

Jeffrey Vallance channels famous dead artists for 'The Medium is the Message'

Art prankster Jeffrey Vallance's new show "The Medium is the Message" opens at downtown L.A.'s CB1 Gallery on July 25. A mix of large prints and small objects, Vallance says the inspiration for the show came from a séance he held in London a few years ago.

For the séance, Vallance hired five psychics to channel famous dead artists — Frida Kahlo, Leonardo DaVinci, Marcel Duchamp, Vincent Van Gogh, and Jackson Pollock. A Fortean at heart, Vallance doesn't necessarily believe in a contactable spirit realm, but just wanted to observe the phenomena — and make some art. John Rabe interviewed Vallance at the gallery to talk about "The Medium is the Message" and why it's good not to take contemporary art too seriously.

Tell us more about the prints inspired by the séance.

"This was kind of a funny program because it wasn't very spooky, I didn't want it to be that way. I set the thing up as kind of an academic panel. So I had the channeled artists sitting in chairs so you could ask them questions. I didn't know what they were going to say, so I asked them questions like, 'Is there art in the afterlife?' The funny thing is, like, they were pretty right on. They were saying that, like, they can look into the minds of some of the artists and sometimes all they can see is dollar signs. Well, it kind of made sense."



(A "Spirit Photo" of Jeffrey Vallance, by Jeffrey Vallance)

... and then, in the tradition of Victorian Spirit photography, you made these prints.

“Yeah, as I was listening to the spirits talk, I was trying to imagine what it would look like if you could see them in the spirit. Obviously we were just seeing the psychics that were channeling them. But I was trying to imagine what it would look like if you could get a photograph of them at that time. So I was looking at the spirit photos from the turn of the century. And if you look at those they look very fake. They have superimposed imagery and certain photo tricks that look to our eye very naive and I sort of like that. So I try to do things that look like the spirit photos, but they’re all digital.”

I checked with one of your friends from 30, 40 years ago — Michael Uhlenkott — and I said ‘Does Jeffrey actually believe in séances?’ And he said, ‘I don’t know.’

“I would say I’m a Fortean, which is one of the followers of Charles Fort. Basically, I observe; I don’t judge. So I don’t believe but also I don’t disbelieve as well. So I’m kind of neutral. I just want to bring these events about and see how they go and how I can learn from them. But I wouldn’t say I’m, like, a follower of spiritualism and that whole thing.”

Did it change your mind about anything?

“I don’t think so. But it just made me realize that the world is a lot weirder than I would have thought.”

There’s a table full of smaller items here, including a little plywood box, the Kahlo Spirit Crystal... What’s this?

“Frida, when she was channeled, she was talking a lot about the afterlife. And she sort of saw the afterlife as sort of being this huge kind of shattered crystal that went into all these rainbows and these colors. And then she said something like, ‘And that is art.’ So I thought, okay, that is art. So I will make that, I’ll make the Frida Kahlo Spirit Crystal.”



(Kahlo Spirit Crystal by Jeffrey Vallance)

I want you to tell the outlet cover story, going back to your first show at LACMA.

"That was in 1977 and I was a student. I wanted to have an art show and I couldn't wait, I couldn't wait until I graduated. So I was looking around and I went to LACMA one day and I noticed that under the paintings along these walls they had the wall sockets. And I took note of that and I thought, oh, I can buy the same exact outlet covers... So I did that. I bought the same kind of outlet covers. And then I painted these dopey little scenes on it that made no sense really. And then I went back to LACMA and I was dressed in, like, a janitor's outfit. I had, like, a name tag and a tool box. And walked in and unscrewed their wall sockets and put mine on with these little scenes on it. And no one said anything because it looked like I was doing my job, in a way. And then for years, every time LACMA would have a show, I would have a show at the same time. I would send out invitations, but in my show you would just look a little lower."

On Saturday, Aug. 8, at 8pm, Vallance will hold a séance at the gallery in which psychic Joseph Ross will channel dead art critics. According to gallerist Clyde Beswick, "a telepathic call will be sent out to art critics in the afterlife willing to speak out about Vallance's artwork. And heaven only knows who might manifest!"

"Jeffrey Vallance: The Medium is the Message" and "Emily Davis Adams: Painting of Levitated Mass" are on view from July 25 through Sept. 5 at CB1 Gallery, 1923 S. Santa Fe Ave. 90021. Meet the artists at a reception Saturday, July 25, 3 - 6pm.