DUANE MICHALS

The light-filled rooms in Duane Michal's stately New York townhouse are casual, open, lived-in. A number of orchids thrive at his kitchen window, the fronds of potted palm trees rustle softly in the breeze. For more than half a century, the photographer shared this house with his companion, the architect, Frederick Gorrée, until the latter's death last year aged 86. Michals – now the same age – keeps talking about him in the present tense, discussing how Gorreem's mental decline offered glimpses into a previously locked chamber of his soul. While steeped in the past, Michals – an uncensored rebel against most rules and all pretensions – is preparing for three major museum exhibitions next year, as well as the re-publication in autumn of his 1963 book *Empty New York*.

Interview by Claudia Steinberg
Portrait by Stefan Falke

Claudia Steinberg Your early morning images of abandoned New York sites were inspired by Eugène Atget's haunting photographs of early 20th-century Paris.
Duane Michals When I looked at Atget's pictures of deserted places in Paris, they looked like stage sets to me. I was captivated by their sense of *mise en scène*, which left an echo throughout my work. At the same time, I was also looking at the paintings of Balthus – there is a street scene at MoMA of people walking down the street in very artificial poses. Looking at that painting and at Atget's empty rooms, it suddenly seemed very logical that I should make my own theatre, that I should create my own drama. And then the question arose, what will those dramas be? It was an exciting discovery.

CS Atget's perspective was already nostalgic, because the old Paris had disappeared rapidly under Haussmann's radical master plan, a little bit like what is happening to New York now. When you arrived in Manhattan more than half a century ago, it was still mostly an old city.
DM Compared to today, the skyline looked amateurish. The old Penn Station was still here, and there is a very charming melancholia in these images. The energy of New York has changed because of all these new buildings, which are not elegant, and their scale is outrageous. I'm glad to live in an original building from 1865.

CS You are surrounded by books here.
DM I'm a big reader and I love books. I love Borges. I love the games he plays. I love his imagination. Rimbaud is my favourite poet, and I love James Joyce – I also like the games he plays. I like people who use ideas instead of description. So of the three upcoming exhibitions, the one at the Morgan Library is most important to me. I am also planning a book of just my texts, no images at all. I did that in French already. Photography duplicates the moment. That is its power – say "now", and it's not now – but it doesn't bring insight. I can show you a picture of my mother and my father with their arms around each other, smiling, but they hadn't fucked in 40 years. They never talked. So I don't care what they looked like – it's what you are left with in your heart, what they mean to you.

CS What are you showing at the Morgan?
DM We are going through their collection, picking works that I'm sympathetic with. I don't need another photo show, but I love this one. I get as much pleasure out of my texts as I get out of my photographs. I will choose some Saul Steinberg – he's an artist I truly love, very literary. And they are going to show my experimental mini-movies. One of them, *Interruptus*, is about two men about to have sex when the wife of one of them walks in.

CS When did you discover making films for yourself?
DM Fred had Alzheimer's for seven years and I was completely involved in his care, so I decided to make the films to go someplace else, to revive my imagination. The films were just an exercise for pleasure – I don't want to go to Hollywood. I have a great assistant now, Josiah, but before I have always done everything by myself.

In Buddhism there is a saying that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. When I needed help, Josiah came. And when he said we can make a movie with the little camera, I said, "Wow, let's do it!" And when I think of something on Monday, I will have it done by Friday.

CS You've said that of all of the iterations or incarnations of Fred the last one was the most interesting. People usually don't speak about Alzheimer's in these terms.
DM He was saying amazing things like: "Everyone who wants to go to Massachusetts, raise your hand!" Where does that come from? He was always very conservative, but in the end all these surprising things came out like "Why don't you take your shoes off and make yourself useful?" or "You're eating a banana – what is the meaning of that?" If I could write like that I would be Rimbaud.

CS You believe that people don't reveal themselves in photographs, and you have made very critical comments on [Dutch photographer] Rineke Dijkstra, calling her style of portraiture "stand and stare pictures". But that could perhaps also be said about somebody like August Sander.
DM It is a matter of assumption. Dijkstra did a series about Israeli soldiers, but what am I looking at? A bunch of teenage boys. If you hadn't told me they're Israeli soldiers, they could almost be anybody else. I'm interested in their thoughts about the Palestinians, and what they think of religious Jews not joining the army. I don't care what anybody looks like. What Dijkstra does is description. As a photographer, you become an artist when you bring insight into what you're describing. People settle for description as being what the photograph does, but you have to demand more. Sander's are classic pictures – nobody asks them the questions that I ask from photography. They have history on their side. My bottom line is not what does something look like, but what does it feel like. I see a woman crying, and I want to know what is making her cry. So I write about it. It's not a question of photography or writing – it's a question of expression. My texts don't tell you what you are looking at. They tell you what you can't see. They pick up where the photograph fails. Photographs fail constantly. People believe photographs, even though they lie all the time.

CS But in the case of Robert Frank, your hero, you speak of authenticity.
DM Because he is absolutely unique and true, and he never tried to be an artist. He and Cartier-Bresson – those two are the alpha and omega of photography. And then you get spinoffs, like Garry Winogrand, who I think is loathsome. I'm very opinionated, as one should be. Like Truman Capote – when Johnny Carson asked him about Jack Kerouac's writing, he answered: "That's not writing, that's typing." I think of Cindy Sherman as inauthentic, for example, because she is a product of the art world, of the museum world. There is even a new category now: artists who use the camera. It makes me so angry. Cindy Sherman went to photography school, showed photographs in galleries and museums, published photography books, and now suddenly she is not a photographer! She is an artist who uses the camera. They say that about Eggleston, too. That's a whole new artificial category – what does that make Robert Frank? Immediately, photography goes back to the end of the line, because we now have "artists with a camera". Before I forget, there is a phrase I love: don't pee on my shoe and tell me it's raining. So I'm sorry, if it squawks like a photograph and walks like a photograph, it is a fucking photograph. Don't tell me I'm looking at this mythical category called art.

CS Death has always been a theme in your work. You have tackled it with poetry and with sensitivity and humour. The medium also has an innate affinity to death. From its very beginning, people created images of ghosts and ectoplasm.
DM The second book I did – I have done more than 30 now – was *The Journey of the Spirit After Death*, based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I did sequence books where the spirit leaves the body, like *The Human Condition of the Man in the Subway* and *Death Comes to the Old Lady*. I have always been curious about death, and I keep coming back to it. But finally, I realise my own insignificance and become overwhelmed by the universe. I'm overwhelmed by billions and billions of stars and galaxies. I feel as small as an insect on the back of a flea. I become smaller and smaller and implode. I'm overwhelmed by my huge unknowing.

CS You've also enjoyed commercial assignments, something that many artists only take on reluctantly.
DM I love commercial photography and hate the snobbery of art students, the preciousness of their creativity. I always made my living commercially. I worked both sides of the street. I did a campaign for Massachusetts Mutual that went on for nine years. I have been on *Vogue* covers, *Life*, *Mirabella*. I'm thrilled that I could solve those problems, too, but I never wanted to be Avedon. I didn't want 20 employees. I was always a cottage industry. I take small pictures. I make small movies. I learned everything on the job, and I had a lot of luck. I have been in rhythm with things somehow.

CS Foucault said that your photographs gave him the feeling that your images are his, even though he knew that wasn't true.
DM I think there are public experiences, and then there are private ones. Poetry deals with private experiences. And when you get to a point of intimacy, if someone can identify with even one sentence you have written, if there is a communication, that's very powerful. And talking about being gay – Foucault invented it.

CS I thought you did.
DM I gave him the French franchise, along with Cocteau. Cecil Beaton got the British one. I saw the recent documentary about him and felt very sad for him. I thought of Andy Warhol because he was also an arriviste – he was very anxious. I did a lot of work with Capote and he hated Andy, because he thought of him as a social climber who was cultivating him, but it was the same thing with Capote himself and Beaton most of all. The interesting thing in the film is when Bailey shows up and Beaton becomes past tense. Bailey was a terrible photographer, a real fashion hack, a third-rate Avedon and Penn. But Beaton could see the writing on the wall. What did Twiggy and Carnaby Street have to do with Princess Margaret?

CS Besides being overwhelmed by the universe, you also found freedom recently.
DM By the time I was 20 I believed every lie the Catholic Church ever told, and I believed every lie the culture told. But I kept abandoning my comfort zone and security. I abandoned religion. I abandoned God. Now I have abandoned longevity. You have to learn how to let go, and there is a certain freedom in that process. But what remains? What ideas support me? I've had an amazing life and it is more interesting now than it has ever been. Eventually I will have to let go of my own life. All of it has been a prologue to this moment sitting here, talking to you.

CS What are you looking forward to?
DM Dare I say it? I have an amazing imagination. I thrive off it, I'm thrilled with it, and I need to live at least four more years, till I'm 90, because I have a lot of junk in my head. I want to see what it looks like. ⊙