

BORDER CROSSINGS

A MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS

On Photography

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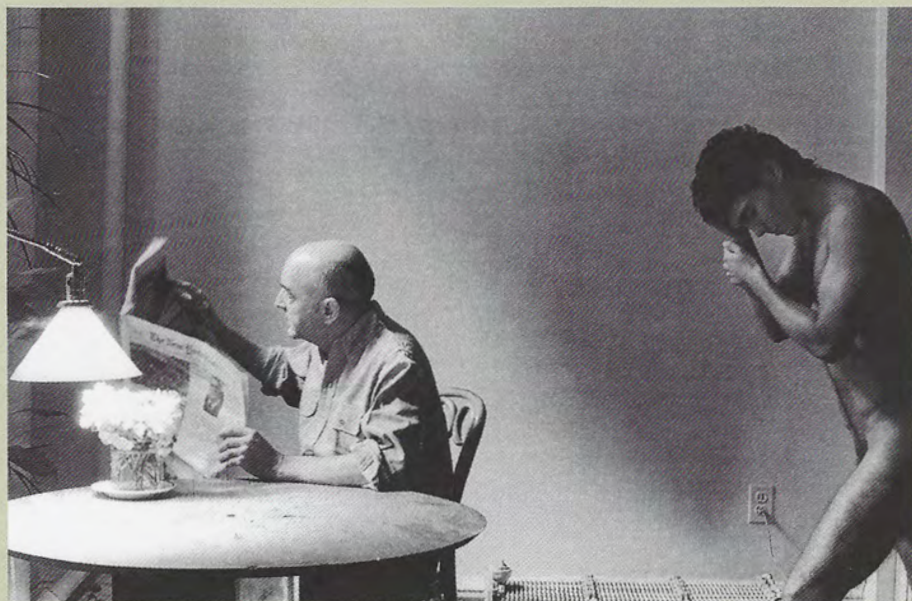
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MICHALS, THE ARCHANGEL

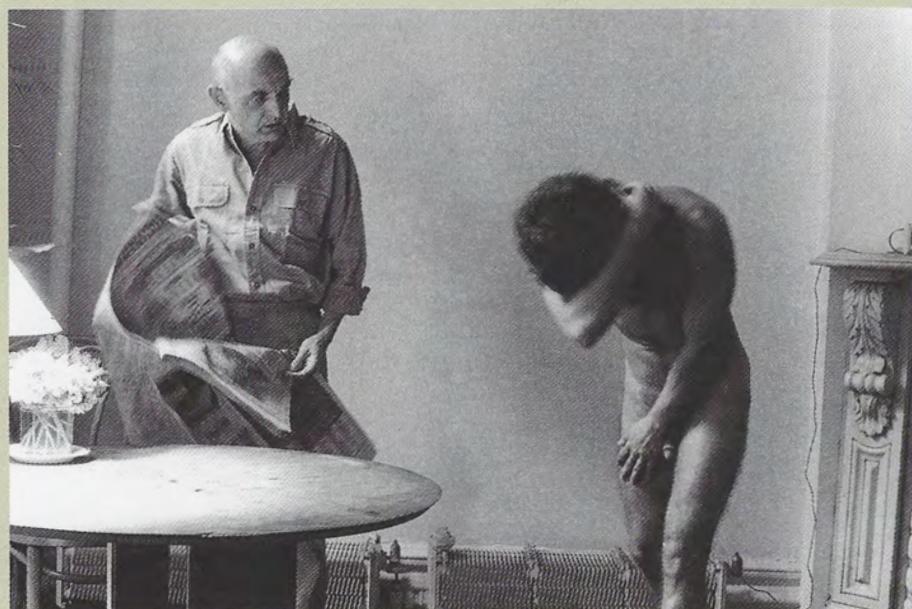
There is, in the body of work that Duane Michals has given to the world, a five-part sequence called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* that fairly sums up the spirit and character of this endearing and enduring photographer. A young man, handsome and naked,

walks disconsolately into a room where an older man sits at a table reading a newspaper. Some minimal, sympathetic conversation ensues and the older man—Michals himself—begins to take off his clothes which he gives to the prodigal son. The final frame

shows the now clothed son and the now naked father leaning towards one another in an embrace that places the young head on older shoulders. They are indistinguishable and their combined gesture suggests an architecture not unlike hands clasping in a prayer

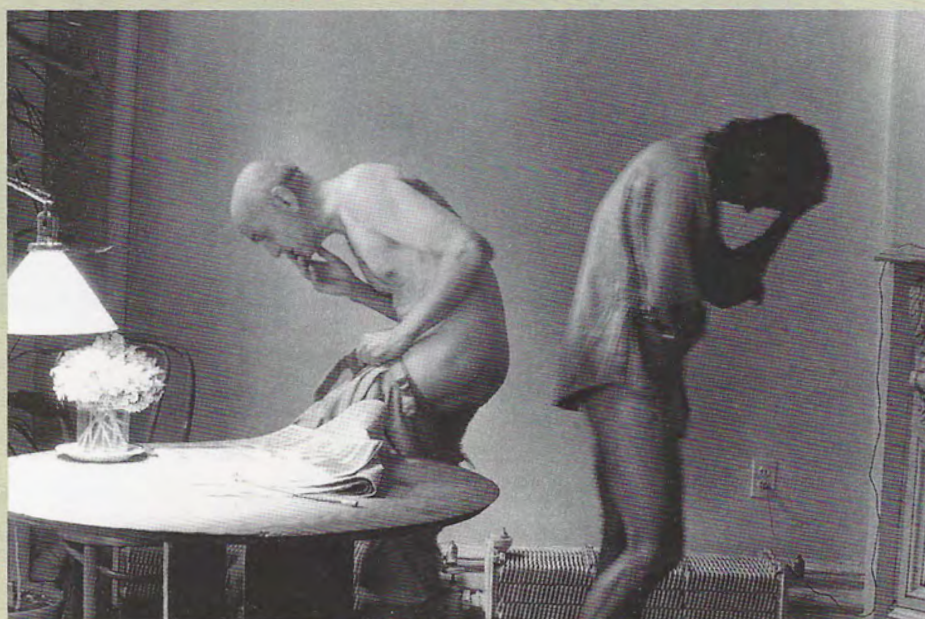


Introduction
and Interview
by Robert Enright



The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1982, five-part series.
All photographs courtesy: Duane Michals.

of consolation. Certainly in this work there is a sense, to alter a notion from Boethius, of the consolation of photography. The medium becomes an effective instrument of forgiveness and recognition in what we call the human condition.



THE UNFORTUNATE MAN



The unfortunate man could not touch the one he loved. It had been declared illegal by the law. Slowly, his fingers became toes and his hands gradually became feet. He began to wear shoes on his hands to disguise his pain. It never occurred to him to break the law.

The Unfortunate Man, 1976.

In *Paradise Regained* Michals employs clothing and its removal to create another contemporary parable: this time a sitting man and a standing woman go from being dressed in a room full of objects to being naked in a room overgrown with plants. The final image shows them looking out at the camera like Adam and Eve in a landscape designed by the *Douanier* Rousseau. It is a divestiture that leads to a provisional innocence: the prototypical man and woman find themselves in a landscape of their own unmaking.

Many of Michal's photographic sequences are reconfigurations of stories that have mythological and religious resonance: the fall from paradise, the prodigal son, the bogeyman and the uneasy relationship between youth and age. So

in *The Old Man Kills the Minotaur* the classical story is really a contemporary restaging of a narrative of sexual anxiety and loss of power, realized in the virile minotaur's successful wooing of the young woman. The old man's struggle is for vengeance, and it is only one of the variations Michals works on what he calls "this great father-son thing that I've been dealing with for a long time." It is a complicated inquiry that involves everything from passivity to power; his fathers and sons wear many masks whether they have them on or not. When the minotaur is shot the arrow pierces his heart and in the last frame his mask has come off to reveal a young man; the memory of beauty is the real casualty in this sequence and in the work of a photographer who takes such

sensual delight watching a man dry himself after a bath. It is a sobering reminder of the damage we are capable of doing to what we desire.

There is often a sense of imminent danger in Michals's photography; *The Bogeyman*, in which a child seems to touch into life a coat that menaces her while she sleeps, is a dressed rehearsal for a sequence like *The Flashlight*. Here a sleeping woman is partially undressed by a man carrying a flashlight which he shines on the vulnerable parts of her body—mouth, breast and sex. Similarly in *The Fallen Angel*, the celestial visit starts out as a benediction and ends up as a transgression. The angel's sexual encounter with the woman (another variation on the biblical story of *The Annunciation*) is taken to be

regrettable. The result is the disappearance of the angel's wings and his humiliating departure in plain clothes. Michals likes the fluidity of his narratives; they shift back and forth between the sacred and the profane, between the fully realized and the subtly imagined. He has avoided what he calls the aesthetics of shock and focussed on a photography of the ineffable. If his art is about imminent danger, it is also about immanent anticipation. No other photographer has attempted to document the phenomenon of the spirit leaving the body, or of a man going to heaven, both of which are titles he has given to specific photographic sequences of his work. This is very risky business and no one is more fully aware of it than Michals himself. But he welcomes the flirtation with sentimentality—he says in the following interview that he “yearns for vulnerability.” The key is expression and in his movement towards honesty and passion he has worked resolutely against any and all restraints.

Michals can be too tricky for his own good and the relationship that his work establishes between image and text can sometimes be an unequal one. But he is an artist indispensable to our age; he brings an unparalleled generosity and sense of wonder to the art of photography and has personalized the medium in a way that is unique. He may not be heaven sent, but he has the smell and the look of the place in his photographs.

The following interview was done over three days in August of this year. During that time Michals had gone to Maine to photograph the writer Stephen King for *The New Yorker*. The interview was conducted by Robert Enright.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *How did the Stephen King shoot go yesterday?*

DUANE MICHALS: Beautifully. When I got there all the conditions were very bad but I liked him enormously and we got along very well. It turns out his wife was a photographer and knew my work, so that helped grease the wheels.

BC: *In your introduction to Album: The Portraits of Duane Michals (1988) you*

write about how you approach portraiture. Is it as much free falling as you imply?

DM: It depends on what I'm doing. I don't like to work in studios, but I love going to locations and having to figure something out. When I get there I don't know what I'm going to find. So it's very hard to be specific. But Stephen King leant himself to certain ideas.

BC: *Because of the nature of his work?*

DM: Yeah. So that was already a direction to go in. It's usually more like playing—that's the great serendipity. I love the challenge of having to figure it out on the spot. Photographers like Annie Leibovitz—who I think is wonderful for what she does—travel with a big entourage. Her camera language is quite different than mine. I think she works within a very controlled situation. I like to deal with what I can't control. I thrive on the uncertainty principle.

BC: *Do you still mostly shoot in natural light?*

DM: Ninety per cent of the time.

BC: *Are your portraits collaborations? I look at your photographs of Joseph Cornell and Claes Oldenburg and it seems you're able to get them to do things or appear in ways that certainly aren't conventional. They have to be cooperating.*

DM: Cornell, of course, dictated the terms of his surrender. We had an interesting language; I would say, “That looks promising,” and he'd say, “Do you really think so?” Which meant don't take it. Then I'd say, “Oh, look how the light's hitting that,” and he'd say, “Oh that is nice, that would be a nice picture.” So we had developed a relationship where I didn't intrude. I always work within the vocabulary of the person I'm taking the picture of, if they have one. So with Oldenburg you think great blowups.

BC: *Have you ever been intimidated by anyone whose portrait you were taking? Given how much you admired Magritte's painting I assume a lot of weight would have attended meeting him.*

DM: Absolutely. And also with DeChirico. He was even more weighty. My pictures are lousy because I was so intimidated by him, I could hardly get him to do anything.

But I've been very privileged that the camera has given me access to people I never would have met otherwise. I'm just flattered that they'd let me take their picture in the first place.

BC: *Is that humility genuine?*

DM: Totally. How could I possibly come to Magritte's door—the guy's one of the fucking geniuses of the century—and say, “Now sit over there.” I'm not one of those fashion magazine stars. For me portraiture is about sharing a moment with somebody. Most portraits are entirely about vanity. I wrote an essay, “I'm Much Nicer Than My Face,” which sums it all up. I knew my mother and my father my entire lifetime and not once did they ever reveal themselves to me. So the more braggadocio you get in terms of what the photographer's “capturing,” which is a word that should be completely abolished from any photographer's language, the more offensive it is. This is a cardinal principle with me.

BC: *Does that mean it's impossible to ever get what you call “clues to our own truth” in portraiture?*

DM: I have a very difficult time with that and I'll tell you why. You must assume people are, by and large, not what they appear to be. And when they get in front of a camera they're even less so. You see, celebrities are the easiest people to take pictures of because they bring their history with them. There's no such thing as a bad picture of a celebrity. The worse the picture, probably the more sellable it is. If you could get Barbra Streisand sitting on a crapper, you'd make a fortune. All professional celebrities are like that. Their only talent is being famous.

BC: *On the subject of fame, the portraits you did of Warhol and his mother, in 1958, are fascinating.*

DM: I love those portraits because that was Andy unadorned. Before he became “professional Andy,” when he was still my sweet little gay boy doing shoes. To me Andy is a great graphic designer who happened to have a great sense of PR and self. He was the artist predator. But he really had another personality beyond. His persona was much larger than his work.



Andy Warhol and his mother Julia Warhola, 1958.
facing page: *Sarajevo - Political Single with Poem*, 1994.

BC: *The amazing thing is that he looks exactly like his mother, or she him.*

DM: His bone structure changed and he became very angular. I think he tended to look more Slavic as he got older. I could just see him sitting on a door step in Bratislava.

BC: *Did you meet because you were both from McKeesport, Pennsylvania?*

DM: No, I met him when he came to New York. A friend of mine did layouts at Bonwit Teller and he said there's this guy from

your hometown. Andy was about four or five years older but we had everything in common. We were both Slovak; I'm second generation, he was first generation. So when we got together we hit it off famously. And of course I hit it off with his mother because I could speak Slovak. My grandmother spoke it at home and she brought me up until I was five or six. So I can be working in my garden and the word for apple—*jablko*—will pop into my head out of nowhere.

BC: *What was it like to grow up in an industrial town like McKeesport?*

DM: I loved it. The curious thing is, it always gets this bad rap. People who live there and move away will say how awful it was. I didn't think it was awful at all; I thought it was terrific. During the Second World War I was convinced that the entire Luftwaffe was going to descend and stuka the hell out of McKeesport because it was the most important and desirable place in the Western hemisphere. I'm very proud of my background. I'm very proud that my father was a steelworker and I'm very proud of my accomplishments and the delicious life I've had. I don't mock any of that. But I also believe that everybody has a person they never became. Our lives are filled with crossroads and intersections and we have two choices, so there's always a road not taken. And there's this whole other person who's like a *doppelgänger*. The guy I never became. I'm fascinated by the notion of this other person.

BC: *There's another road metaphor as well. And that's the dramatic one of Paul on the road to Damascus being knocked off his horse by a life-altering event.*

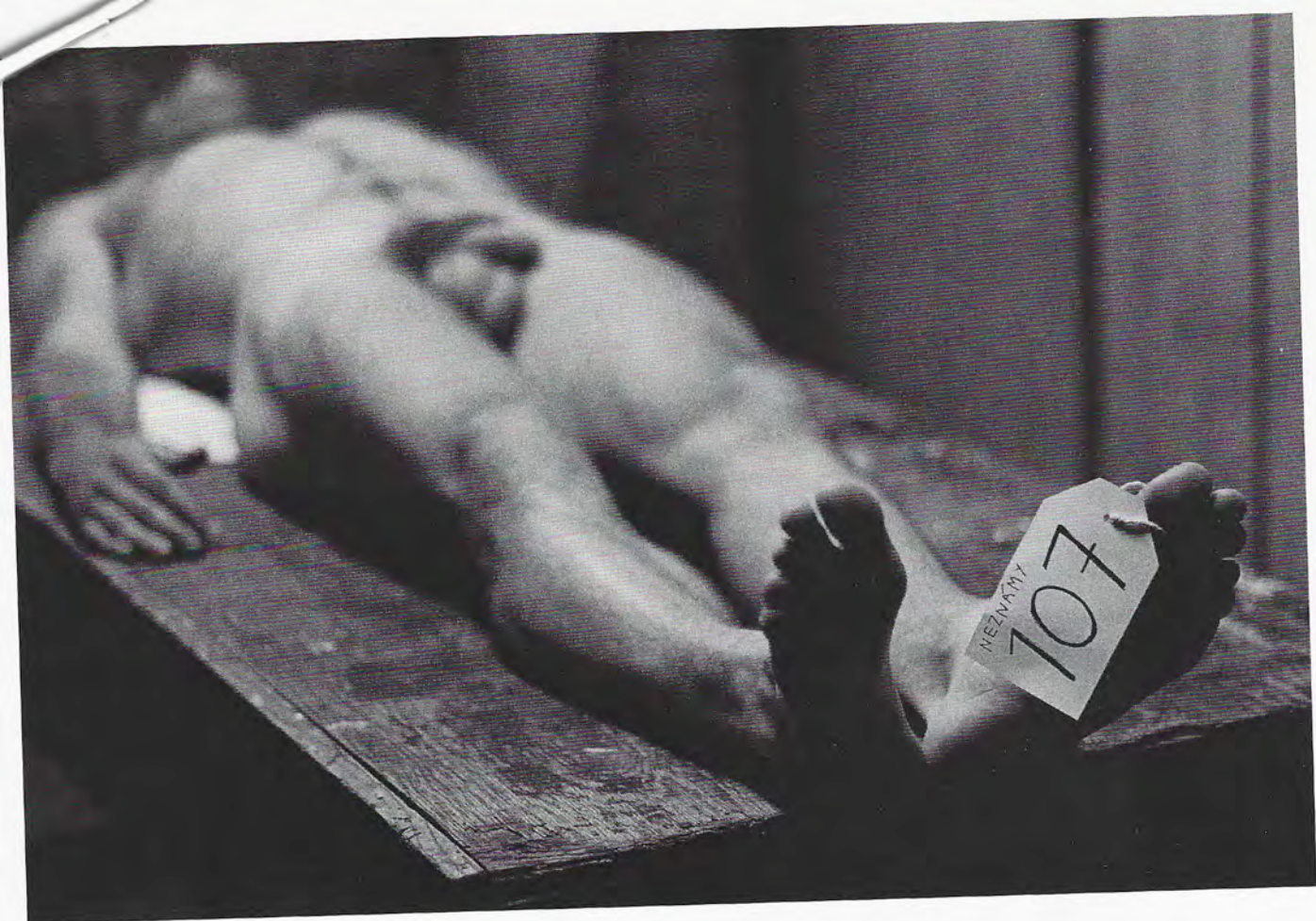
DM: There never was that "eureka" moment. It was a constant. What I got from my background was watching Ed Sullivan on television with my grandmother, and there would be some teenage crooner croaking, and my grandmother would slap me across the arm and say, "You can sing as well as he can, why aren't you on television?" You know what I mean: that kind of chutzpah you know, go get it. So I came from a work ethic.

BC: *Very blue collar?*

DM: Absolutely. But we also had this thing to get good grades. And luckily both my brother and I were very smart, and got straight As.

BC: *You were enrolled in classes at the Carnegie Institute when you were only 14. Did you have an early aptitude and interest in art?*

DM: I always used to draw. The Vienna Bakery wrapped their bread in white paper and my grandmother always let me use the papers to draw on. So I had an aesthetic itch, I just didn't know where to



SARAJEVO

In Sarajevo there's a mountain of meat,
Made of dead people unfit to eat.
With each hour this mountain grows higher,
And as it towers towards the sun,
It casts its shadow on everyone,
Not just those whose lives are done,
For all who cower in this grim shade,
Dead descends when daylight fades.
Now, where children once played their games,
Only their sad shadows remain.
Innocence soon learns there is no defense
Against its foes and our faux concerns.
When prayers fail, there is no heaven only hell.
When the savage self prevails,
Hope rots in the carcass of the city.
Why should we care with our polite pity,
Since we are here, and they are there.



The Fallen Angel, 1968, eight-part series.

scratch. But I drew then and I love drawing to this day. I don't take anything from photographers but I do take things from painters. I love Chardin and Watteau; I love Bonnard. To me the kind of pleasure and subtlety that work affords is absolutely deluxe.

BC: *Is that one of the reasons for your interest in over-painted photographs?*

DM: Absolutely and that's not finished. I think there's an interesting overlap between painting and photography. When photographers use paint, by and large, they use the martial colours and then they tint the sky blue or green. But it's really a dull picture. And then painters—like Hockney—usually do things like reinvent photography. I don't, I try to paint realistically because I like to. I'm not hip or cool at all. I try to paint things that are totally irrelevant to what's on the paper, so that in a sense the paper becomes a kind of collage. Then sometimes I would paint in terms of what was on the photographic image and I'd get lambasted.

BC: *There's one other biographical note that interests me. You served in the American Army in an armoured division. Did you see active service in Germany?*

DM: I was in Germany during the Korean War. Thank God, because if I'd gone to Korea I would be dead right now. I could write a sitcom on my experiences as a Second Lieutenant. It was quite strange, and it was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. It was my watershed of awful. I think everybody has something in their life that they measure against. This isn't as bad as having my teeth all pulled out, or as bad as being audited by the IRS. But with me it was two years of being a tank commander.

BC: *It doesn't seem to sit right somehow.*

DM: Well it didn't. I was always a year ahead, so I was a very young 21 and suddenly I got my commission as Quartermaster and they put me on tanks. I had never seen a tank in my life. You want to talk about culture shock. We're talking about getting your head blown off.

BC: *I'm very interested in the work you did in Russia in 1958. The photographs are startling because they're so blessedly unpretentious.*

DM: I began to notice it when I got home. I thought, these are really nice pictures. That was the photographic vocabulary. You stood there in the backyard with your mother looking down into her Brownie and saying, "Margaret, stand a little bit closer to Duane. That's it. Now, everybody smile." And that's how pictures were taken. Of course, I was also aware of Penn and Avedon. How could you not have been aware of their work?

BC: *Sometimes these photos—the ones taken in Russia and France—look a little bit like Diane Arbus. There's one or two of the circus images that have an edge. They're a bit unsettling.*

DM: Arbus was the beginning of what I call the "era of shock." To be a photographer in the early '60s meant you could be an Ansel Adams or a Minor White. Then Arbus showed up and she was shocking; then we got Mapplethorpe and Larry Clarke, and then Witkin and Serrano and Nan Goldin, and then Cindy Sherman with those fright wigs. So now shock is the rule of the day for all the main photographers. People tend to go for shock and don't pay any attention to nuance. Because that kind of work is very accessible. It's like Andy doing Marilyn Monroe.

BC: I find your photograph of the dead soldier in Sarajevo to be more shocking than any of Serrano's morgue photographs.

DM: Because it's about something. We're both dealing with death, but his photograph simply says what a corpse looks like. The extremely beautiful and the extremely shocking are two sides of the same coin. I don't trust them, I discount them. It's like when we were in high school in Pittsburgh; going to the morgue was a big scary turn-on. In my case, I was really upset by what was going on in Sarajevo and I was just responding to it. I'm always very wounded by the notion of people dying young. For me the key word is not photography, or writing or painting or sculpture. It's expression. If somebody says what do you do, I say I'm an expressionist. I express myself. And once you free yourself from those categories, then you can invent your own. I think artists should always reinvent whatever medium they're in. I'm not Ansel Adams or Diane Arbus, so why should my photographs look like theirs?

BC: I want to go back briefly to the morgue photo in Sarajevo. There are a couple of things I noticed right away. First of all, it is composed in the manner of a deposition painting and secondly, it's a case where Thanatos has overcome Eros. There's something very beautiful about that body, and its lifelessness is heartbreaking.

DM: There is something pathetic about it. A lot of photographers would have been happy just to have taken that picture. But I feel I could be more intimate with language. I just love language and I can rattle on for hours. I love the opening sentence so much: "In Sarajevo there's a mountain of meat. Made of dead people unfit to eat. With each hour this mountain grows higher. And as it towers towards the sun. It casts its shadow on everyone. Not just those whose lives are done." I don't give a fuck if that's literature, or what it is. What I care about is that I could get it on a piece of paper and feel good about it.

BC: You have no hesitation in making yourself vulnerable to accusations of sentimentality?

DM: No. In fact I yearn for that. I yearn for touch. I cannot bear all these poseurs dressed in black hanging out in Soho. You can touch somebody with an honest sentiment when you transcend description. But it has to be honest, otherwise you end up doing bullshit. You end up doing 10,000 white paintings like Robert Ryman. Or Cindy Sherman's self-portraits *ad nauseam*. They become art products and the work becomes a commodity. I didn't do that photograph in Sarajevo because I knew I was going to sell 10,000 of them. I'm never going to sell one. It has nothing to do with selling; it totally has to do with expression.

BC: Were you aware in the late '50s of the limitations of the medium? Or were they your own limitations?

DM: My saving grace was I knew nothing about photography. I thank God I never went to photography school.

BC: So what did you know?

DM: Well, I knew it wasn't popular and I didn't have to unlearn the rules of photography. I never learned the zone system; I don't even know how to use strobe. I'm an example of somebody who reinvented the medium in terms of my own needs. The photographic menu in those days was very narrow; it was usually reportage, some sort of documentation, some sort of



portraiture. I'm the one who literally switched the direction of photography. I've never gotten the credit so now I'm claiming it. I'm the one who literally began to tell stories, began to write with photographs, who put myself in the pictures, who dealt with issues about life after death, who dealt with the romantic, with nostalgia, with eroticism—and not in Mapplethorpe's erectional mode. He reinforced every narrow prejudice. This is the most famous gay photographer in the world and what does he show? Imagine Berlin in 1932, and finally the Nazis let a Jewish photographer have a museum exhibition. And guess what he shows us? He shows us kikes; he shows us guys with big noses counting dollar bills or leering after little girls. Those Mapplethorpe's showed us what everybody thinks gay people are like. Whips up their ass and pissing on each other in leather harnesses. None of which I've done or ever wanted to do. His own expression was so limited that all he could do was think in terms of every gay cliché in town. I loathed that somebody who was so professionally gay knew so little about the subject.

BC: *There was the lyricism of the Calla lilies.*

DM: Please. People always say, "But Duane, his flowers are beautiful." Have you ever seen an ugly flower?

BC: *Were you trying to be original? Or were you just doing what you felt compelled to do and wanted to do?*

DM: I do what I need to do. When I began to do sequences it wasn't because I thought it was cool and the latest thing. I did it out of frustration with the still photograph. I wanted to photograph what happened when you die. I think when I die I'll walk away from my Duane suit. I could go to a funeral home and stand there for days and never see a spirit leave the body. I had to make that happen. And I had to do it in a series of pictures.

BC: *You've never accepted the limitations of the single photograph?*

DM: No, I've always worked around it. Actually I'm the wolf in the hen house. Now that I'm writing more and more the photograph itself becomes a key. It's a key to the text but it's not key to the experience.



Joseph Cornell in his bedroom on Utopia Parkway, Flushing, Queens, 1972.



René Magritte, 1965.

facing page: There Are Things Here Not Seen In This Photograph, 1977.

BC: *In work like There Are Things Here Not Seen in This Photograph you construct such an elaborate narrative around a single image that it seems to be more about writing than it is about the image?*

DM: People assume that the film has told them what was happening at that moment and that's not true. I try to deal with all the other things that are being experienced; the things you could never see. The temperature, my thirst, the music, watching a roach, a panhandler coming towards me and having to pee. That was the real experience. See, I'm the freest photographer in the world. I can do anything I want. I can write about the most obscure notion. I can go after any subject. It's so wonderful I cannot tell you. At 66

years of age, when most people have one foot in the grave and the other foot in Florida playing golf, I've never been busier. I've never had more exhibitions than I have right now.

BC: *I don't know the exact sequence, but when did Robert Frank start to write on photographs?*

DM: As far as I can tell—and I'm not a Frank authority—it happened when he moved up to Nova Scotia. Of course, he's my great photo hero of the 20th century. Although I've never taken anything from him, I have enormous respect for the poetry of his reality. It was a hard poetry. Bresson's was a sweet poetry, more a greeting card poetry. But Frank's was very hard and eloquent.



THERE ARE THINGS HERE NOT SEEN IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH

My shirt was wet with perspiration. The beer tasted good, but I was still thirsty. Some drunk was talking loudly to another drunk about Nixon. I watched a roach walk slowly along the edge of a bar stool. On the juke box Glen Campbell began to sing about "Southern Nights." I had to go to the men's room. a derelict began to walk towards me to ask for money. It was time to leave.

BC: So there are serendipities that you're quite happy to take advantage of?

DM: Absolutely, I'm completely open to the possibility of these little perks that happen. But I don't think a portrait should show what somebody looks like. I think it should deal with what somebody's about. Like the Magritte portrait; you don't really see what he looks like but to me that's the perfect portrait. Somebody else would have done a picture of Magritte just standing there looking at you, but I loved playing within the context of what he did. Or the Warhol where he covers his face, or where, in three pictures, he blurs himself out.

BC: It's kind of an erased Warhol.

DM: Yes it is, because there's nobody there. There's that wonderful quote from Gertrude Stein referring to Oakland, California: "When you get there, there's no there there." Well with Andy, there was never a there there, either. And I'm not talking in the Zen sense. The thing about Warhol is that he legitimized banality and boredom. Andy became a very specific personality but the personality he presented was, "Tell me what to do; tell me what to say." He presented himself as not being there. He was always asking people for ideas.

BC: You use the phrase "the banality of perfection" and it's something you clearly want to avoid. What's interesting is that it comes up in your book next to a perfect triptych of Richard Gere, who many agree is among the most beautiful men in the world.

DM: Let me answer this way. I was working in Alabama and I had to photograph a doctor. He had this assistant who was a very beautiful young fellow but his eye had been damaged. Apparently when he was a kid he had been hit with a stick or something. He had this perfect face but it was the flaw that saved him from the banality of perfection. I prefer women who have a slight flaw to all those perfect models in the magazines. What is intriguing is not the ordinariness of perfection but the vulnerability of imperfection.

BC: Does it still knock the wind out of you when you see a human being who is that beautiful?

DM: Yeah. I was working today with a model and I marvelled, yet again, at how anybody could be so absolutely stunning. I always say that the portrait should not be about beauty, it should be about truth, and truth is not necessarily pretty.

BC: How much of an influence was your Catholic upbringing? It's a difficult tradition to escape.

DM: I became a Buddhist. When I left Catholicism, I left with very good reasons and I arrived someplace else for better reasons.

BC: But your narrative frames—paradise regained and the fallen angel—seem to have come out of Christian thinking?

DM: When I was a sophomore in college I began asking questions and part of my questioning involved reading a book called *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill. I didn't know what the hell I was reading and I saw no references that I could relate to being an ex, or a transient Catholic. And so I've meditated for eight years and have been immersed in the subject. Always as an amateur, not a professional.

BC: But when I look at a piece like *Paradise Regained*, I see you clearly playing within a structure given to us through the redemptive Christian narrative.

DM: Well, if you stripped us of our cars and clothes and air conditioning—all those things that we think make us so civilized—we'd be returning to our true state. And if you reduced us to what we are naturally—without any adornments or cultural decorations—that's what we'd end up being, what we've always been, and what we will be when we die. So I just wanted to eliminate everything and reduce us to our natural state: the eternal him and her.

BC: How do you get away with a piece like *The Fallen Angel*? You do things that nobody else would even dare doing. What was the idea behind the simple narrative frame of the story?

DM: Very simply, it was loss of innocence. Once something occurs you can never go back to what happened, something as simple as losing your virginity, some sort of encounter, some sort of disaster or reward. But when you're profoundly

changed it's simply about the perpetual loss of innocence.

BC: The beauty and the purity of so much of your work is that it's an attempt to reconstitute the notion of innocence.

DM: Well, I admire it. I also think there is a time when one shouldn't be innocent. I wrote that piece which goes, "She was beautiful and kind and innocent, but she had been innocent too long. And her innocence was growing hard inside of her like a stone and one day she would be destroyed by the weight of the stone."

BC: Have you read a lot of Blake?

DM: Well, yeah. But his kind of idealized heavenly innocence is something else. There are moments when innocence can lose its sweetness and become something tarnished.

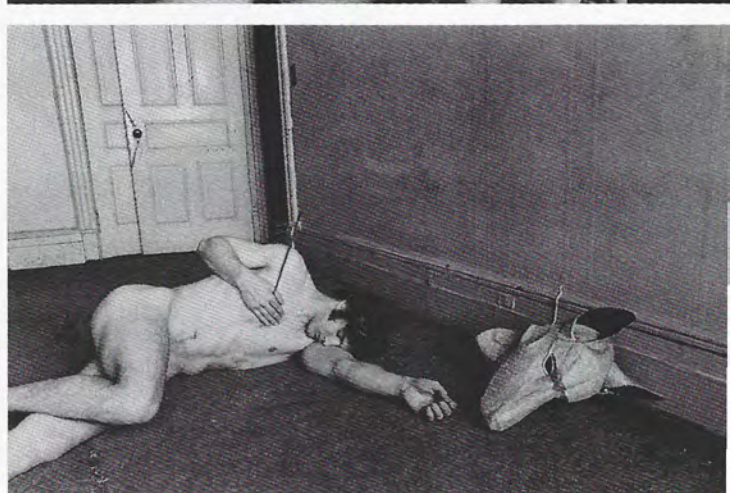
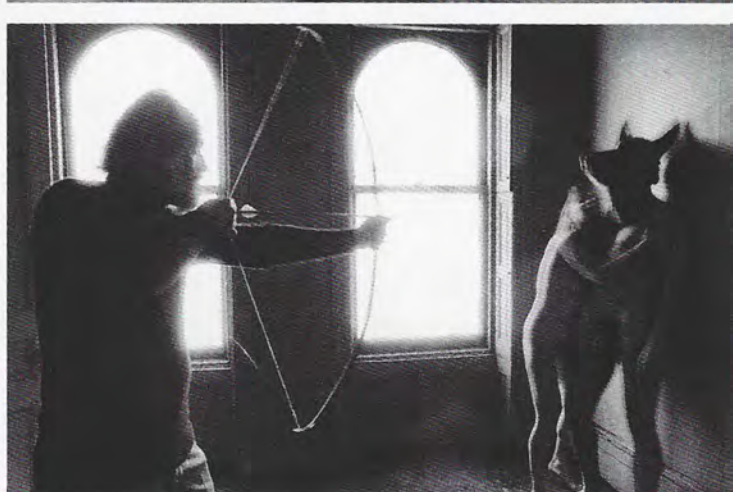
BC: Speaking about innocence, what is it about Whitman that so captivates you and so many American artists?

DM: I think it's his directness. He wrote and dealt with issues that were not sweet. He was not a sweet writer; he was a vigorous writer. I don't think people should do work that looks like art and I don't think people should write something that sounds sweetly poetic. I don't think Whitman was writing for other poets, he was writing to the people, so there's that democratic directness. He's always addressing the viewer.

BC: He also sings this fabulous song of himself, which gave permission for how the self could figure so prominently in the making of art. I imagine that would appeal very much to the kind of art that you make?

DM: A lot of the work is confessional. It comes from the position that the only true knowledge is direct experience. And photographers are always photographing other people's lives, people they know nothing about and can only deal with in the most peripheral way. The only truth one knows is one's own, and Whitman spoke directly from that centre. See I've always maintained that everything is a subject for photography and I think he felt the same way: that everything was a subject for poetry. And he dealt with political issues when he wrote the poem, "To a Common Prostitute." Even today that would be outrageous.

facing page: *The Old Man Kills the Minotaur*, 1976, eight-part series.



BC: And his notion of singing the body electric, as well as the bawdy electric.

DM: Yes. There's a certain kind of vigour here and he always referred to manly things. Of course, a great deal of that came from his homosexual yearning.

interested in the way things operate spiritually, but I'm very much intrigued by the very structure of nature. This is really hard.

BC: So you represented a micro rather than a macro view in a sequence like *The Human Condition*?

etched in our memory, but just one alone would have said the whole thing. As I get older I'm asking more and more questions, and I don't know what anything is any more. I have no idea who's speaking. It's very curious because at its most profound level I don't know where these shots are coming from.

BC: How conscious are you of the whole notion of mortality? I think of Marvel's great line, "At my back I always hear, time's winged chariot hurrying near." It occurs to me that your work has gone quite far in this direction. I'm thinking of something like *Self Portrait As If I Were Dead*.

DM: Oh yeah. I've addressed the subject from the very first sequences where the spirit leaves the body. I have an enormous interest in the subject and it's what I call a real obsession. I'm very interested in the nature of time. We are constantly changing and I'm fascinated by the nature of change itself, beyond the implications of all the changes that take place in us.

BC: You have a wonderful phrase where you talk about your true self as "that random and elusive thing decorated with personality."

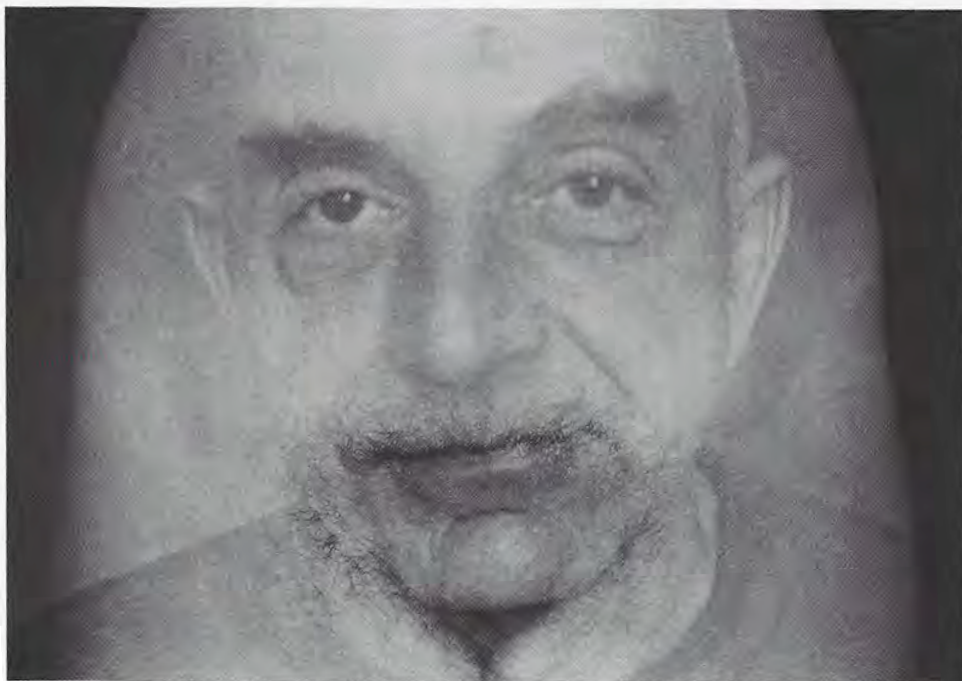
DM: I love that idea. The Buddhists say that our true nature is to be a clearness and this clearness, like a mirror, believes what it experiences to be itself.

BC: So would scanning your work give me an insight into your "true self"?

DM: Yeah. I think we're all decorated with personality. But I think only after you're 20 do you begin to examine the truth of those decorations.

BC: Actually your sense of the human condition, "as a brilliant and unknown moment suspended between memory and anticipation," does very well as a description of how your photography operates.

DM: That's where it's coming from. I don't separate my photography from my life. For me photography isn't when I pick up a camera and go on the street. That's when I take the picture. It's the entire process. The picture taking is in some ways the easiest part. ♦



Self portrait with Feminine Beard, 1982.

BC: Is your shared interest in the quotidian what attracts you to a poet like Cavafy?

DM: I think Cavafy and Whitman were the two greatest poets about gay subjects. Cavafy could be very painfully direct in the same way that Whitman was. He also came from the same point of view—the "I" speaking.

BC: To briefly return to Whitman: is there something about him and his "barbaric yawp" that is essentially located in the American grain?

DM: He addressed that very clearly and I think it was central. He wanted to be the great poet of democracy.

BC: What are you working on now?

DM: I think my next exhibit may be about quantum physics. Not only am I

DM: It's both. I'm just getting into it, so it's extremely difficult. In this case I'm trying to photograph what is truly unphotographable. But it has to be done in a way that it doesn't look like a didactic illustration in a book of physics.

BC: I think of your work as representing a kind of pragmatic transcendence. Does that phrase make any sense to you?

DM: I'm pragmatic in the sense that I'm dealing with the actual thing itself, with the fact of it and the way it works. And I'm also dealing with something that transcends. When I did the Sarajevo thing, I became very specific about what that body was in the writing. It wasn't a body any more; it was a specific body of a dead soldier. You don't have to photograph a million dead people to deal with the idea of political murder. You just need one person. We all have those Auschwitz pictures