

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant
Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago, USA
Stephanie Cristello



'Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant', 2016, installation view, Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago. Photograph: Habib Bolat

How do we give forms to ideas? Thought is inherently immaterial and can only assume a concrete shape through representation in language or art. In being articulated, however, part of a thought can be lost or altered. This epistemological quandry was the motivating force behind the work of the theosophical philosopher and early feminist activist Annie Besant, who searched for a visual language to communicate ideas, or what she called 'thought forms'. 'Intention to Know', curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in collaboration with Theaster Gates at the Stony Island Arts Bank, features work by three artists – Erin Hayden, Lea Porsager and Cauleen Smith – that responds to Besant's illustrated writings, some of which are also on view in the gallery. Besant's expressive illustrations reflect her belief that only abstract art can capture the forms of complex thoughts, as it does not lend itself to straightforward interpretation.

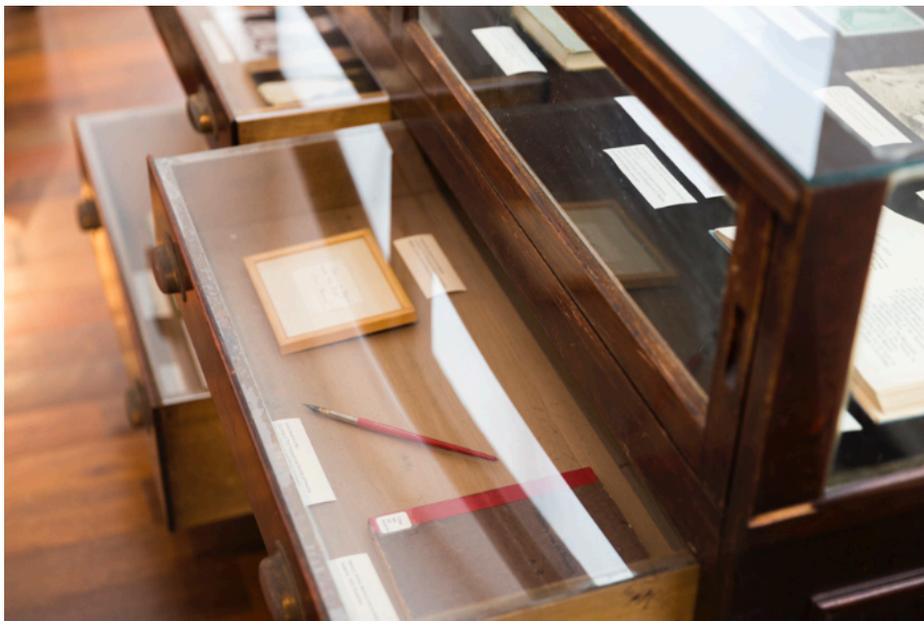
Few viewers will be familiar with Besant's work and ideas. Obscure but accomplished, she met Madame Blavatsky in 1890 and became a prominent member of the Theosophical Society, an international organization of mystic philosophers, for which she co-authored the journals *Thought Forms* and *Lucifer*. Besant's theoretical texts were often accompanied by richly hued watercolour illustrations; at Stony Island, the original 1905 drawings are displayed individually in glass vitrines. The archival display of Besant's manuscripts, publication ephemera and photographic records is consistent throughout the exhibition, which at times overpowers the sparsely hung contemporary work.

Small, framed replicas of Besant's watercolour paintings are presented in pairs as diptychs in Danish artist Lea Porsager's 'Thought Forms' series (2015). The facsimiles are accompanied by oversized wall labels bearing the names of the various thoughts or emotions they illustrate, such as *Self Renunciation/Vague Religious Feeling* and *Definite Affection/Vague Sympathy* (both 2015). Proximity accentuates the absurdity of some of Besant's original theories, which were more subtly paired with illustrations in large volumes of text. Interspersed between the diptychs are diagrams of the patterns

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traced by swinging pendulums, drawn in bold, single colours – small, calculated punctuations between the expressionistic, un-mathematical paintings. While the watercolours are emotive and seemingly spontaneous, they are no less precise in their composition than the diagrams, suggesting an underlying system of scientific logic at odds with Besant's mystic beliefs. For both Porsager and Besant, 'thought forms' are ineffable products of perceptual experience – impossible to define.



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An anthropomorphic assemblage of wood, wheel spokes, chains and feathers by Cauleen Smith, which sits conspicuously in the middle of the gallery, is the show's oddest inclusion – though its idiosyncratic structure could be read as a sculptural 'thought form'. Outstretched on a weathered wooden table nearby, a book of poems and prose by Erin Hayden, type-set in black ink on accordion-folded white paper, appears most similar to the historic documents of Besant's on view. Words stutter and halt across its pages in rhythmic enjambments, or otherwise unfold lyrically, in lines such as: 'F / Real flowers are better than fake ones, this can / similarly be said / of souls.' Hayden's improvisational language echoes the expressivity in Besant's drawings, while verbal repetition suggests later influences.

By adopting the aesthetic of archival museum displays, 'Intention to Know' restores historical importance to Besant's archive. Theosophy may seem antiquated in our current age of simulation and digital distraction, but the exhibition presents Besant's mystic theories as a critical framework through which to consider enduring questions of subjectivity and science. Shown alongside more contemporary work, Besant's drawings appear newly relevant; the works by Hayden, Porsager and Smith inhabit a philosophical impasse between metaphysics and empiricism in which Besant's theosophy thrives. As Christov-Bakargiev makes clear: when observational knowledge fails us, speculative theory provides a path forward.