency (Hämeenkyrö, Finland) later this year.

CAROLYN STOCKBRIDGE received a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and studied at the Art Students League of New York and Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. She is also a film score composer for experimental animation, film, and political documentary. Originally from Canterbury, UK, Stockbridge lives and works in Vancouver.

JOSEPH STROHAN is a photo-based artist who lives and works in Vancouver. He studied at the Istituto d'arte Applicata e Design (Torino, Italy), and holds a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday February 10, 2017, 7:00 PM

A NIGHT OF READINGS ON THE DARK

Thursday February 23, 2017, 7:00 PM

Darkness is a pliant theme, encompassing terror and relief, estrangement and comfort, cunning and stealth, night and death, enigma and presence. Join the exhibiting artists of *A Terrible Signal* for an evening sharing favourite passages penned about the dark, from the realms of poetry, fiction, song, philosophy, and children's literature. Bring your own excerpt to contribute.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. LUDOVIC VAN WAERBEKE:

DARK MATTER AND DARK ENERGY

Thursday March 9, 2017, 7:00 PM

Professor Ludovic Van Waerbeke from the Department of Physics and Astronomy at UBC describes and discusses the dark constituents of the universe, how his research as a physicist and astronomer helps to probe these elusive components and what their connection to light might possibly be.

Ludovic Van Waerbeke is a cosmologist whose research focuses on the nature of dark matter and dark energy, the two dominant mysterious ingredients in the universe. He received a BSc in theoretical physics in 1992 from University Paris XI in France and a PhD in astrophysics in 1997. From 1997 to 2000 he worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute in Garching, Germany and the Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics in Toronto. From 2000 to 2004 he was a staff researcher at Institut d'Astrophysique de Paris. He has been a professor of physics and astronomy at UBC since 2004, and joined the Cosmology and Gravity program at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research in 2005. In 2015 he won an F. Bessel Award from the Alexander von Humboldt foundation in recognition for his work on gravitational lensing.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. ELIZABETH LEE:

HOLD EVERYTHING BLACK AND SEE

Thursday March 23, 2017, 7:00 PM

Social scientist Elizabeth Lee addresses some historical and contemporary questions arising on the North American scene between blackness as a matter of sociopolitical concern and blackness as a matter of aesthetic concern.

Elizabeth Lee is an independent scholar and educator. She earned a bachelor's degree from the International & Area Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley and a doctorate from the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia, where she also received several outstanding teaching awards as a Postdoctoral Fellow. Dr. Lee has published widely on militarism and nationalism, and race, gender, and citizenship in various academic journals and interdisciplinary anthologies, and has lectured internationally at universities in and across the U.S., Canada, and Europe.