

One Photographer's Exploration of the Paranormal

Shannon Taggart spent nearly two decades capturing the rituals of Spiritualism, a movement founded on attempts to communicate with the dead, for her new book, "Séance."

By Rebecca Bengal

Oct. 31, 2019

This is your one article preview.

Log in or create a free account to read more articles each month.

On a blustery October evening inside a chapel at Green-Wood Cemetery in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, the photographer Shannon Taggart guided an audience through a series of images: a circle of hands placed atop a dimly lit table; a woman holding what appeared to be a transistor radio, listening with eyes closed; orbs flashing across a starry night sky. The photographs were from her new book, "Séance," the result of her 18-year exploration of Spiritualism, the religious movement based on a belief in the possibility of communication between the living and the dead that emerged from New York in the 1840s. The project, which she calls "part documentary and part ghost story," comprises her own images of Lily Dale — the world's largest Spiritualist community, founded in the mid-19th century on the shore of Cassadaga Lake in New York — along with historical photographs, narratives about her subjects and illustrated essays by the artists Tony Oursler and Andreas Fischer about the movement's influence on art and culture. The book is, she says, "as much about the history of photography as it is about Spiritualism."

Nonetheless, the work that forms "Séance" has been confounding photo editors for years; the images seek to neither disprove nor validate the existence of the paranormal but to visually explore human attempts to make contact with the afterlife. "One editor at a science magazine actually pushed my portfolio across the table at me and said, 'What are you thinking, bringing this in here?'" Taggart recalls. "It's still taboo in many ways. The irony is that scientists and intellectuals have long been interested in Spiritualism." In the book, she cites as examples the White House séances held by Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln in 1862, Carl Jung's 1902 dissertation on mediumship (the practice of mediating communication between the living and the dead), Pierre and Marie Curie's séances in the early 1900s and the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, whose interest in Spiritualism deeply influenced her early 20th-century paintings. Victoria Woodhull, who in 1872 became the first woman to run for president of the United States, was a Spiritualist; and the suffragist Susan B. Anthony was a frequent guest at Lily Dale, which often hosted meetings to discuss social justice.

Taggart's own first brushes with Spiritualism coincided with her introduction to photography as a teenager. Although she grew up in Buffalo, just 50 or so miles north of Lily Dale, she hadn't heard about the community until a cousin visited the hamlet in 1989 and was given an unprompted — and unsettling — message from a medium about the details of her late grandfather's death, a story that turned out to be true. Around the same time, a high school art teacher showed Taggart the work of the photographer Diane Arbus. "I felt Arbus viscerally thinking in her pictures," Taggart says. "Her work made me see that photography is a place where you can project interior thoughts. I realized it's about psychological space."

[Sign up here for the T List newsletter, a weekly roundup of what T Magazine editors are noticing and coveting now.]



"The Utensils Willa White Bent With Her Mind. Lily Dale, NY, 2002." Shannon Taggart

In 2001, after several years of working as a photojournalist, and eager for a project of her own, Taggart made her first trip to Lily Dale. Initially, she recalls in the book, she was drawn to the odd charms of the small town, for example its small auditorium "papered with flyers advertising trumpet séances, past life regressions, astral travel workshop and spoon-bending exercises." But a summer-long project soon stretched into years. Taggart returned to Lily Dale numerous times over the next decade and a half to participate in trance and hypnosis sessions and explore the various phenomena of Spiritualism and spirit photography, including automatic writing (a practice in which a person transcribes messages they believe are from the dead) and ectoplasm, the strange, viscous substance that Spiritualists allege comes out of the body of a medium who has encountered a spirit. Taggart had first heard about the mythic material when watching the 1984 film "Ghostbusters" as a kid. (The movie's creator, Dan Aykroyd, is a fourth-generation Spiritualist and contributed the foreword for "Séance.")

The worlds of Spiritualism and photography have long been intertwined. Both originated in the mid-1800s, and since its inception, Spiritualism has sought to establish credence through supposed photographic evidence. In one of Taggart's photographs, a student at the Arthur Findlay College in Essex, England, which was founded in 1964 to advance what it calls "psychic sciences," makes a joke of phony ectoplasm images by stuffing her mouth and ears with toilet paper. With her own project, Taggart says, "I realized I wasn't that interested in the true and false of it but in showing the psychological truth of the experiences I was encountering." Like the photographers Francesca Woodman and Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Taggart frequently deploys a slowed shutter speed to create a deliberate, otherworldly blur, making visible her subjects' yearning for a spiritual presence. The photographs in "Séance" are often most resonant when they slip furthest from photography's ties to proof. At the heart of the book are Taggart's portraits of individuals, alone and in community, seeking to make connections to the unseen.