

aperture

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*Hoek, Hoek,
The sassy geese attack.
They're mean and fast
and will bite you on the ass.
Duane Michals 4/07*

7/15/07

DUANE MICHALS: CHROMOPHILIA BY ROBERT KUSHNER

Duane Michals's classical photographs are firmly etched in our minds, holding their unique place in the canon of modern photography. We tend to forget, though, that as a living artist, he continues to exercise the prerogative of allowing his work to evolve and change.

Michals's early work broke uncharted ground, as a refutation of the "decisive moment." He directed his attention to narrative, beauty, and contradiction. With a nearly Biblical range of interests, Michals confronted the big issues: life, death, love, transformation—areas of concern that had long been excised from the context of the avant-garde. The title of his 1993 book *Eros and Thanatos* pretty much sums it up. However, in his early images, he tempered the potentially saccharine nature of these subjects with an intentionally grainy, blurred, sometimes light-flared image, and his own wiry scrawl of narration beneath the photographs. Add a generous dash of hormonal desire, particularly of a homoerotic nature, and

the results were new and electrifying. The errors, the graininess, the sensual longing made these images current, punchy, real, and emotionally charged. The wobbles of the handwriting, and even the occasional crossed-out phrases created an intimacy between the photographer and the viewer. Michals seemed to signal us: "Give me your trust, and I will reveal my dreams as well as my frailties."

But that was "early" Michals. In his recent work, text and a whiff of the erotic remain. However, the photographs are sharp, confident, and radiant. And most shocking, the photographs are in color. Michals has often shot in color for his commercial work, but until four years ago, his studio work remained resolutely black and white. For these recent photographs, he uses color film, which is then digitally scanned and subsequently manipulated. Through digitalization, these images can now conform to a variety of shapes independent of the camera-dictated rectangle. Michals's format of choice is the fan.



Fans carry a wide range of associations, from romantic, coquettish, and elegant to foppish and fey. Artists have long been attracted to the format of the fan. Often literati artists of China and Japan drew on fans: freely painted, freely given to colleagues, later revered and collected by connoisseurs. Degas, Gauguin, Bonnard, and Pissarro—all artists Michals admires—painted fans. Michals (a collector of strata of meaning and association) bases his fans most closely on *japonisme*—the European interpretation and misinterpretation of Japanese tastes—rather than on Japanese prototypes themselves.

Michals's enthusiastic appetite for *japonisme*, with its hunger for exoticism and new visual form while inevitably remaining within the unconscious confines of European expression, underscores the fact that his sources tend to be more in the realm of the painterly and graphic arts than in that of photography. But Michals has chosen his medium for a reason. He is immersed in a nearly

Edwardian appreciation of nature, beauty, gentle narrative, and the overall goodness of life. Michals has said: "Beauty always has elegance. It comes from the spaces and lines and how they define each other as form. Photography does this differently from drawing. Photography reveals the entire gestalt of the image. Later you see the things that you didn't notice that made the photo 'elegant.'" How dramatically at odds with prevailing cynical notions in the current critical dialogue can you get? Contradicting the hegemony of hip and cool photography, Michals revels in the blatantly romantic and sentimental. He presents his own kind of open-ended storytelling, and his very real feelings of wonder in the midst of our jaded age of bombast.

In this work, the veteran photographer Michals has stumbled onto something new for him: a complete intoxication with chroma. Light and color now function as his preferred forms of seduction. Wan winter light glistens off gold leaf onto the throat of a boy. Touch

The Colors of My Garden's Seasons

Musie Nichols 1/25



*The Wintergarden's White
is a ghost of its summer self.
Seed spirits sleep in the earth.*

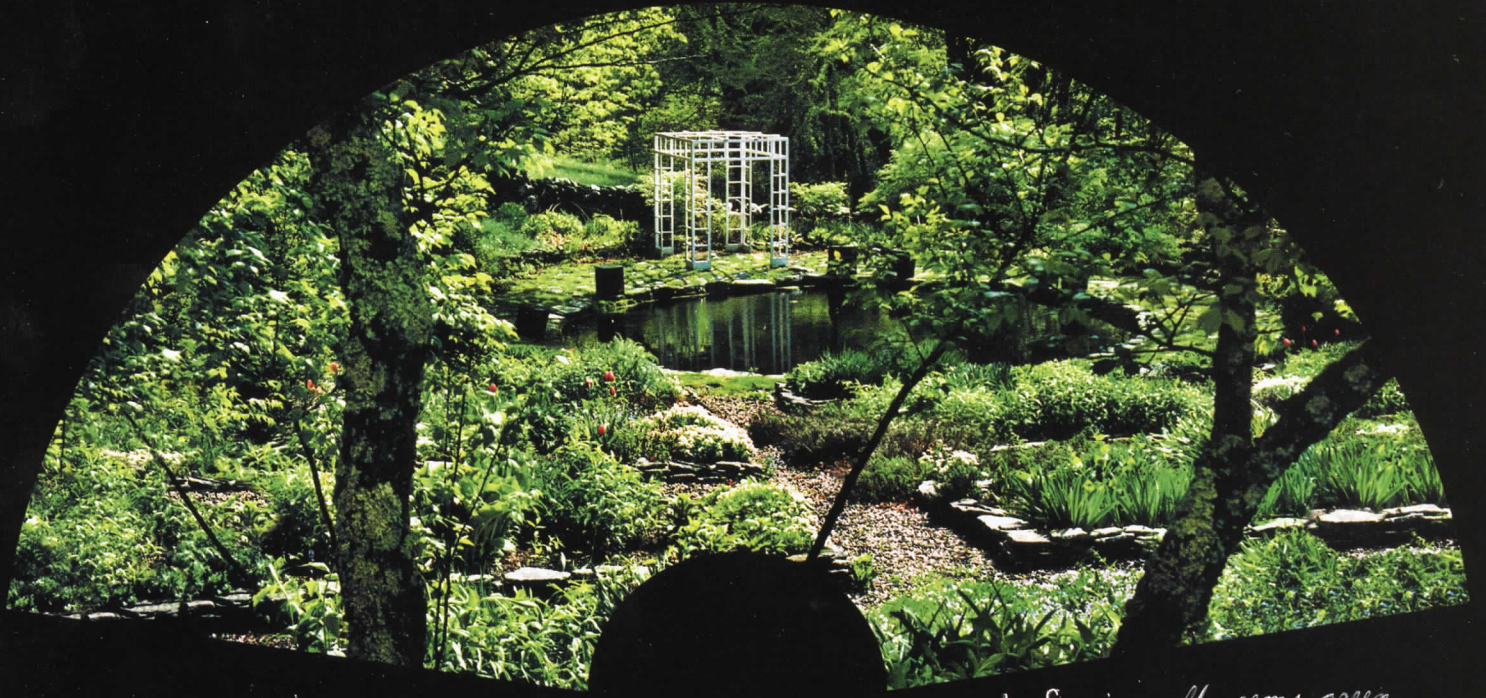
11 10 06



*Autumn is the pot of gold at the end of August's rainbow.
All fallen leaves will rust to dust,
as we must too.*

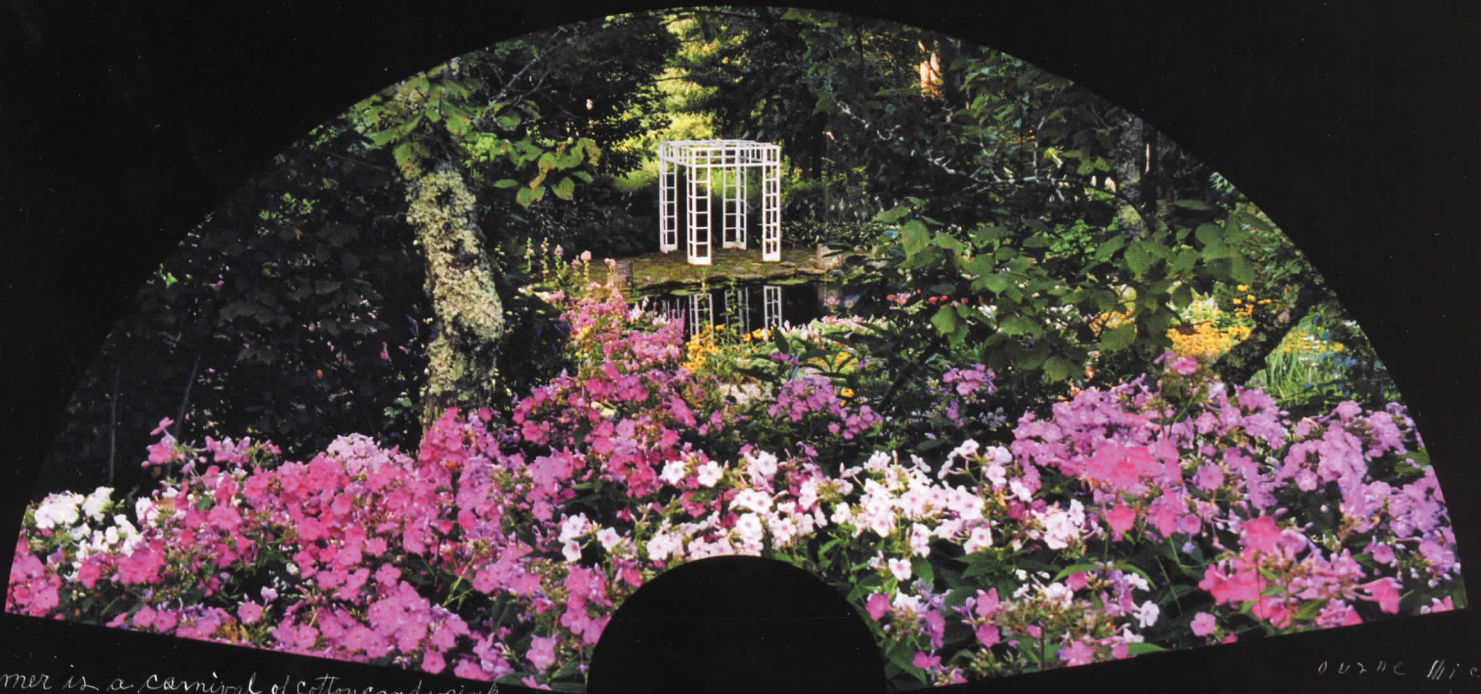
10/13/07

Musie Nichols 1/25



0246 Michals 25

In Spring all seems green,
like an unripe apple.
5 25 07 This Eden is innocent,
Paradise before the first bite was eaten.



0246 Michals 25

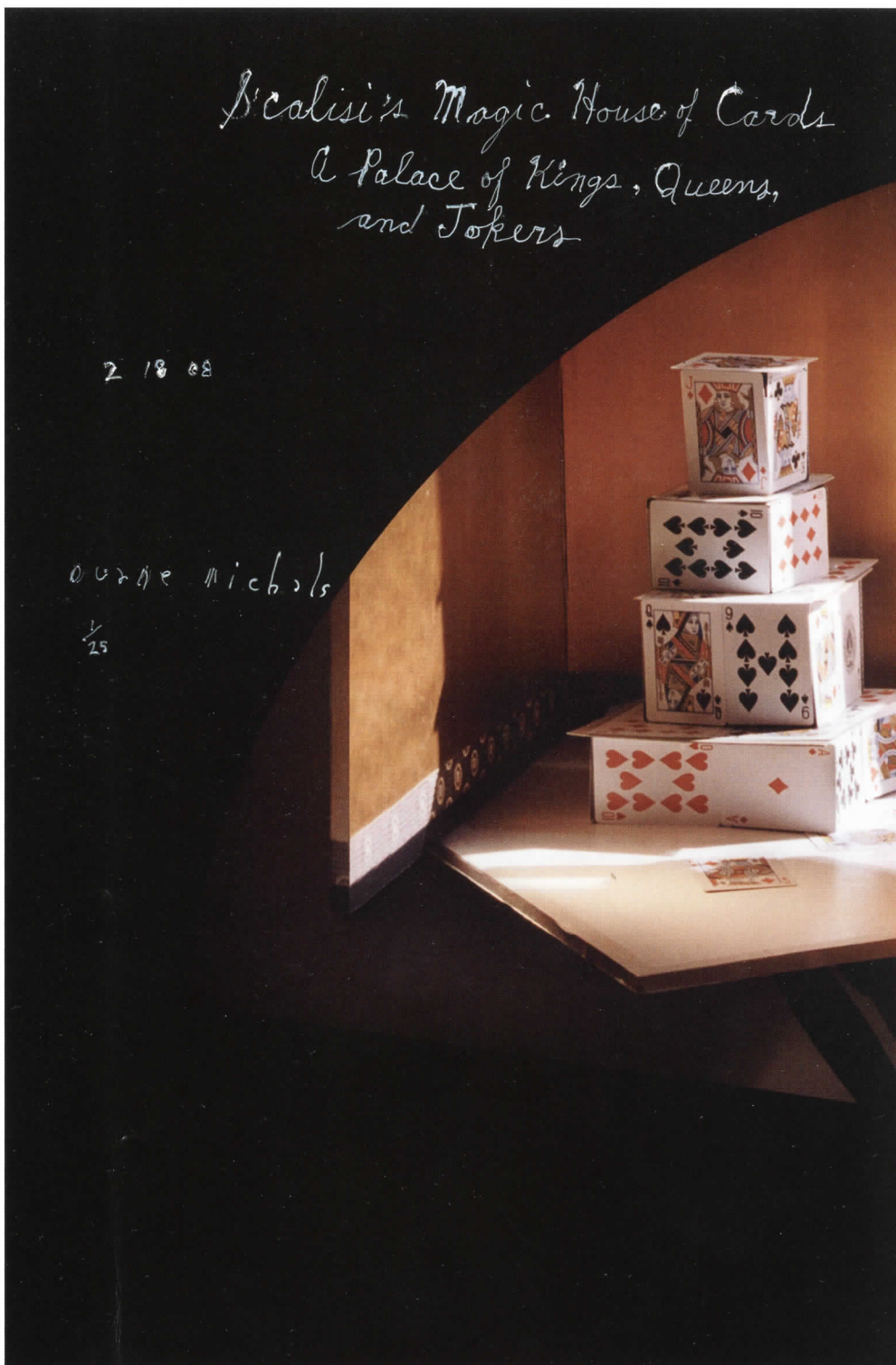
Summer is a carnival of cottoncandy-pink.
And garland sprites dance all night
in swirling, fairy circles.

8/22/07

it in person and it disappears, but for the camera it remains—along with his youth—lovely in its perpetuity. Michals savors the differences of seasonal light caressing his beloved country garden. He captures the arrogant silliness of three sunlit geese, protecting their verdant home turf, unaware of the probable fate that awaits them at the end of the season. There is a delicious rapport between the model's red hair and her raspberry-pink kimono, both luxuriating in a light of Vermeer softness. I asked Michals why this breakthrough into color happened now. His succinct answer: "Because previously my ideas were not color-based. Dreams, surrealism, mystery, emotion, contradiction were not about color."

Each step of his craft seems to give him pleasure these days, an enjoyment we can infer and participate in. I like to picture his delight in arranging whole and broken eggs on a white ground suffused with a raking daylight, finding the correct camera position and then later the precise cropping to suit the fan format. Or building a house of cards against a gold screen, then placing, with equal care, the model amid them. He has said: "Old age should be a reward, not a punishment. These photos are a reward."

What other medium could capture the transient cobalt radiance of morning glories against the reflective glory of a gold leafed screen? Painting could never fully represent the flowers' extreme, paper-thin fragility. Here Michals lets the sensibility of *japonisme* run rampant. The taut vines and oddly spindly leaves hug the strict geometry of their lattice support. But the camera allows Michals to retain his signature offhanded mastery. He intentionally reveals the edge of the screen and a slice of the world beyond. That edge and the intruding space remind us that the world is bigger than any one image, that all art is in the end an artifice. It speaks quietly of the very limitations of art itself, reminding us, his audience, of the contract of collusion on which Michals has always insisted.▲





PAGE 62: *Honk, Honk*, 7/15/07; PAGE 63: *Magnus Was Burnt by Solange's Fiery Mane*, 1/23/08; PAGE 64, TOP: *The Wintergarden's White*, 11/10/06; BOTTOM: *Autumn Is the Pot of Gold at the End of August's Rainbow*, 10/13/07; PAGE 65, TOP: *In Spring All Seems Green*, 5/25/07; BOTTOM: *Summer Is a Carnival of Cotton-Candy Pink*, 8/22/07; THIS PAGE: *Scalisi's Magic House of Cards*, 2/18/08; PAGES 68–69: *Good Morning, Glory*, 10/2/07.

All photographs © Duane Michals/courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Good Morning, Glory,
How do you do?
Your blue, reminds me
of the eyes of someone
I once knew.

10 2 07



