

Fighting Against Photography

Duane Michals has spent his career pushing against the confines of the single image

BY REBECCA ROBERTSON



In a way, I've always been at war with what the still photograph did," says Duane Michals from a wicker chair in the basement office of his New York town house. At 81, he has been fighting that war for a long time—since 1958, when he took a borrowed camera to Russia as a tourist and fell in love with photography, bringing back images that began his commercial and fine-art career.

Since then his work has pushed against the confines of the single image. First he used sequences of staged images, and later he added text, writing directly on prints to say in his distinctive wiry hand what the picture alone could not. Michals was interested in telling stories, often about ideas and subjects that had been left out of the photographic conversation of the 1960s and '70s, when he began receiving widespread recognition.

His work addressed spirituality, religion, sex, beauty, and death in everyday settings. In one well-known sequence, *The Spirit Leaves the Body* (1968), a double-exposed figure sits up and leaves his supine body; in another, Christ visits New York, a halo dodged around his head.

"As a photographer, I've worked against the natural constraints of the medium," says Michals. "What I dislike about photography is that it just reports the facts. It describes." His work can be seen as an ongoing attempt to bring more than surface into the photograph.

To that end, Michals has continued to experiment, expanding his tools to include writing without images, in children's books and poetry; a recent volume is devoted to Pittsburgh, his hometown. And starting in the 1980s he began to paint on photographs, adding carefully rendered objects to his own prints and painting on the photographs of others, including Eugène Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson, revisiting an interest that began in his childhood.

"I would go to Carnegie Museum classes on Saturdays and draw," he says. He painted "what high-school kids paint: the steel mills, somebody's backyard, that sort of thing. I once did a piece called 'New York' and it was of Times Square. I'd never been here, so I put a

The Unretouched Beauty, 2012,
tintype with hand-applied oil paint.



sign that said 'Fifth Avenue,' which gave me away," he recalls.

When he began combining photography and painting, "there was a place between them that nobody's investigated," he remembers, "where somebody could bring the two together in an authentic way, not in a sort of forced, clever way, but where there's integrity."

Recently Michals has continued that exploration, turning his attention to 19th-century tintypes, one-of-a-kind lacquered positives on small iron plates. For his show this spring at DC Moore Gallery in New York, Michals collected more than 25 tintypes, many of them rare large-format examples, some as large as 10 by 14 inches, called "mammoth" plates (although they are tiny compared with today's prints).

Over these studio portraits of respectable, if dour, subjects, Michals added bright, graphic embellishments in oil—solid planes and checkered boxes, multicolor targets and spacey open shapes. Red-and-white polka dots and mint-green checks surround the head of a mild-looking woman in *The Unretouched Beauty*. In *Déjà Vu*, four carefully dressed children sit in a row among outlines in pink, white, orange, and purple.

Duane Michals strikes a pose on the couch of his New York apartment.

Other titles are more complicated. Mysteriously, *James Joyce* depicts a middle-aged man with a long white beard and a cagelike framework of fine white lines painted over his head. Whoever the man might be, he is not the Irish author, of whom Michals says he is "a big fan." Several other titles refer to Joyce's family or the characters in his books, including *Molly Bloom*, *Nora Barnacle*, and *Lucia Joyce*. "I've done lots and lots of investigating him," says Michals. Proust and the modernist Russian poet Anna Akhmatova also show up in the titles, along with the name 'Fred'—Michals's partner of 53 years.

Michals is coy about the meaning of his titles but offers a clue by describing the shapes he paints as "Cubist." "I find the Cubist period so exciting," he says. "Suddenly they came up with this way of destroying all the rules. It had nothing to do with perspective; it had nothing to do with chiaroscuro lighting or nothing to do even with subject. It happened full-blown out of Zeus's forehead—boom."

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And it threw a long shadow over the rest of the 20th century. It still reverberates.”

The radical writers of the Cubist period alluded to in the titles were also attempting to describe the fractured quality of modern life, and it is not hard to see the appeal of literary modernism and Cubism to an artist who sees himself as challenging a medium. Michals’s tintypes reference artists who, like Michals, were interested in representing what is invisible.

But his tintypes are not simply tributes: adding paint to an object with its own history and meaning is not a straightforward act of creation. “These are one-of-a-kind objects,” says Linda Benedict-Jones, curator of photography at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, which is organizing a Michals retrospective for next year. “To take something that rare and apply paint to it is a very, very bold gesture,” she says.

In painting the tintypes, Michals is overwriting the identities of real, if anonymous, people. “These belonged to somebody at one point,” Benedict-Jones says. “On the other hand, we find these things at flea markets and antique stores because families have said, ‘I don’t know who this is, I don’t want to keep it. They have been cast aside by someone, and in some ways Duane is rescuing them—he is reinterpreting them.’”

Michals paints on tintypes in his tiny mirrored studio.

For Max Kozloff, whose essay accompanies the show’s catalogue, there is a “conspicuous discord” between the airy lightness of Michals’s interventions and the objects’ inherent heaviness, both visually and metaphorically. Kozloff writes dryly that painting over these images “reminds me of what happened to a gentleman, mentioned by Mark Twain, who was invited out somewhere for a duel and was ‘modified . . . with a bullet.’ Michals has ‘modified’ these Victorian-era portrait photographs in a spirit seemingly as malignant as the one that claimed Twain’s unhappy victim.” In Kozloff’s view, the images roughly condense the distant past of the photographs with the more recent past of the Cubists, and that distance is “touched by . . . pathos.”

Michals’s view of his recent work, however, is more optimistic. Painting the tintypes in his small mirrored studio, he says, was “very, very exciting, because it brought back all my old painting instincts. I like the texture of it, I like the smell of it, when you see the brushstroke—I like seeing that.” And he takes pleasure, after a long career, in continuing to try new ways of working.

“I always like to be on that edge, where you’re just figuring something out,” he says. “I’m delighted that when most people my age are repeating themselves, I’m invigorated.”

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