

A Unique Magazine

Apr/May/June 1999

PHOTO[®]

I N S I D E R

Delve into
the Mind of
**Duane
Michals**

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Doing What He Loves
Jay Maisel

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THE GREAT EXPRESSIONIST

BY JAMES A. COTTER

Life is too short to be distracted by the pesky, mundane questions that plague most photographers: "How can I get this model to smile without showing her teeth?" or, "Does this house look better with or without the little red wagon in front?" So think hard, think deep and ask new questions.

As a photographer, how can you present the nature of existence and the drama of the human condition? How will you define beauty and ugliness in visual terms? What is death and why is mankind fixated on rational explanations of the afterlife? In short, send the supermodels home and start asking the BIG questions.

Duane Michals has been examining these issues over the span of his legendary and influential career, blurring the boundaries between photography and philosophy to create a body of work unique in the field. Unlike many of his contemporaries who fixate on manufactured ideas of what is real and true in the world, Michals delves deep into the unconscious mind to find lasting meaning in his life and his art.

"When people ask me what I am, I tell them I'm the artist formally known as a photographer," says Michals when describing his creative position in life. "I am an expressionist and by that I mean I'm not a photographer or a writer or a painter or a tap dancer, but rather someone who expresses himself according to his needs." He has often found himself an outsider in the photographic universe that he finds dull and uninspired. Too many photographers, according to Michals, unconsciously rely on what he dubs "PC or photographic correctness." Stuck in a visual bind, photographers pander to the lowest common denominator and, by doing so, betray what he believes are the true possibilities of the medium. Instead, Michals uses visual narratives





All photos courtesy of Duane Michals
Left page: *Dr. Duane's Magic Art*. Above: *Over*.



THE GREAT PHOTOGRAPHERS OF MY TIME

and symbolism to convey ideas and interpretations of the human condition.

According to Michals, to illustrate grief by taking a picture of a woman crying does not aid the observer in understanding what it is truly like to experience deep sadness. Instead, the photographer must help the viewer feel what the woman feels by tracing the woman's pain with photographs, text, icons or anything else that brings the audience closer to the actual experience. "It's the difference between reading a hundred love stories and actually falling in love," he emphasizes.

Michals' career has been based on these terms, a hodgepodge of the brilliant, silly, metaphysical and playful, and has changed the face of photography. For four decades he has asked questions with photography rather than give answers. Now at 66, Michals believes he has never been more engrossed in redefining the medium than he is at this moment in his life. "Photography has to transcend description...it can never pretend to give you answers. That would be insulting."

Michals' journey began with a life-altering trip to Russia at age 26. With a borrowed camera and no agenda, he ventured behind the iron curtain at the height of the Cold War for the sheer adventure of seeing the

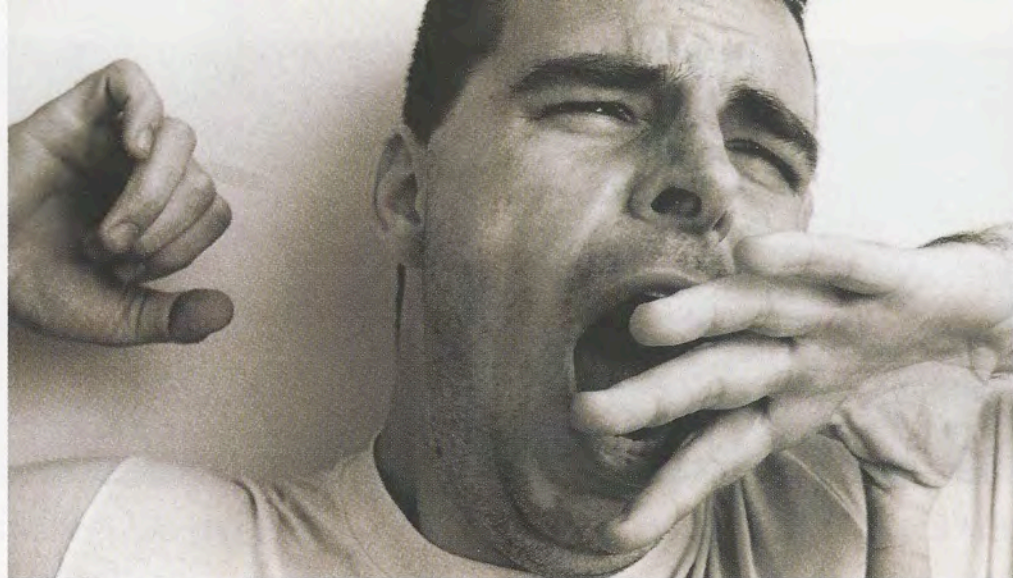
"enemy" on their own soil. Mindful of the fact that many Americans during this period considered his trip dangerous and even crazy, he wandered around the city of Minsk, taking portraits of the people who were supposed to be our adversaries. What he discovered, however, was that he had more in common with the people he met than he could have ever imagined. It was a revelation. Armed with the notion that there is an inherent creative reward in taking risks, Michals returned to New York to pursue photography in a way that would satiate his desire to explore the confounding mysteries of the human condition.

Photography in the early 1960s was dominated by the documentary and portrait style. To reject the paradigm of the medium during the era was to reject the conventions of such giants as Ansel Adams and Robert Frank. Michals did—exploring photography with a sense of freedom and experimentation. Sequences of shots that ran with a narrative theme became Michals means of making sense of issues such as desire, time, youth and death. He did not, and still does not, believe himself to be a radical in terms of the questions he asks with his art. "I think these are very reasonable questions to ask. What could be more important?"

Intent on expressing ideas as opposed to capturing images, he aimed to develop a meaningful relationship with photography. For Michals, it has always been of paramount importance that a photograph not only evoke feeling, but that it be enhanced by inviting the viewer to internally examine issues and ideas. In asking questions that are of such enormous scope and consequence, he is cognizant that he has taken a difficult and often frustrating path. "I fail more than I succeed in a way that someone taking a picture of a sunset can never fail," notes Michals. It is a mantra that has kept him reflective and insightful in a field dominated by fads and heady consumerism.

Throughout his career, Michals claims he has never worked for the benefit of an audience. As much as critics and students of photography scrutinize his work, Michals creates art solely for his own exploration. "If I cared what people thought of my work, I would never go near some of the issues I confront. Certainly not gay issues. I'd have to resort to things that shock, which seems to be all the rage."

Avoiding the trappings of the New York photography scene, absent from parties and openings, Michals works feverishly, conceiving an idea and bringing it to its end



WHAT FUNNY THINGS BILLY DREAMS



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BEING AS NATURE



BEING AS MIND

result without pause. The pace of his creative process allows him to avoid self-censorship and create instinctively. By the time a piece has been shown or published, he has moved onto something new. His work remains vital, kinetic, and wholly uninfluenced by public reaction.

To examine Michals' work is to step into a surreal and dreamlike universe where faces and figures are not always what they seem. People are seen standing in a vast conglomerate of stars, heads are pulled from magic hats, and men gaze at ghostly figments of their imagination. These images are derived from Michals' ever evolving philosophy of

Michals bridges this gap because he is unfettered by the medium's boundaries and explores his visions through interpretive conceptual "spin-offs." For example, when illustrating desire and femininity he rejects the idea that women are merely objects of lust, as depicted in many images, and tries to envision the more intimate details of what it is truly like to be a woman. "What photographers show in magazines are woman as sex objects. If you want to see tits and ass, that's observation. It is not getting into the nature of what it feels like to be a woman...and that's what's interesting." Instead, according to Michals, he might

The layers of insight into the concept of death, says Michals, cannot be bound by the mechanics of photography, but must be given editorial comment and a sense of narrative. By approaching photography in this way, the spectator is given a glimpse into the possibilities of ideas that are often difficult to grasp. Michals' visual meditation about death are not morbid dramatizations of an idea that some people naturally fear, but rather a series of questions asked to reach a closer understanding of something we will all someday face.

Not all of Michals' work is rooted in heavy, mind-boggling issues. In fact,

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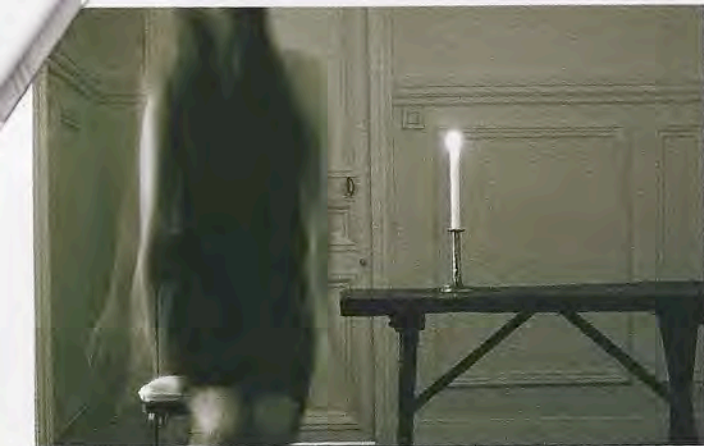
how the universe operates. It dishes out mad-dening speculation and logical rationalization in equal amounts, carefully pieced together from years of intensive reading and hypothesizing about the meaning of existence. "If we use observable fact to dictate what the possibilities of life are, then we are stuck with those who believed the earth was flat. It's like saying when we shut off the radio, the music no longer exists because it only came from the tubes within." These ruminations manifest themselves in his work with dramatic results.

It is challenging enough to derive meaning from the art of photography when the artist is concerned with the rational, literal observation of the world. It is more difficult when the artist moves beyond mere observation and into the realm of his thoughts and translates his muse into film.

explore what it is like for a woman to experience cramps to delve deep into the meaning of womanhood. "I don't want to catalog images. I want to get into something that I can't truly describe. I might fail in the process, but it's where true creativity is born."

Recently, the photographer has had to cope with the deteriorating health and death of his elderly mother and, therefore, the consequences of life and death. Although deeply emotional about the prospect of losing a parent, he is also philosophical about the idea of death and has explored the concept in his photography. Again, Michals moves beyond the idea that the body is merely a vessel for biological functions and tries to envision the processes through which the spirit moves from the body out into the expanse of space and time.

the photographer has a sharp sense of wit and an air of silliness that reveals itself in both his conversations and his photographs. Foolishness to Michals means being playful and expressive with words and images. A series of shots entitled *What Funny Things Billy Dreams* is indicative of this side of his work. The visual narrative uses illustration and photography to penetrate the visions of a seemingly ordinary man who has fantastic dreams set in an almost fairy tale world. The series, included in Michals' children's book *Upside Down, Inside Out and Backwards*, (or *Downside Up, Outside In and Frontwards*, depending on whether you are looking at the front or the back cover) reflects Michals' childlike innocence and sense of wonder.



BEING AS ENERGY



BEING AS LIGHT

Michals is outspoken in his criticism of the current superstars of the photography world and has a particular lack of regard for fashion photography. He has gone so far as to come up with a term, 'fartster,' (first introduced in his article "Dr. Duane's Infernal Tongue and Cheeky Journal," published in the magazine *21*) to describe "...one who confuses fashion with art..." The word, both ridiculous and biting, plays

French Vogue with a pouty soldier of the Army of Cindys staring coyly from the cover. Nestled between perfume inserts and hemline shots, Michals' work brings an exploration of quantum theory to the bible of shallowness. It is as if he is subverting from within. The series illustrates philosophical concepts such as Schrödinger's Cat and Heisenberg's Mirror in the mischievous Michals style. Wormholes, colliding particles and the theory of backwards time travel are photographed symbolically with humorous captions that fill the unlikely pages of the glossy monthly.

Michals rarely teaches, but his workshops and lectures around the country are enormously popular with students looking to avoid a "fartster" career. He enjoys teaching by example, pushing

Walt Whitman who has had the greatest impact on Michals and his outlook on life. While still an adolescent, struggling with his sexuality and his Catholic upbringing, Michals found Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and was astounded and nurtured by the poetic brilliance of the work. He felt it spoke directly to him and discovered great strength in Whitman's honesty. He carried a copy of the book with him while in the Army during the Korean War and still has it today. Later in life, Michals published a book *Salute, Walt Whitman*, as an homage to the author including photographs exploring Whitman's influence on himself and others.

As the 20th century draws to a close, Michals is cautiously optimistic about our place in history. He hopes that our era will be remembered for its ideas, not the trivial indulgences of rock stars and flashes of celebrity. He is vocal about his frustration with the current political climate in Washington and has spent time writing to Congress urging our representatives to focus on the larger issues and problems faced by the country. This sense of activism seems to be a natural extension of Michals' philosophy, pushing others to look within themselves, as opposed to looking for simple and uninspired means to garner attention. As a photographer, or rather, an expressionist, Michals' place in the history of art is secure—and he shows no signs of slowing down. "I've never felt more freedom than I do at this point in my life. I can do anything and I'm having a great time." ②



Man In Hat Ghosted Over Trees/Wall

with the idea that society has been transfixed for too long with the shallow pretenses of celebrity and personality. "Herb Ritts is a fartster, the Boston Museum is a fartster. To show head shots of Cindy Crawford or any of the multitudes of Cindys is the work of a fartster," Michals explains. True art, according to Michals, involves a lasting and profound reflection of society that will stand the test of time. It is with gleeful irony then that his most recently published work appears in the pages of

other photographers to reject the conventions of traditional photography and look inward for the questions that will stimulate artistic growth and enhance the medium. He encourages those in the field to study not only other photographers, but painters, filmmakers, philosophers and writers as well. Italian painter DeCurricio, directors Woody Allen and Bernardo Bertolucci, and eastern philosophy such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead have all influenced Michals. But perhaps it is the writer

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