

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

'Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan' Review: A Self-Curated Retrospective

The wittily eclectic photographer is both the creator and the subject of this exhibit, which features his own work alongside objects chosen from the Morgan's archives.



'The Illuminated Man' (1968) by Duane Michals PHOTO: THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

By Richard B. Woodward

Dec. 28, 2019 7:00 am ET

New York

Duane Michals and the Morgan Library & Museum are so compatible on paper that an invitation to be a guest curator foretold a happy marriage. The opportunity to exhibit one's own work alongside items from an institution that treasures literary as well as pictorial history would entice any artist, especially one like the 87-year-old Mr. Michals, who has given equal weight to words and photographs during his unorthodox career.

Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan

- • The Morgan Library & Museum
 - • Through Feb. 2, 2020
-

Giddiness over his rare good fortune permeates “Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan.” (Before making his final selection of more than 60 objects, he found time to visit the archives at least

10 times, according to the Morgan’s photography curator, Joel Smith.) The show is both a compressed retrospective of Mr. Michals’s oeuvre over six decades, his first in a New York museum, and a public display of his witty eclecticism.

A video screen in the foyer contrasts early and recent work. Inspired by Atget’s early 20th-century views of Paris, the black-and-white photographs in “Empty New York” (1964-65) portray the city’s deserted streets and interiors. In hindsight, they reveal a dissatisfaction with straight documentary and a predilection for the haunted metaphysics of De Chirico and Surrealism. Also playing on the monitor are three of Mr. Michals’s short color films, his favorite mode since 2015. Overtly low-tech, with farcical props and plots, they underscore his lifelong aversion to pompous gravamen.

As he matured as an artist, Mr. Michals often used photographs to tell multi-panel stories that balance the whimsical illogic of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Joseph Cornell and René Magritte with vulnerable ruminations about his working-class upbringing in Pittsburgh, the bonds of family, his sexual longings as a gay man, and his own mortality—a seesaw of irony and sincerity reflected in his choices from the archives.

Inside the gallery, he has integrated his finds with his own photographs and notebooks from the 1960s-1990s, organizing both under headings that range from “Theater” and “Illusion” to “Nature” and “Death” to “Immortality” and “Time.” The loose arrangement allows him to dispense with chronology. In a section titled “Love and Desire,” a racy Peter Arno cartoon from *The New Yorker* of a satyr and a curvaceous brunette in a swimsuit (1967) abides with an Egon Schiele autobiographical drawing of the artist being carried in the arms of a male companion (1914); an Auguste Rodin watercolor of Lucifer (c. 1900); a drawing of two acrobats rising and falling by Charles Demuth (1918); and a disturbing publicity photograph of Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth joined together like a two-headed monster (1926).

Blended within this array are two of Mr. Michals’s text-and-photograph pieces from the mid-’70s: the confessional “A Letter From My Father,” a portrait of his parents with his brother, in which the artist wonders where his father had “hidden his love” for him; and “Certain Words Must Be Said,” about the anguish of two women on the verge of splitting up who hope that a telegram would arrive that “would say the things they couldn’t.”

In an interview with Mr. Smith for the excellent catalog, Mr. Michals says: “When I write, it’s to



'A Letter From My Father' by Duane Michals (1960-1975) PHOTO: DUANE MICHALS, DC MOORE GALLERY, NY/THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

talk about what you cannot see in the photograph. It's to augment the photograph, to give voice to the silence of it."

The momentous and the trivial often coexist in his stories, which pose cosmic questions about life in photographic language that doesn't require a degree in art theory to understand. This sensibility can be seen in the objects he has chosen for the "Immortality" section, where an autographed manuscript of a section from James Joyce's "Ulysses" lies in a case with a paper boat folded by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a quill pen once owned by Goethe, and a red leather portfolio that belonged to Voltaire. A separate case, even more solemnly absurd, juxtaposes a cast-metal laurel wreath on a velvet pillow (a relic from Pierpont Morgan's funeral) with a blue hat box designed to hold a stove-pipe hat (an item from Mr. Michals's own collection).

His handwritten commentary runs throughout. The section on "Death" reads: "To be alive is to be skating on thin ice with the possibility of falling falling falling." One of the accompanying photographs he has chosen is a jokey self-portrait from 1978 in which he pretends to be asleep in an Egyptian tomb at Sakkara.

An elegiac exhibition—Mr. Michals's partner for 57 years, the architect Fred Gorrée, died in 2017—"Illusions of the Photographer" is also uplifting. The Morgan's riches and oddities—drawings by Saul Steinberg, George Grosz, Francesco Salviati and Walt Disney—are here put in service to one man's humane and generous perception of art. Even before it gave him a showcase for his eccentric work and ideas, the Morgan was Mr. Michals's favorite museum in New York. Go now and see why.



SELF-PORTRAIT ASLEEP IN A TOMB OF MERERUKA AT SAKKARA
Duane Michals 19/25

'Self-Portrait Asleep in a Tomb of Mereruka Sakkara' (1978) by Duane Michals PHOTO: DUANE MICHALS, DC MOORE GALLERY, NY/THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

—*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.