The Subtle Games of Duane Michals

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Storyteller: The Photographs of Duane Michals

Duane Michals: A Duane Michals Primer by Duane Michals. Monacelli, 184 pp., $40.00


The photographer Duane Michals is a law unto himself. In a career spanning more than half a century he has worked in both utilitarian black-and-white and luxurious color, produced slapstick self-portraits, evoked erotic daydreams, pampered elephant against art world fashions, and painted whimsical abstract designs on vintage photographs. You would be in for a disappointment if you expected a sober summing up in "Storyteller: The Photographs of Duane Michals," the big retrospective of the eighty-two-year-old artist's career that is currently at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Michals remains aggressively idiosyncratic, the curator of his own overstuffed, beguiling, disorderly imagination.

Michals's reputation was pretty much made in the late 1960s, with sequences of small, black-and-white images that amount to freshly minted fairy tales for adults. These surreal visual fables were first published in the journal Modern Art in 1970, when the museum was the arbiter of all things photographic. In the six frames of Paradise Regained, a young man and woman in a modern apartment go back to nature, shedding all their clothes as the houseplants around them grow larger and larger, becoming an Edenic garden. In Death Comes for the Old Lady, presented in five parts, a woman in a housedress is visited by a man in a dark suit before she evaporates in a photographic blur. With such cosmicomic sequences, Michals became photography's genial troublemaker, seen by some as thumbing his nose at the lyrical realism of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moments" and Alfred Stieglitz's perfect prints. What can all too easily be underestimated is the quick, agile intelligence that Michals brought to his troubled imaginings. That's what has given his dissident spirit its staying power.

There is something of Jean Cocteau's jack-of-all-trades wit, ingenuity, and romantic rapture about Michals and his career. When he wrote, in 1994, that "dreams are the midnight movies of the mind," it could have been a remark made by the Cocteau of The Blood of a Poet or Beauty and the Beast. Both men combine a reverence for high art traditions with a taste for the quick, teasing powers of popular culture. When a handsome young man appears in one of Cocteau's films or Michals's photographic fictions, you can feel the artist introducing him with an impre- sario's flourish. Their best work has some of the attention-grabbing power of a practiced raconteur or a virtuoso performer. They seduce us. And their seductions can at times become annoyances (Cocteau was famously an- noyed). And then they are perfectly capable of seducing us all over again.

Although the galleries of Pittsburgh's venerable Carnegie Museum are scaled much too large to provide the proper setting for Michals's intimate art, the show exudes big-hearted goodwill, representing as it does something of a homecoming for Michals, who was born and raised in McKeesport, part of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. Michals certainly insists on his own story, seeing in his trajectory from working-class beginnings to Manhattan aesthetic some clue to the crazy-quilt vitality of his work. A decade ago he published a book, The House I Once Called Home, about the now-abandoned building in McKeesport where he grew up, which becomes in his photographs what he refers to as "the cabinet where my fam- ily's curiosities are stored." Over the years he has photographed much in and around Pittsburgh, bringing a keen eye to the city's substantial architectural monuments, strikingly engineered bridges and factories, and dramatic mountains and meandering rivers.

In ABDuane, a book of autobiographicallandscape narratives organized as an alphabet and published in time for the Pittsburgh show, Michals observes of his friendship with Andy Warhol, a Pittsburgh native, that "we had so much in common, coming from a similar background. We were both blue-collar.

For Michals, who has razzed the photographic purists by writing titles and extended captions directed at his prints, the narrative tug of the photographically illustrated book may prove the ideal artistic setting. Over the years he has lavished considerable energy on such projects, his photographs sometimes reproduced in rich, deep-toned gravure. His extended homages to poets he admires—Salute, Walt Whitman (1996) and The Adventures of Consantine Cavafy (2007)—are both storybooks and scrapbooks, a series of free improvisations on themes and images from the work of the two authors. These books give Michals room to expand, shifting the mood at will, mingling erotic fantasies with amusingly scattered historical reconstructions and elements ofDownstairs slapstick, especially in the Cavafy volume. In ABDuane there is a section titled "Burlesque," and one feels that the make-believe of burlesque, which can be simultaneously tacky and uniform, reveals much about Michals's art.

In Salute, Walt Whitman—some images are included in the Carnegie show—a well-built, blond young man plays the multitude that Whitman adored. Michals intersperses passages from Leaves of Grass, Specimen Days, and the memories of Whitman's beloved Peter Doyle with images of the blond youth clambering out of a lake on a rock, relaxing in a wheat field, and holding a candle and a bouquet of flowers. In some photographs the young fellow wears jean jackets on a repressed-style bathing suit, while in others he puts on a Union uniform and impersonates a Civil War soldier. Occasionally he meets up with an older, bearded man who plays Walt Whitman, and toward the end the two of them are brought together in a contemporary eatery, actors not at ease, their coffee in paper cups. Michals lingers on the young man's terrific physique and innocent, hand- some face, all the while reminding us that he is only playing a role and that Michals is the magician who's pulling the strings. In an especially sharp

Duane Michals: from the series Paradise Regained, 1968

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sequence the young man looks very closely at a little frog he's holding in his hand, and the profiles of man and frog are elegantly juxtaposed for a new variation on beauty and the beast, the frog's eye is very small beauty.

Michaels's contradictions are all won-derfully on display in The Adventures of Constantine Cavafy, in which the photographer’s friend the actor Joel Grey (who in recent years has pursued a second career as a photographer) plays the Alexandrian poet in skits loosely based on Cavafy's poems. For all his fecklessness, Cavafy’s life, melancholy, Michaels cannot resist giving the poet’s career some moments of almost Charlie Chaplin hiliarity. Grey brings to the photographic sequence a practiced performance of the poet’s sophisticated body language and changeable, expressive face. He provides a welcome vitaliz-ing foil to the succession of im-perturbably handsome young men, Cavafy's love objects, encountered in cafes, in rented rooms, and on the street.

In one sequence Grey and Michaels—identified as Kon-stantinos Kavaphes and Dimi-tris Michaleides—sit down together, two old friends. Grey, playing Cavafy, watches two young arm wrestling; he receives an unexpected kiss from a hunk in a T-shirt emblazoned with the name of Meckesheim, Micha-lis's hometown; and he strobes-blewell lights as a dreamboat lounging in a café reads a book of Cavafy's own poems. In an epilogue—The Poet Decorates His Muse with Verse—Grey covers the bare chest of a youth sitting up in bed with sheets of paper inscribed with his own poems. This image—funny and absurdly romantic—says much about Duane Michaels.

Michaels's work, with its handwritten captions and ad hoc theatrical skits, has a homespun informality. This is what prevents some of his more highflying modernist obsessions, his time, his death, and his immortality from tumbling into portentousness. In a statement posted at the entrance to the Carnegie show, he adopted the style of one of his favorite Platonists, explaining that the appearances that photographs capture must not be confused with reality. “I am a reflec-tion photographing other reflections with the reflection.” To photograph reality is to photograph NOTHING. “If we are inclined to accept that mouthful, it’s because Michaels offers it with a wink. He invites us to play photographs: like magic and Victorian roots when he photographs the soul leaving the body, whether as a grandmotherly photographic blur, or a grandfather disappearing in a flash of light, or a translucent naked man departing from his solid naked self. Most darkroom tricks are wedded to basic questions of life and death. We might imagine that they remain deeply domestic but also into Michaels's own dreams, equivocations, and second thoughts, which can have a winningly sweet-and-sour charm.

Metamorphosis, grounded in the camera’s illusionistic powers, is the essential impulse in Michaels's work. He creates the illusion of time travel, when Wee Whelan and his young friend hang out in what is self-evidently a modern coffee shop. He turns anyone who wants into a Christ figure by granting him a photographic halo. He uses photograph to spin what amount to Ovid-ian legends, as in The Bewitched Bee, a sequence of thirteen images in which a young man stung by a bee grows antlers, wanders through the woods, and finally drowns in a sea of leaves. He uses photo-graphy to revitalize the ghoulish nightmares of old children's stories, as in Margaret Finds a Box, in which a little girl disappears into a corrugated cardboard box that then levitates and vanishes, leaving behind only an inscrutable cat. Time and again, Michaels argues that since photography always has a fundamen-tally ambiguous relationship with reality, we might as well go right ahead and tweak appearances.

artists who depend on too narrow and programmatic a view of influence and inspiration. He confesses his skeptic-ism about Pop Art, which he first encoun-tered when he photographed some of the artists for a magazine assignment in the early 1960s, referring to their work as “popcorn,” some of it “art-school despair,” “a novelty item.” In Foto Follies he announces, contra his Pittsburgh sympathies: “Art is never boring. Andy Warhol was boring.” What offends him in much of the new photographic or photo-based work—by Cindy Sherman, Andreas Gursky, Jeff Wall, Richard Prince, and others—is its self-importance, the sense of the artist as armored in a stylistic gesture or an ideological stand. He refers to one of Gursky's enormous photographs as “a billboard with pretensions,” and ifing if slapdash—he brings you back to his own never-ending celebration of self-deprecating lightness and mis-chevous fun. This is not to say that Michaels always proves the steadiest critical guide, but he is always thoughtful. Although I like Foto Follies as a rab-blerousing pamphlet, I think it was a mistake to include some of the Sher-mans and the Gursky.

In his desire to launch another zinger, Michaels can end up with a flat-footed one-liner. Then again, his stunts can be a way of pushing his work into fresh, unexplored territory. After a few years ago, he produced a series of photographs in the shape of fans, their off-center compositions echoing the stylized fans of Japanese ukiyo-e. A quartet of photographic fans records his country garden in the four seasons; a fan emblazoned with groupings of roses in vases is a salute to his mother’s taste in flowers.

These photographs dare to be dismissed as kitsch, and yet the kitsch cannot be entirely un-tangled from the heart—be-it a spume of the color.

For a recent New York show, at the DC Moore Gal- lery in 2013, Michaels painted abstract designs on antique tintype portraits. He has al-ways been something of a frustr-atated painter, but in the past I think he has struck out when putting an apple or a pear in blazing color on his black-and-white photographs. In this new series of slightly altered or metamorphosed tintypes, some included in the Pitts-burgh retrospective, Michaels limits the brushwork to a few wavy, abbreviated additions to the late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century images—a couple of Cubistic lines here, several Art Deco flourishes there. A portrait of an older gentleman, on which Michaels has inscribed a cage-like mask of zigzagging lines, becomes James Joyce.

The most striking in the group, Guern-mienna, is of a handsome, bright-eyed, nattily dressed young man, whom Michaels has ornamented with just a few quivering lines and circles that echo the still life still life rendered by Braque in Michaels's own collection. These painted tintypes, with their something-old-something-new juxtapositions, seem to take as their subject the uneasy fusion of the modern- and nineteenth-century imagination into a modern imagination. They are fragile conceits, but like some of Saul Steinberg's visual jokes, Michae-ls's still life paintings have remarkable staying power.

Michaels's entire career has been a succession of conceits, feints, and games. Push too hard on his work, expect too much transformation of a nongeometric, gusy, puckish energy evaporating, much as the human souls in his photographic sequences vanish into thin air. You might well say that his work is active as big as the one at the Carnegie Museum would fail to sustain a museum-goer's attention, and yet this is not the case, which proves that there is some hidden power in his evanescent data-ran, with its burlesques, sideshows, and sundry amusements. No wonder Duane Michaels has always had a particular af-finity for the image of the house of cards. His work is a perpetual balancing act.

Duane Michaels: Joseph Cornell, 1972

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