

The Wizard of Gramercy Park

DUANE MICHALS HAS ALWAYS CHOSEN TO PHOTOGRAPH THE THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE, AND NOW HE'S USING PAINT TO SHOW US THINGS YOU CAN'T PHOTOGRAPH. BY JOHN DORFMAN



Photographer Duane Michals in his studio in New York.

AS I CLIMB the steep stairs leading up to Duane Michals' apartment in a Gramercy Park townhouse, he leans over the side of the bannister and calls out, "Are you a Jehovah's Witness?" I've been briefed on the photographer's penchant for near-perpetual banter, so I don't give him a literal reply. That's okay, because he's already onto the next question: "So you're from *Art & Antiques*—are you going to write about me as art or as an antique?" Michals is 81, but he's anything but an antique. Famous for sequences of black and white photos that unfold mysterious narratives, he's now stretching himself in new directions by altering 19th-century tintype portraits with colorful, abstract applications of oil

paint, and also by using Photoshop to surrealistically deconstruct contemporary color still-life photographs. (Both series are on view through April 27 at DC Moore Gallery in New York, which just began representing Michals.)

Because of his mischievous nature, small stature, big ears and bald head, it's virtually impossible not to think of Michals as "elfin." Or maybe "impish" is the word—in a self-portrait from the 1970s he stuck his tongue out and put his hands on his head with the thumbs sticking up to make devil horns. But don't call him "whimsical." He objects to that strongly—humor is a serious business for him, an integral part of his work. In fact, he tells me, his criteria

for satisfaction with anything he creates are, “Have I ever seen it before, and is it funny?” Sometimes the funniness is overt and even silly, as in a 2006 photobook in which Michals satirized the art-photography world. Illustrated with goofy scenes he staged with assistants acting out roles, photomontages and pictures of himself wearing an Andy Warhol wig, it’s titled *Foto Follies: How Photography Lost Its Virginity on the Way to the Bank* (Steidl).

Usually, though, the humor is more subtly playful, or even disturbing. The painted tintypes are funny in the way anything that plays around with culture, time, and established images inevitably is. It’s a little like Duchamp’s defacing of the *Mona Lisa*, except the original image is black and white and the mark-up is in color. In the deconstructed photographs, objects cease to be themselves, start breaking apart, get transformed, and sometimes fly away to strange places. In one, called *Apple Sauce*, a table of apples, the *locus classicus* of Cézanne-begotten still life, ends up in outer space, the fruit blending with multicolored planets. Here, we’re in *Alice in Wonderland* territory—familiar ground for Michals, who once did a black and white sequence called *Alice’s Mirror* in which the observer’s point of view is backed up in five stages until the image is revealed to be a reflection in a tiny hand mirror, which the hand crushes in the sixth photo. In other sequences, a man standing on a subway platform shimmers and turns into a galaxy of stars, a little girl climbs in a big cardboard box that flies away and disappears, and a woman contemplates her reflection in a full-length mirror, until the reflection jumps out and grabs her breasts.

Clearly, Michals has a fascination with mirrors. That’s connected to his general preoccupation with doubling and the figure of the “uncanny double.” Sometimes the double is a spirit-like figure, an animated reflection or astral body. One of his most famous creations, *The Spirit Leaving the Body*, is a sequence, made with the double-exposure technique, depicting a man’s soul rising up from his prostrate form, which could be either sleeping or dead. The dou-



Duane Michals, *Apple Sauce*, 2010, series of three photographs.

CHRIST IN NEW YORK



Christ stands in conversation of a religious book.



Christ cries when he sees a young woman who has died during an illegal abortion.



Christ is beaten defending a homosexual.



Christ sees a woman being attacked.

Christ in New York, 1981, six gelatin silver prints with hand-applied text.

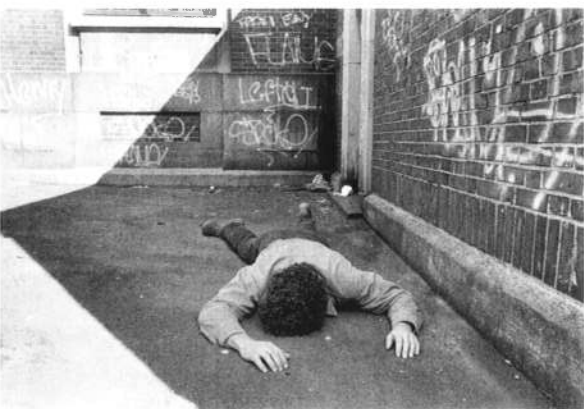
ble could also more tangible, such as a man having a conversation with himself. And sometimes it's Michals himself—or himself, confronting each other.

In fact, Michals' double is more than an image on film—he has gone so far as to create a whole narrative about an alter ego named "Stefan Mihal." Like Duane Michals, Stefan Mihal was born in 1932 in McKeesport, Pa., a steel town near Pittsburgh, and like Michals he comes from a

working-class Slovak family. (McKeesport was also the home town of Andy Warhol, who was almost exactly the same age as Michals.) But the resemblance ends there. Mihal is a big, burly steelworker with a wife and three kids who drinks beer and watches football and never left McKeesport. "He is everything I am not. He's the guy I never became," Michals told an interviewer years ago. "If we ever met on the street we would collide like matter and anti-matter."



Christ eats dog food with an old American song in Brooklyn.



*If I walked by a manger with a horse, I see
the sound coming but occurred a no one noticed.*

To me he says, “I should be teaching high school art in Bethel Township, Pa., with a fat wife and being suicidal. Luckily, I went over the wall and trusted my instincts.” That meant going to art school, deciding to be a photographer, moving to New York, being openly gay, and leaving the Catholic Church for Buddhism and atheism, among other things. Nonetheless, Michals retains a close, if complicated, emotional relationship with McKeesport, akin, he says, to the exiled

James Joyce’s feelings about Dublin, and in 2003 came out with a poetic photobook about his family and his hometown, *The House I Once Called Home* (Enitharmon Editions).

Michals points out that his painted tintypes are actually a return to origins. As a teenager he took summer watercolor classes in Pittsburgh at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie-Mellon University); in a painting contest, he won first prize, which was a scholarship to the college. “I probably know more about painting than I do about photography,” he says. “I’m so excited about the tintype series; it’s coming back full circle. I thought I’d come back to painting one day, and this is the day.” The tintypes occupy “a place between photography and painting,” Michals adds, that he feels is underexplored. By applying abstract, two-dimensional colored geometric forms to these old portraits, he is not only paying homage to the Surrealist and Cubist painters he admires, he is

also playing his own games with identity and the distortion of space and time. In his tiny, cramped studio—just a long desk in a shallow, mirrored room replete with clutter and bulletin boards covered with clippings—he shows me a tintype of a little Victorian-era girl that he is currently touching up with paint. “This kid couldn’t possibly have imagined someone like me doing this to her picture more than 100 years later,” he says, clearly getting a huge kick out of the idea.



Clockwise from top left: *Fred and Ginger*, 2012; *The Unretouched Beauty*, 2012; *Nora Barnacle*, 2012, tintypes with hand-applied paint.

In contrast to his painting education, Michals' photography training was virtually nonexistent. He takes pride in never having used complex equipment, even when he was doing advertising and magazine photography to make a living, and in getting all of his effects by simple tricks that anyone can do with a 35mm camera. He also dislikes most of what he calls "museum photography" and strongly favors small-scale work over the gigantism that's currently in vogue. "They have to be six feet by eight feet," he says. "I call it the Stand and Stare school of photography." He thinks a photograph, like a drawing, ought to draw you in and make you look closer. His biggest influences aren't photographers at all but artists such as Magritte, Balthus, Morandi and Mark Tansy; there are works—mainly drawings and prints—by all of them on his walls.

"I never went to school for photography, and that was my saving grace," says Michals. "I would have

learned things it's hard to unlearn. Back then, you could be either Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank. Kids still do it now, going out looking for America. I guess they find it. I've always been introspective, even though photography is an extraverted medium—I can sit here and come up with my photographs without leaving the room."

Indeed, what Michals wants to photograph can't be found in the street or in the wilderness. He's interested in what he calls "that whole range of things that we can't see, only feel." That means dreams, emotions, spiritual states, ghosts. "The camera describes things exquisitely," he says, "but they will remain mere descriptions unless the photographer brings insight. The question is why, not what does it look like."

The idea of leaving the body has always fascinated Michals, and he says, "Now that I'm 81, the metaphysical implications of life are more important to me than ever." Mortality is one of the themes of his tintype series; everyone in those pictures is dead, and, as Michals points out, "they look dead." The painted shapes that cluster around those faded figures seem to restore life, or rather, they don't so much bring these long-gone people back to life as impart to them a new, alien, and quite possibly delightful kind of life. **LA**



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