

FACES

**Duane Michals
The Portraitist**

Ed Barnas



Duane Michals, "Margaret and Eleanor" 2013

Duane Michals' portrait work is the subject of his current show at the DC Moore Gallery with its many variations - the stand and stare portrait, the prose portrait, the annotated portrait, the imaginary portrait—on display.

I first became aware of his work back in the 70's when I saw some of his "sequences" in a photo magazine. Consciously staged series of images, the prints annotated by hand, looked like storyboards for a surrealistic film. Not all were sequences; some were simply a single notated image, as if setting a scene for a play ("This Photograph is My Proof"). Conceptually self-contained, the "film" was meant to be played out in the viewer's mind. It was Michals' pairing of the handwritten word with the image that intrigued me – a seeming rebuttal to the idealization of the "untitled" single image as "art" object.



Duane Michals, "Magritte: Coming and Going"

At the same time, Michals was working as a commercial photographer, making portraits of artists, actors, authors, musicians, and other notables. Many of these stand out for their unique take on their subject - Magritte's ghostly "Coming and Going" or the back of de Kooning's head. He also created portrait sequences when appropriate: a quartet of close-ups of Warhol's head for "Andy X 4" or the nine-photo 360 degree wraparound portraits of Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, for example, though few were ever published at the time of creation.



*Johnny Cash was hotter than a pepper anise.
duane michals 1960s*

Duane Michals, "Johnny Cash, c. 1960s"

Among the over sixty prints on display there are seventeen vintage prints of these familiar images. But their number is overwhelmed by over thirty new prints pulled from negatives in his archives (60's to 90's), images that at the time may not have fit the needs of an editor, but which have their own intrinsic appeal. As with the published work, these represent a variety of

techniques (straight shots, multiple exposure, reflections, single or sequence, casual or formal) tailored to the subject. [This is not the first time Michals has accessed his archives. Last year DC Moore presented a series of images of “Empty New York” reminiscent of Atget that Michals had shot in the early 60s. One has to wonder how contemporary photographers will fare in fifty years time when delving into their digital archive to put together a retrospective.]



Duane Michals, "Duane Photographs Anthony Red (image 5/5" 2015)

It was a pleasure to look at these simply framed silver gelatin prints and read the handwritten notes, chuckling at times over some of the comments (Dustin Hoffman “before he graduated”; James Coburn “was a bullshitter. He talks too much, too much, too much”; Deborah Turbeville “a Romanov wildflower fleeing the Bolsheviks”). Some of the pleasure is derived from the nostalgia of seeing these familiar faces in their prime, but a large part derives from reading Michals’ present-day comments. However, it is not all light. There is a sense of sadness in the image of Maya Angelou behind Venetian blinds “The angel Angelou singing in her white cage” and a sense of loss in images such as “Mother after Father Died” and “Jack Died of AIDS” and the sequence “Robin Williams and friend.”

While the show includes traditional prints and sequences from the past decade, a dozen examples of work created from 2012 are on display as well, the latter done by over painting patterns onto tintypes and vintage prints. The archivist in me cringes at the irreversible modification of one of a kind vintage images; but my visual sense is intrigued by the mix of bright colors and patterns over these staid faces from a bygone era (I am reminded of costumes in images of surrealist balls of the 20’s and 30’s). Not just a retrospective, the “Portraitist” shows Michals continuing to push “against the natural constraints of the medium” and going off in new directions.

http://www.nyphotoreview.com/NYPR_REVS/NYPR_REV4408.html