

THE AUSTRALIAN

Mark Kimber evokes 19th-century spirit photography

PUBLIC WORKS: BRONWYN WATSON THE AUSTRALIAN JANUARY 9, 2016 12:00AM



Mark Kimber's Death and His Brother Sleep, on display at the Murray Art Museum Albury until May 1.

In the early 1860s, an amateur photographer from Boston, William Mumler, took a self-portrait while alone in his room. However, after he developed the image, it showed another figure — a cousin who had been dead for 12 years.

This image is considered the first example of spirit or ghost photography, where a photo is taken of a living person accompanied by a spirit, often a deceased relative.

After his first spirit photo, Mumler became particularly adept at capturing dead people on film. He turned professional, moved to New York, and made a lucrative business taking advantage of people whose relatives had been killed in the American Civil War. His most famous image is that of Mary Todd Lincoln with the ghost of her assassinated husband, Abraham Lincoln.

Mumler came undone, though, and was accused of fraud. Although he wasn't found guilty, it was enough for his reputation to be ruined and he destroyed most of his negatives.

Despite the demise of Mumler, the popularity of spirit photography continued. It has an intriguing history with many notable advocates, such as novelist Arthur Conan

50% OFF A WEEK FOR THE FIRST 12 WEEKS*

Digital subscription +
Weekend paper delivery

*Conditions apply

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Kimber is studio head of photography and new media at the University of South Australia's school of art, architecture and design. In the past 20 years he has had more than 50 solo exhibitions in Australia and internationally.

Kimber first became interested in art after his grandmother gave him a scrapbook containing pictures from magazines, postcards and reproductions of paintings by artists such as William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich.

Kimber went to art school and a year after he graduated, the Art Gallery of South Australia purchased six of his photographs.

He is now represented in many major collections, including that of Elton John, who has one of the world's largest collections of photographs.

Kimber's work reveals the haunting power of photography and his interest in dreamlike representations. He has said that he is particularly interested in hypnagogia, the transitional, drowsy state that exists between wakefulness and sleep.

During this phase, on the brink of sleep, fantasies and hallucinations can occur. Hypnagogia has been referenced by Aristotle, Edgar Allan Poe, Beethoven and Salvador Dali.

"I work at dusk," Kimber says. "The edge of the day ... where the play of light, people and landscape converge in time and space to create an elusive and ephemeral piece of theatre."

One of Kimber's photographs, *Death and His Brother Sleep* from his Side Show Valley series, is reminiscent of hypnagogia and spirit photography, with its ghostlike, blurred rendition. The ghost photograph also depicts ectoplasm, and it is as though Kimber were a 19th century photographer, according to art historian Anne Marsh.

Death and His Brother Sleep is in the collection of the new \$10 million art gallery at Albury, on the border between NSW and Victoria. When I visit the gallery, now rebranded Murray Art Museum Albury, I am shown the work by curator Bianca Acimovic.

Acimovic says Kimber is a significant artist and his photographs were on her wish list. Given her enthusiasm for his work, she was particularly pleased when *Death and His Brother Sleep* was recently donated through the Russell Mills bequest.

"For me, this scanned body piece is more of a performance-based piece, which is the breaking down of high art meets pop art," says Acimovic. "It delves into the bond and relationship between family while also exploring and encouraging a debate around photography and its power as a storytelling and narrative tool."

Mark Kimber, Death and His Brother Sleep, 2014. Collection MAMA Albury, NSW.

Gift of the Russell Mills Foundation 2015. On display until May 1.