

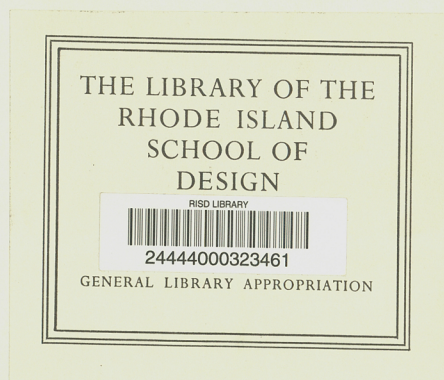
DUANE DUCK



DUANE *m*ICHALS

PHOTOGRAPHS / SEQUENCES / TEXTS

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Duane Michals



SELF PORTRAIT AS A DEVIL ON THE OCCASION
OF MY FORTIETH BIRTHDAY

photographs • sequences • texts
1958 – 1984

Museum of Modern Art Oxford
1984

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Remarkable as it may seem considering the international stature of Duane Michals, this is the artist's first one-man exhibition in the UK. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that we are able to present such a substantial retrospective showing of his work, first in Oxford and then on tour throughout the country. For their role in the exhibition I should like to thank:

- **Duane Michals**, for the enthusiasm and generosity of spirit with which he collaborated on every aspect of the exhibition;
- **Nicholas H. Brown** and the **Sidney Janis Gallery**, for their help with practical arrangements and particularly for lending such a large number of works to this extensive tour;
- **Philippe Stoeckel**, curator of the major 1982 Paris retrospective on which the present show is based, and **Gorka Sistiaga** of **Paris Audiovisuel/Foprimpep**, for their assistance with the transport of works from Paris and for their permission to screen the 22-minute video portrait of the artist produced by them with Director Ely Noyse in conjunction with that exhibition;
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Marco Livingstone
Deputy Director
Museum of Modern Art Oxford

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"CERTAIN WORDS MUST BE SAID"

(Marginal references are to catalogue numbers. Those marked * are illustrated.)

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 might say the necessary words for them. Perhaps a letter might arrive or a telegram delivered that would say what they couldn't. Now they spent their days waiting. What else could they do?

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The fierce desire to overcome the frustrations of non-communication which underlies both the text quoted above and the photograph which it accompanies – an image of two women looking resolutely in opposite directions – has its origins in Duane Michals's experience of the world while defining his ambitions as an artist. As with so much of his work, the situation is based on circumstances he himself has lived through, circumstances, moreover, of such painful intimacy that most of us would be tempted to shy away from them or at least not to air them in public: the tensions within family life and specifically the tragic, but by no means uncommon, inability of lifelong partners to speak to each other about the things that really matter.

In taking such a situation as his subject, Michals has already made an implicit declaration of intent, establishing the preeminence in his work of idea over form and technique. Purist definitions of the photographic medium hold little interest for him. He is a subtle technician and he will avail himself of everything the camera has to offer, including double exposures and intentional blurs, to achieve carefully considered effects, but he thinks always in terms of what will best express his themes more clearly understood that Michals began in 1966, after eight years' experience of portrait photography, to construct the situations he wanted to photograph rather than waiting for events to occur and then to build time into them by relaying a narrative in terms of a sequence of images. By 1974 he had come to the conclusion that even these means were insufficient to indicate the fundamental questions which he wished to share with his audience. The natural solution was to begin writing on the borders surrounding the photograph, denying the commonly held view that "a picture is worth a thousand words" and in doing so breaking one of the most serious of photographic taboos. "The image," Michals explains, "was totally inadequate. A photograph of my parents or my father doesn't tell me for a second what I thought of my father, which for me is much more important than what the man looked like. So I then had to evolve into writing. Not that the writing actually describes what you're looking at, but to actually talk about what you can't see."

Michals is acutely aware of his photographic forebears and contemporaries and cites among those he most admires Thomas Eakins, the nineteenth century American portrait painter who also worked privately as a seminal photographer of the male nude; Bill Brandt, whose work, like that of Michals, is grounded in Surrealism and in a dedication to the portrayal of atmosphere; and George Platt Lynes, whose nudes and portrayals of Greek myths and dream-like images of dancers prefigure Michals's own devotion to artifice and the imagination as essential working tools. He respects, too, photographers such as Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who, unlike himself, find all the imagery they need on the street; their practice, however, based as it is on observation rather than on constructs of the mind, has by its very nature had no visible influence on his own work.

Other photographers have likewise been cited as precursors, particularly with regard to formal and technical matters: Eadweard Muybridge, whose late nineteenth century investigations such as *The Human Figure in Motion* and *Animals in Motion* documented movement through sequences of images; and Victorian artist-photographers such as Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, who produced elaborate photographic tableaux as composite images concocted in the darkroom with the aid of multiple negatives. These have not, however, acted as conscious influences on Michals, who credits a single turn-of-the-century photographer, the Frenchman Eugène Atget, as a major force in rethinking his notions of the medium. In 1964, weary from the demands of working with people on the commissioned portraits by which he was rapidly establishing his name, Michals turned to Atget's haunting images of depopulated Paris and its environs in the early morning hours as a spur to a series of his own concerning "empty New York." These photographs of shop interiors, spied after hours through plate glass windows, made Michals realize that he could construct the images that he had in mind rather than waiting to find what he was looking for on the street. The power of these pictures for him even today is attested to by the fact that some of them have been recycled as raw material for the recent overpainted photographs.

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Michals quickly came to the conclusion that his "empty New York" pictures were like stage sets waiting to be populated. He became even more convinced about the possibility of doing so through his appreciation of the paintings of Balbus, in which otherwise unremarkable interiors also functioned as settings for highly-charged domestic dramas. Michals paid direct homage to one of Balbus's most famous canvases, *The Street* (1933, Museum of Modern Art, New York), by using it as the source of his first artificially posed photograph. When, therefore, Michals came in 1966 to produce his first sequence – *The Woman is Frightened by the Door* – it seems fitting not only that it should be possessed with a charged sexuality and vulnerable nudity equivalent to that of Balbus's paintings, but also that, as in Balbus, the confines of a restricted domestic setting should serve as the container for a complex of emotions and relationships.

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It is from the work of painters and writers, rather than of photographers, that Michals has most consistently drawn sustenance. The recurring theme of the evocative and often sinister power of objects alluded to in a number of the sequences has strong links with Surrealist painting, particularly with the work of two of the artist's heroes, Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte, both of whom he had the opportunity to meet and photograph in the nineteen sixties. To the paintings of these artists, too, can be related the playful manipulations of scale and time which are the subject of sequences such as *Things are Queer* and *Alice's Mirror*, while even a specific image such as *The Illuminated Man* – an emblem of the obliteration of self achieved in moments of intense consciousness – carries echoes of a Magritte painting of 1937, *The Pleasure Principle*. Parallels with and references to the work of painters abound, in the conscious deployment, for instance, of imagery from early Renaissance painters such as Fra Angelico and Andrea Mantegna in sequences such as *The Fallen Angel* and *Christ in New York*. Even Michals's largely practical decision to use his own apartment as the setting for many of his narratives can be related to the work of painters such as Vuillard and Bonnard, who likewise managed to suggest the intricacy of the world and of human emotions and relationships without leaving the threshold of their own home: in each case there was no need to look any further, for what better metaphor could there be for the inner workings of the mind than the interior of one's own domestic environment?

It is a simple matter to establish credentials for what Michals is doing, particularly in terms of his debts to other media. The flow of time implicit in the sequences, particularly in the early ones, has a cinematic character; the form bears especially close resemblance to that of silent films, simple actions progressing frame by frame within a static setting and eventually being supplemented by written words which are not unlike the printed dialogue spliced into the action shots to clarify meaning. As for using words in conjunction with images, distinguished precedents can be found not only in Cubism and more recent twentieth century art, but also in earlier art as varied as medieval manuscript illumination and the illustrated poetry of William Blake. Claims can also be made for the formal innovation by which Michals has extended the vocabulary of photography, particularly in his use of sequential structure, in the association of words and images and more recently in his experiments with paint against a photographic base.

In all honesty, though, I must admit that for me this entire web of historical reference and claims to originality of form and presentation would count for little were it not for the urgency of the ideas and observations which these means serve to communicate. This, for me, is what makes Michals an important artist: "important" not in the over-used and trivialized career sense, but in terms of the manner in which his work can change one's views and alter one's perceptions of what it means to be alive. Faced with the awkward scrawl which covers these photographs, which gives them a naive and almost childish air compounded by the artist's idiosyncratic spelling, I find myself confronted not with the cleverness of historical references but with the personality and individual voice of the artist.

I speak here in the first person, rather than hiding behind the usual academic detachment, because it is precisely one-to-one communication which is at the core of Michals's work. In *Someone Left a Message for You* a hand is pictured in the process of writing out a statement in mirror script: "As you read this, I am entering your mind." This contact – or *Intersection*, as Michals would have it – between author and audience is directly alluded to also in *It is no Accident that You are Reading This*: "These words were waiting for you. I have been waiting for you. Remember me!"

The least we can do as human beings, Michals reminds us, is to share our thoughts and experiences. This can be embarrassing. It is awkward even to write it down in this way; but if it is tragic for so many things to remain unspoken between us, it would be unforgivable not to discuss such matters here out of some misguided sense of propriety. When I was in my early twenties, an aunt of mine of whom I was very fond died of cancer; I had known that her illness was terminal, but had not been able to bring myself to visit her in hospital in the final stages. Rather than torment myself with remorse at having failed to speak to her when she most needed support, I made an unequivocal decision not to avoid such painful but vital confrontations in the future. This is



I build a pyramid

just the kind of jolt which Michals's pictures can give: if you come to the work sympathetically and are willing to bring your experience to bear as generously as the artist has his, your appreciation will be immeasurably enriched; if, on the other hand, you decide to shield yourself from such introspection, you may well find yourself amused and entertained one minute and shocked into bruising self-awareness the next.

Questions concerning the spirit, mortality and the transience of material things are constantly on his mind. Sequences such as *A Man Going to Heaven* and *The Spirit Leaves the Body* represent, he says, his literal view of what occurs after death, as does another sequence, *Death Comes to the Old Lady* (1969), in which his seated grandmother is shown being whisked away by a man as if they were protagonists in a medieval Dance of Death illustration. All these testify to what Michals disarmingly refers to as his "see Dick, see Spot, see Jane" mentality: "I think the spirit simply explodes and gets out, takes the clothes off and walks away from it, or floats away." Michals, however, having been brought up as a conventional Catholic, had come by the mid 'sixties gradually to reject Christianity altogether, jolted out of it by his introduction to Buddhism. "When I had to abandon the idea of a personal God I was really upset," he recalls. "I don't believe in a Mr. God, I don't believe in a Mr. Jesus." He believes in the existence of evil but finds the idea of its incarnation as a person ludicrous, hence the light-hearted *Self-portrait as a Devil on the Occasion of my Fortieth Birthday*. These doubts, though, do not prevent him from thinking about the idea of God – sometimes with despair, as in *I Am Much Nicer than God*, occasionally, as in *Shopping with Mother*, with irreverent hilarity – nor from using Christian imagery in order to present his views on subjects as diverse as sexual guilt or political repression.

Death is a matter of obsessive interest to Michals, not in a morbid way but as a means of heightening his consciousness of being alive. He remarks that every time death comes to someone he knows, reminding him of how little time he has left himself, his passion for life increases. The process of ageing is inseparable from a wistful sense of loss in contemplating the vitality and beauty of youth, a subject approached with particular delicacy in the book *Homage to Cavafy*, for which Michals devised ten captioned photographs as equivalents to ten poems by Constantine Cavafy. One such photograph portrays a plump and balding man, seated and with his back turned to us, contemplating a painted portrait which one presumes represents him in his youth; the caption reads: "When he was a young man, it seemed impossible that he would ever grow old. Now that he is old, he cannot remember ever having been young." The final image in the sequence, captioned simply "The old man photographs the young man," depicts the artist himself, seated melancholically in a room with his model, his camera mounted on a tripod but pointing only at a blank wall.

Another of Michals's books, *Changes*, published in 1981 but reproducing photographs covering his entire lifetime, confronts the question of mortality even more directly. The pairs or sequences of images here document the ageing process of different sitters over the years and include the disturbing sight of a middle-aged couple, Anna and Stephen Matik, photographed happily together in 1962 and then on their deathbeds in 1975 and 1977 respectively. Michals does not flinch from contemplating the ravages of time on his own body, from infancy through to his own imagined death, laid out on a slab and covered by a shroud. His humour remains with him even as he contemplates his own demise in a double exposure wryly titled *Self-portrait as if I were Dead*.

A profound sense of loss runs through much of Michals's work, a reluctant acceptance of the passing of youth and innocence and of the transience of the physical world, which results in a recognition of one's aloneness that is closely linked to the sense of mortality just described. In *The Captive Child* Michals argues that it is the need for companionship and affection – things which we rightly value – which itself imprisons us by making us vulnerable. To shield oneself from pain is no solution, for that vulnerability itself is precious. Just as Michals allows himself to be vulnerable as an artist – exposing his intimate thoughts and laying himself open to attack not only for the quality of his photographs but also for the quality of his ideas, of his writing and of his painting and drawing abilities – so he uses the nudity of many of his protagonists as a sign of their vulnerability. It is deployed with particular poignancy in *The Return of the Prodigal Son* through the eloquence of a simple act by which the father, played by the artist himself, sheds his clothes in order to provide protection for the son.



58 One of Michals's most humorous and best-known sequences, *Paradise Regained*, could almost take as its subtitle the name of a recent book by Quentin Crisp: *How to Become a Virgin*. A male and female couple, sitting fully clothed in an interior filled with twentieth century objects – including a digital clock and a Magritte print which Michals owns – are gradually denuded not only of their apparel but also of all the possessions by which they might define themselves, emerging as a latter-day Adam and Eve in a jungle of houseplants. The absurdity of attempting to retrieve one's innocence, a point forcefully made here through wit, elsewhere receives more sombre treatment. To maintain innocence artificially into adulthood, as Michals suggests in *He Thought that She was Kind*, can be profoundly damaging in that it can make one brittle, aloof and superior. To deny one's sensuality or sexuality, likewise, out of deference to an abstract morality imposed by others – as is explicitly the case in *The Unfortunate Man* – serves only to hide and intensify the self-inflicted wounds. Self-hatred is presented as a wasteful and destructive emotion, whether its origins be racial, as in *Black is Ugly*, or sexual, as in the remorse experienced by *The Fallen Angel* or by the guilt-ridden man who serves as the subject of *The Enormous Mistake* (1976).

If, as Michals asserts, it is pointless and disastrous to attempt to be what one is not, it is likewise misguided to seek to define oneself by possessions and other external trappings which are here today, gone tomorrow. In the sequence *Something Strange is Happening* a bewildered man witnesses the gradual disappearance of everything familiar around him as a prelude to his own imminent evanescence. Is there, in any case, such a thing as the present, Michals asks in *Now Becoming Then*, or does every moment at once become part of the past? Does the past survive in any real sense, or does it exist only in memory? *The Spirit Leaves the Body*, if viewed metaphorically rather than at face value, suggests that it is only through memory that experiences, people and things are able to survive. It is through memory, Michals maintains in the text for *It was the Happiest Moment*, that even intangible things such as emotions can be resuscitated at full strength.

The views which Michals expresses on the subject of transience and time also inform his attitude towards the photograph itself. The text of *This Photograph is my Proof*, which accompanies an image taken seven years earlier of the artist's cousin and his bride, presents the photograph as the only surviving evidence for a relationship described in the past tense. Over and over again, though, Michals stresses the impossibility of fully seizing reality by means of the photograph. He comes right out and says so in one of the few pieces that consists of nothing but text, *A Failed Attempt to Photograph Reality*, appropriately, if ironically, written on a piece of blank photographic paper. *There are Things Here not Seen in this Photograph*, Michals points out, going on to describe in his text the numerous events which the image on its own could not possibly capture. Michals's habit of questioning everything he perceives ultimately leads him, in *The Man who Invented Himself*, to doubt his own existence. As he concludes in *A Failed Attempt*: "I am a reflection photographing other reflections within a reflection." Mirrors as well as pictures within pictures are presented in sequences such as *Things Are Queer* and *Alice's Mirror* as essential tools for examining the world of appearances, in which nothing can be trusted and time unfolds in circular rather than in the expected linear fashion. They are fascinating but maddeningly puzzling images which take one back to the games of illusion first encountered in childhood: a suitable reference point, given that one is left in the state of a six-year-old asking, "Where does the universe end?" Here we are as adults, still in the same condition of ignorance.

Dreams and nightmares figure significantly in Michals's examination of the essentially ungraspable nature of experience. The events of our lives, as he insinuates in the title of his most substantial book, are *Real Dreams*; it is, moreover, in the dream state, as Freud and the Surrealists alike recognized, that our minds speak to us most freely. Although Michals, on his own admission, dreams "all the time," and although his younger brother is a practising psychiatrist, he does not appear to be interested in a clinical analysis of his dreams, nor has he found in them suitable material for any of his pictures. The activity of dreaming, however, is the subject of the evocative *A Woman Dreaming in the City* and of its male companion, as well as of the portrait of *Eva Rubenstein Dreaming of her Children*. Various sequences take the form of dreams: dreams of desire and sexual fantasy (*The Young Girl's Dream*, *Take One and See Mt. Fujiyama*) at one extreme, fearful childhood nightmares at the other (*The Bogeyman*).



73 One of the most successful of the dream sequences, and one which bring the artist's stream of consciousness technique into the open, is *I Dream the Perfect Day in New York City*. Commissioned by *Da* magazine, along with a number of other photographers, to produce a work on the theme of New York, Michals decided to deal with what people imagined to be the rewards of the city: sex, power over another person, money and fame. The events described in the sequence reveal the man in question achieving all these goals, only to have him awaken from the fantasy in the final frame as he witnesses the dematerialization of the Empire State Building in a flood of light. "He awakens from the dream in the end," Michals explains, "but I mean to say that he also awakens from the dream of New York – the dream of lust and power – as well as metaphysically waking up from semi-consciousness."

Given that what Michals seeks both for himself and for his audience is self-knowledge, it is to be expected that the main thrust of his work concerns notions of identity and an examination of the variability of human relationships. Michals presents himself in a number of disguises, some of them self-mocking – like the devil picture or the playful *Duane Duck* – others brutally honest in their self-examination, as in *Portrait of the Injured Photographer by Paul Hill*. He goes so far, in a two-part sequence titled *Self-Portrait as Someone Else*, as to imagine what it would be like to exchange identity with another person. One of the most touching of all the self-images is *Self-Portrait Shaking Hands with my Father*, in which the very formality of the act, coupled with the sense of distance and isolation expressed by the composition, betrays the artist's despair at the impossibility of making contact at the most profound level with his own parents.

The father/son relationship is one with which Michals is particularly involved and about which he has been most articulate. *A Letter from my Father* makes use of a photograph taken by the artist in 1960 – his brother Timothy in profile under the watchful but silent gaze of his parents – paired with a text written fifteen years later, on the death of his father, lamenting the fact that the most essential things were never communicated between them. There is, though, no bitterness in this, especially now that Michals himself, though unmarried, finds that his own role in relation to younger men has become increasingly that of the father. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, fittingly, is a work of forgiveness and compassion. The theme of the older man's relationship to a younger man – one which takes on sexual overtones in the Cavafy illustrations and in recent sequences such as *Burlesque* and *Mr. Inch Me Meets Mr. Pinch Me* – is one which Michals suspects will preoccupy him more and more as he gets older.

Every variety of human contact is deemed fitting subject matter by Michals, whether it concern the violence and power struggles by which people consume or destroy each other (*I Remember the Argument, People Eat People*), the joviality by which they seek to mask or redirect this aggression (*Mr. Inch Me, Burlesque*), or the impulses of sensuality and eroticism. Michals cheerfully admits that he used to subscribe to the "big bang theory of sex," but as he has grown older this obsession with genital gratification has given way to a preoccupation with the potential of erotic fantasy and of tenderness within sexually-based relationships. Michals recognizes, though, that sexual anxieties are often just under the surface. *Take One and See Mt. Fujiyama*, on the face of it, one of the artist's funniest sequences, portraying the fantasy of a man in a somnolent state who imagine that an enormously large and naked woman enters his room and, not seeing him, sits on him, plunging him into total darkness; as he slowly awakens, the misty silhouette of a snow-peaked mountain comes into view, which he gradually perceives to be the outline of his own white underwear, stretched upwards by his state of arousal. A common response to this particular sequence is to giggle nervously: an appropriate response, given that once the joke sinks in, one can appreciate the seriousness of the underlying psychology, which treats the fear – common to homosexual and heterosexual men alike – of being consumed by a woman. Humour is a useful weapon with which to disarm expectations, even one's own. "I think that if you're a very serious person," Michals is fond of saying, "it's very important to be very silly."

59 Michals's treatment of sexuality has touched on guilt, particularly in the context of a religious upbringing, on fetishism, as in *The Plessures of the Glove* (1974), the photograph itself, by implication, being the biggest fetish



68 of them all, and on sexual violence. On the whole, however, he has presented eroticism as a positive force, a
 58 life-enhancing impulse for bringing people together. In *Paradise Regained* he even suggests the possibility of
 a reversion to innocence *through* sexuality: certainly not a conventional Christian notion! Long before Michals
 92 began openly to acknowledge his homosexual orientation in works such as the *Homage to Caviar* portfolio,
 62 he had touched obliquely on aspects of gay experience in works such as *Chance Meeting*, in which two men
 make eye contact with each other as they pass on the street. The fact that this sequence, in its very simplicity
 and open-endedness, can be interpreted in many different ways is one of its strengths, for it allows each
 viewer, regardless of his or her sexuality, to relate the situation to his or her own experience. Men and women
 alike are shown as potentially attractive and as susceptible, one the one hand, to tenderness and vulnerability,
 and on the other to violence and cruelty. While not pretending that differences do not exist, Michals draws
 attention to the common bonds of our emotional needs rather than to the divisiveness which so often faces us
 in our day to day lives.

It may seem odd to be discussing questions of mortality, religion, self-knowledge and sexuality in the context
 of a photographer's work. If it does, it says as much about our limited notions of what is possible in the
 medium as about our reluctance to speak openly about matters of such fundamental importance. Some of the
 greatest photographers of this century have worked by noting down their observations of the physical world;
 they are, in effect, visual journalists. The role which Michals, by contrast, has created for himself is equivalent
 to that of a poet or short story writer. The imagination, not the visible world, is his real subject. In principle,
 therefore, nothing is excluded as possible raw material.

Michals continues to look for ways of extending the possibilities of his medium. Since 1978 this has involved,
 above all, the addition of hand-made marks, either in the pairing of a photograph with a drawing of the same
 subject or in the use of paint directly on the photographic image. Although Michals had enjoyed drawing and
 painting when he was in high school, he had no formal training to speak of and had not engaged in either
 activity since those days. "It was like using a muscle that I hadn't used for twenty-five years," he says, admitting
 that his first attempts were awkward but the sheer pleasure and challenge they afforded encouraged him to
 continue. The Surrealist aspect of his imagination is here given full rein, with disparate images brought
 together in a kind of painted collage that can be as visually seductive as it is intentionally ridiculous. One soon
 stops asking why painted cherries should be obscuring one's view of the original cast of "Who's Afraid of
 Virginia Woolf?" and begins to enjoy the silliness as well as the decorative qualities of the image for their own
 sake. The relation of painted to mechanically-produced image provides another means of questioning reality
 155 and of testing the presence and self-sufficiency of the photograph. In *Arthur Sanzari and Shoe* a man pokes his
 head mischievously into the corner of the frame, in the way that people do when a picture is being taken and
 they want to see what is going on; in this case, though, the picture of the shoe is being painted, not
 photographed, creating a visual joke by which the photograph is treated as an intrusion into the painting.

*150 If Michals implies in work such as *Portrait of Marc Boisseuil* – in which the photographic image is almost
 completely concealed by paint – that the camera need no longer take precedence in his art, it is more a
 question of adding, as he has always done, to the vocabulary of his chosen medium. The witty transformation
 of appearances achieved, for example, in *Portrait of Esta Greenfield Smoking a Cigarette* is made possible
 *137 precisely by the pairing of a photograph with an overpainted version of the same picture. When an idea calls
 for it, Michals has no hesitation in using the sequence format, as in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, or the
 *79 pairing of photograph with text, as in the case of his illustrated poems recently published under the title *Sleep*
 95-104 *and Dream*. The spirit of William Blake is here at its strongest, as, too, is a political dimension which has made
 itself felt with increasing strength in his work out of anger and concern at the present dominance of right-
 *94 wing forces in the United States. *CLEAN*, a single image with text, confronts the terrifying combination of
 mindless patriotism and born-again Christianity which characterises the so-called Moral Majority, while the
 96 more recent *Beitru* goes so far as to name Reagan in the bitter poem which accompanies a multiple exposed
 *78 image of nude men fighting. In one of his most powerful sequences, *Christ in New York*, Michals caustically
 presents his doubts about the genuineness of the Moral Majority's spiritual concerns. So obsessed are they



with forcing their views onto others, he suggests, so swayed by the power of the media and so indifferent to
 the violence they condone, that even if the Second Coming *were* to occur they would be the last to notice. It is a
 startling and extreme statement by a man normally given to introspection, but now driven to expressing
 strong political views in reaction against the dangerous and repressive atmosphere in which he finds his
 country engulfed.

109- Michals, though, retains a sense of proportion about his work and about his position in relation to the
 136 universe. When he visited Egypt for a week in 1978, commissioned by a French publisher to produce a book of
 photographs on the subject, his response to the timelessness of the place was to photograph himself holding
 up a handwritten piece of paper on which he recorded the precise moment of his arrival. Impressed by the
 sheer physical presence of the ancient pyramids, he decided to build one of his own and to record the act in a
 *74 six-part sequence: a wilfully ludicrous and audacious case of "Kilroy was here." His pyramid, however, his
 monument to his own immortality, is nothing but a pitiful pile of rocks. It is not for him to worry about
 whether it will remain standing on the following day, just as it would be useless for him to speculate on the
 afterlife that may be due to him through his work as an artist. In either case the best he can do is to concern
 himself with the making, in the hope that what he produces will be substantial enough to survive so that it can
 be experienced by others. The Egyptian stones, I suspect, have long since been dispersed, but I should be
 surprised if the photographs of Duane Michals did not continue to engage us for a long time to come.

Marco Livingstone
 Oxford, October 1984



DUANE DUCK



BIOGRAPHY

Duane Steven Michals was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania on 18 February 1932, the son of John Ambrose Michals, a steelworker, and Margaret Matik, a housekeeper. As his mother was required to live in with the family for whom she worked, he was raised in his early childhood by his Czechoslovakian grandmother, who had emigrated to America at the turn of the century. The lasting impression made on him by these circumstances and by his foreign background is attested to by his invention in adulthood of an alter ego named Stefan Mihal: a name which not only reverts to the original spelling but which discards the Christian name given to him by his mother in emulation of that of her employers' son. Stefan Mihal is the person who, by rights, he should have become: a factory worker married and with children, living modestly on a suburban housing estate, an object of curiosity rather than of scorn. He has been credited as the author of one of the artist's self-portraits and as the publisher of his book *Take One and See Mt. Fujiyama*.

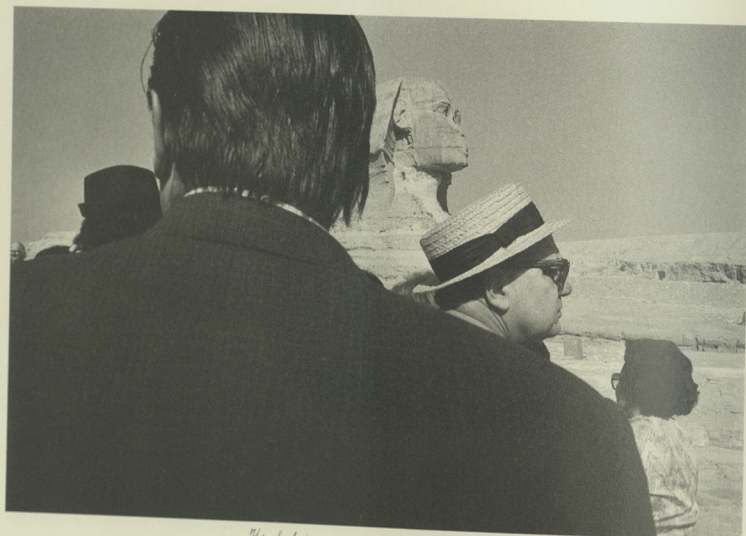
It was while in high school that Michals first sensed his vocation as an artist, enrolling at the age of fourteen, with the aid of a scholarship, in watercolour painting classes held on Saturdays at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. Although his grades helped earn him a further scholarship to the University of Denver, from which he received a B.A. in 1953, he had decided on leaving school to be "sensible" and therefore opted not to train as an artist; it was during these years, however, that he developed his abiding interest in a wide range of painting, from the early Renaissance through to Surrealist masters such as de Chirico, Balbus and Magritte. The debt to Magritte was eventually brought into the open in a series of photographs taken during a week-long visit to the artist in Brussels in 1965 and published in book form sixteen years later.

Immediately following his graduation from university, Michals was drafted into the American army, serving as a second lieutenant in the armoured division in Germany. On his release from the army in 1956 he enrolled at the Parsons School of Design in New York, leaving within a year to become assistant art director for *Dance* magazine. In 1958 he moved on to the publicity department of Time Inc., working as a paste-up artist and designer.

In 1958 Michals seized the opportunity of making a three-week journey to the Soviet Union, recently opened up to tourism, taking with him – as any tourist would do – a borrowed camera (an Argus C3) with no motive other than that of taking some snapshots. The portraits taken during that trip were of the utmost simplicity and directness, successful – as the artist is the first to recognize – precisely because he was not trying to be a photographer. As soon as he saw the results, he recognized that they were worth making public and that he had found his real *métier*. Armed with this "instant portfolio", he took part in his first group exhibition in 1959 at a tiny gallery in New York City called the Image Gallery, in the company of Garry Winogrand among others. Having decided to concentrate all his energies on photography, he rapidly mastered matters of technique, thanks in no small measure to advice from a photographer friend, Daniel Entin, who also offered him the use of his studio at weekends; it was there that Michals began photographing friends and acquaintances, using only natural light, as was to be the case with all his subsequent work.

By 1960 Michals was earning a living as a commercial photographer, without, however, succumbing to the temptation of acquiring a studio or the other trappings generally associated with being a "professional". His first commission was to produce publicity stills for a Broadway musical revue, *The Fantasticks*, which thanks to a long run and cast changes supplied him with a steady stream of work. Within months he was working for glossy magazines such as *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle* and *Show* and later on for *Vogue*, the *New York Times*, *Horizon* and *Scientific American*. Michals has earned considerable respect for his commercial work, which he enjoys and which gives him the financial security to pursue the private work which is his fundamental concern and which is the subject of the present exhibition. He continues to live and work in New York City.

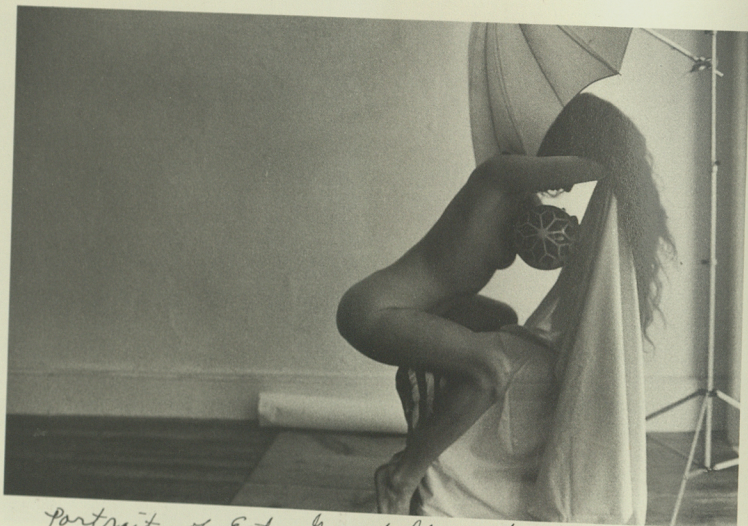




The Sphinx and friends



GIZA



Portrait of Esta Greenfield smoking a cigarette



Duchamp 1917

THE FALLEN ANGEL



59

2



A MEETING WITH DUANE MICHALS

*This interview was conducted by Marco Livingstone in Duane Michals's Manhattan apartment on 6 September 1984. Questions are printed in bold. Marginal references are to catalogue numbers, those marked * are illustrated.*

When did you start working as a commercial photographer?

In about 1960. When I say 'commercial', anybody who makes a living by taking photographs is a commercial photographer.

Have you seen your two bodies of work – your personal work and the commercial work by which you make a living – as distinct from the beginning? Yes and no. When I say 'commercial' photographer, I've never had a studio. I've never had the apparatus of being a commercial photographer. You're looking at everything I have. I'm often cited as being a commercial photographer, but there are many other photographers – like Joel Meyerowitz, who is very heavily involved in advertising – who are much more involved than I am. I started just doing portraits, because that is what I knew how to do. It evolved from there as people started asking me to try different things. But I never set out to be a fashion photographer. I never wanted to grow up to be Richard Avedon. There are certain things that I wouldn't take on because the way I work doesn't give me that latitude. I think of myself as a cottage industry. I love doing commercial work, it gives me a very interesting life.

Is there much overlap between things taken on assignment and work that you have shown in your exhibitions?

Oh, sure. Most of the celebrity portraits have been done on assignment. I had no access to these people privately, so almost all the celebrities have been for some magazine.

What are the usual conditions for the celebrity photographs? Are they done very quickly, in the space of a couple of hours?

Oh, done in half an hour or forty-five minutes. I normally go to a hotel room or some place and the guy from *Time* has been there before me and the guy from *Newsweek* will be coming up.

So what sort of preparation do you have? Do you always know a certain amount about the person beforehand?

No, I don't prepare anything. I don't care to know anything about them, because the truth of the matter is when I get there I've got to deal with what I find when I get there. I don't believe this nonsense about – the fact that I find out this guy was starving and that the woman started to do something when she was twelve years old. I have to deal with what I'm dealing with.

But if you're dealing with an actor or an actress, does it help if you've seen them in a film or something?

Not really, no, because I simply have to work with what I have when I get there.

You just deal with them as you would with anybody else.

Yes, absolutely. But in the case of Magritte I had very specific notions, because he was much on my mind.

There are specific references to some of the paintings.

Yes. So he was easy to work with. But with an actor there's nothing you can do. I'm not involved with all those kind of Karshian ideas. Karsh likes to absorb the ambience of the person and know all about them. I think it's just nonsense.

How much do you allow the sitter to dictate the conditions? Are people very pliable usually?

Some are and some aren't. Some people are very difficult and only want this side of their face, so I go with whatever they want.

And you find that doesn't affect too much your

control over the final result?

Oh, it affects it in some ways, sure. If I can only photograph the right profile, that affects what I can do. But if that's what they want, then I'll go along with it.

Presumably if you're working at that kind of pace, anyway, it might actually be a help to have certain limitations.

There are enormous limitations. It doesn't help. There are enough limitations working in hotel rooms. There are all kinds of things I know to do. I can always do double exposures. There are all kinds of things I can always respond to. I know my craft well enough.

Do you try to minimize the setting? I mean if it's a Holiday Inn or something, somewhere tacky.

Yes, yes. I work against that, I try to avoid it. Unless it's a sleazy movie star, then they *should* be seen in a Holiday Inn. I hate studios. I love photographing people in their homes or in places. But I think a home tells you just as much about the person – or a great deal – as looking at their face. The objects they choose to live with.

You always work with natural light?

90% of the time. I love light and I like to play with light. I won't mention names, but people who use strobes all the time always take the same picture, because they bring ready-made light with them, and the light they take is always the same light. Whereas I always have to work with what I find, so the light can vary a great deal. It's much more challenging.

The first photographs you ever took, using a borrowed camera on your visit to the Soviet Union in 1958, were street shots of strangers. Were there other street shots between those and the *Wonders of Egypt* project in 1978?

Not really. I've never really been that kind of photographer. The only other project I did, which was an interim project, was a series I did on empty New York (in 1964). That was really based on Aget. I'd just become exhausted with working with people and having them not show up. I just wanted something where I didn't have to depend on anybody. I was enthralled by Aget's work. That series was very important because it inevitably evolved into the sequential things. It was very important in that transition. It was with those that I got involved in looking at photographs in terms of stage sets, artificial. Once I arrived at that idea, the idea of peopling them and making my own dramas was the next logical step.

Even taking the empty New York photographs into account, the *Egypt* series, and in particular the group known as *In the Bazaar*, still marked the first occasion in a decade and a half in which you had taken the camera out into the streets.

Oh, yes, yes.

So what was it like?

Fine. I loved it. It was another kind of photography. And I do things – I've done commercial assignments, I've done reportage, no problem. I photographed the Olympics in 1968 for the Mexican government, so I've done all kinds of things. I've got a wide, wide experience of photography, which makes me feel good, because my credentials as a serious photographer are very good but also my credentials as a commercial photographer are very good. I've lived quite comfortably for some time. I don't make as much money as people like Avedon, but that's not my desire.

You never worry about being compromised by your commercial work?

Not at all, I love it. I'd be very worried if I *didn't* do commercial work. I don't think it's compromising at all, because I feel very secure in my private work.

So what happens to all your commercial work? Do you see the Museum of Modern Art one day buying back these photographs for quite different reasons? Would you feel happy about that?

No, I can't imagine it. No, I think Penn's commercial work is

exquisite, but I wouldn't apply that to most commercial photographers. Most commercial photographers end up having portfolios of dated ads and portfolios of dated fashions. I don't consider fashion photography to be art.

Even your own?

Oh, yes, certainly.

Would you be unhappy if somebody did collect them as art?

Yes, because I don't think it is art. My *private* work is art. The nature of fashion is to really report this year's taste. And what's fashionable this year is not fashionable next year, supposedly. The nature of art is to endure, to deal with issues and things that will always be important. That's why I don't consider headlines, no matter how cleverly they're done – I look at it as amusement.

You tend to print your photographs quite small, particularly in contrast to the large scale that has been favoured by other photographers exhibiting their work in a gallery context over the past fifteen or twenty years.

That's true. I tend to like small people, small rooms. I like that sense of intimacy. I like that one-to-one relationship with the photograph.

Do you think in that sense that books are the ideal context for them?

Yes, I'm not that interested in exhibits. I much prefer the work to be seen in books. I love books more than anything. There's a wonderful relationship. In a book you can pause at a page and look at it for as long as you like, and there's a certain kind of privacy. So I like to establish that same relationship on the wall. You can't have twenty people all looking at the same print at one time: it's an intimate relationship. The only two kinds of exhibits I like to do are exhibits like the one with you at Oxford, which is an important show with a lot of work, or else like the one I have coming up with Janis, where I'm showing new work.

The painter R. B. Kitaj has been speaking to me recently about his urge to make paintings which are confessional in nature, an attribute which he regards as relatively rare in his medium although it is characteristic of a certain strand of nineteenth and twentieth century poetry. He cites Robert Lowell, Robert Creeley and Emily Dickinson, though the same could be said, for instance, of Cavafy. One of the main thrusts of your work, particularly in the sequences and photos with text, has been confessional for two decades now. For Kitaj this urge to self-revelation is connected with his growing concern with his Jewishness. Would it be an oversimplification to link your own confessional impulses to your Catholic upbringing?

I don't think of it as 'confessional'. I don't like the word – there's a certain level of guilt implied. I think of them as more introspective. I think that they're stream-of-consciousness. I think of it not in that sense but in the sense of relating very private, intimate things that people don't usually talk about.

Having a Catholic heritage, you go to confession to confess sins, so by nature what you're confessing is something that you're embarrassed about or... So I would not talk about things that I feel very sensitive to. I think they're very personal things. But it goes back to my understanding of 'What is known?' It's part of the human condition, in a way. Only what we really experience ourselves do we actually know for sure. So that when I look at a photograph of women crying I think of grief, but I don't know what they're experiencing for a moment. Even in language, when I say 'grief' and you say 'grief', we may not be talking about the same emotion at all. So the truth that I think works in my photographs is because somebody else's feelings or implying or presuming about what they're experiencing the voyeur photographer actually photographing people crying. So in that sense I think the work has a certain honesty, because I'm working with direct knowledge of what I'm discussing, whereas photographers

often photograph other people's lives, where they have no knowledge of the emotions.

But are you always representing your own emotional life, no matter whom you are using as a model?

Oh, yes, absolutely.

Are they always, in a way, disguised self-portraits?

In a way, yes. I think there's an aspect of that in everybody's work. With my work it's a very high aspect, I would say extremely high.

Is it invariably the case, for instance, what about *Black is ugly*?

No, that's an observation, in that sense. For instance, I would never go to Harlem and photograph black people. That came, actually, from an experience I had with a black man.

But not with the man shown in the picture.

No, that was our superintendent in the building. The people in the building are really actors and models. They're nothing to do with what I'm talking about, essentially. There happened to be a black man here in the house who was cleaning out the top floor. He was this old man carrying

pieces of a big bathtub which we'd broken up. It was terrible. So we talked. We were talking about blackness and he said he had been punished by God. I said it wasn't a question of punishment, it was a matter of geography. I said that if the Equator ran through Sweden, all the Swedes would be black and have very frizzy hair and wide nostrils. I said the Swedes never got any sunshine, so their skin never tans. Because they don't have the same humidity, they don't have to have that kind of nostril and the hair doesn't have to get kinky, and in Africa over the generations the skin had to darken simply to protect itself under the constant exposure to the sunlight. It was the basis of that experience with this man that I wrote the piece about it. Because although I told him this and he thought it was interesting and it had never occurred to him, I knew he didn't believe me. It didn't change his feelings about it at all. All the observations I make are really based on some kind of personal experience, one way or the other. I can always pinpoint the source of the idea. Most of the things I write are not just pure fiction. They're really based on some observation I've made or some feeling I've had with somebody in a relationship. In that way they are

confessional, but I don't like to use that word. I take a lot of risks. I think risk is so important. A lot of photographers go to a party and photograph a lot of other people getting drunk and falling on the floor and making fools of themselves. There's very little element of risk. I don't know what Bresson thinks of God, I have no idea what Robert Frank's sexual appetites are, all those things, and that's fine – it's not necessary that I do know, but I'm saying what I do. I consider them to be newspaper reporters. I consider myself to be a novelist or short story writer. So that's not to say we shouldn't have newspaper reports. I'm just offering another option.

You've also chosen to make yourself very vulnerable in your work, whereas a lot of other people use the camera either as a weapon or as a shield against the rest of the world.

Exactly. If you look at the whole art world in general now, it used to be that there was much more vulnerability in artists work that simply doesn't exist any more.

When do you mean?

At the turn of the century. For instance, I think of de Chirico as being very vulnerable in the kind of loneliness, there is a human element there which is simply not in the work any more. There's an enormous amount of vulnerability in poets, because they're still speaking in the first person singular, but artists have completely given up that kind of... I think of Francis Bacon as being very vulnerable, so that's the kind of work I relate to.

Why do you think that has happened?

Oh, it's the time, it's our time. The nineteenth century was accused of excessive sentimentality. It's gone completely the other way, and now it's so minimal. I love the Cubists, I think what they're experiencing the voyeur photographer actually photographing people crying. So in that sense I think the work has a certain honesty, because I'm working with direct knowledge of what I'm discussing, whereas photographers

referred to as being conceptual, which I am, but I think Arakawa and Kosuth and all those intellectual games are just nonsense. I couldn't care less about them. I think that art should touch. I think that it should move one to a greater consciousness of what one's life is all about. And I find that I'm simply not moved by 99% of what I see... I really don't care about the official culture. What I want out of my life is I want touching, I want passion, I want feeling. I want somebody to tell me what it means to be alive, which was always the domain of the artist and the poet, but they don't do that any more. I don't see it anywhere, but I do what I want to see, so my work tends to deal with those issues that I don't see anywhere else.

Do you have much contact with writers and poets?
No. I live a very quiet domestic existence... I'm not trendy, I never go to openings, I never go to parties, I don't go to all the smart places, I don't read the art magazines. I'm aware that names pop up, but I have nothing to do with the swinging New York art world.

Christian imagery figures very prominently in your work, particularly in the sequences, but it is difficult to gauge how literally to take you. Does *The Spirit Leaves the Body*, for instance, represent a belief in the survival after death of that insubstantial thing which Christians call the spirit?

I literally think that's what happens. I believe that more so now than ever. I have a sex Dick, see? Sex Jane. Mentality—you remember those books?—and that's the way I deal with things. I try to reduce very complicated ideas to the simplest possible story. I think the spirit simply explodes and gets out, takes the clothes off and walks away from it, or floats away. I did it, too, in *Death Comes to the Old Lady*.

Have you read into this, or do you have a basic faith?
I'm essentially interested in spiritual matters. I'm interested in the nature of my experience in the most profound way. I'm very aware that I'm alive. There are people who are more aware than I am, and there are people who are much less aware than I am. I know that I'm not going to be around and I'm very curious about what all this is. I don't take anything for granted, and it gets stronger in me as I get older—it just gets totally reinforced. Those instincts have always been there. I don't know who's making these sentences right now.

Right now my bladder is filling up. I don't tell it to do that. I don't even know how my mind works. There's a total disintegration: all those things that supported me and explained and gave me answers have collapsed and are completely unreliable, so I have a very enormous curiosity about *who* this is speaking, where he's speaking and how he's speaking—all those questions. I don't think I'll ever really know because it totally disintegrates the more as I go along.

I think that there are many many levels of consciousness... it's so unimaginable that it's just beyond our imagination. What I have to do is unload the Catholic church and Christianity and all of those worlds which are essentially designed to make us feel comfortable. If you take Jesus away from a lot of people, their whole world collapses because that's the only thing between them and chaos... We have to explain our lives to ourselves some way, because it's totally illogical. Our logic is not the universe's logic, and every time we come into conflict with that, we tend to run away from it. The universe works on an entirely different process, it has nothing to do with what makes us comfortable. So when I encounter those ideas that take me in that direction—and sometimes in my mind I reach a point where I sense myself being in a place (not over myself, that place is itself)—I get nervous and I want to come back and read a magazine. I want to come back to get these credentials...

I know that you've been interested in Buddhism, but how seriously have you gone into it?

Not seriously enough. I meditated for about eight years and then I stopped, because it had become a pose with me. It's always there, it's underlying what I do. In the East a man does his business with his life and then he spends the last ten years of his life in a monastery. I like to think that after I do all of this, maybe when I'm in my late sixties, I would like to

simplify my life and prepare myself for my death. I don't know. I'm just saying that's what I feel like now.

Do you regard yourself as a mystic?

No. I'm interested in mysticism. A quote I like is that I'm a professional photographer and a dilettante mystic. I'd much prefer to be a professional mystic and a dilettante photographer. That's still true. You see, all this is a distraction. Fame is distraction. Getting laid is distraction. 'What did you mean by that?' 'Why didn't they mention my name in that article?' It's all distraction... I'm hoping that I'll get through all these distractions. But unfortunately most people totally spend all their life being distracted and don't even know they were here...

I don't know how much meaning there is. Meaning is a real problem. We seem as a species to need meaning. Why did God do this to me? And that kind of thinking. And I think that it has its own meaning...

Does your photograph *The Illuminated Man* relate to your interest in Buddhism?

It's somebody who when one reaches that level of consciousness, the personality is obliterated, it's useless. What it really is is realizing the truth of what our nature is in the most profound way, and once you realize that truth, the disguise of being Duane Michaels is superfluous, so that one becomes what one has always been, which is pure energy or pure light. I can't describe it... But I think you have to be very careful with the mind: what you put in your mind is what you get. So if you put a lot of junk in your mind, you're going to have a junky life; if you develop junky appetites and needs and desires, the universe doesn't give a damn, couldn't care less about you. We are the caring ones. And love, I think, is somehow basic, an extremely important thing.

The thing is, even if you examine your life and your decisions, it's impossible ever to know whether you are actually making the right decisions. Whether, for instance, the time I've put into working has taken me away from relationships with other people.

That's an idle question, in a way, because it's just speculation. What you get is what you had to do. Art directors say they envy you because you paint, they say they wanted to be artists... But we do what we want to do...

Sometimes events overtake you and you find it difficult to take that risk. Or some people aren't in a position where they can, because they have other people dependent on them.

Yes, it's a very complex issue. But the point is the act occurred, the event occurred, the decision was made and that's what you live with. It really doesn't matter, it's wasted energy.

But that notion of regret, of looking back on your own life, is something that you've dealt with a lot in your work.

Yes, there's a lot of regret. I don't feel regretful, but I'm conscious of it. A lot of regret has to do with sexuality, too. There's a poem I wrote in my new book which, in a way, deals with middle age—and it's not just me, I think it happens to middle aged people in general... So there's a certain amount of regret in things like that, but regret—which I'm capable of—is the most wasted, next to lust, probably the most wasted emotion.

There are some wonderful poems by Cavafy that deal with this.

Very much so, the old man in the cafe talking about his past life, the chances he missed... Regret is a terrible emotion. It's debilitating, it's punishing, it's useless. Cavafy wrote so beautifully about those things. He understood so clearly and said it so simply.

There is also a sense of even sordid experiences being retrieved morally by making them into art.

Yes—but I hate the word 'moral' because it's used so often as a weapon by moralists. The word 'moral' bothers me. I think the judgment really is something that is self-punishing, or which inflicts pain on yourself or somebody else, by nature is wrong.

Okay, perhaps I should say instead that negative

aspects of certain experiences in one's own life can be neutralized by the way one regards them afterwards.

Totally. In fact, every event, I'm coming to the conclusion—a temporary conclusion, at that—that every experience we have really is an innocent event. It's how we view it that gives it any meaning at all. It's our perception of what has happened that makes it a disaster. Of course there are some things which by their nature—getting hit by a car is not nice—but there are other experiences which can be viewed in many many different ways, and how we choose to see them is what they become to us. But the nature of the event itself is somewhat innocent. But, you see, these are the sort of things that I'm interested in, I'm interested in all of this. Now photographers deal with reality exquisitely. There's no other art form which reproduces reality with that kind of fidelity.

But to me that is to say that appearances are the only things which we consider to be real. What about dreams, what about fear, what about lust, what about all those intimations which we perform on each other? These experiences, to me, constitute reality. It doesn't matter what my nose looks like. I knew my mother and my father my entire lifetime and not once did they ever reveal themselves to me. So when I stand in front of a piece of paper looking at a bag of wrinkles, if it means anything I have no idea. It's a very artificial relationship. I think that people are not that easily revealed, they don't reveal themselves. So I never trust portraits... My concept of reality is a much larger concept, because I try to deal with dreams, and photographers tend not to photograph what they can't see... I can't duplicate exactly: you can't duplicate a dream, I can't duplicate with the same fidelity what I'm dealing with.

The *Return of the Prodigal Son* (one of my recent sequences) is very emotional because it deals with so many issues in my life: my complications with my father's relationship, these are compulsions which I can see. I've dealt with that subject before. *Myself with my Guardian Angel*, the guardian angel, of course, is a surrogate father. *The Old Man Kills the Minotaur* is like the father and son, ultimately, the son in a way always killing the father. Youth kills old age in the same way.

So these are issues I find very, very important which I never see on the street... So my concept of reality questions the reality that all the other photographers are so anxious to tell me is the real. They never question what they look at. I question everything I see. I like to think more in terms of questions rather than answers, a sunset is an answer in itself. So in a way I'm in the wrong business, because the things I'm interested in are more easily solved in writing or film making or painting than they are in photography.

But is that because of the history of the way the medium has been used?

Yes, up till now. I think it's very constipated. I think photographers have the worst cases of ancestor worship. **Are there photographers that you feel an affinity with?**

Contemporary photographers? There are a lot that I like. I love Robert Frank, I think he's marvelous, I love Bresson. I love all these people very much as photographers. It's very difficult. A natural ally that I should have is Minor White, and I don't like Minor White at all. We have so many parallels. We're both gay and we're both interested in mysticism, and I understand the generational difference there. But he turned himself into a professional guru. I would never do that. I would never impose that... I find people who deal professionally with spiritual things, they pontificate and it gets much too thick and heavy and pseudo-religious, so I try to deal with these issues in another kind of way, without underlining the spiritual aspects of them.

***The Spirit Leaves the Body*, which we spoke about a little earlier, I find very difficult to view literally, but I can take it as a powerful metaphor for the transience of material things and their survival not as physical substance but in the form of memory. How do you feel about it being viewed in that way?**

I think the one thing work should do is provoke somebody to some kind of feeling, and I don't care if it's not mine. The fact

that it would induce all these connections in your mind is terrific. I love that... We talked about *Chances Meeting*. There are so many responses to that. That's wonderful. Most photography exhibits I go to bore the hell out of me: it's a series of photographs of people walking down the street or sunsets or forests and they make no demands on the viewer. **You wouldn't say, then, that there's a 'correct' interpretation to a photograph or sequence.**

No, because my interpretation is never meaning anybody gets out of it is all right. I try to tighten the odds. So writing already helps me to tighten the odds by structuring more of what the person is experiencing.

Images can be applied to different people or situations. What triggered it off does not dictate how one experiences it.

I think good work usually has a life of its own beyond my interpretation, and you could look at that and make all sorts of interpretations. I got a lot of flak originally for writing with photographs, because the great cliché in photography is that a photograph is worth a thousand words, and photographers are usually dole birds, anyway. My work speaks for me... I'm very verbal and I deal with ideas, and one is supposed to be embarrassed because you're verbal. Artists aren't supposed to be.

You've said on several occasions that you started writing on photographs because you didn't feel that the image could communicate enough on its own.

Exactly, the image was totally inadequate. A photograph of my parents or my father doesn't tell me for a second what I thought of my father, which for me is much more important than what the man looked like. So I then had to evolve into writing. Not that the writing actually describes what you're looking at, but to actually talk about what you can't see. I'm glad you're including that one picture about that in the book—*There are Things Here Not Seen in this Photograph*—because people believe the photograph tells you everything when you look at it. I was trying to tell me that the reactions I had while taking the photograph which are totally invisible in the photograph. These are the kinds of things I'm intrigued by and not, for want of a better word, erections, the kind of graphic objectivity. I'm interested in a graphic subjectivity.

There are *Things Here Not Seen* reminds me of a passage in Walter Benjamin (*A Small History of Photography*) in which he talks about looking at a photograph of a person and all the things that you wonder about that person which you can't answer from the photograph. I think that's something which does unconsciously, perhaps, affect you when you're looking at any photograph, but it's not something that's usually discussed.

No. In fact, the very first picture I ever wrote on was based on that. I should show this picture again, I love it. It's a portrait of Lance Cook, a carpenter who worked for me in the country years ago and whom I liked enormously. The text describes him, his interests and his nature and concludes. I wonder what he thinks about... But that Benjamin question: when I look at photographs, I wonder about what the situation was when they were taken. Especially with my photographs, which are interesting situations with interesting people, I can see that somebody would want to know what were the circumstances of that shooting because sometimes they're very provocative... But I don't think that it's important or useful for people to know.

How conventional a Catholic were you as a child and teenager?

Totally. I believed everything. I was an altar boy, a choir boy. I toyed with the idea of becoming a Catholic monk, while believing it was totally artificial. But all those questions that I applied to religion, when the answers became inadequate I simply began looking other places for answers, and I simply evolved out of Catholicism.

Did that happen gradually?

Yes, gradually. It started in my late teens when I went to college and I simply evolved out of those notions and

towards other ideas, which I'm still doing. I'm still evolving. **And how much do you think your Catholic upbringing has coloured your point of view?** Well, the sequential things are like the Stations of the Cross. I remember stories being told.

Is that conscious or something that you've become aware of in retrospect?

In retrospect. There are not new notions, photographs have always had writing with them. Comic strips: we're always used to this storytelling. Fra Angelico used it; under those paintings there are little series of stories. I did not invent anything new, I simply adapted it to this medium in a different kind of way. But Catholicism was very important, but they always say that once you're a Catholic you never get away from Catholicism. It's not true in my case. I've really burned Catholicism... I've simply evolved into a whole other view of the universe.

Certainly a lot of the attitudes that one senses in your work seem to be distinctly at odds with Catholicism, in your attitude towards sexuality, for example.

Yes. Also my attitude towards God. When I had to abandon the idea of a personal God I was really very upset. I don't believe in a Mr. God. I don't believe in a Mr. Jesus. I don't believe any of that at all. This for a traditional person is - what they're really talking about is a surrogate father, somebody who is concerned about them and punishes them when they're bad and makes good things... I mean such a ridiculous person they're describing that I wouldn't want to know him. I wrote a piece called *I Am Much Nicer than God* which I'm sure affronts a lot of people, but I am much nicer than the God they describe: this quixotic, nasty person who first invents you and then punishes you for being very much what he invented. I mean it's totally ridiculous, the whole thing is ridiculous.

When did you become involved with Buddhism and Eastern religions?

The first book I read on the subject was Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism (Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness)* and that was very important to me. Another important book was *Jesus* by Charles Guignebert. That jarred me out of Catholicism... You have to be confronted to take a leap into another consciousness, which is something Eastern religions try to do.

So you don't think of yourself as a Christian now? Not at all, certainly not in any traditional sense.

And yet you use a lot of Christian imagery in your work.

Well, sure, because I live in the West... No, I'm not at all a Christian, which in another year in this country will probably get me arrested and put in jail. I'm serious. I like to think we're going through one of our twice-in-a-century religious revivals. This kind of pseudo-religiosity in this country is very upsetting... If most people hear you say you're not a Christian they'd be really appalled, because the idea is that if you're not a Christian, you're nothing. Then what are you? The whole notion that there's another kind of thinking outside Christianity would never occur to most people. For instance, the idea of Satan I find amusing. I mean, I think there is evil, but the idea of this person who is God's enemy and makes us do these things is just beyond belief.

The Christian themes and imagery which you've used are very much a part of the tradition of painting - especially of Renaissance and pre-Renaissance painting - yet they have been almost completely abandoned by painters.

Yes, it has lapsed entirely.

Isn't strange that it should be a photographer who is now using those things?

I think it's actually appropriate because painters have gotten involved in whole other problems which don't deal with that. Painters, I think, are secular, how many painters do you know who are involved with religion in a serious way? An important painter... It's not an issue.

Chagall....

I said an important painter (laughs). You know what I mean. Chagall and Rouault but who else? There's no place. It's simply the times. I just happen to be a peculiar mixture of interests and awareness that bring them together. But I love the Renaissance painters. I take more from painters than I've ever done from any photographers. Agnet is the only photographer I've ever really taken from. As much as I love Robert Frank, my photographs have never looked like Robert Frank's. But I do take from Fra Angelico and I do take from Mantegna.

When you say 'take'...

I'm inspired by them. There are a lot of wonderful references. In *The Fallen Angel* the gesture of the angel is exactly out of a Renaissance painting... There are little things in there which I really love. I love Balthus, too. I've taken a lot from the kind of attitudes of Balthus, not directly from the paintings.

There is one early photograph which was directly inspired by *The Street*.

Very much so. Also I like his upfront sexuality, which he probably still denies but which is certainly there, where there's a tension. I like the sense of tension in the painting. There's a sexual atmosphere and I like my photographs to have that. I visited Bill Brandt once and we talked about photographs, and he said that photographs should have atmosphere... I like my photographs to have an atmosphere. Never an overt sexuality. You never see the mechanics of sex in my photographs, I'm not interested in that photographically, but there's always that sense of eroticism in the air... a very provocative erotic situation, without actually having anything sexual happen. I'm not interested in the theatre of sex, it's what you don't see which is ultimately more exciting than what you see.

I'm interested that a lot of the eroticism in your photographs has to do with women. The gay side of your work has always spoken quite strongly to me, but straight friends have been surprised that it should be there at all, they hardly noticed it, apart from the Cavafy series. And people sometimes find it hard to believe that you could be gay.

I know. Well, it's very funny. I've made some photographs that make straight men quiver. It's the nature of eroticism - it has nothing to do with gender. Just because my tastes are homosexual, it doesn't mean that I can't understand heterosexual eroticism, too, and I could see those relationships quite clearly. There's a picture I did of a woman leaning against the bed, covering her face and with her stockings exposing her crotch, which is like one of the all-time turn-ons. *Take One* and *See Me, Puttyama* makes people go crazy with that nude woman sitting on their face practically on the lens, and yet it also deals with homosexual overtones, this fear of being consumed by a woman, which is also a straight man's fear. Shakespeare did not have to be black and strange his wife to write *Othello*...

But did you consciously want to extend your audience, to speak to everybody...

No, it was years before I did the Cavafy book, so I was interested in eroticism in general and I loved having a good-looking guy in the photograph with this woman. But I wasn't particularly addressing homosexual issues at that point, because there were so many other issues I was interested in. It was very late in my career in the late seventies that I really started talking directly about homosexuality. Have you seen the little book I did called *Take One* and *See Me, Puttyama*? I mean, my God... There's a very interesting thing. My brother is a psychiatrist and I said, 'Well, in this book there are a couple of sequences which are so overtly homosexual, there's no way that a straight person could have had this' - like *The Enormous Mistake* and even *Watching George Drink a Cup of Coffee*, where his tongue turns into a giant cock. And I said to my brother, 'I don't know how I'm going to respond if I give a talk and somebody asks me about these things.' He said, 'Nobody will ever ask you.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'People are so nervous about sexual matters, and so nervous particularly about homosexual things, that they will

never bring it up.' And you know in six or seven years nobody has ever once asked me about it, not once. He's absolutely right. But I was interested in metaphysical things, there are so many other things that I was interested in before I eventually got around to doing the more upfront things.

Could you tell me something about your models? Do you generally use friends, acquaintances and family members rather than professional models?

Yes. I don't use professional models. I never have done. I run through all my friends, acquaintances and family members. I tend to see somebody I find attractive and ask them to pose for me. In the beginning it was difficult because people didn't know what I was talking about, but now I have a track record so people can see the nature of what I do. I always tend to pick models that I find attractive... I'm a victim of the Greek ideal, so I tend to enjoy looking at beautiful people and like using them in photographs.

In a way, doesn't that contradict a lot of your feelings about human beings?

Um hmm. Yeah. But I'm not perfect!

Does your knowledge of the person that you're photographing affect the kind of picture you're making?

No. You mean when I make a portrait of somebody?

No, not a portrait, but say a piece where you're just using somebody as a model, do you feel free to invent another persona?

Absolutely. In fact I try to reinforce in my mind that they are only models and that it has nothing to do with them. They should see themselves as actors in a little play...

How do you go about setting up a sequence? Do you explain to them what the theme is and how they fit into it?

Yes. I tell them exactly what I want them to do and what the idea is and I try to be as clear as I can, because I think if they understand what I'm doing, they can go with me, they can then project more.

There are certain situations, though, which I would imagine to be rather delicate, such as *Death Comes to the Old Lady*. Did you explain to her that that was the theme?

No, I didn't. That was my grandmother. And she died, actually, not too long after I took these photographs.

So did you just talk her through it?

Yeah. She was practically senile. My father pretty much understood. I don't think they really understood totally what I was doing. She certainly didn't know... As a matter of fact, she died after that and then I had a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art, and my aunts came to visit and I didn't know how they were going to take it when they saw *Death Comes to the Old Lady*...

It's an extremely sensitive area.

Yes. I'm very sensitive to the people in the photographs. Very often I look at someone like Arthur Tress, who I like and is a friend of mine, and I'm always amazed that he can get people to do very bizarre things. I've never been able to do that. I'm so aware of the model that I feel very reluctant to ask them to do things and I don't because I don't know how they're going to respond to it.

But what about a photograph like *Black is Ugly*? Did the man who posed for you know how you were going to use it?

No, not at all. He was my black superintendent, the janitor in the house I lived in for seven years.

What responsibility do you feel towards the person in the photograph, if they then see the result in a book or something and the way they've been presented. It may not be him that you're writing about, but other people will assume...

These are totally fiction. I'm not pretending that any of this is real. This is a narrative character... I tell them that they're actors and that this has nothing to do with them. I just say, 'Divorce yourself, this has nothing to do with you. You're just a performer in this little drama.' It's nothing personal. You sometimes use the same people in your

commercial work as well. The superintendent, for instance, appears also in that ad for the drug company.

Yes. I needed a model for that series I was doing and I don't have access to black people, and he was absolutely perfect. It's interesting you picked that up... I love working with people. I'm good at that's why the portraits are good. I know a lot of photographers don't like to work with people; they find it difficult to communicate. I don't.

How important is the interaction between models? Are there cases, say, in the sequences using double exposure in which the people haven't actually met each other?

Oh, no, to do doubles they have to be there.

So they are done frame by frame.

Yes, each frame at once. It's done in the camera, which is always stationary. The only thing that moves is the person that's been double exposed. You can't move the camera, because then everything would be double exposed. Once you move the camera, everything overlaps in the wrong way...

It's very funny that here I am, probably with no official photographic training, yet I'm the one who does all the photographic tricks. I do double exposures. I do the blurs. I do the sandwiching. I do all those things that I always thought that people much more technically suited than me to doing these things should be doing... I love doing it. I love anything the camera can do. So a painter takes advantage of the drips and the dribbles and the splashes and the accident. Well, I like to take advantage of the machine, and these are things that the camera does. It's part of the mechanics of the machine. With double exposures what I like most of all is that I'm taking a photograph with a camera that reproduces reality perfectly of something that does not, in fact, exist in reality... Like the photograph of myself with Robert Strach. They're real people in a real room, but in fact that could never happen. I like that.

How do you go about planning a photograph like that? Do you write down what you are going to do?

No, it's in my mind 90% of the time.

Do you improvise on the spot, or do you plan ahead?

Well, you do a certain amount of improvisation because it never can be that exact. I think a great deal about a photograph before I take it. I don't shoot that much. To me the act of photography is the whole process. The hardest thing is thinking about what I want to photograph. The easiest part is taking the pictures. I probably take less photographs, certainly, than someone like Garry Winogrand - people who just go out and shoot and shoot and shoot and then find a picture. There's very little wastage in my work.

So for a sequence of ten images, say, how much film would you shoot?

Maybe three rolls.

Would you know to begin with how many photographs there were going to be in the sequence?

Pretty much so, yes. I try to keep it to the fewest number of photographs.

But even in the case of a sequence, you don't draw them out.

No. Sometimes if I'm going to do not sequences, but a lot of double exposed pictures in one shooting when I have the model, I do make sketches then because I simply forget them. Maybe I want to try six ideas, so I'll do a little thumbnail sketch of the idea to remind me of the idea. Not that I'm going to copy the sketch...

But these are just working drawings and you throw them away?

Oh, yes. These are simply notes to remind me of the concept. But that's when I'm doing, say, three or four or five or six ideas in one shooting.

In the sequences in which you appear yourself, do you use a delay mechanism or does someone else take the picture?

I use a self-timer. I run around and get in the photograph. It's a little tricky because I can't see what it looks like. How do you do it with double exposures?

Same way.

You mark the positions on the floor or something.
Yes. I don't use myself in double exposures very often, because that's very tricky, but I've certainly done it. There's a high risk involved. I usually shoot something four or five times to make sure that I got it right. A new picture called *Duane Duck*, which I like, I worked with an assistant with that and he actually took the photograph. I drew a sketch of what I wanted but I could not actually take that photograph and get all the relationships right. But that doesn't bother me, because he was working under my auspices.

Do you always use domestic locations for your pictures, rather than studios?

Yeah, I hate studios. I've never had a studio. I rent studios and I do use them, but I use my own apartment a lot. I often just photograph against the plain white walls. I did *Paradise Regained* in the room at the back. I have all these plants in the house. In the basement I did *Mr. Inch Me Meets Mr. Pinch Me*. I've used every square inch of this building one way or the other in photographing. And since we own the building, when we get an empty apartment upstairs I run up and use that.

How important is the actual location? Do you intend it to be just a cipher for a domestic environment?

No, it is important. I'm always looking for certain kinds of rooms. They're hard to find.

You're always poking your nose into other people's apartments.

Yeah. Where I live in the country there's a marvellous old hotel and the rooms there are perfect. I don't use them very often because I don't have the occasion to, but I'm always looking for the right kind of room to work in.

I remember reading an interview in which you were saying that you liked your grandmother's house.

Yes, very much so: old-fashioned, real furniture, none of this Breuer shit—opices! Real stuffed sofas. I think England must be full of those places that I like, much more so than here.

When you plan a sequence, do you always have a particular place in mind as a setting for it?

No, I sort of have to find the place. The idea comes first and then I try to find a location. There are sometimes disappointments.

What first suggested the possibility of working with sequences?

I think photographing those empty rooms, which looked like stage sets to me, looking at Balbus paintings, which also looked like stage sets to me. When I saw the artificiality of these, like I photographed a barber's shop and there was the barber's little white towel and the white jacket and all those things, and I thought, 'That's his costume, he does his barber act and this is his little stage set with his props'.

What was the first sequence that you actually made?

Let me think if I can remember now. Oh, the first one I did was *The Woman is Frightened by the Door* (1966). It was based on the idea that inanimate objects can become sinister. I proceeded to do *The Woman is Frightened by a Letter*. A letter can wound you thoroughly: an innocent piece of white paper with some writing is delivered and your life is changed. Any letter from the tax department, the IRS, always upsets me; unopened, I get upset... After that first one I did *The Violent Act*, where a man comes up and hits another one. Whether it's three thousand men attacking three thousand other men on the battlefield, it's essentially the same notion of one man injuring another man. So the first ones were very simple, and then they began to get more and more complex as I got braver with the ideas.

You were talking earlier about the reaction against Victorian painting, with its sentimentality; a sequence like *The Woman is Frightened by a Letter* is almost like a Victorian genre painting in its subject matter.

Oh, very much so. I can be not of this time, not of this generation. I'm not 'hip' or 'now'. Say, like Mapplethorpe, I think of being very contemporary, very 'now' in attitude. You say that, yet your position in the art world is quite

'hip' and 'now'.

I don't really know. What I mean to say is that my tastes are much more romantic—like I'm not interested in rock music, I'm interested in Mozart... I think of Les Krims as being more 'now' than I am—his attitude towards women, for example, and his attitude towards sexuality. Where mine is much more traditional, based on a very traditional outlook.

And yet you choose to live in New York City, which is right in the middle of it all.

But in a very—I don't live in a loft, I live in a very traditional way. In the country I collect bird's nests, for God's sake... In *The Letter* is there an overtone of the Vermeer painting?

No, not at all. *The Letter* actually came from a letter my mother wrote me. When I first came to New York I was feeling terrific. I was going to the subway and I had got this letter from my mother, and as I walked to the subway I read the letter and it was terrible. It was a horrible letter, a painful, wound-inflicting letter and it completely devastated me. So when I got home I immediately called her up. Well, she had written the letter at least a week before. And I said, 'Well, I got your letter today and I was very upset.' And she said, 'What letter?' Because she had written the letter and forgotten all about it and gotten it off her chest—it was like a time bomb. I opened it up and it blew up in my face. I remember that very well, so that's really what I based the idea of *The Letter* on.

Is there a number beyond which you think a sequence would become too unwieldy?

Oh, yes. The longest one was *The Journey of the Spirit After Death* (1970), which ran to twenty-six or twenty-seven photographs, and I tried to keep that down to as few as possible. I don't do sequences much any more. I'm simply involved in a lot of other things. I've been doing them for a long time. I started in 1966 and this is almost twenty years later.

Do you think there's a danger that you were being typecast as the person who did sequences?

No, I never considered that. I had simply expressed all that I wanted to say. But that doesn't mean I've thrown out the baby with the bath water. Like I did the one last year which I consider an old-fashioned sequence—no writing, five photographs, very simple—*The Prodigal Son*. I like it enormously. And a year before that I did *Christ in New York*. So I don't do many any more, but that's not to say that I would not do it again if I had an idea that needed to be expressed in that way.

Could you conceive of doing a sequence which was, for want of a better word, novel-length?

No. The nature of the sequence is a haiku. It's like trying to write *War and Peace* with a haiku form. Some of them get a little longer and more complicated than that, certainly, but to try to turn it into something that it's not, I think would collapse under its own weight.

I think that a sequence such as *Mr. Inch Me Meets Mr. Pinch Me* works because it's very light and you can take it in quite quickly. I suppose there's a danger if you have too many images that you would lose track of the theme.

Yes, it's really cinematic rather than narrative. Whereas *I Dream the Perfect Day in New York City* (1977) is much more narrative. It is vaguely cinematic, there's little asides that I make. All the early ones, like *The Young Girl's Dream* (1969), are narrative but very cinematic in structure. But there are some which are much more literary that came later, there's a lot more text. *Something Strange is Happening* (1975) has lots of writing, it's a whole other structure. They don't flow like a movie does, they jump from picture to picture.

Those early things are very cinematic, but almost like early films, silent films...

Yes, they are. ... with a static structure. They're very much like silent films and if I would make a film, it would be like a silent film.

Even in the way that the dialogue appears like the printed dialogue in a silent film.

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That's true. It's very much like that. They get complicated later, but in the beginning that's very accurate.

Do you regard the sequences as your main contribution in terms of what you have to express?

So far, yes. It became a genre in itself. There was Muybridge who did moving figures, but there was nobody who actually told stories but me; I was the first person that actually did them... Also I was the first person to really write extensively with photographs which was always a no-no among photographers. It was not done. So I see myself not as a purist photographer at all, but as somebody working with photography, essentially, but doing many other things with it.

Has anyone ever approached you about making a film? I have the idea that I read somewhere that the possibility didn't interest you.

No, I'd like to make a film. If somebody gave me the money, I have an idea in mind and I'd like to try it once. A short film...

Have you seen Magritte's films?

Yes. They're wonderful. They were home movies, very charming, with all sorts of little tricks... Magritte is awesome. I'm so in awe of people like that, also de Chirico. To me de Chirico is to painting what Kafka is to literature in the twentieth century: a certain kind of unique twentieth century sensibility that flowered so perfectly for about ten years before he became an 'artist'. It was absolutely perfect, and the sense of anxiety and loneliness is so provocative in his work.

Did you meet de Chirico on just the one occasion in 1968?

Yes, I was lucky to meet him. He was very difficult to photograph. I was very unhappy... Then we left and went to a café, and that photograph was taken after we left the café.

You don't care for his late work? It's very much in vogue now.

No, I actively dislike it.

What do you think of Magritte's photographs?

Oh, I love them, they're wonderful. They have the same kind of wit as the paintings.

Do you ever use Polaroids or snapshots for planning a sequence?

No. I think Polaroids are wonderful but... I've never taken to it.

I just meant as a working tool. I know of photographers who will take a Polaroid first while they're setting up a shot. Commercial photographers.

Oh, they do that all the time. In fact most commercial photographers are shocked that I don't use a Polaroid. I don't see the point... The way I work is very simple.

And you work with colour a lot in your commercial work, but never in your private work.

No. I think when photographers photograph in colour, they photograph colour, they get seduced by sunsets.

You're obsessed by sunsets!

Because it's the coin of the realm in this country. I mean, Meyerowitz has made a whole career out of it... He's the heir apparent to Ansel Adams.

You're not a big fan of Ansel Adams?

I think Ansel Adams is a very important photographer and all that.

Was it an actual Adams print that you painted over in one of your recent painted pieces?

Yes, somebody gave it to me.

Likewise with the white Cartier-Bresson and the Kertesz?

Those were my own, I owned those.

That seems like a very aggressive act.

No. Well, first of all, I realized if I could paint on my own photographs, why not paint on somebody else's?

But it's not just anybody else's.

I know, I know. To paint on an Ansel Adams is significant because he represents...

It's sacrilege.

Yes, it is, it's very sacrilegious. In fact people got very angry about it, they thought it was very provocative.

Did you do it to be provocative?

No, I did it because I think Ansel Adams is a good target. I'm not going to hurt Ansel Adams, his fame is etched on Mount Rushmore...

Like a mountain—he was there.

Exactly. So I climbed it.

So how many did you do? Just those three?

Yes, that's all I had. I love them, I think they're wonderful. In France someone said, 'You've defiled Bresson.' I said, 'No, no, it's a collaboration. He provided the print, I provided the paint'...

Have you had any feedback?

I met Bresson's wife here. I was in a museum and she came up and introduced herself. She said that he liked it... I don't know, I've never met him.

I love the painted pieces because they're such a challenge for me. For me to paint a shoe is an enormous pleasure (*Arthur Sanzari and Shoe*, 1980). I love that: it's the idea of painting a shoe and someone has stuck his head in front of it, the way

when you take a photograph sometimes somebody puts his face in the camera. It's just funny... It's not so hard for me to take a photograph. But for me to paint something is very difficult. And I try to paint very realistically... So I'm very anachronistic according to what painters do today. I love Manet, I'm old-fashioned. I love the way paint looks. I like the texture of paint, I like good drawing, so in that sense all my references are not at all contemporary.

You've used paint as another way of questioning reality.

Totally.

Another way of picturing things. And it's no less real and no more real than through the lens.

Exactly. And also it's almost like a collage—the early ones—so rather than to paste paper on cardboard and adding a piece of newspaper or whatever, I used a photograph as something to work against. So that in the early ones like *Christophe with Glasses of Water and Hoover* (1980) there's no relationship

Half of them have no relationship to the photograph underneath. They either obliterate it or something. The ones I'm doing now, like *Who Cut My Hat with a Razor?* (1982), I've been working with objects placed in the context of the photograph rather than working against the photograph. The possibilities are enormous. It all depends on how well I can do it.

Does Surrealism come into play in this bringing together of two disparate realities?

Sure, and also I love that sense of play. I really do.

Could you tell me something about your initial training as an artist? Does it tie up at all with what you're doing now in terms of painting?

No. When I was in high school I was very active as a painter. I loved to paint. I went to drawing class in the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh and then I went to the Carnegie Mellon. And I loved it. So I was always interested in art. But when I got out of high school I wanted to be sensible and I didn't know what I wanted to do, and then I decided I loved magazines, so I should work on a magazine as an art director.

So I went to Parsons School of Design to learn the business, but they didn't teach me things like equipment. Then I started doing commercial work. But I was never a painter. I started painting five or six years ago for the first time and I really enjoy it.

So you're self-taught?

Yes, totally self-taught. A primitivist.

So what made you suddenly want to start doing that?

Well, I think I got to the point where I wanted to test myself. I liked the idea of painting on photographs very much. I thought about it a long time before I did it, because I didn't know if I could paint well enough to do it. The first things were very, very awkward, but I kept getting better and learning more and more. It seemed very natural to me, given that I'd always had this passion for art. Since I had done it at some point, it was like using a muscle that I hadn't used for twenty-five years.

Likewise with the drawings?

Yes.

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It seems strange that you let so many years pass. Well, because I was involved with other things. . . I had worked through a number of things. I'm very prolific, I've turned out lots and lots of material, I've done twelve or thirteen little books of some sort. I wasn't ready to do that before because I was trying to solve writing with the photograph, and before that I was trying to solve sequential things. Now I've solved those things.

Are you finding that people who have followed your work for a long time are more resistant to this change — which is perhaps a much bigger change — than when you began writing on photographs or even writing without them?

I think so. I'm much more vulnerable because I can be faulted. My work is always very vulnerable, because I can be faulted first as a photographer, and then I can be faulted because the concept is bad or the writing isn't very interesting. My spelling is terrible, I'm always embarrassed about that. It's funny, because I read all the time. . . Most people don't have the same art references as me. They don't care about the things that I care about.

But who is your public? Are the people who are interested in your work basically concerned with photography, or not?

I don't know who they are. I really don't know. I do know that I cross a lot of borders. I did a big project for *Vogue* with painters who were all very aware of my work. I reach a wider audience, I think, than a photography audience. . .

I was always my own person, I was always my own category and I managed to have a career without any official sponsorship. I like that, I like that very much. It's always been put as somewhat peripheral. . .

I think it's often, in the long run, a much healthier situation to be in: not to be part of any new development or any big push, because those people have their five years and then they're out.

I agree with you. And I think that my position will get better and better. . .

Some of the reviews I've read go on about how influential you've been, but I can't think of anyone who has produced work in your vein.

No, not at all. They can't because they really can't duplicate my sensibilities. There was a large vogue for sequential work, people do it, but. . .

But that's only the form. . .

Exactly. I'm never threatened by it and I wish somebody would do something more interesting than my kind of work. I think it's the concept of people that I would talk about, that I would talk about sexual anxieties. . .

That's where you should be influencing people. That's the important thing.

That's it, not so much the form. Although the form — I've been to schools where people give assignments in which you do sequences, but I think it's important that these subjects become *reasonable* for photography, not just sunsets again. . . These are vital issues that we've talked about.

ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS

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|------|---|------|---|
| 1963 | The Underground Gallery, New York City | | The Collection at 24, Miami, FL |
| 65 | | | Art Gallery, The University of Denver, CO |
| 68 | | | Galerie Wilde, Cologne, Germany |
| | | | Galerie Nouvelles Images, Hague, Netherlands |
| | | | Nova Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia |
| 1968 | The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL | | |
| 1970 | The Museum of Modern Art, New York City | 1980 | Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, OH |
| 1971 | The George Eastman House, Rochester, NY | | Galerie Nouvelles Images, Hague, Netherlands |
| 1972 | Museum of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM | | Susan Spiritus Gallery, Newport Beach, CA |
| | San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA | | Museum of Modern Art, Bogotá, Colombia |
| | | | Silver Image Gallery, Seattle, WA |
| | | | The Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh, PA |
| | | | Sidney Janis Gallery, NY |
| 1973 | Galerie Delpire, Paris, France | 1981 | Galerie Fiolet, Amsterdam, Netherlands |
| | International Cultural Center, Antwerp, Belgium | | Gemeentemuseum, Apeldoorn, Netherlands |
| | Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany | | Halstead Gallery, Birmingham, MI |
| | | | Swarthmore College, PA |
| 1974 | Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany | | The Atlanta Gallery of Photography, Atlanta, GA |
| | Galerie 291, Milan, Italy | | The Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL |
| | Documenta, Torino, Italy | | Work Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland |
| | School of Visual Arts, New York City | | Colorado Photo Arts Center, Denver, CO |
| | Light Gallery, New York City | | Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA |
| | | | Centres Culturel Grasin, Nantes, France |
| 1975 | Light Gallery, New York City | 1982 | Columbia Museum of Art & Science, NC |
| | The Broxton Gallery, Los Angeles, CA | | University of Rhode Island, Providence, RI |
| | | | Art 45, Montreal, Canada |
| 1976 | Jacques Bosser, Paris, France | | Photogalerie, The Compagnie, Hamburg, Germany |
| | Sidney Janis Gallery, New York City | | La Remise du Parc, Paris, France |
| | Galerie Die Brücke, Vienna, Austria | | University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA |
| | The Texas Center for Photographic Studies, Dallas, TX | | Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France |
| | Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH | | |
| | Ohio State University, Columbus, OH | 1983 | Galerie Watari, Tokyo, Japan |
| | Felix Handschin Galerie, Basel, Switzerland | | Miami University, Athens, OH |
| | Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, KS | | Greenville County Museum of Art, SC |
| | | | Rising Sun Media Art Center, Santa Fe, NM |
| | | | Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, KS |
| | | | L'Espace Nipais d'Art et de Culture, Nice, France |
| 1977 | Galerie Breiting, Berlin, Germany | 1984 | Wellesley College Art Gallery, MA |
| | Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany | | Galerie Wilde, Cologne, Germany |
| | G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, Los Angeles, CA | | Light Gallery, Charlotte, NC |
| | Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA | | Sidney Janis Gallery, NY |
| | Focus Gallery, San Francisco, CA | | Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England |
| 1978 | Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, KS | 1985 | Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England |
| | The Collection at 24, Miami, FL | | Watershed, Bristol, England |
| | Camera Obscura, Stockholm, Sweden | | John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, England |
| | Galerie Fiolet, Amsterdam, Netherlands | | Bluecoat Gallery and Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, England |
| | Galerie Wilde, Cologne, Germany | | |
| | Akron Art Institute, Akron, OH | | |
| | Sidney Janis Gallery, New York City | | |
| | Galerie l'Oeil 2000, Chateauxaux, France | | |
| 1979 | La Remise du Parc, Paris, France | | |
| | Canon Photo Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland | | |
| | Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, KS | | |



RENE MAGRITTE ASLEEP