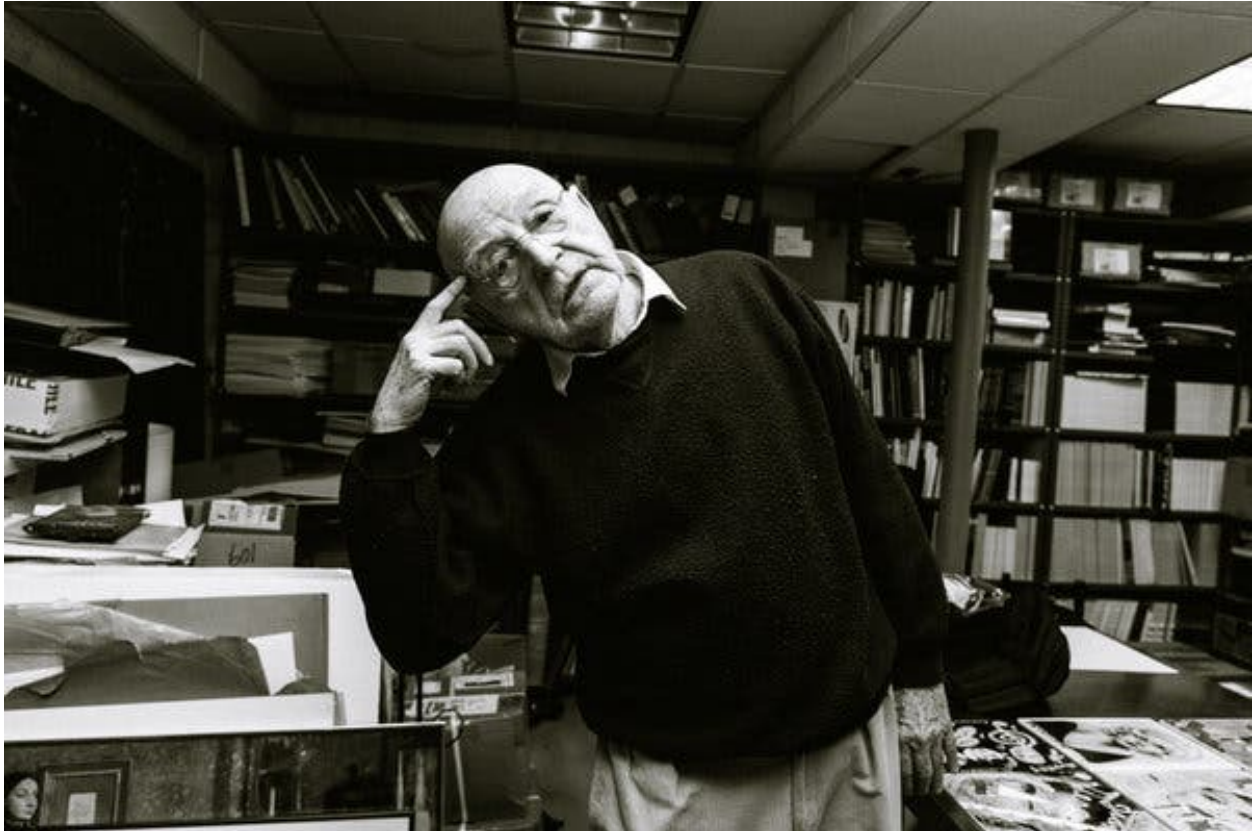


The New York Times

Duane Michals Searches the Morgan and Finds Himself

The photographer's Odyssean journey led to a dialogue with the museum's treasures.



Duane Michals, shown at his home, spent two years searching through the treasures of the Morgan Library & Museum for the current exhibition. His pick of drawings, paintings and artifacts reside in dialogue with his own photographic works. Credit...Mark Elzey for The New York Times

By Philip Gafter

- Oct. 29, 2019, 10:00 a.m. ET

Duane Michals, the pioneer of still-image, multiframe sequences that introduced storytelling to modern photography, stood in the conservation lab of the Morgan Library & Museum one recent autumn day discussing his two-year treasure hunt through the institution's vast collection of works, and their relevance to his own.

For Mr. Michals, whose roving mind at age 87 still sprints from the philosophical to the paradoxical to the playful, foraging through the museum's vaults was tantamount to an Odyssean journey through some of the finest examples of what civilized man hath wrought. "Imagine all Christmases and birthdays combined into a single event," he said

about the pleasure of discovering a trove of drawings by William Blake, or the original score of the Haffner symphony by Mozart, or a Gutenberg Bible from 1455.

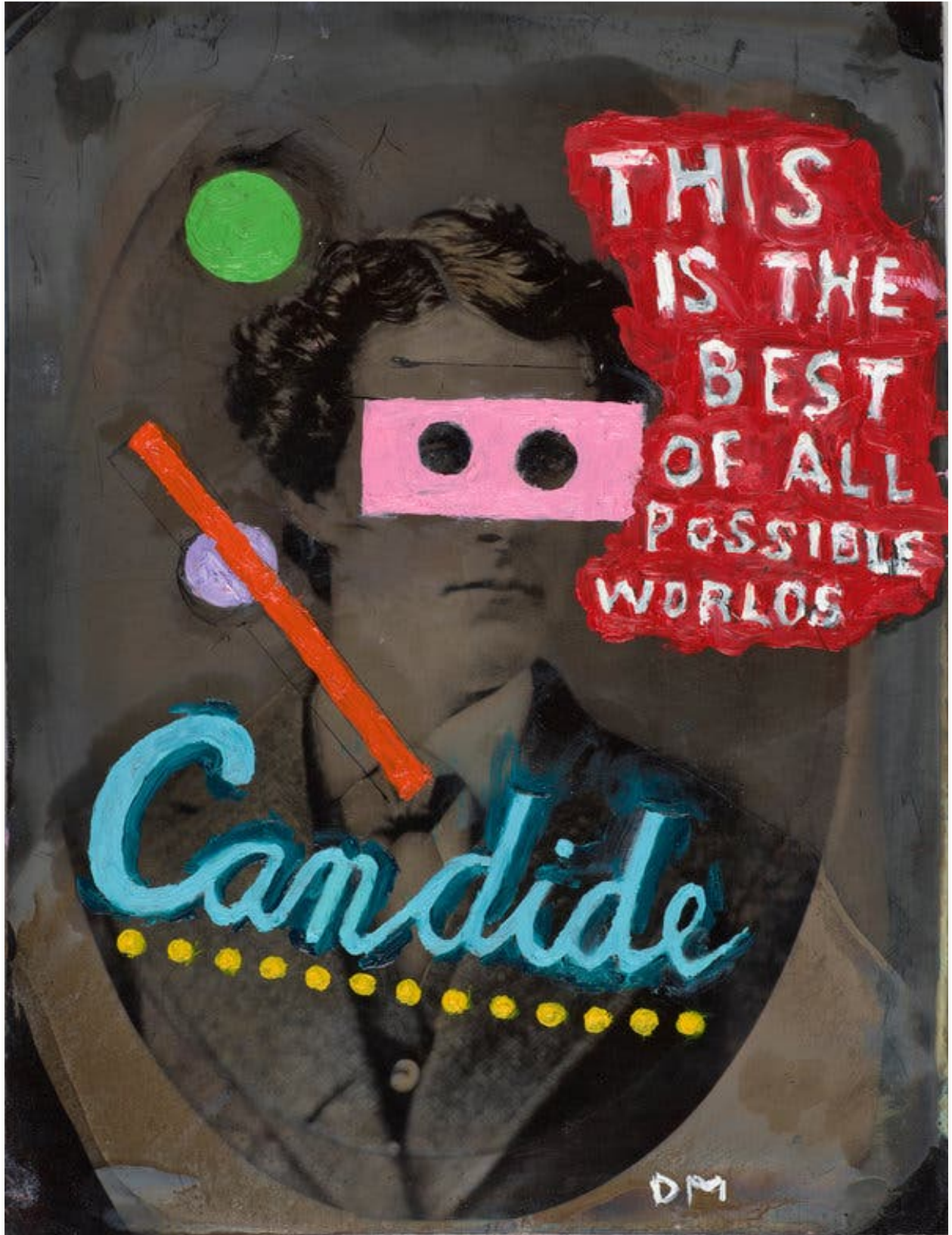
He picked up a panel of gouache drawings from around 1900 by the French illustrator James Jacques Joseph Tissot titled “God Creating the World,” a biblical morality tale in a series of lighthearted scenes depicting the creation of Adam; then Eve; the two of them frolicking; Eve eating the apple; and their banishment from paradise. The Tissot sequence is among nearly 60 works in his final selection for the current exhibition [“Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan,”](#) through Feb. 2. His pick of drawings, paintings and artifacts resides in dialogue with 38 of Mr. Michals’s photographic works — his narrative sequences as well as stand-alone prints, projected images from a series titled “Empty New York,” and several of his recent short films.

He pointed out a link between the Tissot drawings and his own “Paradise Regained,” from 1968: a suite of six images that begins with a well-dressed young couple sitting and facing the camera in an empty apartment. With each frame they get progressively undressed, and more and more plants fill up the space behind them. In the final image, they are naked amid a lush, domestic Eden.

Image



The red leather portfolio “Voltaire’s briefcase,” at the Morgan Library & Museum. Credit...The Morgan Library & Museum



Duane Michals, "Candide, 2019," inspired by Voltaire. Credit... Duane Michals; via DC Moore Gallery; The Morgan Library & Museum

“I had been looking at a lot of Rousseau paintings when I made the sequence,” Mr. Michals said, referring to the jungle scenes of the French Post-Impressionist. While he loves the Tissot panel, he admitted, “I’m a raging atheist,” distancing himself from its religious message. “I was a pretend Catholic and then I stopped pretending.” The spiritual dimension of “Paradise Regained” is balanced by the artist’s tongue-in-cheek view of urban life, where men and women only return to a natural state indoors, where everything is unnatural.

“The things we chose from the collection were so close to what my instincts are,” he said to Joel Smith, the curator of photography at the Morgan, who organized the show with Mr. Michals.

The photographer was referring to the kinship between things he chose and the irreverent nature of his own work. “I’m completely overwhelmed by the nature of our reality,” he is quoted as saying in the exhibition catalog about human evolution. “We’ve been working on this version of man for a thousand years. He lives longer, he’s healthier, but he’s still an unproven product. Still the same greedy little bastard.”

To illustrate the point, he reached for Voltaire’s briefcase among the holdings in the Morgan’s collection. It dates from the 1700s and is decorated with gold-leaf filigree on its red leather casing.

Mr. Smith recalled that Mr. Michals was so “wowed at the thought of Voltaire’s ideas living inside it and amused by the showbiz of its provenance” that he went home and painted a portrait of Candide on an old tintype, adding Voltaire’s bitterly ironic refrain in white block letters: “This Is the Best of All Possible Worlds.” The briefcase and “Candide, 2019” are both in the show.

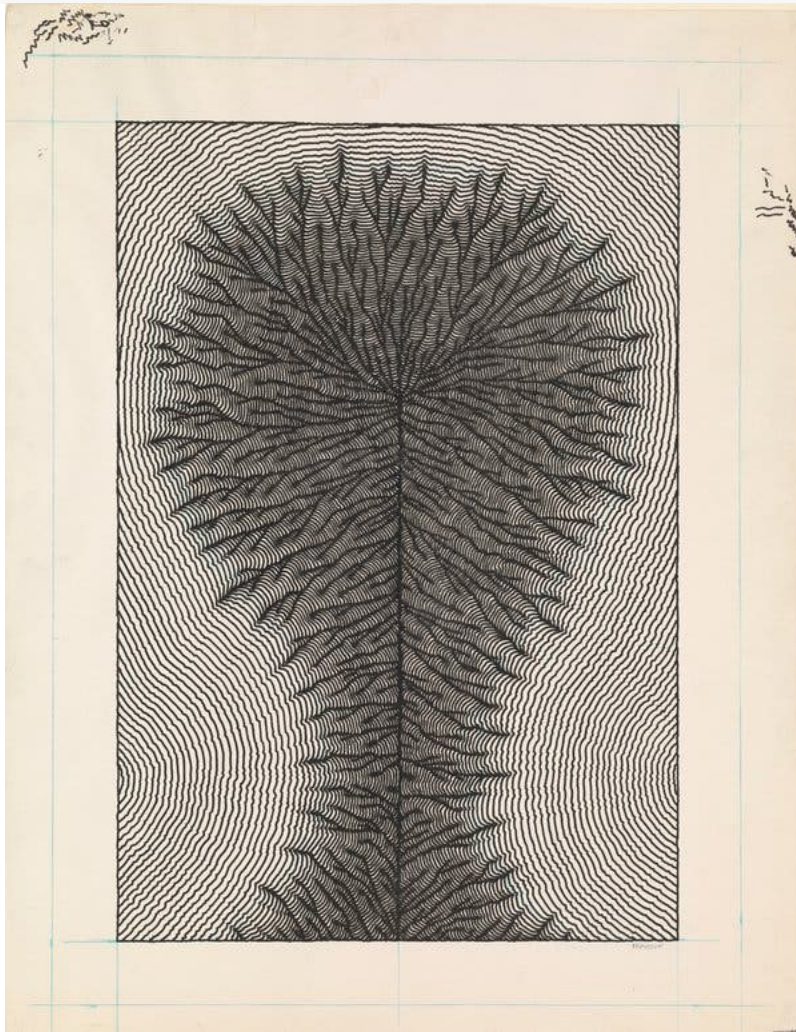
Yet, Mr. Michals doesn’t share Voltaire’s bleak view of existence. His own work is often characterized by an iconoclastic wit, imbued with serious metaphysical inquiry — a “curiosity about the nature of reality, in a much more profound sense than just a bunch of atoms.”

When Mr. Michals arrived in New York from Pittsburgh in the early 1950s, the city provided not only freedom from the strict conventions of his Catholic upbringing, but an opening to worlds of ideas and experiences that extended in all directions. By the early 1960s, he was living with his life partner, the architect Frederick Gorree (who passed away in 2017) and experimenting with the photographic image beyond the single frame, often including handwritten texts.

“Duane cut photography’s umbilical cord,” Mr. Smith said about the photographer’s contributions to the medium. “He saw there’s no reason to limit the camera to what you find in the world; it should be part of the history of expressing ideas.” Mr. Michals’s 1970 one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art confirmed his significance in establishing a new genre.

In the 1960s, he became interested in Buddhism and meditation, further expanding his artistic concerns. At the Morgan, Mr. Michals walked over to a large, eye-popping ink drawing by [Henry Pearson](#), an abstract artist loosely associated with the Op Art movement. Pearson's "128th Psalm (Study for 'Five Psalms')" from 1968, is a light-bulb-shaped form with lines emanating from the center like electrified nerve endings and pulsating out beyond the frame.

"This drawing is pure energy," he said. That same year, Mr. Michals — who had not known Mr. Pearson's work — made "The Illuminated Man," a photograph of a male figure facing the camera, his head emanating light, suggesting enlightenment. "The Illuminated Man" and "128th Psalm" share the theme of spiritual radiance.



Henry Pearson, "128th Psalm (Study for 'Five Psalms')", India ink on paper, 1968. The work shares the theme of spiritual radiance with Mr. Michals's "The Illuminated Man." Credit...The Morgan Library & Museum

THE ILLUMINATED MAN



Duane Michals 86

THE ILLUMINATED MAN



Duane Michals 86

Duane Michals, "The Illuminated Man," 1968. Credit...Duane Michals; via DC Moore Gallery; The Morgan Library & Museum



René Magritte



René Magritte

Duane Michals, "Magritte at his Easel." Credit... Duane Michals; via DC Moore Gallery

Mr. Michals cited a 1937 painting by René Magritte not in the Morgan Collection called "The Pleasure Principle." It is a portrait of the poet Edward James, a patron of Surrealist art, his head a glowing light bulb. "I only discovered the painting later," he said, after he had made his own photographic homage, in 1965, in which Magritte appears ghostlike

in double exposure, against a canvas on an easel, behind an empty chair. “I was very proud to have had a similar idea to one of my deities,” he said.

“The nature of consciousness is always the central question,” he asserted. In “The Human Condition,” his panel of six photographs from 1969 begins with a man standing on the 14th Street subway platform; the train arrives and he is bathed in a halo of light; the light becomes a swirl and in the last frame he is swept into a white disc the size of a galaxy passing through the night sky. From the immediate to the universal in six frames.





Duane Michals, "The Human Condition," from 1969. Credit... Duane Michals; via DC Moore Gallery; The Morgan Library & Museum

Mr. Michals was admittedly intimidated photographing another of his deities, Giorgio de Chirico, in Rome in 1968, at the end of the painter's life. So when he came upon a portrait of de Chirico by Irving Penn in the Morgan's collection, he included it in the show, along with his own portrait of the artist. He considered de Chirico at the height of his powers as a Surrealist, before he turned to more classical painting.

“Like a god controlling lightning bolts, he could throw ideas,” he said of de Chirico in his metaphysical period. “He presented a private vocabulary that I had to learn to speak. We always have to come to great poets and artists; it’s not their responsibility to come to us. Now I can speak de Chiricoan with a New York accent.”



WHAT IS TIME ?

Time is the duration of everything, and life is an event, a fluttering of wings. Its measure is the essential dimension, the moment is the interval, now and then and then again. Time is a thought, and we are clocks whose heart beat is its tick and tock. Time is recurrent, and depending on the where, it is both tortoise and the hare. It sees nothing ever, forgives twice, each moment as a toss of dice, a random selection of possibilities. Time is only now, there is no past except what lasts on the flickering shadow of our memories' doubt. There is no future except in the anticipation of salvation of the devout. The secret key to the arcane mystery of all things imaginable and unimaginable and all diverse domains is in the serenity of now, a broken flesh in perpetual continuation. Here language fails, and we are confined within the mind's capacity for metaphysical comprehension, bound by our three dimensions.

Our illusions float in waves of time like concentric circles in a pond. Time resides in ripples from the moment's splash, and the ripple wades into waves of stillness, where time becomes nothing. Clocks lie, there is no time.

© 1994 Duane Michals



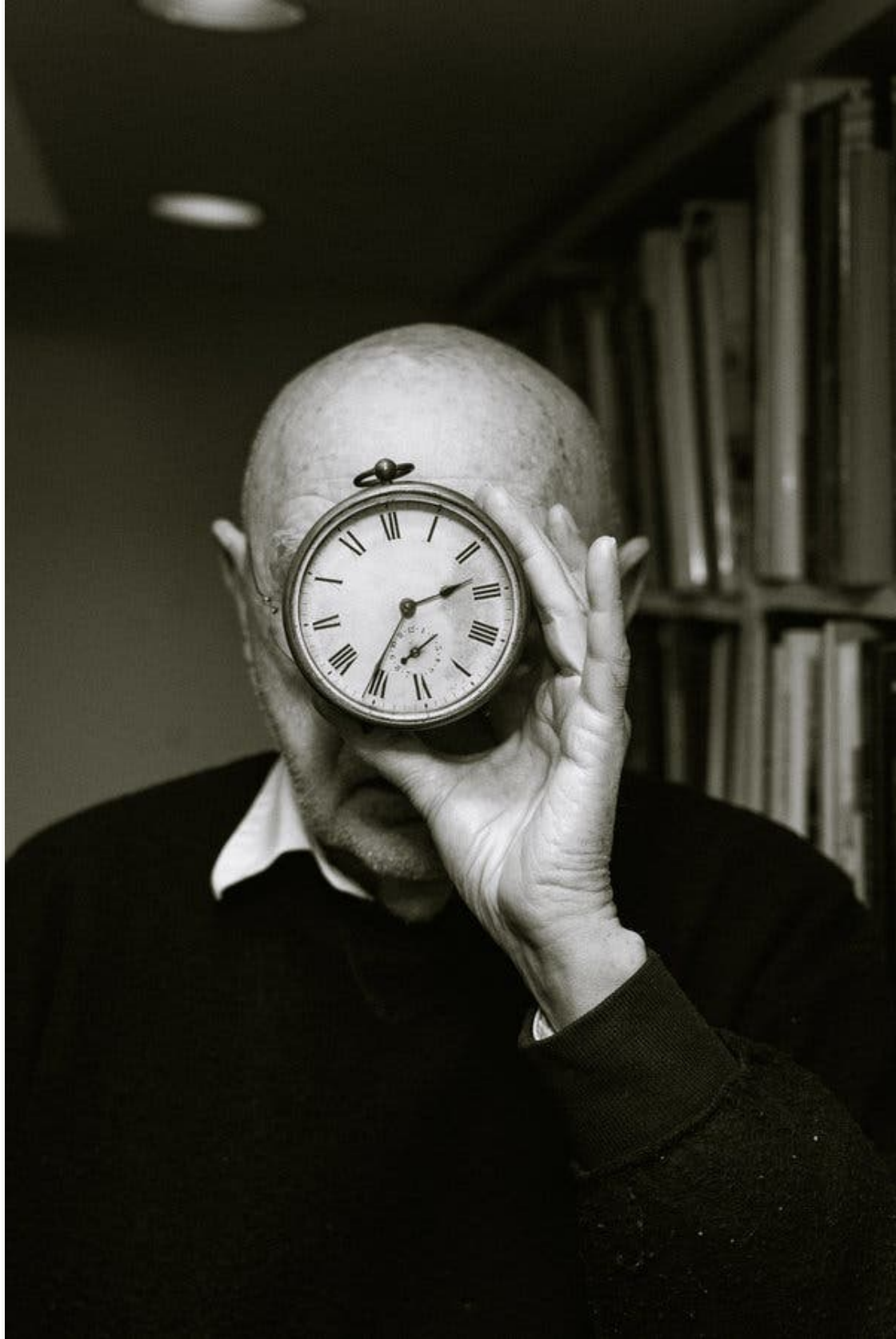
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© 1994 Duane Michals

Duane Michals, “What Is Time?” from 1994. Credit...Duane Michals; via DC Moore Gallery; The Morgan Library & Museum



Time has always been central to Mr. Michals's thinking. Credit... Mark Elzey for The New York Times



Mr. Michals holds a painting by an anonymous Spanish painter bought at an antique store. Credit...Mark Elzey for The New York Times

Included in his selection from the Morgan is an amusing drawing by Saul Steinberg, "Cat and the Wheel of Time, 1965," in which the months of the year, the days of the week, and the hours of the day are written in circles inside a large wheel following a small cat down a hill. "Time has always been central to so much of my thinking," Mr. Michals said. Mr. Smith handed him his text and image piece, "What Is Time?" from 1994, in which an eternally handsome young man holds an old-fashioned round clock to his ear. The text beneath it begins, "Time is the duration of everything, and life is an event, a fluttering of wings ... the moment is the interval between now and then and, then, again."

In Mr. Michals work, the immediate and the infinite spar. In the show is a single image by a little-known photographer named John F. Collins. The 1935 self-portrait shows Collins looking at us while holding a large photograph of himself; in that photograph he is looking down at the same photograph of himself. In each subsequent picture within a picture, he is looking out, and then into the photograph he is holding, into a spiraling infinity.

It is a striking parallel to Mr. Michals's "A Story Within a Story" of 1989, in which a man leans against a mirror in the corner of the frame and faces a mirror in which his reflection echoes repeatedly as it recedes behind him. "This is a story about a man telling a story about a man...." starts his text.

He might as well have been describing himself.