**LUCKILY, I STRAYED**

Late in his career, Duane Michals has found a new creative outlet in film.

By Jackson Arn

**ZIP ZAP ZIP** (2018), A SHORT FILM DIRECTED BY Duane Michals, begins with what sounds like a plum statement of fact. “I am speaking this sentence.” Michals says, standing before the camera in a mask. “This is the sentence that I am speaking. The sentence says, ‘This is the sentence that I am speaking’.” The statement seems hard to refute, until you consider that Michals isn’t really speaking at all. A machine is playing a recording of his voice. Michals, for his part, seems fully aware of this paradox. There’s no mistaking the faint, playful quaver in his taped voice, and you get the sense that his masked face is a second away from erupting into laughter.

Since he took his first photographs in the late ’50s, Michals has made a delicate art of playfulness. He packs his works with juvenile pranks, dizzying optical illusions, and winking allusions. What keeps them from feeling indulgent—and what often allows them to achieve transcendence—is their lush, solemn beauty and their serene matter-of-factness, even when they’re offering something more than just the facts. It is fitting that “Illusions of the Photographer,” a career retrospective, should be held at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York—an institution that has devoted shows to Henry James, Tennessee Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Michals is among the most literary of photographers. He is fond of scribbling long, nuanced captions underneath his pictures, and has used this format to author rhapsodic appreciations of his favorite writers: His visual influences, many of which are displayed alongside his own work at the Morgan, are equally rich and nearly as literary: he shoots muscular male bodies to look like William Blake engravings, and his eight gigs are worthy of Saul Steinberg’s New Yorker cartoons. Most remarkable is when he manages to evoke Steinberg and Blake in the same photograph, as in the gorgeous, punchline What Is Time? (1994).

Michals, working with the cinematographer Josiah Cuneo, has been a prolific director of short films since 2015. In this time he has told more than one interviewer that he prefers making films to taking pictures—an oxymoron, had become the perfect medium for fast-paced, skidlifftune artists. It was also, in the eyes of Those Who Knew Best, inferior to actual film in every way. To these people, Michals, who had spent the bulk of his life shooting on film, had a simple reply: “Fuck that! Fuck film. Digital is so much better.”

IN A 1980 CONVERSATION AT THE NEW SCHOOL in New York, an interviewer asked Michals if he would consider a career as a filmmaker. He gave three reasons why he never would: he was too much of a loner, film was too expensive, and he worked too quickly. Within a few years of that interview, filmmaking had changed so utterly that even the name was starting to feel anachronistic: The money- and time-consuming process of recording light onto celluloid had a younger, number-cruncher in digital cinematography. Suddenly, it was feasible to shoot and edit an entire feature in a week for tens of thousands of dollars, without the help of a studio or a film processing lab. Digital filmmaking, that oxymoron, had become the perfect medium for fast-paced, skidlifftune artists. It was also, in the eyes of Those Who Knew Best, inferior to actual film in every way. To these people, Michals, who had spent the bulk of his life shooting on film, had a simple reply. “Fuck film. Digital is so much better.”

Since he got his start, Michals has delighted in these kinds of swerves and renunciations, the brasher and the better. Born in 1932 to working-class parents in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, he discovered photography only after four years studying art at the University of Denver, two years in the army, and a short, unsuccessful stint in graphic design at the Parsons School of Design in New York. By his early thirties, he had established himself as a fashion photographer and had gigs with Mademoiselle, Life, Vogue, and Esquire. Like many avant-gardists, he made up for a lack of formal training with a deep admiration for his heroes, undiluted by exams or classroom discussions. Small wonder, then, that he excelled at portraits. For one of his first great photographs, from 1965, he shot René Magritte wearing his trademark bowler hat upside-down, trapped under another ghostly, superimposed hat many times the size of his head. What’s remarkable

about this image isn’t its cheesiness so much as the way it makes cheek inexpressible from reverence. Michals gives the famous, straight-faced Surrealists a taste of his own medicine, honoring him and parodying him all at once.

More great work followed, much of it printed in the glossies: a diptych of Andy Warhol (another Catholic kid from Pittsburgh) with his mother; a portrait of Magritte with Hat (detail), gelatin silver print, ca. 1970, 9 × 6 1/2 inches. Winogrand, the celebrated street photographer, took it for granted that the camera was designed to capture a rough authenticity, even if one had to sacrifice composition and coherence in order to get it. If you accepted this premise, then an exactlyingly choreographed Michals series like Paradox Regained (1966)—in which a black-garbed, blank-faced couple slowly transforms into a latter-day Adam and Eve, while their room becomes a luxuriant jungle—could be said to sharpen his work, forcing him to display the ugly harmonies, the alienating truths of his generation, a species of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment,” “You’ve got nothing to sell!” “Winogrand said more than once, “has no narrative ability at all.” He may have been right about his own work—there are too many meanings and potential meanings teething in different directions, canceling each other out. Michals preferred to give his images a clear direction, which is to say, a narrative.

What all this suggests (and what at least one interviewer had figured out by 1980) is that Michals’s work was cinematic all along. While other photographers of his generation hunted various species of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment,” Michals shocked—with his photographic series and lengthy captions—the purity of the individual image. Each installment of Paradox Regained is like a film still, beautiful in itself but still propelling you, with its text incompleteness, to the next. Like Paradox Regained, YORT (included in the Morgan’s screening program) begins in a stuffy little room. The titular hero, a bowed-backed, big-headed beast, dines off his chair, dreams himself into two bodies, and then struts off while his other self remains asleep (“The Yort chortled, an intertitle lets us know). What follows is a series of symbols unmoored from their meanings—dixie, boxes, a forest, a cracked egg, a dash of jester flashing signs that say, “You, Then, Me, Now.” If this nonsensical delights more than it perplexes, it’s because the images are enchantingly strange and ravishingly beautiful. Hardly anything is the right size or color: the forest has a silvery glint, and the egg gushes thick, greenish yolk. As in so many of Michals’s works, the dream never ends. A cinematic antecedent to this might be the dream sequence from Buster Keaton’s film, a silvery glint, and the egg gushes thick, greenish yolk. As in so many of Michals’s works, the dream never ends. A cinematic antecedent to this might be the dream sequence from Buster Keaton’s film, Zip Zap Zip Zap Zap Zap, a key to slapping even Michals couldn’t have dreamed up.)

A blunder criticism of Michals’s early work came from the reliably candid Garry Winogrand: “This isn’t photography.” Winogrand, the celebrated street photographer, took it for granted that the camera was designed to capture a rough authenticity, even if one had to sacrifice composition and coherence in order to get it. If you accepted this premise, then an exactlyingly choreographed Michals series like Paradox Regained (1966)—in which a black-garbed, blank-faced couple slowly transforms into a latter-day Adam and Eve, while their room becomes a luxuriant jungle—could be said to reject the truth of photography, chocking the medium down to a kind of knockoff painting. Winogrand was only half right. His churlishly real images are almost the negation of Michals’s elegant, harmonious ones. And yet, for Michals, there can be no surreality without the real; the frankness of his camera is as important as the fanciful presentation of his subjects. The six installments of Paradox Regained, each a little more otherworldly than the last, would lose most of their jolt as paintings, like a good magic trick, they get you to ask, “How’d they do that?” “A photograph,” Winogrand said more than once. “has no narrative

Jay Croft, “Duane Michals on innovating, gay imagery and digital (he loves it),” Focus on the Story, May 9, 2014. newyorker.com.


10 Jackson Arn is a writer, critic, and filmmaker based in New York.

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