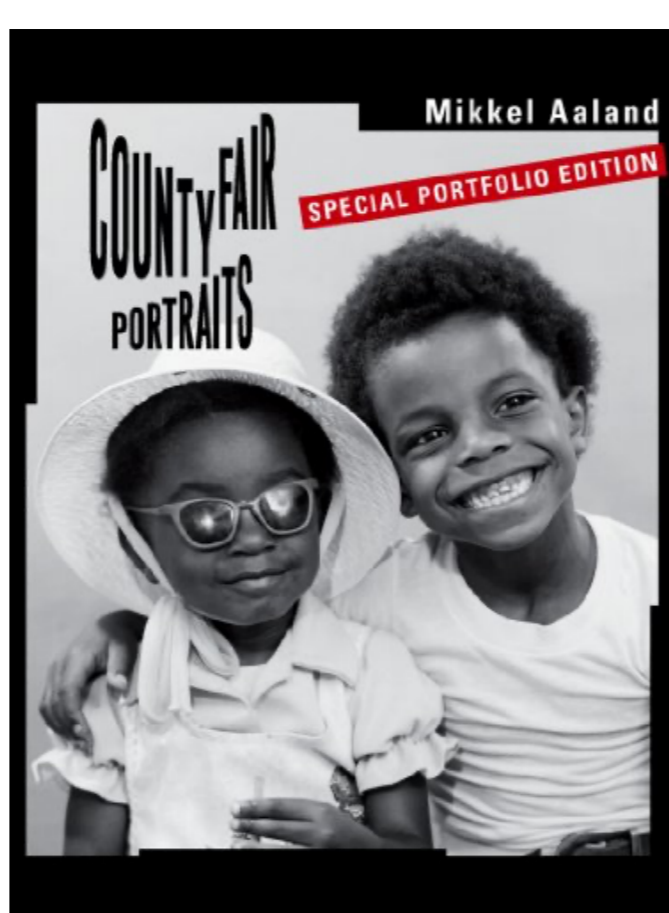


# Mikkel Aaland



*"It's All An Adventure"*

*It's been a while since I sent out my occasional newsletter. It was hard finding motivation during the last year and a half of COVID restrictions and lock down. I am motivated now to send this post because of something that happened recently on Instagram. Unknown to me someone had re-posted my page of **County Fair Portraits** and by the time I found out there were over 23,000 likes and over 400 comments. I was blown away by the positive response to work I did over 40 years ago. And with that in mind...*

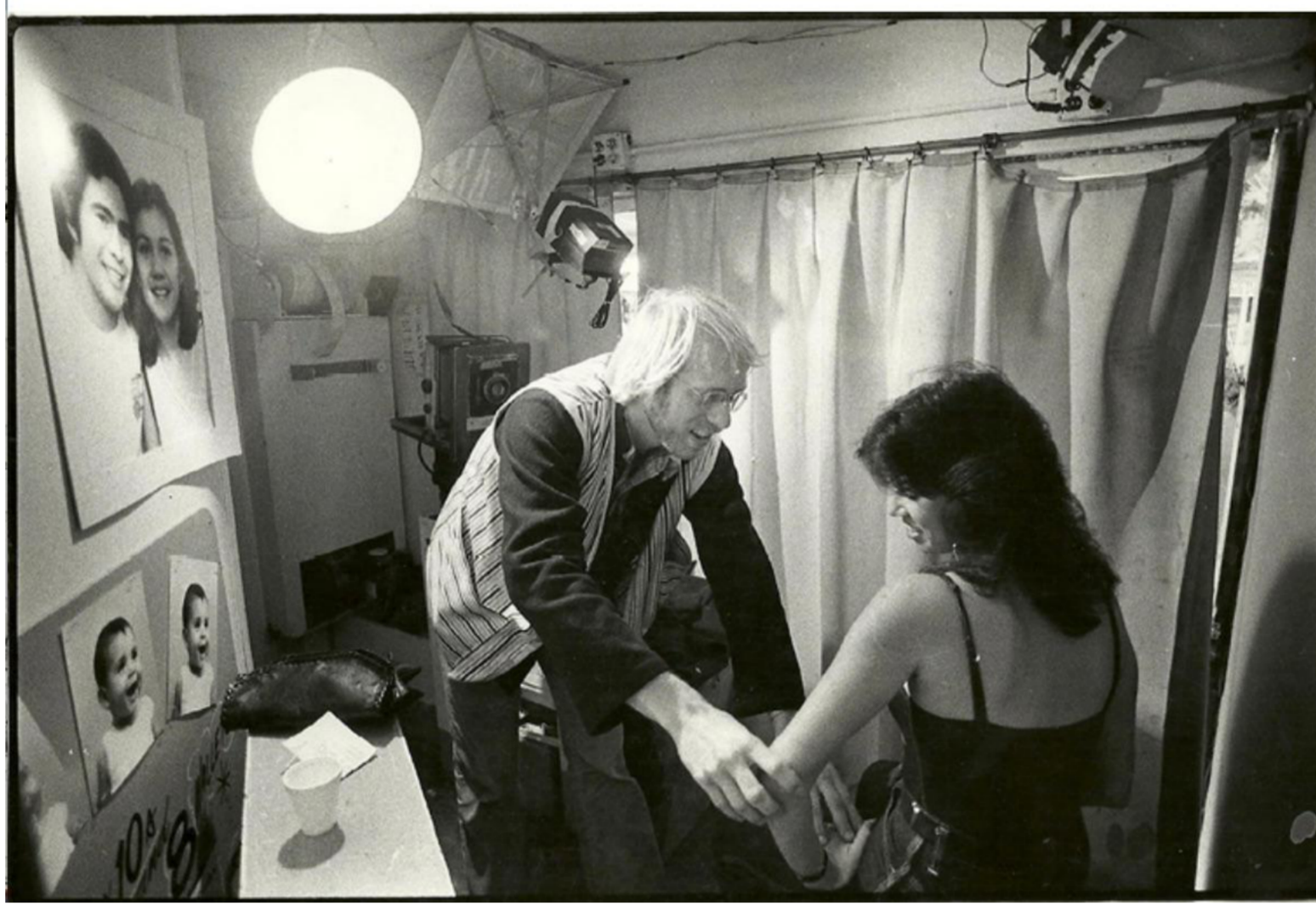
## Spirit Photography: Photographing the Sublime By Mikkel Aaland

In my many years as a professional photographer, while shooting a portrait I have occasionally experienced a brief moment of the sublime. I had one of those moments in 1977 at the Alameda County Fair during the days when I managed a portable photo studio on wheels. The studio was complete with a shooting stage and since these were pre-digital days, a chemical darkroom to develop the film and print the prints.



*Me and the studio, 1980. Photo: Wayne McCall.*

It was a successful business. Our prices were so reasonable and our quality so high we often had long lines of customers. We used 4x5 sheet film and to keep our costs down we mostly took one shot per customer. Usually, one was all I needed because the festive atmosphere of the county fair did so much of the work for me. People came to the fair to have a good time and all I had to do was get out of the way and let my subjects be themselves.



*The shooting area of the studio with the Burke and James 4x5 wood box camera in the background. Photo: Greg Schneider.*

When these two siblings shown below were seated, I stepped back, loaded the film holder and grabbed the squeeze bulb I used to trip the shutter of the old-fashioned wood box 4 x 5 camera. The bulb controlled the speed of the shutter: the faster I squeezed the faster the shutter speed, up to around 1/60th of a second. I looked up from the camera, and these two kids were sitting in front of me as you see, beaming with sheer joy. I quickly squeezed the bulb and released the shutter. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I felt the distance between me and the remarkable children disappear. For a fraction of a second, as the shutter released, I felt both of them and I were one, entangled into something larger than the sum of us both. For want of better words, I felt like I had touched the face of God.



*Alameda County Fair, 1977. Of all the thousands of children's pictures I have taken, this is my favorite.*

I instructed the darkroom crew to save the negative, and told my people working up front of the studio to ask the children's parents for a model release when they returned to pick up the finished print. I then moved on to my next customer in line.

Years later, when Noel Young and Capra Press agreed to publish a collection of my county fair portraits in a book, I had no doubt in my mind what I wanted on the cover. Noel had another idea and we had a bit of a battle. His choice was ok, but I remembered the sublime feeling I had when I took the photo and I hoped it would somehow transfer to others. Noel finally agreed and I got the cover I wanted.



*Original Cover 1981. Design by Tom Mogensen.*

It's been 44 years since I took that photo. I have no idea where the children are now. Back then it seemed to me they were wise old souls. Hopefully they are happy and healthy grownups with children of their own. Part of me wants to try and track them down, but another part of me wants to leave everything alone and full of potential. I don't know if I could bear hearing about an unhappy outcome.

BTW, while preparing this post, I learned something I never knew. Even though it's not exactly what I had in mind when I used the term, spirit photography is actually considered a type of photography. According to **Wikipedia**, spirit photography was fueled by the mid-19 Century Spiritualism movement and was especially popular at the end of the American Civil War. Its goal was to capture images of ghosts and other spiritual entities. One of the most famous spirit photographers was William Mumler, who photographed Mary Todd Lincoln posed with the purported spirit of her assassinated husband Abe Lincoln.

My research also led me to a 2018 book, **The Spirit Photographer: a Novel by Jon Michael Varese**. It's a post-American Civil War story featuring racial politics, ghosts, spirit photography and, of course, a love story. It is totally entertaining and I highly recommend it.

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[Link to Original County Fair Book](#)  
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