

# Duane Michals: Photographer, Storyteller

DAVID B. BOYCE

**I**N DUANE MICHALS' 1973 nine-image photographic sequence entitled "Things Are Queer," the depicted objects and model (and a viewer's perception of them) change scale increasingly with Magrittian surreality as the sequence is followed, but there appear to be no representations, indicators, or signifiers of anything that could be construed specifically as gay. Sometimes, however, looking at photographic images can be deceiving, which is an especially important fact to keep in mind when looking at the photographic art of Duane Michals.

As a seventy-year-old gay photographer whose art over the past 44 years has from time to time dealt with gay themes, Michals has been acknowledged internationally as an innovator in the medium. Represented in the permanent collections of over sixty major art museums and institutions, in over 22 states and in fifteen countries, Michals has had full-scale retrospective exhibitions mounted in Great Britain, France, and the U.S. France honored him in 1993 with his induction as an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters, and just last year the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh announced the acquisition of his artistic archives.

From the mid-1960's to the present, Duane Michals has created photographic art that is antitraditionalist. His early training did not include the formal study of photography or its techniques, so its rules never limited him. Relying instead on his intuitive creativity and expressive needs—albeit influenced by such Surrealist painters as Magritte, de Chirico, and Balthus, and by writers of magic realism and metaphysics—Michals reintroduced such photographic tricks and techniques as double exposure, blurring, and mirror image, at that time disdained by mainstream photographers.

Successful as a commercial photographer since the late 1950's, Duane Michals began exhibiting what he calls his "personal work" in New York in 1963. By the early 1970's he had built an impressive exhibition history and a bibliography of favorable critical response to his work. In handwritten narratives in the print margins of the individual images and sequences of his work—which were wholly devised *mise-en-scène* playlets—Michals addressed human emotions that were essentially intangible and interior. Wrote the eminent photography writer A. D. Coleman, an early Michals admirer and enthusiast: "Perhaps Michals' most significant creative achievement is the precise coordination between his prose voice and his imagistic sensibility. Through those intertwined communication systems he has enabled himself to address an assortment of recurrent concerns that were not previously assumed to be accessible to photographic investigation."

*David B. Boyce, a freelance arts writer living in New Bedford, Mass., curated the Nov. 2002 exhibition, "Duane Michals Unlimited 1958-2002," for the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.*

Evidence of Michals' gay sensibility appeared early in his work, however encoded within a generalized humanism. Cultural writer and photography historian, Allen Ellen Zweig, author of *The Homoerotic Photograph* (1992), observed that while Michals often employed nude models of both sexes, "The subtext of homoerotic desire can be decoded by those male viewers attracted to the idealized youthful physique." For example, in the contact sheet *Untitled, 1967*, the rhythms of movement engendered by the turning physique recall the locomotion studies of Eadweard Muybridge, E. J. Marey, or Thomas Eakins. Yet the informality of the poses and the striking beauty of the model's well-proportioned muscularity in the caress of natural light invite additional readings. Of this work Michals is quoted as having said (in 1979's *Nude: Theory*): "I was interested not in the mechanics of how the legs and arms operate, but in the aesthetic quality of what the body does, in the sheer pleasure of observing the body moving in a circle." This sense of enjoyment in the body's motion extends to its longer-term propensity to change over time: "I have photographed this particular man through the years, and it is interesting to see how his body developed after he began to work out. Here you can see the potential; step by step he matured and fulfilled that promise." This sentiment, in turn, is echoed and romanticized in a later work depicting a full-length nude male figure, his arms raised to remove a tee-shirt over his head, shielding his face. The accompanying lines of text by Michals reads, "He was unaware that at the exact moment he removed his undershirt, his body had grown to its perfection. With his next breath, the moment had passed."

In 1970 Michals produced a six-image sequence entitled *Chance Meeting*, which is among his best-known works. While it depicts an encounter that is hardly the exclusive province of gay experience, it is one regularly familiar to many gay men. For the non-gay viewer, the aura of erotic possibility such an encounter can generate may remain unseen and unfelt, but it is these kinds of events, and the broad range of responses to them, that make Michals' work so accessible to a general audience.

A photograph with text from 1976, *Certain Words Must Be Said*, can be interpreted as a crisis of feelings between two women, possibly lovers. Ellen Zweig has written of this work, "What is 'happening' between the two women is not represented. Yet Michals' handwritten caption suggests we are witness to a female intimacy of profound delicacy and tension." The text for this work reads:

Things had become impossible between them and nothing could be salvaged. Certain words must be said. And although each one had said the words a hundred times to herself, they had never said them to each other out loud. So they began to hope someone would say the words for them. Perhaps a letter might arrive, or a telegram delivered that would say what needed to be said. Now they spent their days waiting. What else could they do?

Writes Ellenzweig: "Note that among the words never said is 'lesbian.' This is entirely appropriate to Michals, whose desire to photograph the things we cannot see relies not on social categories but on feelings. 'Lesbian' is a social construct, no more or less than 'gay' or 'homosexual,' yet among the words that must be said but that can never be photographed are 'I love you,' 'I need you,' or 'I don't love you anymore.'"

Michals isn't interested, photographically, in the mechanics of sex or its genital apparatus. What intrigues him is the atmosphere and aura of sexual possibility, the building and releasing of erotic tensions, something that is common to all sexual orientations. However, a previously unpublished seven-image series from ca. 1975, *The Blue Sequence*, depicts oral sex between men. Nevertheless, it evokes a kind of archetypal apprehension or fear that all men can experience in the sexual act, regardless of whether it's happening in a specifically gay context. This piece also elicits a humorous reaction, embellished as it is with a certain outlandish absurdity.

Among photography analysts and writers, it is commonly agreed that the project announcing Michals' "coming out" was a 1978 deluxe edition portfolio (and later book) entitled *Homage to Cavafy*. Ten of Michals' photographs with text accompany ten poems by the 20th-century Greek poet, not illustrations for the verses as such, but instead works with elements both "separate and sympathetic," in Michals' words. His introductory passage unequivocally conveys his passions and perspectives:

Constantine Cavafy was a man of great feeling and even greater courage. His poetry was his life. And because he was a man who loved other men, he demonstrated his courage by making public these private passions. He lived then, as we still do today, among those brute people who would literally destroy him both physically and spiritually for the unforgivable sin of loving the wrong person. Despite this vulnerability, he wrote about the truth of himself with painful honesty, and the strength of his art protected him and freed others. I salute his courage and thank him for the gift of his life.

With the rise of Reagan and the Moral Majority in the 1980's, Michals concerns at times turned to outrage. The AIDS epi-



demic was then cutting its initial, devastating swath through the gay and creative communities, leaving a trail of loss that the government largely ignored. Medical solutions were frustratingly elusive. Having eschewed the Catholicism of his youth, having adopted instead a more humanist perspective culled from other disciplines and systems of thought such as Buddhism, metaphysics, mysticism, and his own experience, Michals abhorred what he regarded as human rights abuses that resulted from the inappropriate alliance of church and state.

Of several sharply critical political pieces he made across that decade, one photograph with text is entitled *Salvation*. Created in 1984, the powerful image speaks for itself; its indicting text reads:

No American citizen has the right to impose his private morality on any other American citizen, which is exactly the political agenda of some organized religions today. Millions of women have been victims of these churches' intrusions into their most private and painful decision, whether to have or not have an abortion. Millions of gays and lesbians have been victims of these churches' assaults on gay rights legislation, which would simply protect them from housing and job discrimination, rights assumed by all heterosexual citizens. If one does not have the freedom to make his most intimate choices without fear, one does not have any freedom at all.

Duane Michals may not be a gay household name like Mapplethorpe, Ritts, or Weber, but it should be, because his work goes beyond a focus principally on glorifying the perfect male physique. To be sure, the history of male nude art photography has hardly escaped Michals, and he readily admits to being "a victim of the Greek ideal" when selecting his models. Unlike other photographers whose work is classified as homoerotic, Michals insists on locating his gay perspective and homoerotic response within a matrix of shared human experience, refusing to define gay sex or identity as radically separate from the larger human condition.

And he's still hard at work. In fact, Michals' has just created what is perhaps his magnum opus of personal memory and innovative imagery, a work entitled *The House I Once Called Home: A Photographic Memoir with Verse*. This 25-

*Chance Meeting*, 1970. Courtesy of the artist and Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY.

image epic, which includes a highly personal memoir, in verse, that spills his own and his family's secrets, was inspired by a visit back to the house of his birth in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, just south of Pittsburgh. The structure and property are now abandoned, overgrown, and dilapidated, but while walking among the weeds and crumbling rooms, taking photographs, Michals aligned his lens to match the angle of pictures he'd taken years before. With manipulated double-exposures, the work is comprised of individual pictures and three-image sequences, in which the vacant and decaying rooms of the house eerily re-emerge as decorated, lived in, and populated by members of the Michals family.

About midway through this remarkable work of memory, the viewer comes upon the photograph of a title panel from a "Prince Valiant" comic strip, as seen in Sunday papers. The verse text reveals how Michals discovered his attraction to men at the age of fifteen by seeing the comic strip hero captured and "stripped to a kind of thong": "I hid the comics in a drawer, so I could peek/ at his physique encore./ Desire had whispered in



*Certain Words Must Be Said*, 1976. Courtesy of the artist and Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY.

my mind,/ thoughts I never heard before./ Now as I decline, in the ripening of time,/ I've forgotten what those thoughts once were." The art of Duane Michals achieves a direct communication with viewers at an unusually profound and intimate level—a rare occurrence in an age of cheap emotion and spammed ideas.

## ESSAY

# A Maori Writer in Two Worlds

MARGARET MEKLIN

**W**ITI IHIMAERA was born in 1944, in Gisborne, New Zealand, into the Te Aitanga A Mahaki, Rongowhakaata, and Ngati Porou tribes. The New Zealand writer and poet Bill Manhire once noted that if *Moby Dick* were translated into the Maori language, its introduction would be titled "Call me Ihimaera." The Ihimaera is a Maori version of the name Ishmael. His nickname is "Wicked" Ihimaera.

Ihimaera emerged as a writer in the 1970's, a time of Maori renaissance in the arts. In 1972 he published his first book, *Pounamu, Pounamu*, a collection of short stories. New Zealand Prime Minister Norman Kirk read the book and selected Ihimaera to serve in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a diplomat Ihimaera served in Canberra, New York, and Washington. In his acknowledgments to *The Uncle's Story* (2000), he remembers the grief surrounding the unveiling of the AIDS Quilt in Wash-

ington in 1997. His second book, *Tangi* (1973), which tenderly portrays a boy who learns about his father's death, is considered the first novel written by a Maori writer. Currently Ihimaera is teaching in Auckland and has compiled and edited a number of anthologies, one of which is called *Growing up Maori* (1998).

With his curious mind and restless feet, Ihimaera is still surprised by his achievements, by his transition from a suburban youth into a famous writer. In a personal letter to me, he remarked that "it was Richard Ford who emphasized that passion is worth more than form or style in writing. I like to think that, if anything, people might remember my work for its passion and subversive energy." Of his two gay books, Ihimaera prefers *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995) to *The Uncle's Story*. In 2002 a movie based on Ihimaera's novel *Whale Rider* (1988) was screened in New Zealand and later will be shown at the Toronto Film Festival.

Witi Ihimaera considers English to be his primary language for articulating his visions of Maori identity. In an interview with Paul Sharrad he said that the Maori language is "sacred" for him, and that English is a "profane" language. He also notes that if his works were written in Maori, they would not reach as wide an

*Margaret Meklin, a native of St. Petersburg, Russia, living in San Francisco, will bring out a collection of short stories (in Russian) in 2003.*

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