Duane Michals Appears And Vanishes

Over the course of his long and celebrated career, photographer Duane Michals has proved himself a winner both artistically and commercially. On the occasion of his recent visit to Boston for his Photographic Resource Center lecture and workshop, Michals's fine art photography was being shown in group shows at Vision Gallery and the P.R.C. show ("Re-Views II") at Boston University. The Metropolitan Museum's Yves Saint Laurent fashion exhibit, for which Michals photographed the catalogue, had also recently opened.

Best known for his enigmatic and often wry photo sequences, Michals suggested during his February 3 slide lecture that his penchant for serial work results from a personal indecisiveness which precludes the more traditional "decisive moment" aesthetic. Speaking to a capacity crowd of 600 at Boston University's Morse Auditorium, Michals revealed himself to be as much the charming raconteur as his best work suggests.

Playing to an energetic and very receptive audience, the enormous images projected overhead dwarfed the balding photographer, emphasizing visually his boyish exuberance. Michals offered anecdotes, advice and a lot of opinion in his characteristically colorful and provocative style. Above all else, Michals cautioned that invention, and not recognition, is the essential creative act.

For participants in the day long workshop held the following Saturday at the Photographic Resource Center, Michals was more specific. Tired of photographic "purists," he feels that technical proficiency is a skill which anyone can acquire with practice. The real challenge for the serious photographer is in the selection of his or her subject. While Michals promotes no specific "style" of photography, he feels that "talking inside is important. Most photographers are more or less reporters. I am a short story writer." As a teacher, Michals tries to provoke his students into thinking about new ways of working, and he operates as a catalyst rather than a literal example.

Each of the 15 students participating in the workshop brought along a portfolio which the class reviewed together. Typically, Michals downplayed technical issues, and sought instead to elicit from the photographers more abstract ideas about their work, thus forcing them to deal with their work on their own most internally compelling terms.

Such a concept of photography does not however imply the usual accompanying "fine art" condescension to commercial work. Michals, in fact, was quite adamant that the notion of artistic "prostitution" is largely myth. He has completed many commercial assignments over the years himself.

For young photographers serious about their work, he says that opportunities are out there: "Just Do It!"

Kevin Concannon