

# LUCKILY,

Late in his career, Duane Michals has found a new creative outlet in film.



# ISTRAYED

By Jackson Arn

**ZIP ZAP ZIP (2018), A SHORT FILM DIRECTED BY** Duane Michals, begins with what sounds like a plain statement of fact. “I am speaking this sentence,” Michals says, standing before the camera in a mask. “This is the sentence that I am speaking. The sentence says, ‘This is the sentence that I am speaking.’” The statement seems hard to refute, until you consider that Michals isn’t really speaking at all. A machine is playing a recording of his voice. Michals, for his part, seems fully aware of this paradox. There’s no mistaking the faint, playful quaver in his taped voice, and you get the sense that his masked face is a second away from erupting into laughter.

Since he took his first photographs in the late ’50s, Michals has made a delicate art of playfulness. He packs his works with juvenile pranks, dizzying optical illusions, and winking allusions. What keeps them from feeling indulgent—and what often allows them to achieve transcendence—is their lush, solemn beauty and their serene matter-of-factness, even when they’re offering something more than just the facts.

It is fitting that “Illusions of the Photographer,” a career retrospective, should be held at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York—an institution that has devoted shows to Henry James, Tennessee Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Michals is among the most literary of photographers. He is fond of scribbling long, nuanced captions underneath his pictures, and has used this format to author rhapsodic appreciations of his favorite writers.<sup>1</sup> His visual influences, many of which are displayed alongside his own work at the Morgan, are equally rich and nearly as literary: he shoots muscular male bodies to look like William Blake engravings, and his sight gags are worthy of Saul Steinberg’s *New Yorker* cartoons. Most remarkable is when he manages to evoke Steinberg and Blake in the same photograph, as in the gorgeous, puckish *What Is Time?* (1994).

Michals, working with the cinematographer Josiah Cuneo, has been a prolific director of short films since 2015. In this time he has told more than one interviewer that he prefers making films to taking pictures—an announcement that, coming from one of the world’s most admired photographers, packs roughly the same punch as Philip Guston ditching Abstract Expressionism or Bob Dylan going electric. The title of the Morgan show calls Michals a “photographer,” and his filmmaking is relegated to two evening screenings. Placed in conversation with his earlier work, though, Michals’s films could be thought of not as an abrupt departure but as a culmination—the ripe, rich fruit of seven decades of image-making.

When discussing the films, it’s useful to start with

the titles: *The Sorcerer Invents the Universe* (2015), *People Eat People* (2015), *The Book Crook* (2016), *The Pleasures of the Glove* (2016), *Abra Cadaver* (2019), *YORT* (2019), *Ulysses* (2019). Together, they read like a glossary of Michals’s signature themes and motifs: magic, nonsense, deception, cheesy puns, eros, the Western canon. But the word that jumps out to me from this list is “pleasures”—there can be no playfulness without pleasure, after all. Yet the pleasures of these films come so fast and so easy they’re almost unsettling; they seem to be wrapped protectively around a deep, incurable melancholy. To enjoy the films is to feel, indirectly, that melancholy, and to become, as Michals wrote of himself, “a victim of beauty, wounded by its perfection.”<sup>2</sup>

**IN A 1980 CONVERSATION AT THE NEW SCHOOL** in New York, an interviewer asked Michals if he would consider a career as a filmmaker. He gave three reasons why he never would: he was too much of a loner, film was too expensive, and he worked too quickly.<sup>3</sup>

Within a few years of that interview, filmmaking had changed so utterly that even the name was starting to feel anachronistic. The money- and time-consuming process of recording light onto celluloid had a younger, nimbler rival in digital cinematography. Suddenly, it was feasible to shoot and edit an entire feature in a week for tens of thousands of dollars, without the help of a studio or a film processing lab. Digital filmmaking, that oxymoron, had become the perfect medium for fast-paced, skinflint loner artists. It was also, in the eyes of Those Who Knew Best, inferior to actual film in every way. To these people, Michals, who had spent the bulk of his life shooting on film, had a simple reply: “Fuck film. Digital is so much better.”<sup>4</sup>

Since he got his start, Michals has delighted in these kinds of swerves and renunciations, the brasher the better. Born in 1932 to working-class parents in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, he discovered photography only after four years studying art at the University of Denver, two years in the army, and a short, unsuccessful stint in graphic design at the Parsons School of Design in New York. By his early thirties, he had established himself as a fashion photographer and had gigs with *Mademoiselle*, *Life*, *Vogue*, and *Esquire*. Like many autodidacts, he made up for a lack of formal training with a deep admiration for his heroes, undiluted by exams or classroom discussions. Small wonder, then, that he excelled at portraits. For one of his first great photographs, from 1965, he shot René Magritte wearing his trademark bowler hat upside-down, trapped under another ghostly, superimposed hat many times the size of his head. What’s remarkable

Duane Michals:  
*Zip Zap Zip*, 2018,  
film, 4 minutes.



*Magritte with Hat*

about this image isn't its cheekiness so much as the way it makes cheek inseparable from reverence: Michals gives the famous, straight-faced Surrealist a taste of his own medicine, honoring him and parodying him all at once.

More great work followed, much of it printed in the glossies: a diptych of Andy Warhol (another Catholic kid from Pittsburgh) with his mother; a portrait of Dennis Hopper in which sunlight transforms the actor's marijuana haze into the clouds of heaven. Even after Michals's work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, he had a reputation in some circles for being a sellout, since he continued to take commercial gigs. Michals's usual response to this line of attack was to tell people who claimed they'd never sell out, "You've got nothing to sell."<sup>5</sup> (The notion that fine artists, who rely so heavily on the guilty consciences of plutocrats and robber barons, are somehow incapable of selling out is a knee-slapper even Michals couldn't have dreamed up.)

A blunter criticism of Michals's early work came from the reliably candid Garry Winogrand: "This

*Magritte with Hat*, 1965, gelatin silver print with hand-applied text, 6% 10 inches.

isn't photography."<sup>6</sup> Winogrand, the celebrated street photographer, took it for granted that the camera was designed to capture a rough authenticity, even if one had to sacrifice composition and coherence in order to get it. If you accepted this premise, then an exactly choreographed Michals series like *Paradise Regained* (1968) – in which a black-garbed, blank-faced couple slowly transforms into a latter-day Adam and Eve, while their room becomes a luxuriant jungle – could be said to reject the truth of photography, shrinking the medium down to a kind of knockoff painting.

Winogrand was only half right. His chaotically real images are almost the negation of Michals's elegant, harmonious ones. And yet, for Michals, there can be no surreal without the real; the frankness of his camera is as important as the fanciful presentation of his subjects. The six installments of *Paradise Regained*, each a little more otherworldly than the last, would lose most of their jolt as paintings; like a good magic trick, they get you to ask, "How'd they do that?" "A photograph," Winogrand said more than once, "has no narrative

ability at all."<sup>7</sup> He may have been right about his own work – there are too many meanings and potential meanings tugging in different directions, canceling each other out. Michals preferred to give his images a clear direction, which is to say, a narrative.

What all this suggests (and what at least one interviewer had figured out by 1980) is that Michals's work was cinematic all along. While other photographers of his generation hunted various species of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," Michals mocked – with his photographic series and lengthy captions – the purity of the individual image. Each installment of *Paradise Regained* is like a film still, beautiful in itself but still propelling you, with its taut incompleteness, to the next.

Like *Paradise Regained*, *YORT* (included in the Morgan's screening program) begins in a stuffy little room. The titular hero, a bewhiskered, big-headed beast, dozes off in his chair, dreams himself into two bodies, and then strolls off while his other self remains asleep ("The Yort chortled," an intertitle lets us know). What follows is a series of symbols unmoored from their meanings – dice, boxes, a forest, a cracked egg, a duo of jesters flashing signs that say, "You, Then, Me, Now." If this nonsense delights more than it perplexes, it's because the images are enchantingly strange and ravishingly beautiful. Hardly anything is the right size or color: the forest has a silvery glint, and the egg gushes thick, greenish yolk. As in so many of Michals's works, the dream never ends.

A cinematic antecedent to this might be the dream sequence from Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) – another delirious stretch of film in which a sleeper rises from

his body and goes onward to strange new places. In any case, there are quite a few nods to the silent comedies in Michals's shorts: their use of iris shots and intertitles and classical music, their concision and sentimentality, their dashes of knockabout humor (*The Book Crook*, 2016, probably comes closest to containing all of these). Maybe it's not surprising that Michals would be drawn to this era of cinema history, when the art of filmmaking hadn't yet hardened into a grammar. Keaton, after all, pulled off a trick that Michals shows every sign of trying to emulate in his own work: being avant-garde and accessible at the same time.

#### THOSE SEARCHING FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN

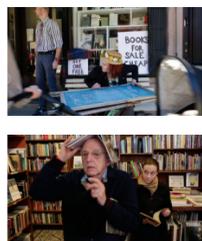
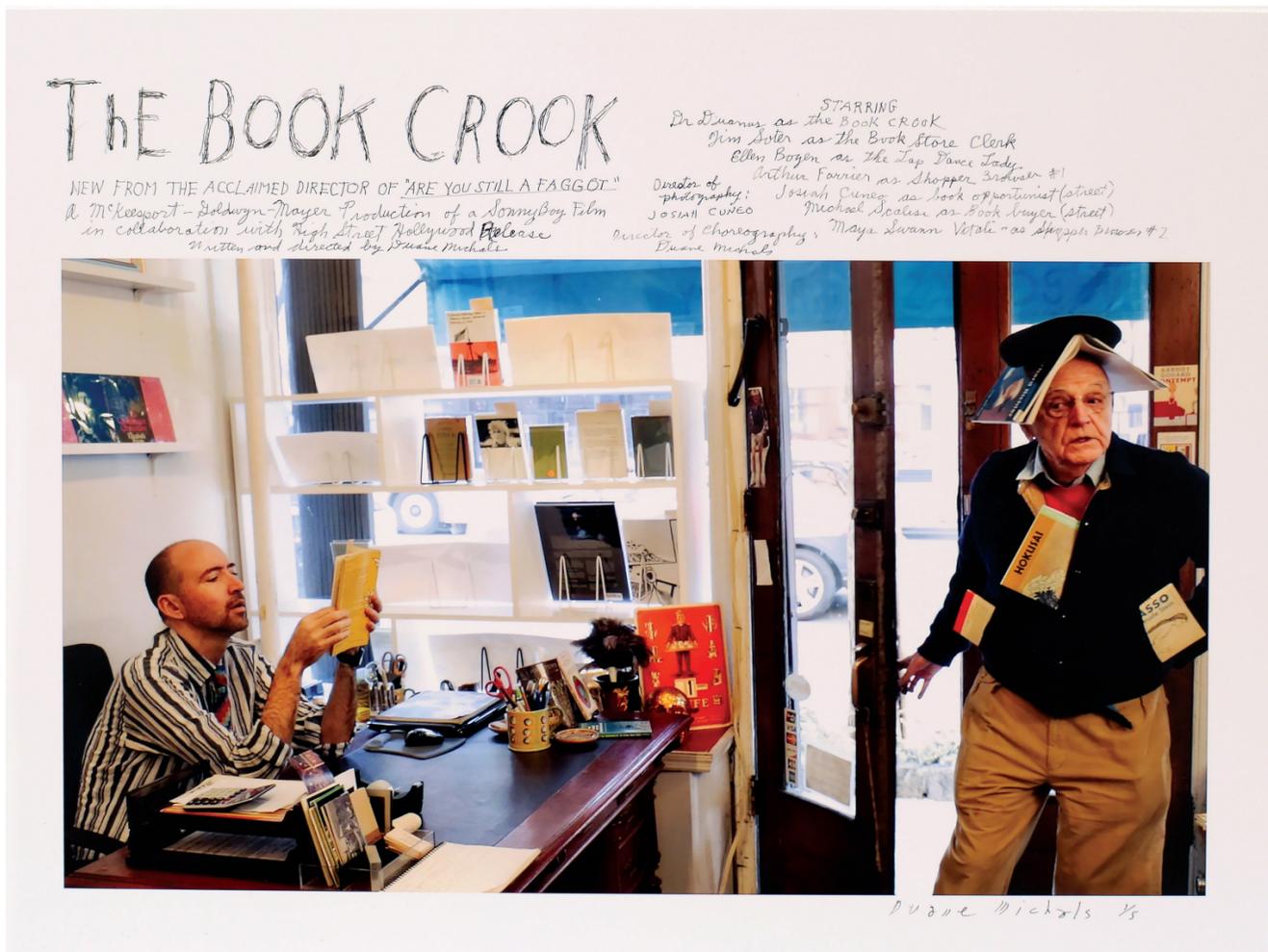
Michals's work have never had to rummage too much. "The only truth I know," he said, "is my own experience . . . I have to define my work in terms of my own truth."<sup>8</sup> In the past, this commitment to subjective truth has sharpened his work, forcing him to display the ugly parts of himself alongside the charming, whimsical ones. In the text he wrote to accompany a photograph of his family, Michals had this to say about his father: "Once I saw him cry. I never thought to ask him why. He was already a ghost when he died. I hate to write this; but the truth is he was not missed."<sup>9</sup> When he read these lines at a Denver Art Museum lecture in 2013 there was an audible gasp, as if it hadn't occurred to the audience that a cute old man was capable of saying such a thing.

Allusions to Michals's life and work drift plankton-like through his films. The elusive, recursive voiceover that opens *Zip Zap Zip* riffs on a number of Michals



*Dennis Hopper (detail)*, ca. 1970, gelatin silver print with hand-applied text, 6% by 9% inches.

All images this article courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.



Top, *The Book Crook*, 2016, chromogenic print with hand-applied text, mounted on board, 11½ by 21 inches.

Above, two stills from *The Book Crook*, 2016, film, 12 minutes.

captions (compare it, for instance, with the one accompanying *A Story about a Story* [1989]: “This is a story about a man telling a story about a man who is telling a story”). Later, Michals, ever the Magritte fanatic, brandishes a pipe. The entire film has the air of a hangout session between pals, nourished by memories and inside jokes. “No Tim Soter was injured in the making of this film,” the credits reassure us, Soter being a photographer and friend of Michals’s. The cast includes another photographer-comrade, Arthur Tress, whose dreamy, staged work is often compared to Michals’s own.

If *Zip Zap Zip* suggests an informal lineage of American photographers, other shorts explore Michals’s literal family. In *The Somnambulist* (2017), Michals – already older than his parents ever were – thinks back on his father. At times, the film seems to be building to a confrontation, and a catharsis. Instead, we’re left with the unanswerable phrase, “You were an accident” – and we see what that curt “He was not missed” might have been a response to.

In the summer of 2017, Michals lost Fred Gorrée,

his husband, friend, and lover of nearly six decades. In his last years, Gorrée had Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, and Michals was his caretaker. “[Fred] has started saying the most wonderfully strange things,” Michals told an interviewer in 2014. “Recently, he said, ‘I saw you eating a banana. What was the meaning of that?’ The other day, he quipped, ‘I wonder what Marco Polo’s doing,’ and, ‘On holidays, everybody likes lemons.’ There are so many of them and they’re so sweet.”<sup>10</sup>

No photographs of Gorrée are included in the Morgan exhibition. In the past, Michals has spoken about guarding his husband’s privacy and criticized photographers like Richard Avedon for shooting family members in their final years. But he has spoken eagerly about Gorrée in interviews, and cited many of his sayings. He began planning the Morgan show only a few weeks after Gorrée’s death. His films since then hint at the wounds of the loss. Every gag seems like a refusal to accept despair; nonsense phrases become a private language of love. At the end of *YORT*, Michals draws a white curtain over the set, and a final, devastating

intertitle flashes across the screen: “Adieu, adieu, my darlingest dear.”

The concept of “late style” in art and literature has already launched a thousand doctoral dissertations. Late style is apotheosis, resolution, tranquility; it is rupture and displacement, too. Michals’s most recent work exemplifies both kinds of lateness. Someone so prolific – someone who likes making art, not having made art – was never going to produce a single, crowning work. What his films offer, instead, is something like tranquil displacement, a jaunty willingness to be wounded over and over again. ●

<sup>1</sup>Two of these appreciations are book-length projects: *Salute, Walt Whitman* (1996) and *The Adventures of Constantine Cavafy* (2007), both published by Twin Palms, Santa Fe.

<sup>2</sup>Duane Michals, *The Nature of Desire*, Santa Fe, Twin Palms, 1986.

<sup>3</sup>Duane Michals and Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel. “Visions and Images: Duane Michals,” the New School for Social Research, Nov. 11, 1980. A video of the exchange is on YouTube.

<sup>4</sup>Jay Croft, “Duane Michals on innovating, gay imagery and digital (he loves it),” *Focus on the Story*, May 30, 2018. focusonthestory.org.

Top, *The Somnambulist*, 2017, film, 7 minutes.

Above, four stills from *YORT*, 2019, film, 7 minutes.

<sup>5</sup>Duane Michals and David D’Arcy, “‘I like the liberation of film’: the photographer and experimental film-maker Duane Michals explains why he prefers moving pictures,” *Art Newspaper*, Aug. 8, 2018. theartnewspaper.com.

<sup>6</sup>Michals shares this anecdote with Joel Smith in an interview for the Morgan catalogue, ed. Joelle Seligson, *Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan*, New York, the Morgan Library & Museum, 2019, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Garry Winogrand quoted in Jordan G. Teicher, “Why Did Garry Winogrand Photograph That?,” *New York Times*, Apr. 6, 2018.

<sup>8</sup>Michals and Diamonstein-Spielvogel.

<sup>9</sup>Lecture by Duane Michals, the Denver Art Museum, Mar. 7, 2013. A video of the lecture is on YouTube.

<sup>10</sup>Duane Michals and Siobhán Bohnacker, “The Last Sentimentalist: Q & A with Duane Michals,” *New Yorker*, May 9, 2014. newyorker.com.

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**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**

“*Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan*” at the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, through Feb. 2, 2020.