

THE HOUSE  
OF  
THE SEVEN GABLES,  
AN EXHIBITION CATALOGUE.

BY  
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WITH  
JUSTINE S. MURISON, CHRISTOPHER ATKINS, AND CORINNE MAY BOTZ.

NORMAL, ILLINOIS:  
UNIVERSITY GALLERIES OF ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY.

MMXIV

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Now, see: under those seven gables, at which we now look up—and which old Colonel Pyncheon meant to be the house of his descendants, in prosperity and happiness, down to an epoch far beyond the present—under that roof, through a portion of three centuries, there has been perpetual remorse of conscience, a constantly defeated hope, strife amongst kindred, various misery, a strange form of death, dark suspicion, unspeakable disgrace—all or most of which calamity I have the means of tracing to the old Puritan’s inordinate desire to plant and endow a family. To plant a family!

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1851, 211-212.

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# THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES.

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## I.

### ART, HISTORY, AND HAUNTED HOUSES: NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*.

IN THE dark recesses of the titular house in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) hangs a peculiar portrait of the Pyncheon family's Puritan ancestor. This portrait, as it turns out, is vitally important to the plot of Hawthorne's novel. Behind it hides a family mystery: the missing deeds to the Maine land that two centuries of descendants have desperately tried to prove they own. In one of many descriptions of this portrait, Hawthorne's narrator notes that the figure in the portrait has "faded into the canvas, and hidden itself behind the duskiess of age" but also, paradoxically, grown more prominent:

For, while the physical outline and substance were darkening away from the beholder's eye, the bold, hard, and, at the same time, indirect character of the man seemed to be brought out in a kind of spiritual relief. Such an effect may occasionally be observed in pictures of antique date. They acquire a look which an artist (if he have anything like the complacency of artists, now-a-days) would never dream of presenting to a patron as his own characteristic expression, but which, nevertheless, we at once recognize as reflecting the unlovely truth of a human soul.<sup>1</sup>

To our postmodern ears, the claim that a portrait can reveal the "unlovely truth of a human soul" itself sounds antiquated. If we follow the line of thinking of both Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, we do not find truth or reality in painting, but a swirl of referentiality and representation, fragmentation and surface, a never-ending *representation* with no original *presentation*.

But Hawthorne most certainly means that this portrait, over time, reveals the truth about Colonel Pyncheon, and that truth is, no less, an ugly one. Yet, and this is an important distinction, Hawthorne does not mean the essential fact of Colonel Pyncheon. The modern fact, as Mary Poovey argues, emerged in the seventeenth century in opposition to Aristotelian epistemology and rhetorical conventions. To put it plainly, what we now assume about a "fact"—that it is both a discrete, transparent unit of information and the foundation for general knowledge about the world—Poovey locates as a result of a historical process that began in the late Renaissance and depended upon cordoning off other epistemological modes, deeming them rhetorical, supernatural, or simply unprovable.<sup>2</sup>



Colonel Pyncheon's portrait is a clue to how Hawthorne considers the relation of art to both "truth" and "fact," and more broadly it helps readers understand the genre of *The House of the Seven Gables*. What Hawthorne attempts to capture in his description of the Colonel's portrait is not how art can represent reality (the transparent facts of our everyday world) so much as how art reveals the assumptions and complexities hiding behind the term "reality," assumptions that value certain styles of writing as a mark of realism. His emphasis on "truth" in art is exemplified in his insistence that *The House of the Seven Gables* (like all of his long fiction) be termed a "romance" not a "novel." As he puts it in the preface to *Seven Gables*, a novel "is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience," while the romance, though it cannot "swerve aside from the truth of the human heart," allows for a wider latitude of representation. The writer of romance, Hawthorne insists, "may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture."<sup>3</sup> Quite famously, Hawthorne draws here not on portraiture for his compositional analogy but on the new technique of daguerreotypy. Calling attention to the use of light in the production of his romance, Hawthorne associates *romance* with *photography* in a way that seems counterintuitive to the assumptions about photography as a realistic (and thus, analogically, a factual) medium. But as Susan Williams, Marcy Dinius, and other scholars of the nineteenth-century invention of daguerreotypy remind us, this connection of romance to the daguerreotype was not all that unusual. As Williams puts it, this new art was conceived "simultaneously as a magical agent of revelation, an astoundingly 'true' and accurate likeness, and a locus of sentimental value."<sup>4</sup>

Hawthorne invests the daguerreotype, as he does the aging portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, with an ability to reveal truth about character. As the daguerreotypist of the novel, Holgrave, explains, "There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it."<sup>5</sup> Surface and sunshine, in other words, can betray depths and secrets. No painter, Holgrave suggests, would hazard such a trick and hope to be paid by the sitter, though as we know the portrait will eventually "out" that character nonetheless. The daguerreotypist can ascribe revelations of secret character to the "scientific" aspects of the medium over which he or she has no control; this scientific veneer is really just an alibi, though, allowing the artist to reveal a sitter's personality. Hawthorne, though, does not see a great distinction between painting and daguerreotypy. While the portrait *eventually* brings out the "secret character" of its sitter, a daguerreotype *immediately* does. The distinction between the two mediums is temporal rather than of a kind. In either case, exposure, in time, will out one's character. Art and romance operate together, in other words. In doing so, they demonstrate to viewers that which is haunting the mundane world, that which motivates people beyond what can be seen on the surface.

The development and exposure of secret character is indeed the point of *The House of the Seven Gables*. Rather than a novel of adventure and suspense, Hawthorne concentrates on the delicate interplay between private and public character. *The House of the Seven Gables* narrates the travails of the Pyncheon family of Salem, Massachusetts, from their founding member, a stern Puritan with a penchant for turning witchcraft accusations into real estate opportunities, to the remaining members of the family, the main characters of the novel set in the 1850s United States: old Hepzibah, with her misunderstood scowl; her brother and object of affection and care, Clifford, the aesthete recently released from prison for a murder he did not commit; their cousin Phoebe, the angel of the house with New England common sense practicality; and finally, their other cousin Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, a seeming reincarnation of the seventeenth-century Puritan, but with a "sultry, dog-day" smile adapted to a democratic age. Jaffrey is the villain of the plot: responsible for Clifford's unfair imprisonment, he continues to hound Hepzibah and Clifford with his malevolent intentions. The modern day Pyncheons' power struggle is rooted, the narrative implies, in the house, built on land the old Puritan Colonel Pyncheon has acquired by manipulating witchcraft accusations against Matthew Maule, who, in turn, had cursed Pyncheon ("God will give him blood to drink!"). When Colonel Pyncheon dies unexpectedly on the day of his own house-warming party, with "blood on his ruff," Maule's curse seems to have come true. Hawthorne's romance suggests, without stating explicitly, that a curse can have a real effect on a family.

By invoking a curse, Hawthorne moves outside of strict realism. Doing so, he can represent the immaterial yet real effects of history on the present. This desire to delineate the effects of history in the present is seen most apparently in the gothic genre. From wildly popular eighteenth-century page-turners like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) to the familiar nineteenth-century novels of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to today's love of *Twilight* and *The Walking Dead*, audiences have long been obsessed with the gothic. The gothic asks us to dwell upon the metaphoric lingering of the dead—and the consequences of the dead's actions on the living. Yet *The House of the Seven Gables* never veers into an explicit affirmation of the gothic mode. Hawthorne's gothic is not quite like the horrors of vampires and zombies. Instead, we might now call it the "fantastic," which, as defined by Tzvetan Todorov, presents the "world of the characters as a world of living persons" but yet obliges the reader "to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described."<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne's contemporary reviewers appreciated how his novel walked this fine line, producing a feeling of real world characters enmeshed in a potentially supernatural curse. While a review of the novel in the May 1851 *Athenaeum* makes Hawthorne "a necromancer," George Ripley, reviewing the novel for Harper's *New Monthly Magazine*, opines, "In spite of the supernatural drapery in which they are enveloped," the characters "have such a genuine



Kendra Paitz, curator of the exhibition, selected relevant passages from *The House of the Seven Gables* to pair with the artworks. All citations are from the 2010 Simon & Schuster paperback edition.

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*I believe I am a little mad. This subject has taken hold of my mind with the strangest tenacity of clutch since I have lodged in yonder old gable. As one method of throwing it off, I have put an incident of the Pyncheon family history, with which I happen to be acquainted into the form of a legend, and mean to publish it in a magazine.*

—Hawthorne, 213.



CORINNE MAY BOTZ

*Nathaniel Hawthorne's Desk (Ink Stain)*

2012

Archival pigment print

20 x 24 x 2 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York



*The house might just as well be buried in an eternal fog while all other houses had the sunshine on them; for not a foot would ever cross the threshold, or a hand so much as try the door!*

—Hawthorne, 58.



CORINNE MAY BOTZ

*Rebecca Nurse Homestead*  
2012

Archival pigment print  
24 x 20 x 2 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York



*This picture, it must be understood, was supposed to be so intimately connected with the fate of the house, and so magically built into its walls, that, if once it should be removed, that very instant the whole edifice would come thundering down in a head of dusty ruin.*

—Hawthorne, 227.



CORINNE MAY BOTZ

*Untitled*

2011

Archival pigment print

30 x 40 x 3 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York



*There is sad confusion, indeed, when the spirit thus flits away into the past, or into the more awful future, or, in any manner, steps across the spaceless boundary betwixt its own region and the actual world.*

—Hawthorne, 78.



DARIO ROBLETO

*Diary of a Resurrectionist (I'll Be Waiting For You) b/w A Mourner Learns to Relinquish the Lost*  
2003-2004

Photo albums: Cast and carved bone dust, dehydrated bone calcium, crushed amino acids, melted vinyl records of Jackie Wilson’s “Lonely Teardrops” and Irma Thomas’ “Time Is On My Side/Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand),” homemade paper made from cotton and bone dust from every bone in the body, fragments of soldiers’ personal mirrors, spirit of ammonia, myrrh resin, copper, mica, water extendable resin, rust, pigments, velvet, bone glue, typeset.

Photographs and tintypes: Antique “spirit photographs” (detection of a ghost or spirit disturbance on photographic film)

7 x 5.5 inches each

Collection of Robin Wright and Ian Reeves



*The sick in mind, and perhaps, in body, are rendered more darkly and hopelessly so by the manifold reflection of their disease, mirrored back from all quarters in the deportment of those about them; they are compelled to inhale the poison of their own breath, in infinite repetition. But Phoebe afforded her poor patient a supply of purer air. She impregnated it, too, not with a wild-flower scent—for wildness was no trait of hers—but with the perfume of garden roses, pinks, and other blossoms of much sweetness, which nature and man have consented together in making grow from summer to summer, and from century to century. Such a flower was Phoebe, in her relation with Clifford, and such the delight that he inhaled from her.*

—Hawthorne, 163-164.



**BILL CONGER**

*Our Lady of the Flowers*

2012

Vases, fresh flowers

46 x 5 x 5 inches

Courtesy of the artist



*She instinctively knew, it may be, that some sinister or evil potency  
was now striving to pass her barriers; nor would she decline the  
contest.*

—Hawthorne, 232.



SUE DE BEER

Still from *The Quickening*

Single channel video installation, 27:00 minutes

2006

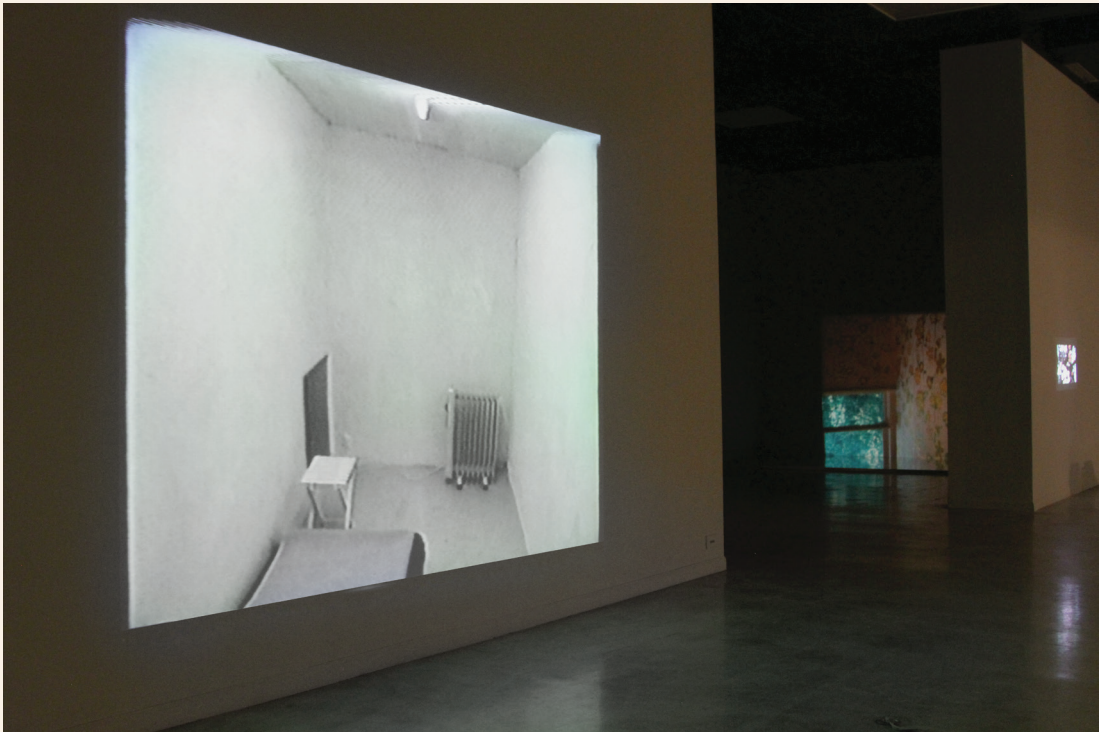
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York



IV.  
EXHIBITION VIEWS.









## IX.

## EVENTS.

*THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES.*

Curated by Kendra Paitz

On view at University Galleries of Illinois State University from February 23 - April 7, 2013

Opening reception: February 23, from 5-7 pm

## ARTIST LECTURE BY CORINNE MAY BOTZ.

February 23, 2013, at 4 pm at University Galleries

*A MOMENT THAT FLITS AWAY: DAGUERREAN VISION IN NATHANIEL**HAWTHORNE'S THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES.*

On view at Illinois State University's Milner Library from February 23 - April 7, 2013

Curated by Melissa Johnson, with assistance from Marissa Webb and Samantha Simpson

*NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE IN MILNER LIBRARY'S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.*

On view at Milner Library from February 23 - April 7, 2013

Organized by Maureen Brunsdale

## EDUCATOR WORKSHOP: THE ART OF BOOKMAKING.

February 25, 2013, at 5 pm at University Galleries

Led by Andrew Huot

## GALLERY WALK WITH EXHIBITION CURATOR KENDRA PAITZ.

March 6, 2013, at 5:30 pm at University Galleries

## ARTIST LECTURE BY DARIO ROBLETO.

March 20, 2013, at 12 pm at University Galleries

## PHOTOGRAPHY HISTORY LECTURE BY MELISSA JOHNSON.

April 1, 2013, at 4 pm at Milner Library

DEvised PERFORMANCE AND *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES.*

Performances created and performed by the 340 Directing Workshop class in Devised Theater

April 2, 2013, at 12 pm, and April 4, 2013, at 4 pm, in Williams Hall (an Illinois State University building allegedly haunted by the school's first librarian, Angeline Milner). Led by Sonja Moser

## READING GROUPS AND CURATOR-LED TOURS.

Ongoing throughout the duration of the exhibition

## WORKSHOPS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.

Ongoing throughout the duration of the exhibition

Organized and led by Tony Preston-Schreck and Jeri Kelly

## X.

## CREDITS.

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© 2014 Christopher Atkins, "Shall we never, never get rid of this Past?"

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*...but in old houses like this, you know, dead people  
are very apt to come back again!*

—Hawthorne, 89.

THE END.