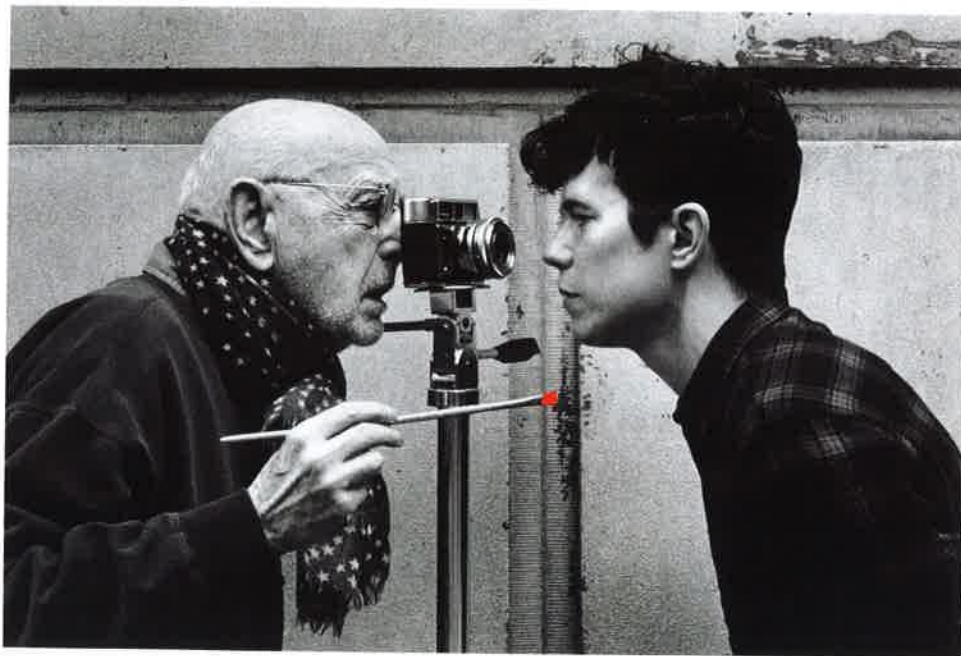


# The Master and the Masterful

by Michael Scalisi

Duane Michals talks to Anthony Goicolea about the conceptual philosophy behind his photography, the closed-mindedness of some of the art world, and how he considers himself an Expressionist.



DUANE PHOTOGRAPHS ANTHONY RED

“I’m not jumping on any bandwagon. I’ve always been my own parade,” Duane Michals told the *New York Times* last year before a half-century retrospective of his work opened at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. It’s still quite a parade as the eighty-two-year-old Expressionist, which is how Michals refers to himself, continues to experiment with the film-frame construct, multiple exposures, hand-written texts, photographic sequencing, and ready-made photographs as the canvases on which he places his paintbrush. His work is in the permanent collections of, among others, the Israel Museum, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, where he held his one-man show in 1970 titled *Stories*, which pointedly alluded to the innate pull of narrative that’s always been evident in his art. His extensive archive is housed at the aforementioned Carnegie Museum of Art.

“Photographs are approximations,” Michals has said. “You can’t see fear or lust; you can’t photograph someone’s anxieties, how disappointment feels . . . Photographers usually want to photograph facts and things. But I’m interested in the nature of the thing itself. A photograph of someone sleeping tells me nothing about the dream state; a photograph of a corpse tells me nothing about the nature of death. My work is about my life as an event, and I find myself to be very temporal, transient.”

One can see the influences of René Magritte, Thomas Eakins, the poets Walt Whitman and Constantine P. Cavafy, and lately Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso in Michals’s protean, ever-evolving work, even as it remains, after close to sixty years, his singular vision. Michals’s own influence—his narrative tendencies, the use of the photographic impulse to push forward into his art and not to be bound by it—can be seen in the extraordinary creations of forty-four-year-old Cuban-American artist Anthony Goicolea, whose elaborately

staged photographs, video works, and layered drawings and landscapes on Mylar examine issues of identity, assimilation, displacement, and the incongruity embedded in his vision of reality. His early large-scale photographs were portraits of prepubescent boys—often portrayed by Goicolea himself in different guises—that some have described as deviant in the ways that they were variously depicted as well as how they made viewers themselves feel while gazing at them a little too longingly. “I’ve always been attracted to things that have a dichotomy,” Goicolea has said. “Things that are beautiful but grotesque or things that attract and repulse.”

Each artist approaches his work not only with a singularity of vision and purpose but also as a bit of a loner where his art is concerned, even though the results of their respective visions seem to rely on an elaborate preparatory process. “Most of the time, I’m on my own. Actually, Duane and I were discussing this earlier when we were taking a walk,” said Goicolea on the day during last winter when we asked the two to meet for this conversation for our Conceptual issue to discuss their work. “Duane asked if I had ever directed a short film. I said yeah, but the thing I don’t like about it is how much production is involved in coordinating people. I like to keep things more on a bare-bones, minimal level because working with too many people becomes stressful.”

“I feel exactly the same way,” said Michals.

We did ask one other person to join them for the purposes of the conversation, however—writer and photographer Michael Scalisi. Here is some of what the three of them talked about after that walk Michals and Goicolea took, when they all settled into the apartment in New York’s Gramercy neighborhood since the 1960s.

—Kevin Sessums



DUANE MICHALS

**Michael Scalisi**

What was the first time as a photographer that you thought of placing yourself in a photograph?

**Duane Michals**

Well, it's interesting, because you do that, and you've then made a whole statement out of multi-personalities. Do you see yourself as having multi-personalities, Anthony?

**Anthony Goicolea**

Not really. I felt like I was playing some sort of archetype of the idea of boyhood and adolescence. And so it felt very separate from me. It was more like performance and role-play. When you're in your work, does it feel like that to you?

**DM** I only put myself in the photograph when it's essential to the idea. But it's certainly not about vanity, because I always suffer when I see myself in photographs. I've sort of completely given up hoping to look interesting. So I settle for looking like a prune. But the first picture I ever did when I was in the picture I did as myself portrayed as if I were dead. I thought it was a very interesting idea. If, indeed, the spirit leaves the body, there might be a moment when the spirit sees the body. So I put myself in the picture, not because I was interested to see myself in a picture but because I was interested in what that would look like acted out.

**AG** I don't use myself anymore or do much portrait photography at all, but at the time, I sort of liked it as a catalyst. Like almost creating a generic prototype of the idea of . . .

**DM** The essential.

**AG** Yeah. To me, it felt more like performance, and I was using the camera to document the performance. And then in post-production, I created this artificial scenario that actually never happened. But now I think a lot of people have moved into this way of photographing where there's actually not even any figures in the work. It's as if the viewer becomes the figure.

**DM** Mmhmm. The second time I did a self-portrait was on the occasion of turning forty. And I thought that I should do a commemorative picture. My self-portrait is a picture of a devil at the occasion of my fortieth birthday. Then I did a sequence called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* in which I played the part of the father.

**AG** Have you ever wanted children?

**DM** No! Kids? Are you crazy? I love other people's kids. You can leave them. No, I don't want children. I like the *idea* of children.

**MS** Did you both have to work very hard to not be influenced by what others were doing around you? You each are sort of your own category. That's an ironic commonality to your work.

**DM** Yes. No. Sometimes. And never. I was never influenced by anybody in the photo world. When I came onto the scene, it was in the '60s. The paradigm of photography then was entirely different. There was no space for setting something up. I simply wasn't visible in terms of John Szarkowski, who was the director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. I was eventually. But you could be Ansel Adams. You could be Robert Frank. You could be Cartier-Bresson. You could be Wynn Bullock. But there was no space for setting something up and telling stories. All my influences were from the art world—de Chirico and Magritte. Those were my sources: surrealism, their contradictions. People who photograph on the streets tell you exactly what you already know. That was never even on my menu, so I had to invent it. But I had no support system. There was nobody applauding. There was nobody going, "Whoa!" Gary Winogrand walked out of my first exhibit saying, "What's this? This is not photography."

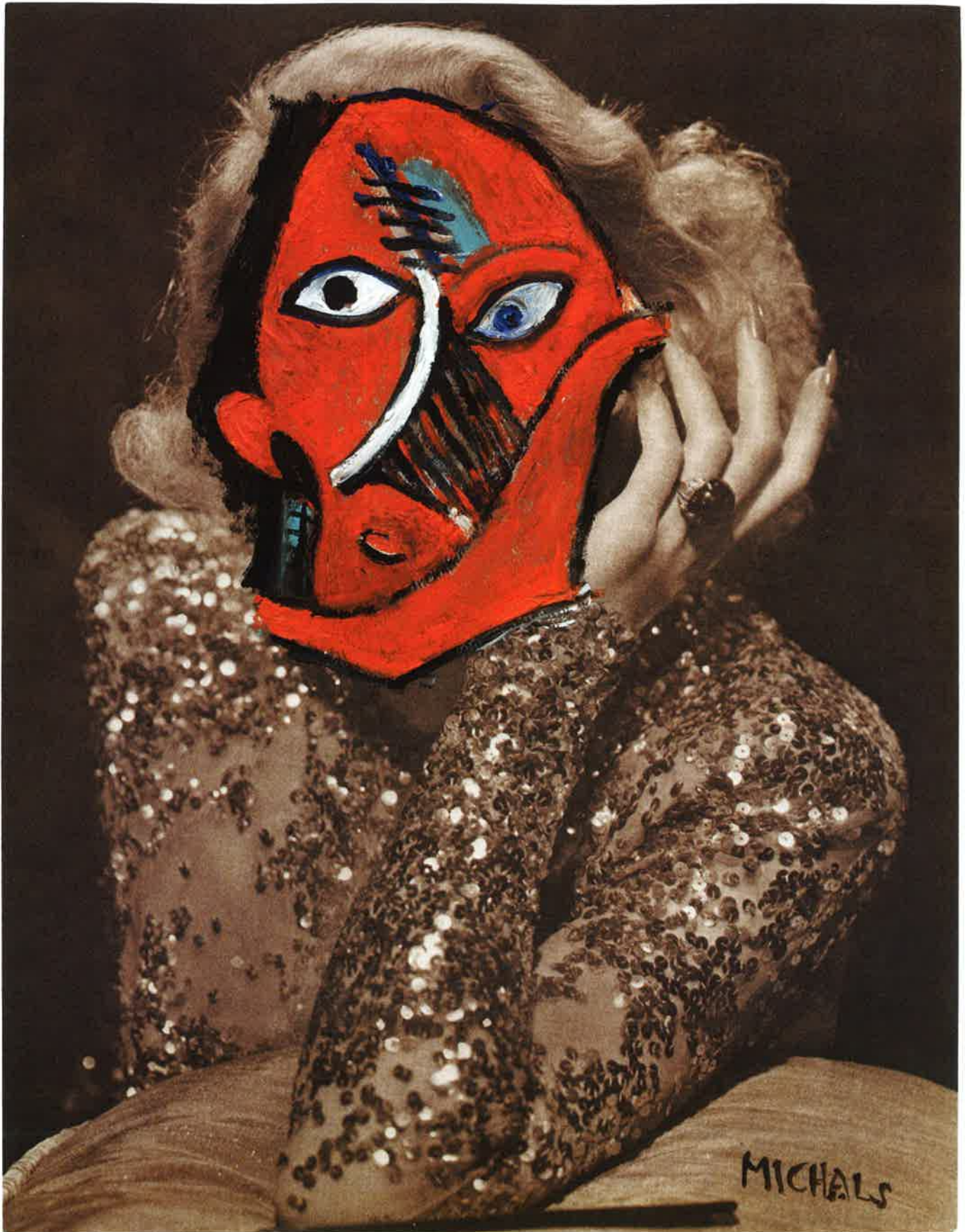
**AG** Oh, wow. I originally went to school for painting and then, in grad school, started doing sculptural stuff. When I graduated, I no longer had a studio, so I started doing photography because it was a compact way of documenting what I was making. But my inspirations were always more from painting and drawing and sculpture. I didn't really look at that many photographers. Because I was born and raised in Georgia, I was kind of in this bubble. Once I moved to New York and started going to gallery shows and stuff like that and was aware of other ways of making art, I became less interested in actually painting and drawing and more interested in doing other means of creating work. And so the camera was just kind of always there as a way to document it. I felt my relationship to photography was, in a way, documenting these things that I was doing, whether it was making something or doing a performance or whatever. And then in postproduction, doctoring it even further and always manipulating it. I didn't have any mentor or role model. But when I started doing photography, it was just becoming more acceptable as a medium along the lines of painting. When Duane started doing his work, there was still this idea of photos can be replicated, so they're kind of a lesser version of art.

**DM** Minor.

**AG** I think photography has gone through this whole weird arc. I think initially it felt somewhat disposable. Then it became elevated and made precious. And it got bigger and huger and more like large paintings. And now, with Instagram and everything else like that, they're seen again as an anybody-can-do-this kind of thing. It's sort of interesting to see how cyclical everything is and how things change so quickly.

**DM** But that's the very problem of photography. It's the most democratic of all the arts. Not everybody can tap-dance. Not everybody can sculpt. But everybody can take a picture. And now there's a whole tsunami of picture taking—more than ever. But the question is, what are the pictures about? And as long as photography keeps basing the whole concept of what the

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# DIETRICH

by Michals

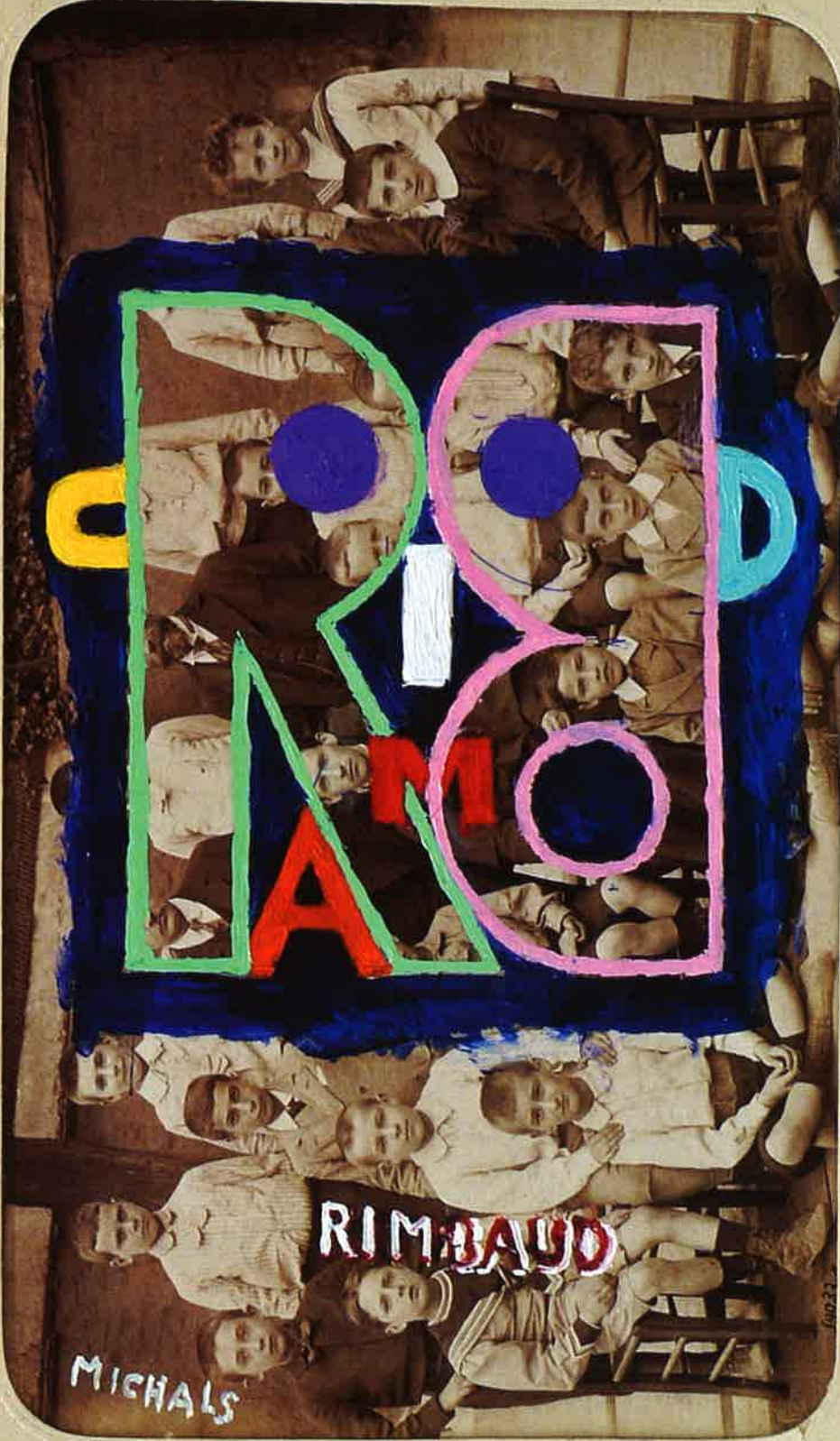
In the mid-1970s I had been working in London, photographing the Royal Ballet with Leo Lerman for *Mademoiselle*. After a week of photography, we finished on a Friday night and retreated to Leo's flat for a celebratory drink, congratulating ourselves on a job well done. Leo asked me what I'd like to do on my last night in London, and of course I hadn't a clue. He inquired, "Have you ever seen Marlene Dietrich perform? She's closing her act tonight, and I might be able to get tickets." As luck would have it, his phone was ringing as we entered his apartment. Marlene was calling, and she was wondering if he could suggest a recent Von Karajan recording she needed as a gift for a friend. Yes indeed, she could get us closing night tickets.

We had the best seats in the house, perfect for viewing La Dietrich's famous act. The story was that it took forty-five minutes to sew her into her dress, and I could see why. The form-fitting costume glittered as she came on the stage to thunderous applause. She sang in her smoky voice a series of hits including "Falling in Love Again." I assumed that she was in her sixties, but on stage she possessed an alluring androgynous glamour and seemed to be a different species of woman. Every gesture was as calculated as Kabuki. There was an aura of theatricality that placed her in the legendary company of performers who were beyond reality, like Mistinguett and Josephine Baker. When the curtain fell to a standing ovation and the house lights came up, Leo asked me if I would like to go backstage and meet her. Yes.

Backstage was not well lit. Props leaned against walls, casting strange shadows, roped dangled from the ceiling, and the theatre's crew prepared to disassemble the sets. Marlene strode forward towards us and gave Leo a huge embrace, then turned her glance to me. Leo said, "I would like you to meet Duane, my photographer." She replied, "Leo, how long has he been in London, and why haven't you introduced me before now?" She glanced at me so intensely that I felt my eyebrows could have been singed by the heat. Slowly she slid her arm through mine and leaned her head on my shoulder. I was as stunned as if I had been shot by a Taser. After my fifteen seconds of blistering attention, she turned to Leo to discuss business, and my shoulder became her prop. "Cohen wants me to bring my act to Broadway next year, do you think it's a good idea? I'm also getting offers to do something special in San Francisco."

I didn't really hear the rest of the conversation, as I kept reminding myself that the Marlene Dietrich was leaning on my shoulder. Apparently, when she met men she would give them the full intensity of her attention, which flattered, disarmed, and intimidated simultaneously, and a second later, she would move on to her next prey. After our perfunctory goodbyes, as she walked away, I noticed she had a flat ass. Noel Coward was right: sex is a matter of lighting.

Classe de Septième.



MICHALS

RIMBAUD

- M. Comby
- B. Vandel
- J. Begombes
- R. Juillias
- Karène Krashinsky
- P. Mory
- P. de Sagade
- M. Imbs
- M. Guesdon (F)
- M. Legendre
- M. Bouchat
- M. Poillot (F)
- L. de Sagade
- H. Legendre
- M. de Kélevé
- R. Créval
- M. Bouchet
- M. de Kélevé
- M. de Sagade
- M. Bouchet
- P. Weckerlin
- E. Durand
- P. Milieu
- R. Collin
- Guy de Bonneval
- Cazenave

ECOLE BOSSUET, 1907-1908

# RIMBAUD

by Michals

*Rimbaud wrote the most amazing non sequiturs.  
To Rimbaud, in the manner of Rimbaud.*

Dwarfs cavort, steeples, zephyrs wave the banners.

Water falls with jewels gleaming in the cascade.

The swimmer drowns like Lucy with diamonds in her mouth.

Sirens whispering their come-hithers in the dusk.

The touch slumbering on my shoulder.

For Helen a thousand warriors swim upstream to Troy.

A vampire lingers at my neck feasting.

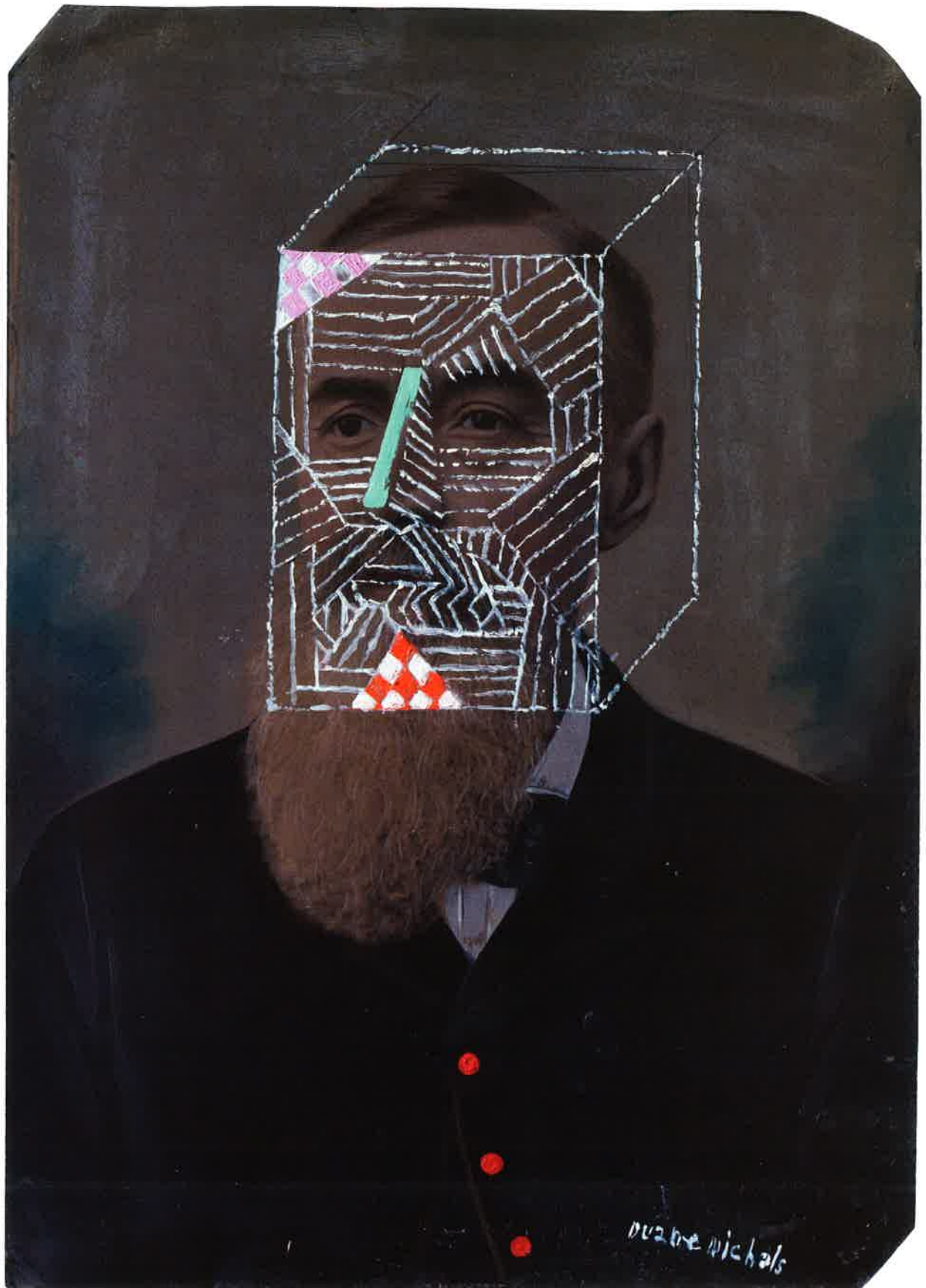
I am embarrassed by my desire for you, Zeus should know better.

I see myself reflected in your reflection, you wink.

Good oh for you, a bad cloud waves goodbye.

*Zut alors*, a crow watches me walk backwards.

Is it still today?





# JOYCE

by Michals

James Joyce was Nora's mick big charmer, the Till Eulenspiegel of twentieth century literature. A teller of the tallest tales, singer of salty songs and bogus raconteur who serenaded and seduced with language. He could write a wrong. When Nora said "yes, yes, yes," it was the loveliest swoon of sex. Miss Barnacle's

BJ was the shot heard around his world. Everyday was ladies day, especially June 16th. When he taught English at Berlitz in Trieste, he became enamored with a teenage student of his. He kept a notebook titled Giacomo Joyce that contained his romantic impulses. Below are some excerpts from that notebook.

"This heart is sore and sad. Crossed in Love?"

"Long lewdly leering lips: dark-blooded molluscs"

"Her body has no smell: an odourless flower."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise I could not see you."

"Sliding—space-ages—foliage of stars—and waning heaven—stillness—and stillness deeper—stillness of annihilation—and her voice."

"She listens: virgin most prudent"

Dublin was his Jerusalem. He would never return for fear of being sued, and because of the perpetual exile, Dublin remained the constant home of his heart. He tapdanced his way from Zurich to Trieste to Paris. Always broke, he always landed on his feet with sweet sugar mamas paying his bills. Gertrude Stein hated him. Joyce was the real thing, the Cubist poet she wanted to be. Miss "A Rose is a Rose is a Rose" broke with Sylvia Beach when Shakespeare and Company published *Ulysses*. The weight of THAT BOOK crushed Gertie's literary posturing. Thank God for "Four Saints in Three Acts," and the rest is mystery.

*Finnegan's Wake* made me quake.

picture is on the eyes, it's going to seem giggly because it's defining itself more and more narrowly. Photographers have got to stop looking. Get rid of your eyeballs. You know—photographing pretty people. Until the photographer brings insight into what he's photographing, then it's just description. Photography has to transcend description.

**AG** All art has to do that.

**DM** But in photography it's more and more difficult. I'll show someone a picture, and they'll say, "Oh, you really captured him," and that's total nonsense. You captured their nose and their eyes and their chin. That tells you nothing of significance. There's a whole philosophical shift that's important to me. And photography's just going to be masturbating for the rest of its life as long as it covers the same subjects in the same way and it makes the same assumptions about the photograph. Or makes the same assumption about reality.

**AG** A lot of times people conceptually are very advanced, but not technically. Or technically they are very advanced, and they can do something really perfectly well, but they're lacking conceptually. I feel like in photography as well as in the other mediums in art making, you have to have equal ingredients of both. Because if not, it's true—you're either describing something, or you're making something that's well made but doesn't have any sort of effect. I go to galleries, and I see a sculpture that's really beautiful, and I'm very interested in the process behind it. But it's really just about that: the process. And once I figure out how it was made and how it was done, there's nothing left that resonates or makes me want to come back to it. And I think it's the same with photography. There has to be something underlying the whole notion.

**DM** You're talking about technique.

**AG** No, I'm talking about the concept too. It can't be all concept. It can't be all technique. It has to be the perfect blend.

**DM** Yeah, and I agree with you one hundred percent. It's like Proust and Hemingway and Joyce sitting around talking about their typewriters. It's just useless. The only thing that matters is the vision and the idea. And if you have to rub it together with charcoal or something—it doesn't matter how you do it. It's irrelevant. People have great technique, but if they don't have a vision—

**AG** Yeah, exactly.

**MS** I've always thought of your work, Duane—particularly the sequences of photographs—as being quite literary. So if I were to associate your photographs to a literary reference, it would be beautiful short stories. And I think of your work, Anthony, as a beautifully written diary. Do you think of your respective works in terms of literary references at all? Do you ever think of them this way?

**AG** Yeah, I do. When I was growing up, I was really into old Victorian Gothic novels. I think there's an element of that, particularly in my earlier work. But even now, with the kind of landscapes that I make, there's a reference to that. It's sort of a blend between literary references and cinematic references. Because also, when I initially started photographing, I was really interested in the idea of breaking out of the traditional format of a photograph and working in these really super-horizontal or vertical planes and playing with the actual idea of a narrative format. Like you read from left to right, and so you view a photograph from left to right in this very long format. Embedded in that is the idea of reading and literary references. And I know that yours is very literary, Duane.

**DM** I'm totally literary. When I was at the Sidney Janis Gallery, you couldn't use the word "literary" because, in the art world back then, that was total suicide, the art world that is very faddish and stylish. And my work was totally literary. I always maintained you were either defined by the medium, or you redefine the medium in terms of your own needs.

**AG** I think the other similarity between our work is how narrative it is. You'll tell a narrative through a sequence of photographs. I try to pack it all into one photograph, but it's still a really strong narrative.

**DM** Well, the trouble with that is that most photographers have nothing to say. I mean, literally, they have nothing to say. So Winogrand will walk around ad nauseam photographing strangers in the street hoping something interesting will happen in front of the camera. A painter will come to the canvas. It's white. And everything that he puts on that canvas comes from his imagination and energy. A writer comes to an empty piece of typewriter paper or a computer screen. A photographer comes with an empty piece of blank film. It's as if writers would simply write descriptions of everything they saw. "So I walked down the street, and I saw this man crossing the street, and he had a red hat, and he smiled and gave me the finger." That's the equivalent of what photography is to some people.

**AG** Well, I may be wrong, but I think the other thing that we share is that a lot of our photographs are very constructed.

**DM** I invent.

**AG** I do the same thing. I'll make a set, or I'll find a location and intervene within it and build something so the camera is a tool to document this world I've created. And I think that's the difference between waiting for something to happen and going out and actually making something happen. My tastes lie more in the realm of creating a story or a narrative.

**DM** That's what I am. I'm a storyteller. I've never waited for life to happen in front of the camera. But also the key word for me is "Expressionism." I'm an Expressionist. I'm not just a photographer. I write. I paint on photographs. It's how well you can express

Continued on page 127

with John Fairchild, Anna Wintour, and powerful retailers, there was a surprise in store. Enriched by his licenses, especially for men's shirts, he left behind an enormous estate, apparently valued at around \$200 million. And though many had mistook him for a lonely, loveless curmudgeon, I knew better. He had a lovely young man in his life, about my contemporary, who lived out of town.

Geoffrey Beene remains the gold standard of designers for me. He is the measure by which I judge all others, and just about all of them fall short. I was spoiled by proximity to a great modern artist, one who

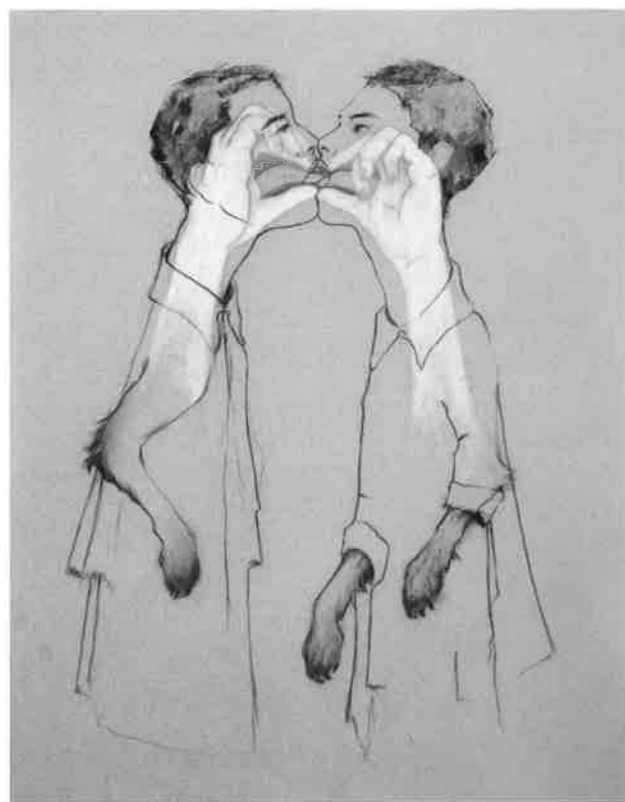
revered women, who experimented relentlessly, who exemplified integrity, who discovered and promoted young talent, who worshipped the body in a nearly pagan way. I had feared Mr. Beene's demise, as one would fear the passing of a parent. He had helped me discover who I was. I couldn't imagine wearing anyone else's clothes any more than I could imagine being in someone else's skin. Long before Mr. Beene got sick, I asked Babs Simpson, the veteran Condé Nast editor, then in her 80s and now 101, "What will I do if Mr. Beene ever retires?" "My dear," she replied, "there's always another." I'm still looking.

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#### THE MASTER AND THE MASTERFUL from page 104

yourself. If I can express myself in a single picture, great. If I need six pictures, great. Or if I want to write underneath it, great. You redefine the medium. But I'll use any vehicle or technique to express myself.

- AG** I feel the same way. I work in painting and drawing and sculpture and video. So for me, if I have an idea for something, it's then trying to find the right way to express it. So it's not necessarily always suited for a photograph.
- MS** Keeping on this literary idea in your work, Flannery O'Connor once said, when asked how she came up with her short stories, that the short stories always find the writer. The writer never finds the story. Do you think the photograph finds the photographer?
- DM** No, I hate that. That's such bullshit. "The photograph finds the photographer"—blah blah blah blah. No. That's just total nonsense. I haven't found a photograph finding me ever in my life. That's too clever.




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#### FINDING THE LIGHT from page 114

hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of years ago. I don't know—there was just something about these mournful, dying stars. By the end of the year, you have a stack of letters about them. But to me that is such a beautiful idea.

**KS** So you like conceptual art.

- OA** I guess so. It sounds more emotional to me than conceptual, though. It's so sentimental.
- KS** Sentimentality is one of the greatest concepts.
- OA** That's true. It is.