



Michals, Duane (b. 1932)

by Mark Allen Svede

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Homoerotic photography has existed almost from the photographic medium's nineteenth-century inception, but more than a century passed before photographer Duane Michals discovered ways in which photography might represent same-sex love and spirituality as compellingly as it did same-sex desire.

Befitting an artist whose works often surrender their meaning gradually, Duane Michals did not become a photographer in the most direct, immediate manner. Born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania on February 18, 1932 to working-class parents, Michals first took an interest in art as a teenager, enrolling in watercolor classes at the Carnegie Institute in nearby Pittsburgh.

Undergraduate art courses at the University of Denver exposed him to the work of Magritte and other Surrealists, whose oblique, associative methods would eventually inform Michals's self-described quest to "go beyond description" to "reveal the subject not as it looks, but how it feels."

Believing his life's vocation to be graphic design, Michals briefly attended the Parsons School of Design and held various jobs in the publishing industry. During a 1958 trip to the USSR, however, Michals discovered that photography was his *métier* and passion.

Self-taught, Michals became a successful commercial photographer within a decade's time, a career that continues to this day and has encompassed projects ranging from *Vogue* fashion spreads to *Life* magazine cover shots, from advertising imagery to album cover art.

But it is the noncommercial photography of Duane Michals that represents his primary contribution to queer visual culture. As early as 1970, Michals plotted the psychic terrain of urban gay life with his series *Chance Meeting*, in which two men are seen to cruise each other within the sharply receding space of an alley that communicates both the encounter's intensity and also its potential for alienation.

The Unfortunate Man (1978) allegorizes the crippling personal effects of gay criminalization, combining photographic image and coarsely handwritten text in what would become Michals's distinctive style. His frequent incorporation of textual elements is not only Michals's accounting for reality beyond the visible world, but also his unassuming participation in the gay literary tradition that occasioned two books of photographic homages: *Homage to Cavafy* (1978) and *Salute, Walt Whitman* (1996).

(Among Michals's two dozen books and catalogues, there is also a tribute to René Magritte, with whom Michals shared a fondness for sophisticated visual humor.)

With the publication of his illustrations of ten homoerotic poems by Constantine Cavafy, Michals identified himself publicly as gay, and thereafter one finds in his oeuvre images of tremendous tenderness between men, for example, *Just to Light His Cigarette Was a Pleasure* (1978) and *How Nice to Watch You Take a Bath* (1986).

It should be mentioned that Michals's meditations on human affection were never exclusively gay. Indeed, the impartiality with which the artist's lens has shifted focus among variously gendered pairings is perhaps his most profound commentary on the protean nature of the heart and sexuality.

At the same time, however, the prevalence of male nudes in these works leaves little doubt as to the photographer's orientation, just as Michals makes it clear that he subscribes to classical Western notions of physical beauty.

It is also significant that Michals has often cast himself as a character within his narrative-driven photographic sequences, exposing not only his body but also his personal stake in these open-ended discussions of attraction, aging, desire, love and mortality.

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<http://www.pdn-pix.com/legends3/michals/>

About the Author

Mark Svede is a historian and curator whose work often addresses marginalized artists and communities. He publishes extensively about Latvian visual culture, ranging from nonconformist art and underground film to hippie fashion and dissident architecture. He also works as a residential architect.