

THE ILLUMINATED MAN



duane michals 19/26

FEATURE

The Illusions of the Photographer

The dazzling imagination of Duane Michals is brought to life in a new exhibition that brings his photographs into conversation with objects, paintings, drawings and books, inviting viewers into the artist's inner world.

Photographs by Duane Michals

Exhibition review by Magali Duzant

“This is a story about a man telling a story about a man who is telling a story.” So begins the text of Duane Michals’ image *A Story About a Story*, currently on view in the show *Illusions of the Photographer* at **The Morgan Library & Museum** (<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/duane-michals>). *Illusions of the Photographer* is an exhibition about a man who tells stories. I say ‘about’ rather than ‘of’ because the exhibit is both a survey of Michals’ work as well as his interests and inspirations. The exhibition is filled with photographs, paintings, and objects that weave their way through the subjects of Michals’ work; culled from both the Morgan’s impressive collection as well as the artist’s own.

A STORY ABOUT A STORY



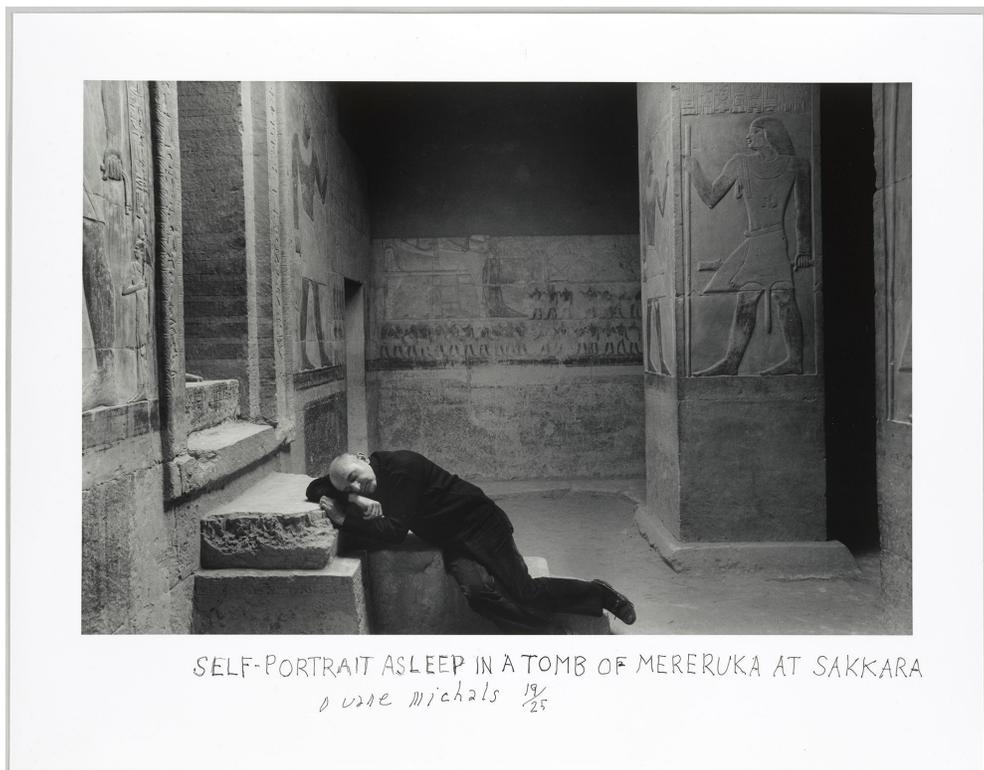
This is a story about a man telling a story about a man who is telling a story.
He sits in front of a mirror, and tells his tale to the man in the mirror.
And the man in the mirror thinks he is telling a tale to the man he sees in the mirror.
He finds a box, and when he opens it there is another box inside. And inside
that box he finds an even smaller box inside of it, with yet another smaller one
inside of it. When he arrives at the tiniest box, he looks inside with a magnifying
glass, and he sees an eye looking back at him.
All this confusion exhausts him and he falls asleep and dreams of a man
who is dreaming about a man who is dreaming.
And as you are reading this, I am writing a story about you reading a story
about me writing this story. Did you tell this story to me or did I tell it to you?

Duane Michals 1979 ch. 2/18 13/35

A Story About a Story, 1989. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

I first came across the work of Duane Michals in a photo history class at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Michals was born and raised in Pittsburgh and my professor was a fan and friend of the artist. To a young photographer starting off, Michals' work felt thrilling and welcoming—funny, personal, direct. The prevailing trends at the time were for staged work, studio rigs, high key lighting or, at the opposite end, 4x5 color portraits taken out in the field. Michals' work walks a line between irreverence and sincerity. The result often feels like the surprising revelation of a friend, said with such ease that it sticks, opening your eyes to something new.

A sense of fullness pervades the room at the Morgan. One wanders between themes, noted on wall placards written in Michals' familiar spidery script; Love, Nature, Death, Theater, Reflection and so on. A collection of handwritten cartoon captions submitted to the New Yorker is included in the 'Image and Word' section. The words and letters jump off the strips, speaking to character and individualism, a knowing wink to the artists inscriptions scattered on the walls, a favorite being the line: "Language withers when trivialized. I love pizza and your eyes." This feels like classic Michals: witty and sharp yet clear eyed to the truth of the matter.



Self Portrait Asleep in a Tomb of Mereuka, 1978. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

The bright, colored walls are joyous. One weaves through an oversized prop book, a top hat, a Saul Steinberg drawing, a portrait of Andy Warhol. In essence, a sampling of all the ephemera that speak to a full and fulfilling artist's life. This idea of a survey that goes beyond just showing the 'finished work' is an exciting, engaging way to get a deeper picture of the artist, for art is never created in a vacuum. Artists pull references from personal experiences, travels, interests. A note that explains that Michals first picked up a camera for a trip to the Soviet Union and realized that he was good at making pictures, is accompanied by an image from said trip: a portrait of a young sailor looking into the camera. The directness of this gaze feels like a door opening, a signal loud and clear to both photographer and viewer, that this is the beginning of something special.



Multiple Self-Portrait, 1935. ©John F. Collins

The exhibition design brings the themes of Michals' work alive; 'Playtime' features a fan with a painted cat and a set of paper dolls; 'Reflection' greets the visitor with a parabolic, or trick, mirror. This mirror is then paired with the photo work, *A Story about A Story*, hung next to John F. Collins' photograph *Multiple Self-Portraits* from 1937, in which the photographer looks down into an image of himself looking back at the viewer, complicit in the illusion of multiple selves. Hung nearby is a cabinet card from the 1880s, a frame made of flowers around more flowers and the word 'mirror'. We are left to wonder: was the memorialized man named such? In looking at others looking at themselves, we are looking at vanity but also vulnerability.



Exhibition view, Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan, courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum

Across the way is 'Theater' which includes the work that gives the exhibition its name. *The Illusions of the Photographer*, made in 1969, is a multi-image work. In a statement Michals explains that these sequential narratives more fully express and explain an event than just one still photograph can and he considers them to be premeditated illustrations. Across nine silver gelatin prints a street scene unfolds, a man reading a paper enters the first photograph, in the second he appears to walk into a box on the ground, as the series continues another man enters the image, he stoops to examine the box and we see the framing of curtains from a theater stage around the print. In the remaining images we are let in on the trick, the camera pulls back to reveal the theater stage set-up as a diorama balanced on a plinth, the scene playing out beyond it. In the final image the photographer is seen kneeling in front of the prop theater as he turns to acknowledge the viewer, sealing the loop of the narrative, as if winking at the grand reveal.

Around the corner in the section 'Image and Word' is the series, *I Remember Pittsburgh*, in which Michals revisits where he grew up. The sequential narrative device deployed elsewhere becomes deeper, more introspective here. He photographs the spaces of his youth and writes about memory and change. Steel mills, storefronts, verdant hills, and a family portrait sketch out this city of his past. The text enriches the images creating entry points for the viewer to reconsider their own past, the places left behind and the place they hold within ourselves.



A LETTER FROM MY FATHER

As long as I can remember, my father always said to me that one day
he would write me a very special letter. But he never told me what the letter
might be about. I used to try to guess what secret would be revealed,
what mystery and intimacy we would at last share.
I know what I had hoped to read in the letter.
I wanted him to tell me when he had hidden his affection.
But then he died and the letter never did arrive.
And I never found that place where he had hidden his love.

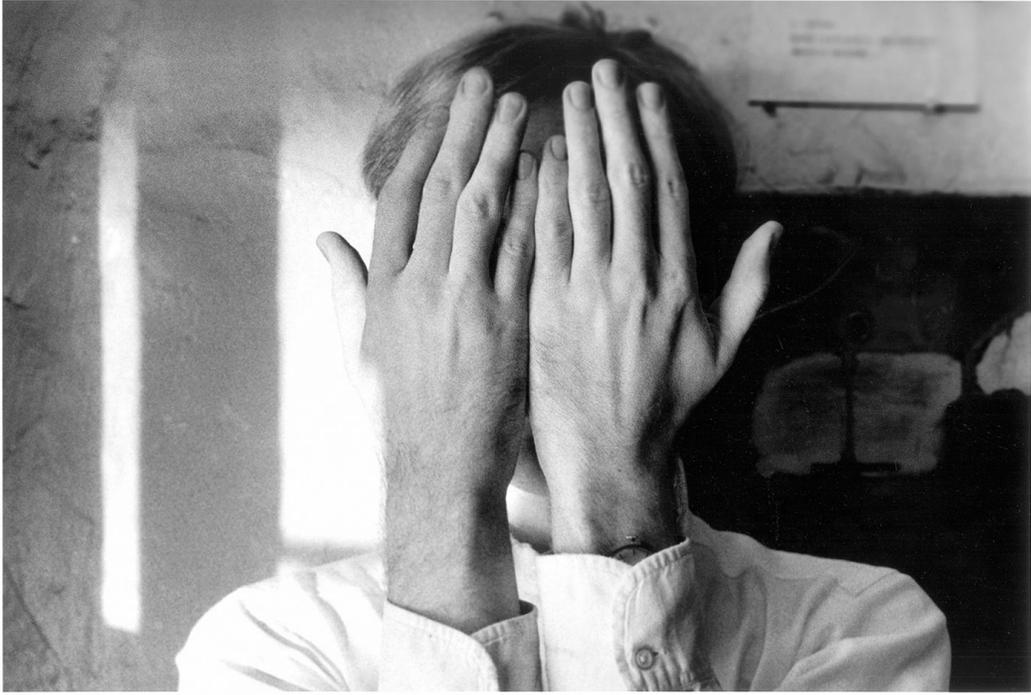
DUANE MICHALS

A Letter From My Father, 1960-1975. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

Michals work hits a sweet spot: it is often naturally touching or funny, and deployed in a simple format. It is easy to forget that text paired with image, specifically text written on image, was quite radical when he began making these images. The work now feels foundational to our contemporary understanding of mixed media; it is a forerunner to a world of expanded photography—the artists combining installations, sculptures, film, and books today all owe a debt to him. The narrative sequencing, the tongue-in-cheek unfurling of a story, the gridded-out plot are hallmarks of so much contemporary work, it is in many regards taken for granted.

What I walked away with was something so rare: that feeling of experiencing work that was joyful and human, work that pulled you in and said something but didn't do away with humor to hit at something bigger, something more pressing. In telling a story, with the simplest tools available, Michals creates more than just an illusion. He creates a whole world in print.

*Editor's Note: The Illusions of a Photographer is on view at **The Morgan Library & Museum** (<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/duane-michals>) in New York City until February 2, 2020.*



Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

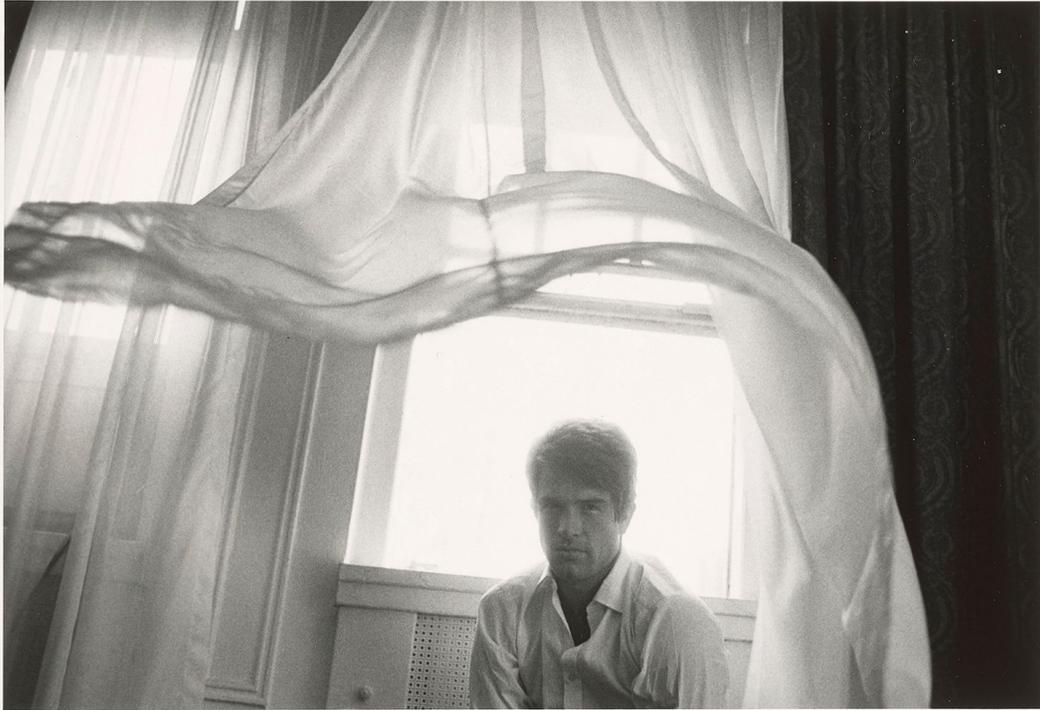
THE ILLUMINATED MAN



Duane Michals 25/65

The Illuminated Man, 1969. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

WARREN BEATTY



duane michals 10/25

Warren Beatty. © Duane Michals, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York



*Exhibition view, Illusions of the Photographer: Duane Michals at the Morgan,
courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum*



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