

## Visual Arts

## Communing with the ghosts of technology past and present

New and old photos, videos, and etchings summon the spirits

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BRUNSWICK, Maine — Technology's progression is one of disembodiment. Before photography, artists drew or painted. In the mid-19th century, photography took image making out of the artist's hands and into a camera and chemical solutions. With this physical remove from the practitioner, the image was considered more reliable, more objective. Yet, because it was removed, it also held something in common with the spirit world: It made pictures out of light. It made substance and image out of something nobody could touch.

The faster technology carries us into the future and into a more virtual world, the more doggedly the past haunts us — and with it the riddles of mortality and residue of who and what we've left behind: ghosts.

"The Disembodied Spirit," an exhibition curated by Allison Ferris at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, examines the tightly coiled Möbius strip linking past and future. Ferris argues that when new technology cranks us more swiftly into the unknown, the chain reaction into our past jerks at memories and fears, and ghosts appear. The exhibition comprises equal parts past (19th-century photography) and present (contemporary art) that don't match up. The specificity of the historical presentation gives way to contemporary works that address too many top-



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The exhibit grounds itself in a particular form of 19th-century portraiture called spirit photography. The spiritualism movement proposes that a person's energized essence could separate from his or her body and exist after death. Spiritualists took advances in technology as proof of invisible energies affecting the world around us. Photography, they thought, was an opportunity to prove the presence of otherworldly spirits.

In 1861, William Mumler took a self-portrait, and when he developed it, a second figure appeared in the print. We see photographs like this today and recognize double exposures. Even now, as much as we know of photographic manipulation, we still often assume that photographs portray reality. That assumption was gospel in the 19th century, and Mumler made a name for himself taking "spirit photographs," portraits with ghostly figures hovering around the sitter.

Ferris offers up a host of spirit photographs. Most of them are hokey by today's standards, but there's a poignancy to an image like Mumler's "Man With Spirit of a Woman Who Holds an Anchor Across His Heart," shot in 1865.

Ferris is careful not to call Mumler and his like charlatans. She places him on a continuum of artists who use technology to explore the uncanny. Perhaps they're all charlatans, because technology is itself uncanny, and with it they weave images that seduce us into believing a reality beyond our imaginations.

The contemporary part of "The Disembodied Spirit" takes off from the spirit photographs, but ranges in many directions, exploring the power of the unseen and the invisible in a variety of contexts such as race, class, history, memory, and shame. Anyone ostracized by society is, in a sense, a ghost. As we disempower such people by pushing them away, we invest



"Song of a Sentient Being" (left) by Bill Jacobson, 1995, and "Man With Spirit of a Woman Who Holds an Anchor Across His Heart," circa 1865, by William Mumler.

#### The Disembodied Spirit

At: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, through Dec. 7, 207-726-3275; [www.bowdoin.edu/artmuseum](http://www.bowdoin.edu/artmuseum).

them with a different kind of power: our fear.

Glenn Ligon's untitled etchings of the opening text from Ralph Ellison's seminal novel about race in America, "Invisible Man," starts out black-on-black and fades to impenetrable, making the invisibility described in the novel manifest visually. "Laudanum," Tracey Moffatt's series of photogravures, plays out the artist's version of "The Story of O," a tale of the power trade-offs of domination and submis-

sion. Moffatt, an Australian artist of aboriginal descent, uses a gothic Victorian context to play out a drama of class, race, and gender politics.

Bill Jacobson, best known for his ethereal photos of friends suffering from AIDS, here offers a wraithlike figure, white fuzz against black, more ghost than man. Sally Mann used antique lenses to shoot Southern architecture and swampland in her "Deep South" series. Here, light seems to have its own conscious-

ness, stinging what it touches, leaving other areas in the murmuring dark. The images, stained to sepia with a tea wash, seem steeped in memory, pride, and pain.

There are many nods to film, which, like photography, heightened the artist's ability to capture or imply the presence of something sinister and unobtainable. Leighton Pierce's lovely digital video, "The Back Steps," runs in a fuzzy loop, showing his daughter and a friend dressed as princesses at Halloween, going

down the back steps. They disappear, then reappear at the top and go down again, a bit further each time; he weaves us into the eternal disappearance of youth.

Gregory Crewdson produces his photographs as if they were films. His "Untitled (Butterflies and Shed)" looks like a moment out of "ET," crisp with enchanting tones as a girl in pink stands in her backyard at dusk, gazing at butterflies emerging from a ghostly-lit shed. Bill Viola's "Memoria" video, shot with a surveillance camera to achieve a grainy texture, shows the head of a man opening his mouth as if to speak, then fading into the fuzz.

For an added spooky twist, Ferris has installed haunting artwork in galleries throughout the museum. Cornelia Parker's "Thirty Pieces of Silver (Exhaled)" hang just above the floor of a gallery filled with 17th- and 18th-century paintings, and Ann Hamilton's ("white

cloth — table), with a length of silk billowing mysteriously over a tabletop. It is the centerpiece in a gallery of 19th-century portraiture.

These pieces are fun, tweaking the viewer's sixth sense for traces of the unseen and long gone. "The Disembodied Spirit" could capitalize a little more on the thrill of ghosts, but it has loftier aspirations. Ferris begins the exhibition making the clear point that technology's advancement stirs up ghosts. Ghosts appear throughout the unwieldy contemporary part of the show, but they bring up so many other issues that the question of technology's role in the spirit world gets muddled. Maybe that shouldn't be a surprise. Ghosts almost always bollix things up.