

## Duane Michals

DC MOORE GALLERY

Around 1964, Duane Michals had the habit of leaving home in the early morning to take photographs in New York. Michals was already beginning a celebrated career, both in the glossies and in galleries and museums, where his contributions to photographic discourse would come to include the staging of pictures to be viewed in short narrative sequences, fictive and symbolic, and the addition of text, usually in an apparently handwritten or hand-printed script, to guide our reading of them. The New York photos of around 1964, though, remain relatively unknown, and, in fact, this exhibition marked their first showing as a group.

There's a well-known story about Andy Warhol driving across the country in 1963—roughly the period of these photographs—and finding that “the farther west we drove the more Pop everything looked on the highways. . . . Pop was everywhere—that was the thing about it, most people still took it for granted, whereas we were dazzled by it—to us, it was the new Art.” Michals, whose various portraits of Warhol, a fellow native of Pittsburgh, go back as early as 1958, was working in New York, not the West, but there were pictures in the show—of commuter buses, diner interiors, a Laundromat—that reminded me of Warhol so productively cherishing what went seen but unseen daily in the American surround. This sense of the built landscape as a kind of museum, though—a storehouse of the “new Art” constituted by American industrial, graphic, and vernacular design—went back well before Pop art, of course, to painters such as Stuart Davis and photographers such as Walker Evans, whose work Michals's New York pictures sometimes recall. Indeed, Michals's photos of barbershops and bodega shelves have direct precedents in Evans, though the younger man's eye is more affectionate and less austere.

Evans's interest in images of text, too, may have informed Michals's lovely photo of the interior of a bar, where his attention was caught both by printed placards in appropriate spots up above the tiers of liquor bottles and by carefully hand-lettered signs on cards or papers pasted unevenly to the mirrors and wall (*SPECIAL/WHISKEY/35¢*). The room is part shiny chrome and light-radiating glass, but it needs new paint and is furnished with battered wooden stools of a Windsor style that, in this context, is discordantly old-fashioned. Also, instead of placing the bar itself centrally, Michals shot to catch to its left a dark, dingy corner where some kind of cord dangles loose and some kind of post is propped or has fallen against a door—an unflattering complement to

the claims of the room's decor, which, if faded, is glittery and modern. That framing, though, happens to include the door's windows, which appear on the far left as panels of a pure-white light that resonates through the picture like an echo of Vermeer. The photographs are full of incongruities like this, knowing captures of the balance between ambition and humility, between the grand, even the spiritual, and the grimly mortal and mundane.

The trace of Evans in Michals's pictures commingles with that of another photographer who marked Evans himself: Eugène Atget, of whom Michals has spoken as a great influence, not just in general but in relation to this particular group of works. “I would awaken early on Sunday mornings,” Michals writes, “and wander through New York with my camera, peering into shop windows and down cul-de-sacs with a bemused Atget looking over my shoulder.” A view of a window display crowded with a great many pairs of women's shoes indeed looks back to the gentle strangeness of Atget's shopwindow photographs. More broadly, in working at a time of day when no one was around—there is not a soul to be seen in these pictures; the show was called “Empty New York”—Michals may have been seeking the sense so common in Atget of a deserted city, a place of cultural and historical fullness that somehow hints at its own end. In this strange and sad way, the pictures anticipate the works that Michals would make twenty-odd years later in the New York of the AIDS crisis. He could not have known at the time that the epidemic was coming, but he had a poetic sense of the fatality in everyday things.

—David Frankel



Duane Michals, *Empty New York*, ca. 1964, gelatin silver print, 5¼ × 7½".