

A Failed Attempt to Photograph Reality, 1976

A FAILED ATTEMPT TO PHOTOGRAPH REALITY

How foolish of me to believe that it would be that easy. I had confused the appearances of trees and people and automobiles with reality itself and believed that a photograph of these transient appearances, to be record of it I own a reflection photographing other reflections within reflections. It is a momentarily truth, but I must always fail. To photograph reality is to photograph nothing.

While quietly exploring on a wholly personal level the human psyche and matters of the spirit, Duane Michals has inadvertently expanded the established boundaries of the photograph. In 1966, finding that he had more to say than could be contained in one single image, Michals was the first to present a fable or allegory in a sequence of photographic prints. In 1974, feeling the limits of the photographic images themselves, Michals augmented these images with an accompanying narrative handwritten on the border of the prints. Though he has confounded the purists, both innovations have altered the directions of contemporary photography.

Michals was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania (also Andy Warhol's birthplace) in 1932. As a teenager he attended Saturday art classes at the Carnegie Institute. After graduating from the University of Denver, he served in the army and later attended the Parsons School of Design.

On a 1958 trip to Russia, at the age of twenty-six, Michals took his first photographs with a borrowed Argus C3. Within a couple of years Michals gave up his career as a graphic designer (he had been assistant art editor of Dance Magazine and had designed the ubiquitous blow-in subscription cards for Time Magazine.) to pursue his interest in photography. With good luck and very little delay he became a successful commercial photographer covering major assignments for such publications as Esquire, Vogue and Scientific American. His accomplishments in that area continue to grow. Choosing to draw a sharp distinction between the work he does for others and the work he does for himself, Michals comfortably manages a dual career in photography.

Profoundly influenced by the Surrealists, Michals has used

photography not to record the physical world as he finds it around him but rather to create visual images which probe inner realities. In 1966 Michals created his first staged photograph in which he used actors in tableau. Based on The Street a painting by Balthus, it is called After Balthus. Shortly following this Michals produced his first sequences. It is in these important works that he first emerged as a choreographer of hidden fears, hidden dreams and hidden truths.

The most important work - imagination and perception - goes on in Michals' head. Each piece is carefully worked out before he ever assembles the actors and picks up his camera. He has consistently confined his technique to the simplest aspects of the camera, resisting the use of special materials or equipment. Perhaps because he remains open to the "life" of inanimate objects, he has made extensive use of double exposures and blurred images sometimes intentionally, other times welcoming them as serendipitous gifts from the camera itself.

It is important to acknowledge that Michals' artistic independence - his seeming obliviousness to the traditional conventions of the medium - stems directly from the total earnestness of his personal search for clarification of difficult psychological and metaphysical issues. He feels that both daily routine and art too often serve to distract human beings from meaningful contemplation of latently prevalent concerns such as, for example, what happens to the consciousness after death. Michals resolutely refuses to be distracted from these concerns. From his courage to ask insoluble questions (rather than from inventive darkroom technique) comes the sense of mystery and strange journey so

integral to his work.

A new work by the artist is exhibited publicly for the first time in this current exhibition. Entitled A Failed Attempt To Photograph Reality it suggests that Michals' quest may lead us to new levels of awareness about the possibilities and the limitations of photography. Whether or not it does, the piece itself is likely to stand as an important work in the history of photography.

Michals lives in New York City where he is represented by Light Gallery.

AMK

I believe in the invisible.

[About his first staged photograph, After Balthus:] For me it was a revelation. I could create my own photographs. Once I realized that a whole world opened up. I didn't have to wait for something to happen in front of my lens. I could do anything with the camera I wanted to do.

[About his use of friends and relatives in his early sequences:] When I was just starting out, it was kind of difficult to walk up to a stranger and say, look, you're going to be the spirit leaving the body. Right off that sounds a little banana-land.

I think we are all stars but we don't know it. We are all, each one, a universe but we don't know it. We walk heavy to the earth and we are pulled down by the gravity of our ignorance. Why are we stuck here like this? I don't know.

As quoted by Ronald Bailey, The Photographic Illusion: Duane Michals, 1975

Works in MATRIX:

Sailor in Minsk, 1958, photograph, 8" x 10".

Boy in Leningrad, 1958, photograph, 8" x 10".

Russian Woman, 1958, photograph, 8" x 10".

Andy Warhol, 1958, photograph, 8" x 10".

After Balthus, 1966, photograph, 8" x 10".

People Eat People, 1972-73, a sequence of six photographs, 5" x 7" each.

The Human Condition, 1968-69, a sequence of six photographs, 5" x 7" each.

Fireflies in My Hand, 1973, photograph, 8" x 10".

A Letter from My Father, 1975, photograph with hand-written text, 8" x 10".

Duane Michals, Self Portrait by Stefan Mihal, 1975, photograph with hand-written text, 8" x 10".

Take One and See Mt. Fujiyama, 1975, a sequence of fifteen photographs with hand-written text, 8" x 10" each.

The Man in the Room, 1975, a sequence of seven photographs with hand-written text, 5" x 7 1/8" each.

A Failed Attempt to Photograph Reality, 1976, hand-written text on fixed photographic paper, 8" x 10".

All photographs courtesy of the artist.

Selected one-man exhibitions:  
Underground Gallery, NYC '63  
(first), '65, '68; The Art In-  
stitute of Chicago '68; Museum  
of Modern Art, NYC '70; The  
George Eastman House, Rochester  
'71; Museum of New Mexico, Santa  
Fe '72; Galerie Delpire, Paris  
'73; International Cultural  
Center, Antwerp '73; Light  
Gallery, NYC '75.

Selected group exhibitions:  
"Photography in the Twentieth  
Century," National Gallery of  
Canada, Ottawa '67; "Portraits,"  
Museum of Modern Art, NYC '69;  
"Contemporary Photographers,"  
U.C.L.A. Art Galleries, Los  
Angeles '69; Visual Arts  
Gallery, School for the Visual  
Arts, NYC '71; "Photographs of  
Woman," Museum of Modern Art '71.

Selected bibliography by Michals:  
Take One and See Mt. Fuji-  
yama and Other Sequences, Addison  
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Sequences, Doubleday & Co.  
(Garden City, NJ) '70.  
The Journey of the Spirit  
After Death Winter House Ltd.  
(New York) '71.  
Things Are Queer Fotogalerie  
Wilde (Cologne) '73.

Selected bibliography about  
Michals:

Coleman, A.D. "Shows We've  
Seen," Popular Photography, vol.  
68, no. 2 (February '71), p. 53.

Rosenheck, Natalie. "Duane  
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Popular Photography, vol. 69,  
no. 6 (Dec '71) p. 126.

Ratcliff, Carter. "New York,"  
Artforum, vol. 11, no. 4 (De-  
cember '72) p. 91.

Greenberg, Jane. "More Than  
One," Modern Photography, vol.  
37, no. 3 (February '73) p. 76.

Szarkowski, John. Looking At  
Photographs, Museum of Modern  
Art (New York) '73.

Frampton, Hollis. "Incisions  
in History/Segments of Eternity,"  
Artforum, vol. 13, no. 2 (Oc-  
tober '74), pp. 48-50.

Grundberg, Andy. "Duane  
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ica, vol. 63, no. 3 (May-June  
'75), pp. 78-79.

Bailey, Ronald R. The Photo-  
graphic Illusion: Duane Michals  
Thomas Crowell (New York) '75.

Kozloff, Max. "Photos Within  
Photographs," Artforum, vol. 14,  
no. 6 (February '76) pp. 34-39.