



OUT OF THE BOX:

Hiraeth: The Nostalgia Within Abandoned Homes

How and Why Abandoned Houses Became Symbols of Darkness

Student researcher Jessica McDaniel explains why abandoned houses obtained a reputation for horror, as well as how this fear is not all that remains in what were once homes.

Abandoned houses have become icons as sinister settings for the macabre. The boarded-up windows, sagging roofs, and overall combination of striking dejection and obscurity build a gravitational mystery that greatly contributes to the horror genre. But most do not wonder how the visceral appeal of abandoned houses came to be, and what changed a once warm and inviting home into what many would consider a haunted house.

While many old structures have associations with the paranormal, one architectural style became the archetype for ominous houses. The Victorian mansion, with its imposing figure of towers, iron lace, intricate gingerbread, and mansard roofs conjures feelings of apprehension and dread. In the mid- to late 1800s the Victorian mansion was the height of fashion, a display of wealth and taste, but only half a century later these affluent homes became symbols of death and decay. By understanding the contextual shift of the Victorian mansion, we can gain a sense of how the abandoned house came to be an emblem of terror.

Sarah Burns, an art historian, writes, “In the early twentieth century, all things Victorian—including houses—came under such a withering onslaught that if words alone could destroy, not a single structure would have been left standing” (p. 4). American artist Edward Hopper’s painting *House by the Railroad* illustrates a General Grant-style mansion in his signature realism. Hopper’s friend and peer Guy Pène du Bois said of his work: “There is . . . a stillness in which has its counterpart in the calm preceding a storm, an ominous lull . . .

void, inhuman. These dead American houses—Victorian in architecture generally, ugly, whimsical exaggerations in tortured wood—are haunted” (p. 190). Victorian houses became associated with new money and were considered ostentatious wooden monstrosities connected to corruption of the Gilded Age, but they also served as empty reminders of the loss the Civil War brought to the young nation. “Like the period that spawned it, the house was unclean” (Burns, p. 9). As time moved on, the Victorian style fell out of fashion. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Colonial style made a comeback, “representing something pure, and purely American, rooted in traditions of early (and infinitely more virtuous) American home life, safely distant from the pathologies of the Gilded Age” (Burns, p. 9). The Colonial homes were simpler, cleaner, brighter, and did not have the excessive nooks and crannies to collect dust, cobwebs, reminders of death, and “past lives that refused to die” (Burns, p. 10).

When the Great Depression hit, the wealth that supported the upkeep of these mansions trickled away. With their delicate details, the houses required maintenance, but they did not receive it as they were left vacant in their excess. They weathered quickly and stood out as haunting notices of what caused their demise. Artists of the time, such as Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Mabel Dwight, found inspiration in the structures and ultimately were voices of a generation that “created the iconic image

(Banner) Fading. Charcoal and colored pencil drawing on a photograph.



Reminiscence. Drypoint print on a photograph.

of the Victorian house as a haunting presence in the modern landscape” (Burns, p. 11). A multitude of writers of this generation also adopted the Victorian home as a setting for horror stories and mysteries. “So pervasive was the notion of the Victorian house as a site of evil that fact and fantasy became virtually interchangeable,” writes Burns, as she notes how the use of imagery in media caused the architectural style to become the icon of haunts (p. 17). Even members of the Addams family, a famously eerie cartoon first published in 1938, were revealed to reside in a Victorian mansion in 1945 when a house with a mansard roof, iron lace, and fish-scale shingles appeared in the illustration (Burns, p. 11–22).

As the Victorian mansion was adopted as the icon for all things scary, people began taking elements from these homes to fit narratives of their own stories. Haunts were adapted and even modernized to include any and every old house that seemed odd, especially ones that appeared to be abandoned. Like the Victorian mansions, abandoned homes may hold stories of the past that people wish to forget, or they may already have been forgotten and left to rot. But abandoned houses were once homes, whose walls hold warm memories of the past and historical significance in the building of communities that have evolved into the modern era.

HIRAETH

Hiraeth is a Welsh word that can be defined as homesickness for a home to which one cannot return, a home that maybe never was. It encompasses the nostalgia, the yearning, and the grief for the lost places of one’s past. In the project titled “Hiraeth,” cinematic scenes of abandoned houses superimposed with traditional figure drawings demonstrate the lingering memories and personal histories within forgotten spaces. This project intends to challenge the notion that abandoned places are to be feared and

instead present them as emotionally haunting, full of memories seen through the contrast of the figures interacting with the void left behind. This project also aims to promote the preservation of personal and domestic histories that are lost through generations, in distinction from larger, more well-known historic sites.

The passage of time is important to this body of work, as it is demonstrated through the decay of the interiors and exteriors of the houses, showing the neglect of the spaces through stages of vacancy. These different stages of decay can coincide with the mind and the phenomenon of nostalgia, in that the more time that passes, the further we are away from the reality of the past. In these vacant spaces, memories are idealized, but possibly not reality itself. The deterioration of the structures corresponds with the distortion of memory and the changes of the emotional experiences tied to them. “Hiraeth” presents the viewer with ghostly figures remembering a home that no longer exists, but are still preserved as echoes within barely standing walls.

Select pieces were framed and returned to one of the abandoned house locations, installed on the walls to further emphasize the echoes of the empty spaces, often bare of the ornamental decoration that makes one feel at home.



Echoes. Charcoal and colored pencil drawing on a photograph.

PROCESS

“Hiraeth” began as a visual research project focusing on abandoned houses in rural Indiana. The houses were sourced by word of mouth from local residents, by searching for signs of derelict properties through satellite imagery, or by purposefully driving through struggling rural towns. The property history research began with property tax records to learn of the owners and extended to the town history, often located in local libraries, historical societies, or online history discussion boards. The most valuable information for the project came directly from people who had lived in the homes in the past.

Often, though, there was no substantial information to be found. Permission was obtained to enter locations where possible, but many were photographed from the road or through missing windows and doors due to not receiving responses from the owners, as well as concern for personal safety. While many of these properties were old and had some local historic value, they weren’t eligible for preservation through organizations such as the National Register of Historic Places. Criteria for the National Register of Historic Places, according to the National Park Service website, includes “The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and: A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or B. That are associated with the lives of significant persons in our past; or C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and



Connections. Charcoal and colored pencil drawing on a photograph.



The Electricity Is Gone. Charcoal and colored pencil drawing on a photograph.

distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or D. That have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory” (National Park Service, paras. 1–2). Often, since no official body was appointed to preserve the structures or the stories of their past, they have been forgotten completely.

Once appropriate locations had been pinpointed, the houses were photographed with the intention of telling a story through the voids and leaving room to reintroduce the life that was once there. Various people at Purdue University agreed to model for the project, in which their photographs also were taken and digitally Photoshopped into the abandoned houses to use as accurate reference material for the final drawings. Final images of abandoned scenes were selected and large, high-quality prints were made. Figures were drawn directly onto the photos with charcoal and colored pencils. This process resulted in a ghostly image representing the memories faintly attached to the decaying structures.

One photographed location stood out among over thirty recorded for the project. This house, a large, two-story farmhouse, appeared to have been left without a goodbye. Dishes sat on the kitchen table, a recliner faced where a television may have been, and clothing hung in the closets. Trophies and 4-H ribbons were on the walls, along with shelves of board games, toys in the upstairs bedrooms, and even a Purdue University diploma gathered dust on the dresser in the master bedroom. Scenes like this make one question what may have happened to cause such sentimental objects to be abandoned and spurred the idea of “Hiraeth” forward.

While these homes may not be eligible for official preservation efforts, “Hiraeth” documents them in their current states to preserve them long after they are gone.



Stay. Charcoal and colored pencil drawing on a photograph.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous residents possess the connections to the decaying structures that the word *hiraeth* defines and were able to provide insight to the sentiments attached to them. The real and imagined memories associated with the abandoned homes influenced the visual representation by emphasizing the emotion still tied to places that are left behind. Often, these homes, with belongings remaining inside, appear as archeological sites. Papers, trophies, and day-to-day objects piece together the past. “Hiraeth” conveys the personal and historical significance to individuals and communities that these homes have influenced throughout their existence, and it encourages the preservation of the undervalued and overlooked historical spaces that built rural Indiana.

REFERENCES

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Student Author



Jessica McDaniel studied fine arts and art history at Purdue University and graduated with a BA in 2018. She was awarded an Office of Undergraduate Research scholarship to assist in continuing the development of her photo drawing project, “Hiraeth,” which explores memory and loss through haunting portraiture of the past in decayed spaces. McDaniel was also named Outstanding Senior of the Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing Arts for her comprehensive work in both majors. McDaniel’s photo drawings have since been exhibited throughout the United States, including in the Alexandria Museum of Art. She plans to continue developing “Hiraeth” in her professional art career by expanding the project to include rural abandoned houses throughout the Midwest.

Mentor



Christine Wuenschel is a figurative artist. Her work explores the gestural, expressive nature of drawing media, usually on a larger than life-size scale. Wuenschel is most recognized for her large drawings addressing identity and body image, and challenging puritanical ideals that influence images of the female body. Her work has won several exhibition awards and continues to appear in both national and international exhibitions, including Drawing Discourse: 7th Annual International Exhibition of Contemporary Drawing at S. Tucker Cooke Gallery at University of North Carolina-Asheville; The Derwent Art Prize at The Mall Galleries in London, England; and Kink: The Seduction of Art at Koplín Del Río Gallery in Culver City, California. Wuenschel received her BFA in painting and drawing from the University of Akron in 2004 and her MFA in drawing and painting from Arizona State University in 2008. Wuenschel currently serves as an associate professor of fine arts in the Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Design, Art, and Performance at Purdue University.