

## Jeffrey Spalding: Ghosts and Angels



In the making of these works, Jeffrey Spalding collaborates not only with master printmaker Gordan Novak, but with recognized artists of the modern art period, contributing layers upon layers of inked, fragmented imagery onto pre-existing image fragments, and hence, creating a dense palimpsest of recontextualized figures and forms into abstract, expressionistic compositions. These image fragments are the results of print screen test sheets that Novak pulls to test the image quality of individual screens or plates during the various stages of creating a print for an artist. Incomplete, the test sheet displays a fragmented or isolated component of the overall image. While undergoing a residency at Novak Graphics studio in Admiral, SK, Spalding witnessed Novak's test process, where he would occasionally repurpose old test sheets and overlay screen tests, and found the newly, layered compositions intriguing. Also fascinating was Novak's impulsion to collect old screen tests, finding that he was not able to dispose himself of these remnants or rejects of the print process. Spalding then conceived of a collaborative project, where Novak would print each new screen test on various, repurposed sheets in a random manner over a two year period, and, much like Jackson Pollock's process of painting on large canvases to then edit them for paintings, Spalding would then select, edit and deem which test sheets would be declared art. The resulting images are these visually and conceptually rich compositions. Each work is a multi-layered collage, an interface of various artists' images and marks that are transformed into an orchestral arrangement by happenstance. Slight traces or 'ghosts' of images are sometimes visible, giving hints of earlier forms, while others are completely enveloped in the mix. These 'ghosts' are sometimes acknowledged in the titles of the work, with references to the originating artist, while other references to artists are associative for Spalding based on the formal qualities of the work.

The exhibition raises questions of originality, authorship and appropriation. Printmaking, itself, is a discipline that offers complexities when it comes to the concept of originality in visual art with print editions supporting the existence of multiple copies of an image. It has been argued that there is no longer the concept of the original in art – that every image is made up of others that have preceded it. Perhaps this is the point that Spalding is making. These monoprints, which are unique in their dense and random layering, could perhaps fall under the category of "Added Art", a term for contemporary work that uses or appropriates an existing piece of artwork for its canvas, much like tags of graffiti. "Added Art", though, is typically regarded as antagonistic in nature and it is evident that Spalding's intentions are as a homage.<sup>i</sup> Conceptually, these works draw associations with Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953). Rauschenberg set out to discover whether an artwork could be produced through erasure, getting permission from Willem de Kooning to erase one of his drawings. Is the embedding of other artists' imagery an act of erasure or overwriting? Or is this an act of honouring artistic practices that have contributed to an understanding of contemporary image-making? I believe this to be true. It is interesting to note that the exhibition includes references to Warhol, Rauschenberg and Carl Beam, all artists that have engaged in using appropriated imagery for new means and commentary. The inclusion of imagery of Indigenous artists' work, such as that of Carl Beam and obvious Woodland Cree imagery, by a settler artist and printmaker adds to the complexity of image usage, and perhaps the understanding and significance of the work.

Spalding's impulse to rescue the test sheet remnants from their dormant lie, as neither works of art nor disposed material, and engage with them to honour and elevate their visual and cultural value comes honestly. He has maintained a practice throughout his artistic career of annexing and transforming failed, forgotten and rejected images. A series of erasures of his own early works was his attempt to take away failed elements, altering them to ultimately accept them as finished pieces. Other practices have included sourcing black velvet paintings from the sale bins at thrift stores, rescuing them from a position of being forgotten and devalued to then transform them into abstract paintings through overpainting grids and stripes. Spalding sees these acts as a means of dialogue, not only with the original image, but with the artist, honouring and finding value in their honest human effort and desire to express themselves.<sup>ii</sup>

In this homage to the artists of *Ghosts and Angels*, Spalding not only creates compelling, contemporary, abstract expressionist images, but a space where art history can converge and dialogue with the present. Through this process, he acknowledges that every artist has looked to art history to inform their practice, to source ideas and approaches and draw knowledge and inspiration from artists that inspire them. In the presentation of this work, this exhibition also offers a forum to engage in discussion surrounding the practice of appropriation within art, a practice that carries a history from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a topic of debate in our mass-media, instant-access, digital and post-colonial world today.

Jennifer McRorie, MJM&AG Curatorial Director

<sup>i</sup> Added Art, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Added\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Added_art), accessed September 11, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> From a conversation with the artist on September 11, 2018.