

Silly, serious,



*This photograph is my proof
This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon,
when things were still good between us, and she embraced me,
and we were so happy. It did happen, she did love me
Look see for yourself!*

duane michals 1967

STORYTELLER: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF DUANE MICHALS
MARCH 7–JUNE 21, 2015

The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, organized *Storyteller: The Photographs of Duane Michals*. Major funding was provided by The Henry L. Hillman Fund. The East India Marine Associates of the Peabody Essex Museum also provided support.

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Duane Michals, *This Photograph Is My Proof*, 1967. The Henry L. Hillman Fund. Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

sentimental

MEET PHOTOGRAPHER DUANE MICHALS

BY LISA KOSAN, CONNECTIONS EDITOR

One way or another, Duane Michals tells stories. They are revealed through photographs in the hundreds of exhibitions he's mounted and in the 30 or so books he's produced. Get him talking and you'll learn about the times he watched *Bonanza* with René Magritte or took pictures of Sting for the cover of *Synchronicity* or of a seedling growing up through the floor of his abandoned childhood home outside of Pittsburgh.

What else does he like to talk about?

"Ask me," he says, "How does it feel to be Duane Michals?" So I ask.

"It feels good!" says Michals, who turned 83 in February. "I've been able to express everything on my mind and I took a lot of risks. I might be on the cusp of death but I have all of my noodies." Michals' use of humor — to disarm, to provoke, to entertain — never takes a break. He says it's important if you're serious, which he is, to also be ridiculous. But seriously, he says, he has a "nice history."

At 15, he took a bus to harvest wheat in Texas, a "disastrous but amazing experience" that convinced him to seek adventure. At 26 he saved \$1,000 and borrowed a camera to go to Russia, where he produced photographs that would yield his first exhibition and establish his career.

Storyteller, the retrospective that opens at PEM on March 7, reveals Michal's inventiveness, his philosophy on life (see related story) and his hunger over the decades to advance photography into new artistic spaces. He's best known for his sequences of images, brilliant painting on tintypes and handwritten annotations.

"Everything I did grew out of my frustration with the medium, the silence of the still picture," he says, so he found the "wiggle room." With sequences, he could add drama before and after the decisive moment. Having his subjects move created ethereal

Duane Michals decided to wear a clown nose for this recent portrait for PEM. Photo courtesy of Randy Duchaine. © 2015.

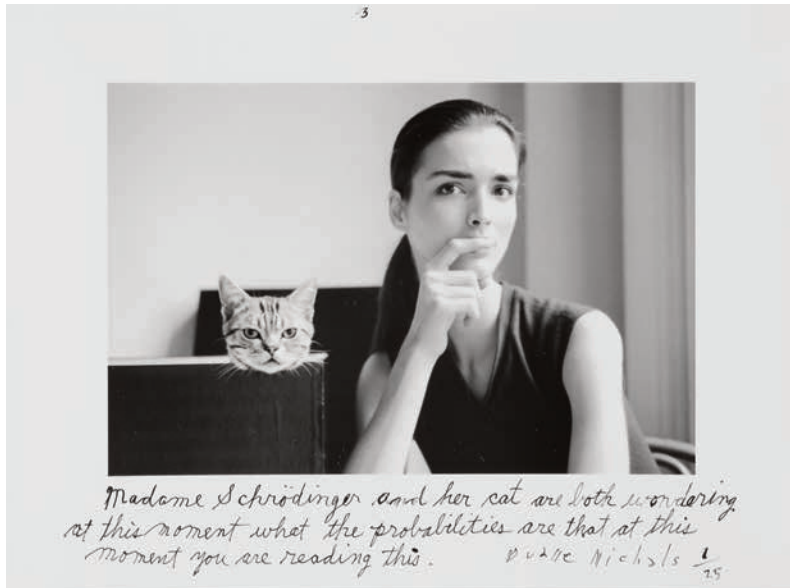
images and an awareness of time's passage. Layering negatives challenged preconceptions.

Language, Michals says, has always been associated with photographs. A newspaper caption might tell you that 20 inches of snow fell on Boston or Vladimir Putin arrived by plane at the Olympics. "I write about what cannot be seen," he says. "My text picks up where the photograph fails. *This Photograph is my Proof*, a "nice picture" of his cousin and new bride at Michals' grandmother's house, is metaphorically "out of focus" until Michals adds the text (see image at left).

Michals uses a pen nib and ink to enhance his visual stories, writing in cursive or all capitals depending on his mood. "I like the

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Duane Michals, *Madame Schrödinger's Cat*, 1998. From the series *Quantum*. The Henry L. Hillman Fund. Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

handwriting, the texture.” He also collects original manuscripts. He describes himself as an intimist, a lover of diaries, books (he has three libraries at home in New York City), small pictures and intimacy. “My photographs whisper into the viewers’ eyes rather than shout. They say, ‘Come closer. I’ll tell you a secret.’”

Michals says he’s taken many professional risks, especially when presenting issues born of the gay community like isolation and illegal behavior. “Remember, 20 or 30 years ago, marriage wasn’t even on the table,” he says. (Michals and Fred Gorée, his partner of nearly 56 years, married in 2011, just days after same-sex marriage was legalized in New York.)

Unlike Robert Mapplethorpe, whom he says is more hard core, Michals tends toward sentimentality and the legitimacy of the love between people of the same gender. “I’m not a typical gay person any more than I’m a typical person or photographer.”

That disdain for following established paths might explain why Ansel Adams and Henri Cartier-Bresson are not among his heroes. “My sources for inspiration were anybody who contradicted my mind and opened my imagination,” Michals says, like Lewis Carroll, Magritte, Joseph Cornell and surrealists in general. “Ansel Adams did not open my imagination. He dealt with Yosemite and sunsets. I was interested in metaphysical ideas, what happens when you die.”

Trevor Smith, PEM’s Curator of the Present Tense, says Michals’ need to authentically express himself trumped any interest in being accepted into the mainstream art world. “His work charts fresh territory, creatively mixing philosophical rigor, surreal witticism and childlike playfulness with an unabashed sentimentality and nostalgic longing.”

So far, Michals has seen the *Storyteller* exhibition twice at the Carnegie Museum of Art and looks forward to its presentation at PEM. It is, he says, a very demanding show. “You have to read and think. If a show is about the seashore, after the first 20 pictures about waves, it gets predictable. Adventure comes from going to the unknown.”

Life according to Duane:

On *Storyteller* The residue of the exhibition will hopefully lead people to ideas they’ve never thought of before. I put lunch on the table. A smorgasbord. Some like the pickles and not the celery. It’s up to people to eat.

On adventure There’s a line from *Gypsy*, ‘Some people can thrive and bloom, living life in the living room.’ I didn’t live that way.

On books I’m a reader. I read every night before I sleep. Fred has Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s so that pretty much consumes me. My little bit of privacy is retreating into reading.

On technology Anything that expedites my ability to express something complicated is terrific. I just did a piece with a friend’s kids and a bowler hat enters the room and flies around. That amount of work would have killed me in the darkroom if I didn’t use a computer.

On variety My safest image? *Grandmother and Odette Visit the Park*. They’re sitting on a bench. Well, maybe it’s not the sweetest. In the last image Grandma leaves and never comes back. The riskiest image? It’s one I’ve never published or hardly shown. Frankly it’s erotic, about castration.

On philosophy *In Questions Without Answers* (Twin Palms Publishers, 2001) I talk about absolutely everything. These issues about god and life are not just the domain of philosophers. Everything is a subject for a photographer, especially the hard things you can’t see and the things you can’t answer.

On death I’ve always been interested in death and what happens when you die. People fuss when they’re 40, 50, but when you get into your 80s you’re someplace else. It suddenly becomes fact. It’s on your menu.

On taking risks I grabbed every opportunity that came my way. The most I could have hoped if I stayed put was teaching high school art in Pennsylvania, having 2.3 kids and being suicidal. I feel sorry for people who don’t take chances.