



My Own Personal Ghost

David R. Harper



1"

Foreword

Faythe Levine"

Arts/Industry Program Director, John Michael Kohler Arts Center"
Sheboygan, Wisconsin"

February 2020"

In 2016, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center was the site of an enigmatic installation filled with objects that appeared to belong to an alchemist's laboratory from another century. *My Own Personal Ghost* was David R. Harper's first solo exhibition in Wisconsin and his most ambitious project up to that time. Although the precision of the work made it seem as though the room had popped into existence from another reality, the exhibition was many years in the making.

Harper's relationship with The John Michael Kohler Arts Center began in the Arts/Industry residency program hosted in the Kohler Co. factory. A two-time alumnus of the Pottery residency (2012/2014), he produced a library of objects during that time, including the vitreous ceramic skulls and geodes that appear throughout *My Own Personal Ghost*. Additional objects Harper cast while in residence continue to be included in several of his other projects."

During a 2019 studio visit with Harper in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, we spent some time together as he was finishing work for an upcoming exhibition and packing to move out of state. Sprawled throughout the massive four-thousand-square-foot studio was work that seemed to be pulled from the universe he created in *My Own Personal Ghost*: cast plaster hands, hand-blown glass atomizer bottles, feathers, sequins, photo-realistic embroideries, three-dimensional stained glass sculptures, and beautifully handcrafted

display cases. The sheer quantity of work in the room was dazzling, but what stood out was Harper's fastidious attention to detail in each object.

In Harper's studio, it became apparent that *My Own Personal Ghost* was a monumental stepping-stone on his path of meticulous art processes. The exhibition is a reflection of the Arts Center's ongoing mission to support artists in their efforts to take risk and push work forward into new terrain.

The John and Geraldine Lilley Museum of Art's 2020 presentation of *David R. Harper: My Own Personal Ghost* at University of Nevada, Reno comprises works on loan from the John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, which are gifts of Kohler Foundation, Inc. Support for this exhibition includes grants from the **City of Reno** and **Nevada Humanities**."

David R. Harper: My Own Personal Ghost was organized by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and was on view in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, February 7–August 28, 2016. Support for this exhibition included grants from the **Herzfeld Foundation**, **Sargento Foods Inc.**, and the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin** and the **National Endowment for the Arts**. Additional funding was provided by the members of the Arts Center's **Exhibitions & Collections Giving Circle**."

Several pieces in the exhibition were produced by the artist during an Arts/Industry residency in 2014. **Arts/Industry** is a unique collaboration between the **John Michael Kohler Arts Center** and **Kohler Co.** This residency program is administered by the Arts Center and generously hosted and funded by Kohler Co."



2"

Cover image: David R. Harper, untitled (Adam and Eve), 2016; giclee print on canvas, cotton embroidery thread, and wood; 58 3/4 x 48 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation, Inc."

1-2" Works in progress at the studio of David R. Harper in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 2019."



The Corner of My Eye

Paul Baker Prindle, MFA"
Director, Carolyn Campagna Kleefeld Contemporary Art Museum"
Long Beach, California"

October 2018"

"For as long as the house stands, this will be your ghost spot—and mine too, I wanted to say. We stood there for a few seconds where my father and I had spoken of Oliver once. Now he and I were speaking of my father. Tomorrow, I'll think back on this moment and let the ghosts of their absence maunder in the twilit hour of the day."

-André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*

On the last day of January in 1632, the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons gathered together in an operating theater for an anatomy lesson. Carefully regulated by law, the event was held only once a year. Public dissection of human bodies was permitted in rare cases under the watchful eye of civic

authorities. It was the bodies of only criminals that could be used for this purpose. The Guild chose none other than Rembrandt van Rijn—twenty-six years old at the time—to record this momentous occasion for young scientists that was also a society event for the educated, fashionable, and wealthy members of Amsterdam's upper classes. A masterful representation of the dissection and of several prominent Guild members, including the titular Dr. Tulp, Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* has taken on layers and layers of meaning since it was first unveiled.

David R. Harper included his own version of the painting [now in the collection of Providence College] in his 2016 multimedia installation *My Own Personal Ghost* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Within a complex arrangement of tableaux arranged in the gallery space hung a version of the Rembrandt painting. In his version, Harper uses twenty-first-century technology to reproduce the seventeenth-century image on canvas. He then intervenes on the image's surface with painstaking embroidery stitched into the outline of the criminal's body on the surgeon's table.

In many ways, Harper's version of the original image is a key to understanding *My Own Personal Ghost*. Just as Rembrandt's painting is about the power of imagery, viewership, ways of knowing, mystery, and memory, Harper's installation considers all these as well as the role museums play in extending and amplifying our exploration of our world. Museums, after all, are where we go to learn things we believe are important and worthy of knowing. Rembrandt's painting reveals to us that paintings and the artists who make them play a central role in communicating scientific knowledge, representing everyday life, memorializing individuals, and introducing wonder. Harper's amended version indicates that *My Own Personal Ghost* is about these themes as well.

As I stand among Harper's installation of hanging mobiles, sculptures in vitrines, freestanding sculpture, embroideries, and more, I think of myself also within *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. The lesson here is not strictly that of the painting's title, it is also a lesson for us—the viewers of the painting. Indeed, as viewers we could learn quite a bit from a mostly scientifically correct rendering of the dissection. But the real lesson here goes beyond anatomy and physiology. Implied within the visible part of Rembrandt's painting is the invisible audience toward whom the figures in this painting are turned. Dr. Tulp's empirical exercise is the point of critical connection for Rembrandt and for me. It is an experiment that involves actual observation with the senses rather than theorizing how the human body works. I understand myself in Harper's space in much the same way I experience Rembrandt's space. Moment after moment, vantage point after vantage point, Harper's installation welcomes the viewer to look carefully and learn through observation."

Above: David R. Harper, untitled (Anatomy Lesson), 2016; giclee print on canvas, cotton embroidery thread, and wood; 48"½ x 63"½ x 1"½ in. Providence College Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation, Inc."

Rembrandt isn't the only historical character or artifact Harper works with. As I navigate my way through the exhibition, Harper provides consistent guidance through allusion. He tips his hand over and over and does so through an integrated, thoughtful overall design. What the artists of the Italian Baroque would have called *composto*—a word that is difficult to translate, but means something like “all-encompassing composition”—*My Own Personal Ghost* is a muscular, robust tour of art history and masterful technique that is deeply self-aware, smart, and exceptionally well composed.

The exhibition, which is an installation of several interwoven art objects, welcomes viewers into the gallery space in much the same way the artists Harper references would have shepherded parishioners into the spaces they designed across Europe. I think of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural installation in Rome's church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. Within the church's Cornaro Chapel, he created bas-relief loges in which men are depicted viewing the central scene of Saint Teresa in ecstasy. In Bernini's version, St. Teresa writhes in rapture as a seraph pierces her heart with a red hot, golden arrow while the Cornaro men, and we, look on. For Bernini, seeing was believing. In *My Own Personal Ghost*, seeing, looking, viewing is everything.

No matter which way I enter the exhibition, I find myself treated to multiple vantage points, including one in which two cases filled with sculpted peacocks, cast bones, flowers, shimmering geodes, and woven images frame a textile map of the human circulatory system, above which birds float and fly. Just before the space between the vitrines and in front of the circulatory map stands a workshop table with various cast objects, a woodworker's clamp, and other indicators of hand work. Reminiscent of Petrus Christus's painting *A Goldsmith in his Shop* and also John Everett Millais's *Holy Family in St. Joseph's Workshop*, this desk is one of many works that bridges the references to Northern Renaissance, Southern Renaissance, Protestant Baroque, and Catholic Baroque works of art and their attendant meanings. The dimensions of meaning that arise from Christ's humble role as a carpenter, or maker of things, resonates in the allusions to both Protestant and Catholic art found throughout the installation. All the references Harper makes are clues for us to engage. My place within the space helps me—and others—become as necessary to the sculptural composition as Dr. Tulp's unseen audience is integral to Rembrandt's painting.

Harper doesn't only mirror the space-framing technique of historical artists; he does something even more exciting. He leverages the tension of historical Baroque rooms to create ambiguous spaces where the viewer feels both at one with the installation and also distanced. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Martin Luther's radical endeavors were countered



Right: David R. Harper: *My Own Personal Ghost* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2016."

by the Catholic Church through an art that emphasized the mysteries of the faith Luther sought to explain logically. Artists and their patrons wanted to create theatrical moments wherein visitors would identify emotionally with the saints and holy family. It was important to see these characters as divine and beyond the viewer, but also as righteous characters who were humanlike. They were sacred role models whose humanity made them relatable. There was an essentially Baroque tension between the viewer's identification with what they were looking at and their realization that they must reach toward what they were seeing."

Harper's project leverages these historical techniques, but *My Own Personal Ghost* is not, strictly speaking, about the sacred and the profane. Instead, it is about the history of knowledge and how we come to know things and the role of history and memory in this process of learning. It is also, on the most intimate and personal level, inspired by the artist's relationship to traumatic memory and knowing his present through a remembered past. Yet his handling of this type of memory is one that is open for us all to engage—"he makes himself vulnerable at moments so that we too might enter into the work. Like many of the artworks he alludes to, Harper's installation includes the viewers physically and conceptually as a means for provoking a thoughtful and contemplative encounter with the work and with themselves."

Harper repeatedly references a humanist project that began in antiquity—"perhaps even with Adam and Eve where they named everything in the Garden of Eden. The cases and their contents create the look of a European *Wunderkabinett*. These rooms of curiosities and specimens were the precursors to museums and, like the museums of today, were contingent spaces that purported to represent humanity's mastery of the natural world while also indicating limitations and agendas that attend that mastery.

When I spoke with Harper, he told me:"

My Own Personal Ghost was one of the moments where you are looking at the cases that are creating distance, but then you're also in the space. It was purposeful to start doing installations where I needed the viewer to be in it, but still kept out of it...It's all one object. It's important for people to know that those [vitrines] were not provided by the institution...they were made by the artist to create a relationship between you and the work...I'm trying to create a language of distance that is extremely purposeful.¹

Just like everything else in the installation, the cases were hand built by the artist. They represent a reversal and a comment on the role museums



play in framing and contextualizing work. Here, the artist wields the power to do this rather than the museum. Harper is intent on maintaining greater control over the work of guiding viewers through the space and also over the decisions about what to withhold and what to reveal.

When I spoke with Harper recently, he told me that the ghosts at work are more than the historical images. Each object in the exhibition is also an index or container of memory. Objects are often the touchstones for memory: I myself keep an old, inoperable smartphone with voicemails from my departed grandmother, and my desk is covered in rocks I collect from memorable vacations. Our self-awareness, our consciousness, our ability to know things are powers that are amplified by our ability to remember and the tools we use to do so. A blessing and a curse, memory helps form us and make us who we are. Our bodies are containers of memories that are specific to us, even the shared ones—only we hold them as we hold them. But memories are also like foreign invaders in our bodies. Every time we engage the action of remembering, the memory files in our brains are accessed in new ways, in the context of new information gained since we last filed the memories away. We think we remember the past accurately, but what we actually do is create a contemporary past every time we remember. Our memories may live in our brains, but they have lives of their own. They



are welcome guests, they are invading soldiers, they are ghosts that haunt us and spur us to action.

People, images, objects, and sensations often function as mnemonics, reminding and indexing things from our individual and collective histories. Many of the objects and images within this installation index histories of the West. These metanarratives are part of our shared cultural memory. Our collective memories are tied up in the narratives that historic works of art advance. Our origin stories, our pursuit of knowledge, our curiosities, and our position within nature are all illustrated in *My Own Personal Ghost*, and they function to ground our experience of the exhibition. But the images also indicate more personal meanings for the artist. These are at once strange and also familiar to us. We can recognize moments throughout the installation that must have particular meaning for Harper, yet at the same time they mean something unique to us as viewers.

Cast hands are placed throughout the installation—on a desktop, in a case, holding a parrot or a segment of rope. These body parts, responsible for so much mischief, sensation, and partnership, are also indicators of work and



creativity. They represent the place where wedding rings are placed, where two people connect, where a glass is held, and they represent the starting point of a physical process and the actions involved in making sense of an idea or experience. Moreover, the artist says that they often represent his own ghostly presence. Harper says that he imagines the hands busy at work in his studio even after he has left and is at home or out with friends. While he is away thinking about what comes next, the hands continue the work. The objects they produce have a life of their own, and they carry the many meanings we are then able to sort through."

Skulls—animal and human—point us toward St. Jerome, the patron saint of librarians, students, and translators. A symbol of the saint, a human skull is invariably included in images of St. Jerome as an indicator of his continued intellectual work through the eventual failure and decay of his temporal body. As containers for the brain, the organ truly at the physiological center of our sense of self, the preserved skull indexes knowledge, memory, and death. It remains long after our death and proves that we were once here.

The decay of the body through trial, through intellectual toil, physical trauma, and plain old daily life is inevitable. In one of life's stranger paradoxes, our wisdom and knowledge grows stronger as our bodies grow weaker. Like all of ours, Harper's life has included personal traumas that have taken him to deeper levels of understanding and awareness, but not without a price. He refers to Caravaggio's representations of a healthy and an ailing Bacchus. Called Dionysus by the Greeks, the Roman Bacchus was responsible for all that was beyond reason, for freeing humans from self-consciousness and fear, and for communicating between the dead and the living. Harper's intervention on Caravaggio's hungover, liver-diseased Bacchus installed next to the version of a healthier looking Bacchus, indicates process. That process is deleterious at the same time it is constructive. Hardship, trauma, and struggle take their toll, but they also can lead to deeper understanding. The memory of life's difficulties stays with us and haunts us, but it also continues to work on us and shape us.

A privilege of writing about this work in particular has been getting to ask challenging questions of the artist and receiving even more challenging answers. A text exchange with Harper during which I asked what the parrots found throughout the installation mean affected me deeply. Harper told me that he would pass by the Mimico stop on one of the Toronto train lines on his way to visit his father, a man with whom he had a challenging relationship. The stop's name, *mimico*, comes from an Ojibwe word, but it is also the Spanish word for "mime." Harper recalled for me, "I liked the idea of passing through this place and adopting (mimicking) my father's

mannerisms and masculinity to make myself appeal to him more.”² At once, this anecdote and Harper’s willingness to share this with me felt profoundly personal in a way that I almost felt bad for asking, but I also recognized my own self in this story. I was only affirmed in my feeling that *My Own Personal Ghost* succeeds at something so many other works do not. Harper transforms and builds on the personal to create something we can all find ourselves in.

We cannot say that any of Harper’s work is strictly biographical, but it is informed by or founded in biography. Self-aware, learned, and multiskilled, Harper and his work are complex and layered. Past traumas stay with him. At times, shades of melancholy emerge as he speaks, and I understand his work better in relationship to this. The death of his father and a significant accident are events that stick with him in specific ways and present themselves as spectral presences within the installation. I also recognize a particularly Jewish relationship to trauma, memory, and remembrance of the past as I consider how the installation works and my own Jewish way of remembering things. Jewish ritual, holidays, and ways of connecting with other Jews often references past traumas. Past events, some of which happened thousands of years ago, color the ways Jews understand their place in this world and relate to events in their present. This cultured behavior is important to understanding the artist behind this work. Yet, despite what the title indicates, the meaning of *My Own Personal Ghost* for us is not indivisibly tied to specific traumas or cultural memory practices, the details of which we cannot fully discern in the work. Rather, the exhibition is in many ways about the larger process of working through. It is also about leveraging memory and personal ghosts toward constructive purposes. In this way, the installation is even more available to all of us than we might recognize at first.”

Harper’s work advocates in beautiful ways for an understanding of how important making is to us as creatures. We count on artists to help us understand and advance knowledge, and we often make things ourselves as a way of working through things in our life. Artists regularly hash and rehash specific symbolic imagery and material from their own lives and from our shared, community experiences as a means for working through them. Anselm Kiefer uses soil from his native Germany as material for working through his individual and communal tragic past. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein used humble chicken bones from a nearby restaurant to imagine a new, more comfortable and privileged future for himself and his wife that contrasted with the extreme poverty they experienced while living with the effects of their shared past.

Right: David R. Harper: *My Own Personal Ghost* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2016.”





The practices of other artists help us to better understand the ways in which Harper's activity adds to larger conversations about how people today make sense of the past. Clearly, he is dialoguing with a long history of artists from Caravaggio and Albrecht Dürer to Bernini as well as artists, critics, and art lovers who look at them. Another comes to mind: Charles Willson Peale, a lesser-known artist whose personal museum in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia exhibited paintings from his talented family alongside such things as natural history specimens, minerals, exotica, and archaeological items."

Harper has told me that he looks toward other often historical or non-art influences as he makes his work. That said, working to see the fuller texture of contemporary efforts helps us to understand how Harper's efforts add and differentiate within a larger dialogue. Mike Kelley's *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago) immediately comes to mind. Kelley's installation of found-object stuffed children's toys engages museum practices of categorizing and digesting information for visitors. Kelley and Harper explore related themes in an ongoing conversation about craft and making as well as memory, narrative, and history.

Certainly, fellow Canadian artist Sameer Farooq prompts us to ask questions of the roles of museums in framing knowledge, as do other artists such as Fred Wilson, Guerrilla Girls, and Occupy Museums. Harper's practice expands on and dialogues with the activities of these artists by adding questions about the place of what is often pejoratively called "craft" in museums, about artists' relationship to curators, and the value of the array of skilled professionals either absent or fully present in the production of museum exhibitions. By personally making every object in the installation, including the display furniture, he makes his position known. As the creator of exceptionally well-made cast objects and other sculpture, furniture, embroidery, and more, he encourages viewers to ask questions not only about the term "craft," he also asks us to think about the role of museums in shaping our relationship to it.

From a different approach, we might also think about Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* in Washington, D.C. Massive in scale, the memorial is a sculptural installation on the National Mall. Making use of Bernini's strategy for shepherding visitors into the art space, Lin's masterwork looks like a scar in the Mall from above, but at ground level it is like two open wings. Visitors walk at a decline to the corner angle at which the two walls meet. Over fifty-eight thousand veterans' names are etched into the polished black granite. The physical arrangement of the space guides visitors to the heart of the memorial, emphasizing the importance of the viewer/citizen in the act of remembering.

Harper invites personal identification with trauma while also indicating the mechanisms that undergird memory. Most importantly, his installation invites us to consider how our vantage point can shade and frame our memories. In *My Own Personal Ghost*, memory is, according to Harper, often relived from the corner of our eye. We catch glimpses of things that could be other things, just as we sometimes think we see someone we know is not there. In this way, Harper's work adds to the larger conversations about memory and perspective being advanced by the visual artists mentioned earlier as well as musicians, playwrights, and authors. As I write about Harper, I have relevant lines from A.S. Byatt, André Aciman, and Ian McEwan running through my head.

Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing's final book, *Alfred and Emily*, tells two of the many stories that could have been told by assembling Lessing's memories of her parents. Lessing took what she had stored away and created first a fictional telling of the lives her parents would have had if World War I hadn't torn their lives apart. She took what she remembered of them and imagined different futures with different spouses and jobs and dreams and children. In



the second half of *Alfred and Emily*, she tells of their actual lives as a family of three in Rhodesia following the Great War, during which her father was crippled by shrapnel. In this way, Lessing advances a notion that Harper does as well: memory is dynamic, it is plastic, and can be reshaped. In doing the work of remembering, we create.

In the forward, Lessing writes, "If I could meet Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve of the lives I have given them."³ Lessing has been critical to how I understand memory. She made use

of the malleability, the imprecision, the power, and the visceral qualities of memory to make something as authentic and important as the past reality she builds upon. *My Own Personal Ghost* does something very similar. David R. Harper pulls together memories spanning centuries, including things we all know about and things we can never know about, and pieces them together for us to look at and decipher. I walk into this exhibition so I too can imagine these memories as my own; these images and objects are now in my mind. They are my memories now. They are my own personal ghost. A new present, made possible through remembering, is now also my own.

Above: David R. Harper: *My Own Personal Ghost* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2016."

*David R. Harper:
My Own Personal Ghost*

2020"

John and Geraldine Lilley Museum of Art"
University of Nevada, Reno"

On loan from the John Michael Kohler Arts Center

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