DUANE MICHALS
Duane Michals

Introduction by Renaud Camus
Duane Michals was born on February 18, 1932, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. His parents were of Czech origin, like those of another Pennsylvanian, Andy Warhol. Early on in their respective careers, Michals would photograph Warhol, producing a singularly striking portrait.

Wishing to Americanize the original family name Mihal, his parents had it changed to Michals. Mrs Michals was employed in the home of a wealthy couple who had a son named Duane. She must have liked the name very much, or perhaps she was particularly fond of the little boy, for she decided to name her own son Duane as well. As a boy, Duane Michals was understandably intrigued by the boy whose name he shared; however, the two would never be given an opportunity to meet. Though probably highly regarded by his namesake, the "original Duane"—as a recent biography, not without a certain stinging cruelty, called him—committed suicide during his sophomore year of college.

The whole issue of the name Duane, and all it suggests of frustration, doubts regarding identity, a virtual rivalry for his mother's love, unsatisfied curiosity, the ambiguity surrounding the death of someone who was more himself than he was—and more legitimately so—may not entirely explain but may well symbolize the majority of the basic themes and recurrent aspects found throughout Michals' work, his life, and especially in his comments. There are his obsession with duality (*René Magritte*, 1965), and the usual accoutrements of mirrors and subtle reflections (*Bill Brandt*, 1974; *François Truffaut*, 1981); his double career as an artistic and a commercial photographer; time divided between doing the
work necessary to provide for material comforts and that
done for personal pleasure, or between the city and the
country; a taste for such binary opposites as spirit and
matter, appearance and reality, youth and old age, the artist
and the model, or life and death; things split in two (Now
Becoming Then, 1973); twins (Homage to Cavafy, 1978);
veiled threats of obliteration (Joseph Cornell, 1972); hidden
faces (Andy Warhol, 1958); emptiness (the series on deserted
places, 1964-66); superimposed images; disappearances;
transparent presences; ghostly silhouettes; double exposures;
and the omnipresence of death.

“How can I be dead? the spirit asks himself, standing
in front of a mirror in The Journey of the Spirit after Death.
Michals speaks repeatedly of “dissatisfaction” when ex-
plaining his decisions to combine photography with activi-
ties or other artistic expressions which had, until then, seemed
to be as distinctly different as possible. These innovations
are landmark dates in his evolution as an artist. In 1966 he
associated photography with narration, thus creating his
famous sequences and ensuring his reputation as a photog-
rapher. In 1974 he added written narratives; this new form
became as typically his as the earlier sequences. Then, in
1979, he incorporated photography’s most renowned rival,
painting, in his work. He did this by painting directly on his
own prints or on classics by photographers such as Cartier-
Bresson, Kertész or Ansel Adams. In the latter instance, he
never hesitated to add his own signature above that of the
other. One may interpret this gesture as a sign of his persist-
tent interrogation and anxiety with regard to identity. Fur-
ther confirmation of this is found in his own statements
concerning the handwritten captions on his own photo-
graphs: “No one can reproduce my handwriting, but some-
one else can always make a new print.” Writing about
Michals, Michel Foucault quotes him on the same point:
“Seeing words on a page pleases me. It is like a trail I’ve left
behind me, uncertain, strange markings, a proof that I’ve
been there.” “Proof”, of course, has two meanings, referring
both to a photographic proof or to something that estab-
lishes truth. Among the most moving examples of Michals’
work is a 1974 photograph with text, significantly entitled
“This Photograph Is My Proof.” Yet, in a text without photo-
graphs, handwritten as always on photographic paper, he
said, "It is a melancholy truth that I... can only fail. I am a reflection photographing other reflections within a reflection."

Consider the 1974 photograph entitled "Self-portrait with My Guardian Angel." The right side of Michal's face is cast in shadow while, on the left side, the profile of his "guardian angel," who resembles him in many ways, seems to be overexposed. The accompanying text speaks of the angel, Pete, who we're told died in 1931, just before Duane's birth. It contains a suggestion of frustration and the splitting in two of the double himself: "... He never became what he could have been." The name Duane has a definite affinity to duality. Likewise, the family names Mihal and Michals, for which many different, often very vague, interpretations have been expounded, are inevitably traced to Michael the Archangel. Many years ago, Michals created for himself an imaginary double, Stefan Mihal, who is the opposite of everything he is, the person he never became.

Michals was brought up in the Catholic religion. Among the possible origins for the sequences that are so intimately associated with his image as an artist, he readily cites the different Stations of the Cross and the order in which they hung along the walls of the family's home. The philosophic and metaphysical aspects which preoccupy him and which he emphasizes when speaking of his art are discreetly tinged with a more or less repressed religiosity. This same element is clearly manifested in his choice of words, in his titles, e.g. soul, heaven, paradise, spirit, Prodigal Son, Jesus Christ, grievous fault.

In the sequence The Fallen Angel, another angel – not the same one as before – immediately loses his wings for having tasted of the flesh. Michals believed he had found in Constantine Cavafy's work the literary counterpart to his own photographic work. But sexuality and, in this case, homosexuality are far more serene and more triumphantly assumed, albeit nostalgically, as concerns Cavafy than they are for Michals. Any guilt in this regard remains completely exterior to Cavafy; the memory of his youthful ardors gives wings to the poet in his old age.

One of the specific traits of the intellectual premises in Michals' work is an obstinate mistrust – basically very Chris-
tian, in fact — of appearances, coupled with a rather naive faith in the superior reality that these appearances hide. As he has said: "It is important not to worry about appearances but about what people are. What they represent in one's life is the meaningful thing, not what they resemble today or yesterday." Note the exquisite ambiguity produced by placing the verb represent in a position of near equivalence with the preceding verb to be.

In an extremely well-known sequence, Paradise Regained, a young couple in an apartment see themselves progressively being stripped, or freed, of their cultural environment, beginning with their clothes. Furniture, knick-knacks, art reproductions — all disappear one by one to be replaced by a growing profusion of greenery. But the primitive Garden of Eden thus reconstituted and, no doubt, supposedly natural, is represented by the most cultural of all these objects, green plants. In the last picture, the clock on the mantel can still be glimpsed among the leaves. This particular paradise has not been freed of time, nor, therefore, from History.

Another of the most frequently reproduced and commented upon of Duane Michals' works, and one of those which most arouse differing emotional responses in the mind of the viewer, is "A Letter from My Father." A complex composition in all respects, the photograph itself was taken in 1960, whereas the written commentary surrounding it was not added until 1975. In the text, the narrator uses the first person in speaking of his father. Presumably, therefore, especially as the text is handwritten, the narrator and the author are one and the same. Hence the observer identifies the narrator with the young man whose stubbornly set profile is seen on the right of the photograph confronting the face of the father, who is seen full front. Although the father is indeed Duane Michals' father, the young man is not the photographer, but his brother, a psychiatrist.

Photography is, of course, the art of duplication par excellence. However, the function of duplicating reality does not satisfy Duane Michals, who insists that the important thing is not the appearance of things, but rather their philosophic nature. But what if their philosophic nature were their appearance? Neither the artist nor the thinker in Michals can completely escape this terrible suspicion.
Michals' work is almost as autobiographical as that of Lartigue, for example. However, it differs radically in that Michals does not surprise the moment, he creates it. Unlike Lartigue, who, in his youth, would station himself at a bend in the paths of the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, patiently waiting to capture the apparition of elegant ladies in their best finery, Michals is never on the lookout to catch a body in motion. He provokes movement in order to put it on film so as to produce a movement in the soul. To do this, he uses models, whether professionals or not, complex technical processes, and intelligent staging. He occupies a place of honor in the ranks of those photographers, less numerous than at the turn of the century, who are dedicated to what A.D. Coleman called “the directorial mode.” It may be said that, with him, one is as far away as possible from reporting, that “universal reporting” for which he professes a total poetic disdain.

A certain little boy wearing a cap, standing in a public square in Leningrad, seems to offer the viewer something *déjà vu*, in the tradition of Cartier-Bresson, if you will. The great square behind him, however, glistening with rain after a storm, is nothing but reflections, throwing back images of the few passersby, the street lamp, a small van; it is an inverted response, trembling, precarious, threatened. One is tempted to see in the photograph, in those shadowy silhouettes, a more specific presage of the art to come of the real Michals. But there is no real Michals. He is always elsewhere, beyond the mirrors, critical reductions and closed genres. He has been carried away by new inspiration from any image of himself that would freeze him in clichés. A 1973 self-portrait is entitled “I Am Another.” Let us end here, with the little boy among those reflections, and with those first scenes and characters photographed in Russia in 1958, which, to Michals' surprise, opened up and revealed to him his true vocation. One who believes in signs, and the signs made among signs, will delight in a small detail. These photographs were taken by a young traveler with someone else's camera, an Argus, which, before leaving New York, he had, just in case, borrowed.

Renaud Camus
Chance Meeting
Andy Warhol, 1958
The Human Condition
The Illuminated Man. 1969.
The voyage of the spirit after death
7.

8. The great white light
"How can I be dead?"
The wandering

The spirit visits those he loves
13. He visits his possessions.

14. The apparitions: Adam and Eve
The apparitions: His friends

"Please let me return to my past life."
The spirit in ignorance
The woman is hurt by a letter.
René Magritte. 1965.
Paradise regained
Myself with Feminine Beard. 1983.
Women Fighting. 1983.
Nude Denuded. 1983.
The Fallen Angel
The Logeyman
Leningrad. 1958.
The young girl's, dream
Nude in City Setting. 1969.
Take one and see
Mt. Fujiyama
It was a hot day. The book was dull.
He was bored.

Someone slipped an envelope under the door.
There was something peculiar written on it.

Inside were some pills. Without any hesitation he gulped down a pill.
5. He felt like a balloon with its air being let out. Instantly he became six inches tall.

6. The door squeaked behind him as an enormous nude woman entered the room.
She grew larger as she approached his chair.

She did not see him. He was excited by her size.
His excitement turned to terror, when he realized that she was going to sit on his chair, and on him.

As her colossal ass descended upon him, he tried to run, but was paralyzed. His tiny legs refused to move.
He stood frozen with excitement, as her big behind settled down, closer and closer.

She sat on him!
Miraculously, in the darkness, he began to see the snow covered peak of Mt. Fuji-yama.
Things are queer
where the giant unlocked a cellar door and showed him gold: 'One is for the poor, the second for the King, and the third is yours.' Just then the clock struck twelve and the giant vanished. The king returned to the boy in total darkness. Next morning the King came to the boy to apologize for what had happened. 'My dead cousin came to see me and a fellow showed me three treasure chests in the cellar; but I could not lift them, so he said, 'Now you may marry my daughter.'
From the sequence "For Balthus." 1969.
The pleasures of the gleam
Although he had to walk blocks out of his way, it had become a daily ritual with him to look in the shop window. It was strangely pleasing to see them there.

Of course it had occurred to him to buy the gloves. To own them would have ruined it. It would not be the same.
He sat there much too long staring at his gloves.

His eyes kept returning to the curious shape his gloves had taken. One had become a garter fungus. He wondered where it might lead.
"How marvelous to let his hand enter the tunnel and see when it would take him," he thought.
7.
The glove ate his hand.

8.
She sat there, reading the paper, wearing one glove.
9. She brought her hand to her hair.

10. He could almost touch the glove.
11.
The hand in her glove became his hand.

12.
He could not control his hand. The glove's will became his will.
The glove made his hand follow the contours of her face and down her body.

The glove did what it wanted to do.
He rose abruptly, leaving a glove.
Christ in New York
Christ is sold on television by a religious hypocrite.

Christ cries when he sees a young woman die of an illegal abortion.
Christ is beaten defending a homosexual.

Christ eats dog food with an old Ukrainian lady in Brooklyn.
5. Christ sees a woman being attacked.

6. Christ is shot by a mugger with a hand gun and dies. The Second Coming had occurred, and no one noticed.
CERTAIN WORDS MUST BE SAID

Things had become impossible between them and nothing could be salvaged. Certain words must be said. And although each one had said those words a hundred times to herself, they had never had the courage to say them out loud to one another. So they began to hope someone else would say the words for them. Perhaps a letter might arrive, or a telegram delivered that would say what they could not. Now they spent their days waiting. What else could they do?
Marcel Duchamp. 1962.
Death comes to the old lady
Andy Warhol. 1958.
1932. Duane Steven Michals is born on February 18, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. His father, John Ambrose Michals, is a metal worker; his mother, Margaret Cecilia Matik, a cleaning woman. He spends his first five years with his grandparents because his mother resides with her employers.

1946. Michals is awarded a scholarship enabling him to register for the Saturday watercolor classes held at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.

1951. Thanks to another scholarship and earnings from spare jobs, he enrolls at the University of Denver.

1953. Michals receives his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Denver. Although he was not an art major, he was very interested in Magritte, Balthus and De Chirico. He enlists in the Army and is stationed in Germany.

1956. Having finished his military duties, he settles in New York and registers at the Parsons School of Design.

1957. He obtains his first professional job, assistant art director for Dance magazine.

1958. Michals is hired by Time Inc., to do graphics for the advertising department. Just before leaving for a three-week trip to the USSR, he borrows an Argus C3 camera. During his travels in Russia, he seems to discover his true vocation, taking numerous pictures of children, sailors and workers. Home again, he takes a job in a graphic arts agency, which closes down six months later. He then decides to make a career out of his newfound interest in photography. With the help of the commercial photographer Daniel Entin, he begins a fruitful career in this field. His first professional jobs are a series of publicity photographs for the musical The Fantasticks. He receives regular assignments from such publications as Show, Mademoiselle, Esquire, and later from Vogue, The New York Times, Horizon, and Scientific American, as well as commissions from Revlon and Elizabeth Arden.


1964-66. Michals photographs the deserted interiors of urban sites that are usually bustling with people and activity – laundromats, beauty parlors, subway stations, cafeterias and theaters.

1966. He decides to people his sites with persons he uses as actors. Places and persons both participate in his stories and narratives, which represent dreams or parables and which unfold in sequences. At first, each sequence comprises six photographs; later he sometimes uses nine photographs Burlesque, 1979, fifteen Take One and See Mt. Fujiyama, 1975, or even twenty-six The Journey of the Spirit after Death, 1970.

1974. He introduces photographs accompanied by texts handwritten in the margins. These may be single photographs or several arranged in a sequence.

1979. He produces his first works combining photography and painting.

1980. At the beginning of a new decade, Michals seems to display, among other things, a new interest in politics and a marked concern for the "intolerance of the moral majority."
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Book on Duane Michals


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Duane Michals

Born in 1932 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Duane Michals discovered his vocation in 1958 when he borrowed a camera for a three-week trip to Russia. Since that time he has become famous for such haunting narrative sequences as "The Journey of the Spirit After Death," "Paradise Regained," and "The Fallen Angels," among others. Relying on props, double exposures, reflections, and texts written on the margins of the images, Michals occupies a singular place in the long line of photographers who create the events they capture on film.

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