



ARTIST

Bill McDowell

TITLE

Spirit Painting of Napoleon Bonaparte, c. 1890, Maplewood Hotel, Lily Dale, NY.

DATE

1993

DIMENSIONS

15 in H x 15 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1995.021

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-22B

BILL MCDOWELL

BORN

1956

BIRTHPLACE

Albany, New York, NY

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1995
Fine Print Program, 1996
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1998
Fine Print Program, 2016

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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ESSAYS

In the first half of the 19th century, Western New York became known as the 'Burned-over District,' where new revivalist religions and progressive ideas moved through the region like a brush fire, giving rise to Mormons, Millerites, Shakers, and Spiritualists alike. Most historians would agree that modern Spiritualism was founded March 31, 1848, in Hydesville New York, 30 miles east of Rochester, when the Fox family first encountered a series of mysterious rapping noises in their home. It was determined that these rappings were made by spirits, and only occurred in the presence of the Fox's two young daughters, Kate and Maggie. The Fox sisters went on to make several public presentations of this phenomena, becoming the first commercially contracted mediums. News of these events spread throughout the country and by 1855 there would be over 2 million practicing Spiritualists and scores of journals published on the subject. Spiritualism would influence a number of 19th and 20th century thinkers, including Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Wassily Kandinsky and Frank Lloyd Wright. The momentum of the American Spiritualist movement could not be halted even by the 1888 confession by Kate and Maggie Fox that their seances had been a hoax, and the mysterious rapping sounds were made by striking their big toe against the floor or dislocating the bones in their knees and ankles. The Lily Dale Assembly was founded in 1879 in Western New York as a retreat for Spiritualists. Today, all 150 residents of Lily Dale are practicing Spiritualists. In order to practice as a medium in the village one must pass a rigorous screening by the town board. In the summer visitors travel to Lily Dale seeking psychic readings, spiritual healing, or to attend classes and workshops. In 1991 Bill McDowell began photographing and taping interviews at Lily Dale to document residents of the community who are mediums and Spiritualists both by conviction and occupation. McDowell would also use this project to explore his own unresolved beliefs and feelings about life, death, and the etheric phase residing in-between. A medium acts as a conduit for an astral entity that wishes to 'manifest' itself on the physical plane, and mediums communicate through a 'spirit guide' which acts as an intermediary to other departed souls. McDowell's portraits reflect the mystical and enigmatic qualities of his subjects seen in the portraits of Ray Torrey as he looks reflectively up to the sky, or Kitty Osborn as she mediates in front of her home with a large satellite dish antenna looming in the background. McDowell's formal portraits range from the mysterious, to the devout, at times playful and even humorous, each unique to the subject. With a subject matter that could easily be presented in a critical or cynical fashion, McDowell's photographs are compassionate portraits of these individuals who's lives and professions are intertwined with a heighten sense of the natural and the spiritual world around them. Lily Dale remains separated from Theosophy and New Age philosophy, and even further removed from 1-900 psychic advisors and side-show palm readers, which have served to discredit the Spiritualist Movement. In the series Dialogue with the Dead, The Lily Dale Photographs, McDowell sought to document this intimate community which in many ways remains unchanged from its beginnings in the 19th century. Spiritualism can be defined as the ability to 'look beyond' or to look deeply within, which is exactly what Bill McDowell has accomplished in revealing the essence or 'aura' of this community. Gary Hesse (c)1996 Bill McDowell recently moved from Rochester, New York to Commerce, Texas, where he teaches photography at East Texas State University. He participated in our Artist-In-Residence program in June, 1995.