

ARTWORKS FOR
JELLYFISH
AND OTHER OTHERS



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GHOSTS OF PAST FUTURES

Terrance Houle

In the future, I am a ghost. I decided that it would be better to die as an artist and haunt you all through my own work. “Fuck you, art world!” RIP Terrance Houle.

GHOST DAYS

*Mountains of the dead, are you listening?
You're gonna lose a lot, now that
the lightning has passed you by.
You've already lost so much, now that
the moon has passed you by.
All the good things are asleep in the human world
It makes more room for the dark to walk around.
Speak to all my friends,
whose names I can't remember now...¹*

My mother is Kainai; her name is *Natoyeebotahkii*, Sacred Soaring Bird Woman. My father is Salteaux; his name is *Nausea Noon*. I am *Inniwahkiima*, Buffalo Herder.

My ancestors are ghosts in the present. I make art and offer it to them and they in turn haunt my artworks. Sometimes they take my work as an offering. Sometimes they make themselves present through sights, sounds, and conspicuous silences. I make them present from an invisible time and place. My work moves through time to mediate my ancestors to those who know how to experience my art. But then I decided I wanted to be a ghost of my own past future. That is how *GHOST DAYS* started.

In my photographs, I conjure the ghosts of my ancestors who live in a different timeline. Through a process of hauntology, they appear to us from an estranged past; one that was buried and that we didn't know was there. This is also a time that shows us what would be; how things are different than we think they are now, because the ancestors occupy the future. In their time and in the future, I am already there with them. We are together beyond the grave. So in my photographs, I show how "the world of the dead would follow you."

Seven-generations thinking moves me through cycles of turning back to my elders and looking forward to imagine myself as an ancestor to future generations. My work orbits through these times,

Terrance Houle, *I-XL Brick Factory*,
photograph, 2017.

across the world of the living back to the world of those who have passed, and then forward to those I will haunt.

In *GHOST DAYS*, I am already in my afterlife, an elder who haunts my photographs as a ghost.

THESE BRICKS

In 2017 I did a performance called *These Bricks* at the old I-XL Brick Factory in Medicine Hat. I crushed bricks that I-XL made for the residential schools my parents went to and even ones from my own Junior High, King Edward in Calgary, Alberta.

Treaty 7 was signed in 1877 and is upheld over the entire territory of Southern Alberta. After the Treaty was signed my people, the *Kainai*, moved west of Medicine Hat to Belly Buttes.

The Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Factory, which eventually became I-XL, was built in 1886, nine years after the signing of the Treaty. It was founded by a family who discovered a gas well on their property. The free-flowing gas meant that they could make as much brick as they wanted without having to buy or transport gas for baking it. The family mined the red clay in the hills around the area and produced the bricks used for the settlement of Western Canada, from B.C. and Alberta to Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Today, it is the oldest industrial site in Alberta.

The factory operated in full force, selling building products and masonry supplies until a flood left it irrevocably damaged in 2010. The flood was completely unexpected; the building was full of raw

brick set out on rail carts, ready to be run through the kiln. Torrential rains made the Bow River rise up and engulf the factory. The bricks were washed out and melted into the silt on the ground. All the equipment was fused into position, and still sits poised for use as though stuck in time.

The factory was converted into an artist residency and a historic museum at the Medalta site, where the clay was extracted. I was commissioned to do a performance there. I-XL had made the bricks that built St. Paul's Anglican Residential School, where my mother, grandmother, and great grandparents



Terrance Houle, *These Bricks*,
performance documentation, 2017.

went. My mother didn't go to day school; she had to live there. My father is also a third-generation residential school survivor. He went to Sandy Bay Residential School in Manitoba, which burned down in the nineteen-nineties.

I wanted to get my parents into the I-XL space for my performance. I wanted to reclaim these bricks that represented their residential schools; to pulverize them and return them to the land. So Medalta recreated the bricks that were used in my parents' residential schools. I had an original one from my own junior high, King Edward.

My father is a Sundancer, so he has the rights to give names, drum and sing the Sundance songs. The Sundance is four days of dance and prayer. It's about dancing with the sun, not worshipping the sun. The Dancers don't eat or drink for those four days; they just sweat and dance and they sleep outside. They pierce the skin of the chest with wood or bone hooks and entreat the spirits to take pity on them. Then, at the end of the Dance, they pull out the tied piercings to break their fast.

For the performance, my father sang two Sundance songs: one of them is the Horse song and the other is a Warrior Rally song. These songs were used to get the warriors to get up and dance; to stir them up to continue the Sundance. My father said "I'm going to help you. I'm going to sing these songs to give you the strength." I did an art-trade with Sonny Assu and he gave me a custom-made drum. The drum is based on a woollen point-blanket that was given by the *Niitsitapi* (Blackfoot) to Prince Charles

the sledgehammer on the brick. I was shaking. But it wasn't just that my hands were hurting; it was also the sheer intensity of what I was doing. I was crying and sweating. In pain.

I hold up a pile of brick dust to the camera, to show the spirits what I had done so that they would take pity on me. My performance is not the same as the Sundance, but I wanted it to use my pain and my prayer for mercy. This piece is about suffering and



Terrance Houle, *These Bricks*,
performance documentation, 2017.

trying to lay the ghosts of the residential schools to rest. It is not reconciliation. It is reclamation.

I took the dust of the bricks outside and knelt to the ground, mixing it with the earth. I brought the stolen land back, returning the clay where it belonged to offer it to the ancestors. I gave my parents their land in the spirit world.

It was the first time my parents ever saw what I did. After the performance, my mother said, “I think I can move on now. Thank you, Son.”

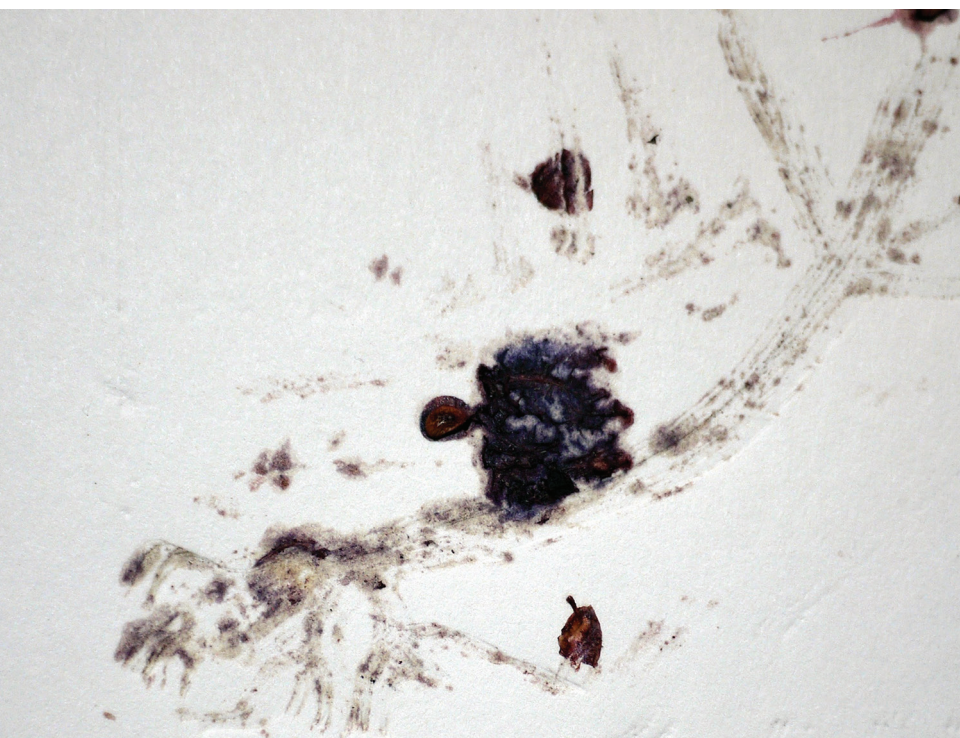
This is what we have to do for that generation so that they can go into the afterlife without the burden of their suffering. I took that burden from my parents so they can pass on and return to their land.

GESTATION: A HAUNTING IN DAWSON CITY

*If you have ghosts
you have everything
In the night I am real²*

Out of the ashes of my career, after I disappeared from the art world, I started working with a friend: a psychic named X—. I talked with him about how I was haunted by my own artwork, and my past life as “Terrance Houle”. At the time, I was touring Canada, and my work was activating colonial spaces. But things started grabbing me by the shoulder and turning me around. I went to Dawson City for a residency and stayed in a haunted house. That’s when *Ghost Days* really started gestating.

Finally, I said, “Are you accusing me of something? What’s going on in there?” He said, “I keep going into my studio, and the first print I worked on [the one made from berries before the trip to Vancouver] keeps appearing on my table. I keep thinking you’re putting it there as a joke!”



Terrance Houle, *Detail from one of Z's prints*, photograph, 2014.

I told him, "I AM NOT GOING INTO YOUR STUDIO AT ALL!" I had to laugh, though.

I asked him, "Is there anything else happening?"

"My bed keeps shaking!" he told me, "Is yours?"

"No," I told him, "it's not".

We had opposite working schedules; he worked in the daytime and I worked mainly at night. But the sun was out around the clock. The ghosts weren't coming from the shadows.

I asked him, "Have you done something?... *Did you put tobacco outside?*"



Terrance Houle, *Ghost Days (Chairs from the Ghost Camp)*, Dawson City, 2014.

He answered bluntly, “No ... should I?”

“Yeah, of course you should! Don’t you know that? As an Indigenous person, there are things you just have to do Where’d you get your inks? Where’d you get the berries?”

He paused, “Lots of different places...I went down to the graveyard. There were a whole bunch of raspberries and strawberries and I picked all those.”

I said, “Did you put tobacco down?”

“No.”

(Eyeroll) “*Man, those are for the dead! And you’re making ink out of it! And now you’re bringing spirits back into the house!*”

I made a tobacco mixture with him, because I had some Sundance mixture. I told him, “Go put it down there and tell them you’re sorry.”

That’s when I realized that my art could continue into the afterlife and be a performance for the living. I would die, and everything would switch over. *I would be a ghost conjuring the living as my performance.*

HAUNTED EDITION: THE SPIRITS TOOK MY SONG

I held a series of four workshops at the Banff Center in 2019. There were fifteen artists in residence there. I invited elders to come and take part in the workshops and engage with the artists. Through the workshops I turned my practice into an offering. That’s how I learned to create a haunted edition of my own work.

In the first workshop, the elders came and together with the artists we all created a song together and sang to the spirits. My parents and their Sundance

leader came to open up the spirit realm to give us safe passage to work in this manner. One of the elders led us in creating the song and I gave direction. We all had instruments to play and starting singing through call and answer. We synchronized as a group like a powwow drumming session.

We recorded an analog version of the song on a reel-to-reel recorder with a microphone in the middle of the room. I did a sound test as we started and the equipment was working. I was also recording it on my computer through the video function. But when we went back to listen to the analog version, the song was GONE.

The audio technician was gobsmacked: he said, “There’s only the sound of you counting everyone in and giving directions. But the singing and the music just aren’t there. It’s just your voice by itself.”

We had a 28-minute reel with nothing but the sound of me cuing people, and then the sound of the tape hissing. I had never even heard that sound before: tape with nothing on it. And when I went to my computer to play the recording THE FILE WOULDN’T WORK.

I told one of the elders about it and he knew exactly what had happened. “Oh, the spirits took it ... you know those ghosts!” My parents and the other elders said, “Well, isn’t that what you wanted? For the spirits to take your song? They took your song” Of course, that’s what I wanted. *But I didn’t think it was going to work!* It did though.

We did another song and then recorded that overtop the tape hiss from the original. We brought out 4H4s, AND recorded reel-to-reel, AND recorded

volatile and she couldn't bring the remains back. So we held a pipe ceremony for her. Joe, the elder who led the ceremony, said that he never would have imagined doing that ceremony in those mountains around Banff, since traditionally Banff was only ever a meeting place for Indigenous people, not a place of living and burial. It's the place of the dream-spirits and night-spirits; those spirits are a purple-ish blue color. People often have strange dreams when they do a residency in Banff and that's why.

At the end of the residency, the elders came and closed the way to the spirit realm for us. They did a blessing and took the haunted photo edition. Joe smudged one of the editions and put a cigarette on top of it, then we put it in the fire pit and burnt it. That way, we created a print edition for the afterlife. By burning it, we gifted it to the spirits. Now, all the residents have an edition, the Banff Center has one, and the spirits have one.

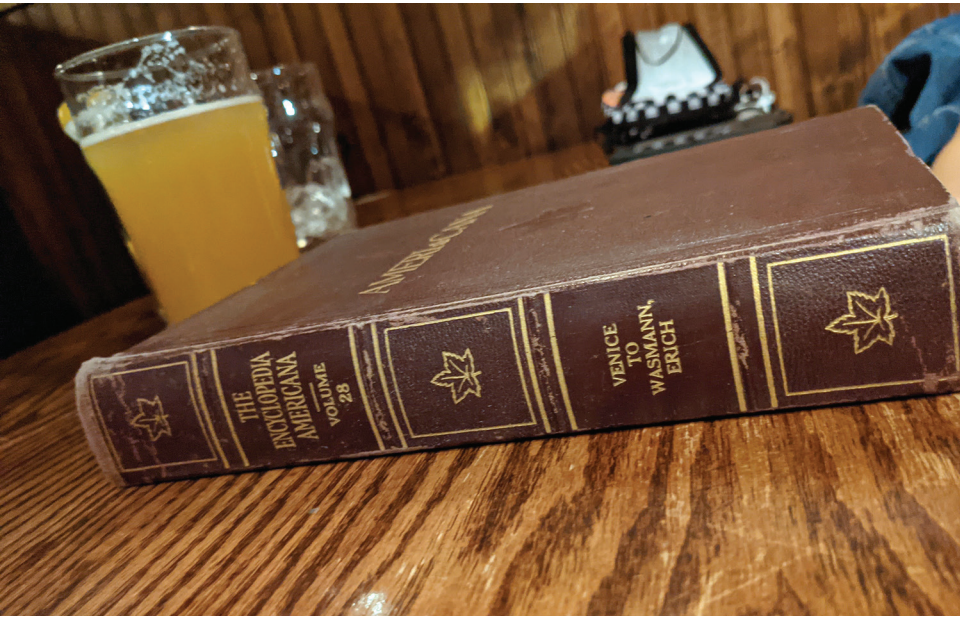
This was the beginning of my new practice for *Ghost Days*: art for my own afterlife.

CONTRARY

The contrary is a recurrent figure in Native Plains culture. A contrary is like a clown or a joker. Contraries think and act oppositely from everyone else. They talk oppositely: they say goodbye to say hello. They ride their horses backwards. They clean themselves with dirt and dry themselves with water. They wear burlap. And they are an important part of most ceremonies. They come into the ceremonies and

sweep away all the negative. They take the bad things away and clean the spaces.

I have always considered myself a contrary. My performances make reversals. I twist time around in order to put things in an opposite order; to see things differently. When the art world wants to see me a certain way, I disappear like a ghost. If I haunt you, I'm sorry



Terrance Houle, *A textbook from The Ship & Anchor pub in Calgary, Alberta*, photograph, 2014.

THE CONJURING: ART AFTER TERRANCE HOULE

The final performance of *GHOST DAYS* will be my grave. It must have a house built on it and a white settler family must live in it. The house will be built on an Indian burial ground—my own grave.

GHOST DAYS: an experimental art
adventure with film, video, performance,
photo and music to conjure spirits and
ghosts as collaborators!

Terrance Houle will attempt to raise the
ghosts of colonial and noncolonial histories
that exist as much in the light of night as
they do in the darkness of the day!

I am preparing myself for the future afterlife. I have become aware of myself as a ghost that will appear to upcoming generations. My work is a portal that I can travel through. As a ghost in my future afterlife, I will need a studio. *GHOST DAYS* already exists on the other side.

I am planning to build myself a house on an “Indian burial ground”; one that stands over my own grave. I’m building it so that I can have a studio in the afterlife.

Terrance Houle, *Sketches for a studio in the afterlife*,
drawings added to a textbook in The Ship & Anchor pub
in Calgary, Alberta, and then returned to the shelf, 2014.

I haunt my own studio so that my art can be a medium between me, my ancestors, and those future generations who know how to experience my work. We appear and disappear from each other all the time. And it is those moments of appearance and disappearance by which we make ourselves known to one another.

I am haunted by my artwork of the past. Dogged by the great “Terrance Houle,” the artist that decided it would be better to become a ghost that haunts his own art.

NOTES

- 1 Jason Molina, “In the Human World,” *No Moon on the Water* (Atlanta: Chunklet, 2004)
- 2 Roky Erikson, “If You Have Ghosts,” *The Evil One* (San Francisco: 415 Records, 1981).

Terrance Houle, *Sketches for a studio in the afterlife*, drawings added to a textbook in The Ship & Anchor pub in Calgary, Alberta, and then returned to the shelf, 2014.