

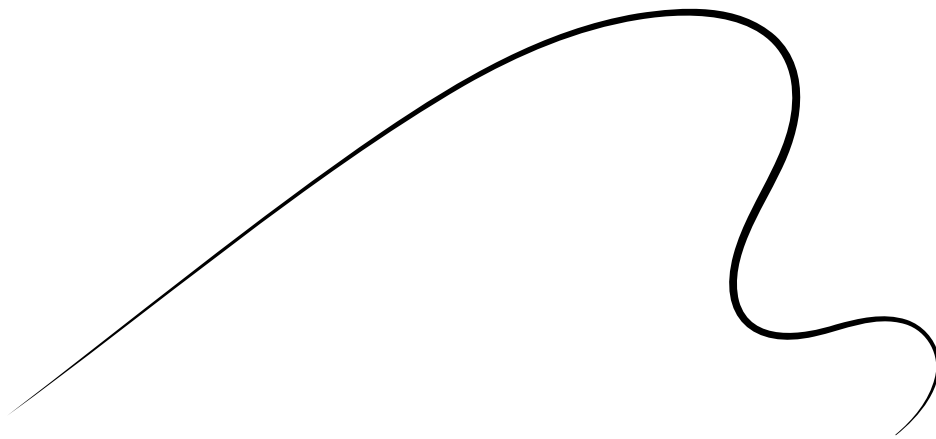
Tyler
Mellins



A Host
of Hauntings



Words by
Jamie Sutcliffe



Preceding

Tyler Mellins, *Receiver*, Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2023.

Photo: Jules Lister

Installation view. A tower made of scaffolding stands in the centre of a darkened room, illuminated from above by a spotlight. It has a pointed top like an obelisk, to which various aerials and antennae are affixed. Split across three wooden shelves within the tower are seven domestic television sets with big backs, which look to be from the 1990s. Most of the televisions seem dysfunctional, displaying only static. On some of them, various black and white figures can be made out amongst the static. The televisions and antennae are connected by a mass of black wiring, which sits in a tangle beneath the tower on the floor and draped around the scaffolding poles.

The whole planet reeks of mysticism without revelation. — Dan Simmons¹

Ghosts plague the work of Tyler Mellins. These aren't the polite, culturally agreeable spectres that conform to the conceptual parameters of spooky contemporary art practices, populating the contours of whatever metaphorical alembic the artist has provided with their ethereal, suggestive residues. No, Mellins's ghosts are disruptive and unruly – 'damned things!' to borrow a phrase from arch supernaturalist writer Ambrose Bierce, 'cheap and nasty' to borrow another from charming grimscribe Sir Andrew Caldecott – and they carry the novel charges of cattiness, embarrassment, and, most productively, discomfiture. Mellins's ghosts are potently awkward things, and he's dying for you to meet them.

A word of caution ... it is perhaps essential to know that Mellins cut his teeth as a paranormal investigator. Working as an assistant on séances and ghost hunts for a production company, he was able to step into a unique position as a conjuror of phantasmic experiences, a wrangler of spirits. Regularly witness to the 'other side' that so few of us mortals ever obtain a chance to see, Mellins was able to view those

Tyler Mellins

truly strange locales that are revealed when the veil separating realms is lifted.

Of course we're not talking about the afterlife here, but the secret world of stagecraft that has, since the seventeenth-century creation of the magic lantern by Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens, enhanced the culture of the paranormal; the literal smoke and mirrors that so effectively tense the membrane bifurcating elevated scepticism from trembling credulity. From this vantage, Mellins observed the behaviours and anticipations of audiences, interpreting them against the machinations of hucksters and hoaxers. It is to both his and his work's credit that he's emerged from such encounters with a disarming sense of openness and good-willed curiosity.

This 'openness' seems to characterise the strange contradictions at the heart of his artistic disposition. What might it mean to maintain a research-based practice that pursues the ineffable? What should we expect from a material project that explores diaphanous experiences, sense impressions, flights of the imagination, superstition or projection? How can you quantify or represent a sudden chill, a sensation of creeping unease? Such

Tyler Mellins

332

questions add an occulted frisson to the notion of art's dematerialisation.

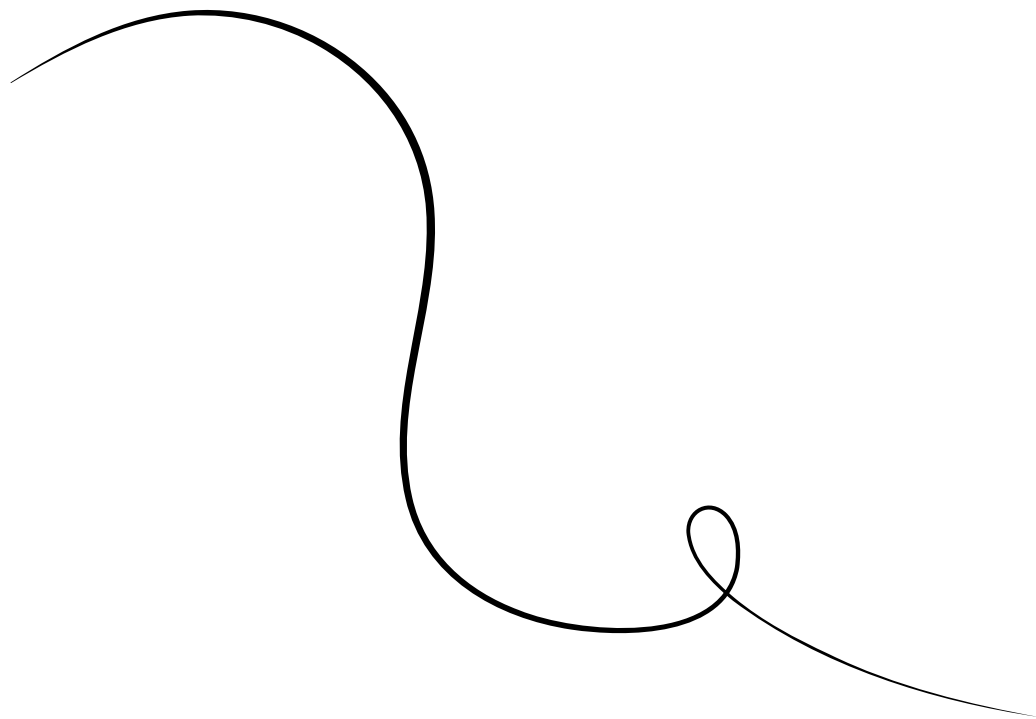
Mellins's works resemble quasi-scientific apparatuses. **Receiver** (2022), is a cable-strewn tubular steel monolith housing several detuned television sets hissing with static, channelling clipped and distorted messages from some televisual elsewhere. **Breakthrough** (2022), is a pulsing digital video that appears to depict an animate vapour quivering in response to sonic interferences gathered from a spirit box; that trusted tool of paranormal investigators used to scan AM and FM radio bands for ghostly chatter. Exhibited together during the exhibition **Platform 22: Dark Echoes** at Site Gallery, Sheffield (2023), both works constitute a laboratory of sorts in which viewers' propensities for belief might be tested. Following film historian Tom Gunning, it's tempting to locate these projects as part of a lineage in which the cultures of the supernatural are rendered visible as a kind of dubious 'evidence' by the development of 'special effects' in communications media, but also play an active role in their conceptual and mechanical ambition.²

Importantly, the 'truth' of these works is never confirmed; the circumstances of their creation is left

Tyler Mellins

333





Preceding

Tyler Mellins, *Receiver* (detail), Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2023.
Photo: Jules Lister

Three outdated television sets sit on a wooden shelf amongst a scaffolding structure. Two of the televisions show black and white imagery with lots of static, as though the television set is receiving a poor signal; one set appears to have no signal at all. The screen on the left shows someone being operated on; the screen in the middle shows someone shaking a vending machine, as another person watches them; the screen on the right just shows static.

to speculation, because Mellins simply isn't interested in proving or disproving the existence of ghosts. Echoing contemporary thinkers on the intellectual evolution of the supernatural – writer Victoria Nelson or professor of comparative religions Jeffrey J. Kripal for example, both of whom understand the paranormal as a sublimation of deeply human religious impulses into popular culture – Mellins forgoes absolutes in favour of a suspension of judgement. It's a place from which a unique form of conjecture can emerge. 'Popular culture is our mysticism', suggests Kripal, echoing sentiments found in both **Receiver** and **Breakthrough**, 'The public realm is our esoteric realm. The paranormal is our secret in plain sight.'³

This popular charge is most apparent in Mellins's persistent preoccupation with electricity. In his seminal work **Haunted Media**, cultural historian Jeffrey Sconce describes how technological evolutions are commonly haunted by uneasy metaphors of fluidity and displaced presence. From the electricity that feeds any technology, through the information that inhabits the medium, to the consciousness of the viewer or listener, our electronic comprehensions are undergirded by vectoral imaginaries of liquidity and transmission. 'This "flowing" imagination presents the possibility

Tyler Mellins

of analogous exchanges, electricity mediating the transfer and substitution of consciousness and information between the body and a host of electronic media technologies’, Sconce suggests, ‘such electrical possibilities for fusion and confusion, of course, remain central in describing both the wonders and horrors of an emerging cyber culture.’⁴

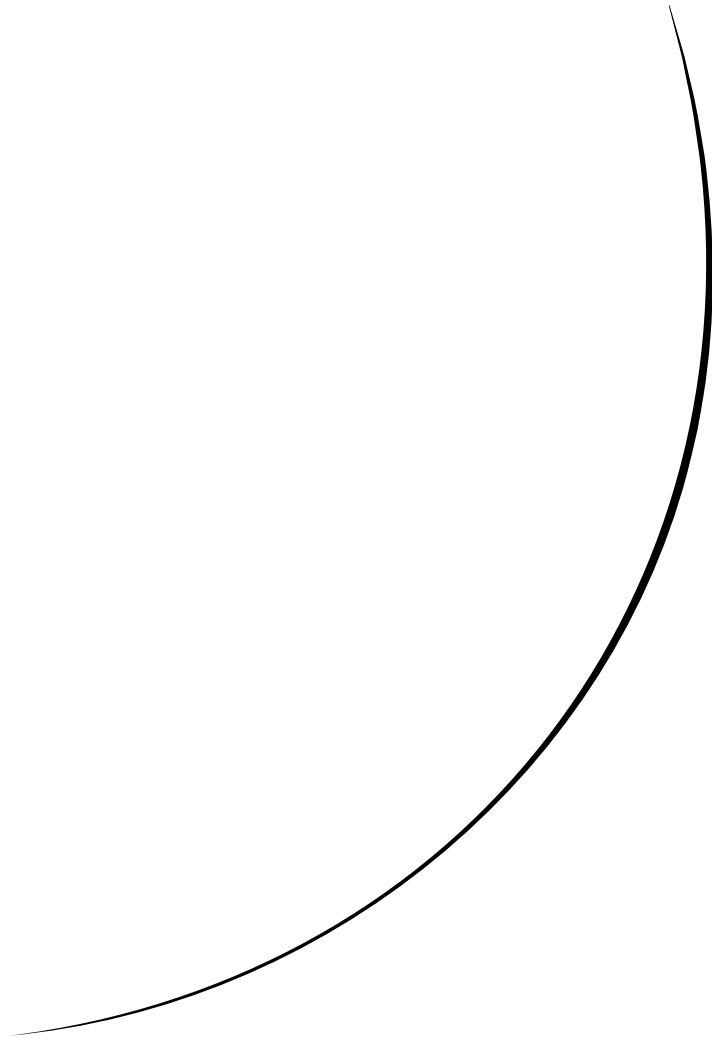
While other works have focused on the terrestrial transmission of signals and messages, such as **Sigils For Communication** (2021), which recast redundant television aerials as obtuse glyphs in the service of some vague demonic correspondence, Mellins often explores Sconce’s ‘cyber culture’ in private acts of mediumism. Recasting the artist-researcher as an agent of occult detection (think Algernon Blackwood’s psychic detective character John Silence re-positioned in the hyper-mediated present), he scries digital interfaces for resonant meanings. Holed away in his studio, he cruises the pathways of software-defined radio broadcasts and makes medium-like requests of AI chatbots. Careful scrutiny of the resulting psychobabble reveals occasional instances of apparent sentience. The philosopher Marshall McLuhan once postulated that new media constitutes nothing less than the prosthetic extension of the human nervous system

into novel cartographies of communication.⁵ Mellins’s solitary mediumistic encounters suggest the anticipation of a further prosthesis, the digital unconscious, a domain populated by the emergent phantasmic agents of displaced presence.⁶

Jamie Sutcliffe is a writer, curator and co-director Strange Attractor Press.

Notes

- 1 Dan Simmons, **Hyperion**, 1989.
- 2 See Tom Gunning, ‘To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision’, **Grey Room**, no.26, 2007, pp.94–127.
- 3 Jeffrey J. Kripal, **Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred**, The University of Chicago Press, 2010, p.6.
- 4 Jeffrey Sconce, **Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television**, Duke University Press, 2000, pp.7–8.
- 5 See Marshall McLuhan, **The Medium is the Massage**, Penguin Books, 1967.
- 6 See Konrad Becker and Felix Stalder (eds.), **Digital Unconscious: Nervous Systems and Uncanny Predictions**, Autonomedia, 2021.



Opposite

Tyler Mellins, **Breakthrough**, Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2023.
Photo: Jules Lister

A large flat-screen television is turned on its side, giving a portrait orientation. On the screen is a beam of white light against a black background. Within the light beam swirling smoke creates patterns. The image is reflected along a line in the middle of the screen, making it symmetrical. There appears to be a strange face looking back at us. Two pairs of wireless headphones are hung next to the screen on the wall.

