

DUANE MICHALS. *Salute, Walt Whitman*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 1996.

DAVID GROFF AND RICHARD BERMAN, eds. *Whitman's Men: Walt Whitman's Calamus Poems Celebrated by Contemporary Photographers*. New York: Universe, 1996.

Whitman's career coincides with the early history of photography, and the poet himself made use of photographs both to record his own relationships and to construct himself as a figure of the artist. It is not surprising therefore, that contemporary photographers feel a particular affinity for Whitman and his work. In very different ways, these two volumes speak to the exceptional meaning and cultural power that Whitman continues to exercise more than a hundred years after his death. Whitman remains what he has been since the beginning, a figure of the artist as democrat and as the recorder of male friendship. For a gay artist in America, Whitman remains a central figure of self-definition and tribute.

Duane Michals is one of the U.S.'s most important contemporary photographers, the subject of important museum shows. He has established himself as the principal practitioner of an art that is situated at the boundary of text and image. The textuality of his works takes different forms, sometimes inscribed on the margins, sometimes superimposed, but always suggesting that the image does not come to us as it were innocently. Michals's narrative sequences are also part of a project that inscribes male desire, particularly in a mentoring situation that finds a natural home in Whitman's life and writing. Michals is also the originator of a moving volume dedicated to the Alexandrian poet Cavafy, whose work has been crucial to many gay modernists, included Auden and Forster. Michals's work reminds us of the affinity between the cosmopolitan and bittersweet desire of Cavafy and the yearning and loss of the Whitman of "Calamus."

Although Michals's work appears to owe something to the documentary tradition, as he works in black and white, largely realistic images, his fascination with the text and the nature of perception locates his work in other contexts of surrealism and postmodernism. The jacket photograph identifies some of the artist's dominant concerns. On our right, an apparently naked young man, the muse and model of the sequence, radically cropped, so that only one arm and a section of back and the side of the face are visible, holds a photograph of Whitman, whose eyes appear to return the young man's gaze. Whitman's desire for the young man is returned by the young man's desire for, or devotion to, the artist, an exchange of desires that is both biographical and autobiographical, that is, that reenacts Whitman's loving look.

The end-papers of the front of the book are made from a reproduction of a letter from Whitman to Harry Stafford, thus providing a context for the Whitman poems and Michals photographs. The verbal account of Whitman's affection is both textual (offering a meaning) and visual (the letter is an object and a part of the book). Michals has written Stafford into *Leaves of Grass*, as he includes the famous photograph of Whitman and Peter Doyle. We are asked to recover an experience, through the text's seduction: "Dear son, how I wish you could come in now even if but for an hour & take off your coat & sit down on my lap," which is an invitation to the reader/viewer as well as to the historical Stafford. The first sequence in the volume, set at an equivalent to Whitman's Calamus

“pond,” echoes the famous Eakins Swimming Hole with five photographs of the young man. The photos seem almost to be a film running backwards: the shots begin with the young man in the water, with only his upper back visible. The series concludes with the young man erect, out of the water, and looking out toward the viewer/photographer, thereby illustrating Whitman’s role both as mentor and as former of a new self. There is one odd aspect of this series: the young man is wearing a modern bathing suit, one smaller than the tan marks on his loins. In this celebration of the body and desire, it is not clear why Whitman’s words, “The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath,” are not heeded. Probably the artist wanted to avoid falling over a fine line into the pornographic, but as a result the thematics of freedom and the body are vitiated.

The least successful of the sequences in the volume are those that seek to historicize. The young man remains a man of the 1990s even when he is wearing a Civil War uniform. And the photograph of the *New York Times* reporting on President Kennedy’s assassination as an equivalent to President Lincoln’s seems merely artificial. It is not that Michals cannot play with reality, but that an image such as that of the *Times* seems to want to be too didactic. More successful are the frankly surreal images that recall the work of George Platt Lynes. An image of a sleeping young man, with a sprig of lilies of the valley emerging from his mouth is accompanied by a hand-written text of Michals’s, “Young men dream in the garden of the dead, with flowers growing from their heads.” Michals has discovered a marvelous way to portray the body/soul relationship and the transformation of the body. Several of the sequences locate the text in a natural world. Three images of the text “Whoever You Are” shift focal point, so that the text becomes smaller and smaller, and finally unreadable, as it is absorbed into the landscape.

Michals’s photographs are a major document in the history of Whitman reception. The product of an enormously important artist, they amount to a major re-reading of Whitman’s work for our generation. At the same time, the traditional representational elements of Michals’s work make him seem conservative up against the more self-consciously postmodern work of the photographers of *Whitman’s Men*.

Seven contemporary photographers are included in this volume, along with two brief introductions to the poetry and the photography. Several of the photographs exhibit a postmodern fondness for the reworked photograph, as in the hand-colored images of Mark Beard, with their odd Victorian tone, the reworked Polaroid of Russell Maynor, or the dream state captured in the underwater photos of Robert Flynt. The images do not represent the poems, as Michals’s often do, but instead accompany them. They are works inspired by Whitman, not illustrations to Whitman. John Dugdale’s bath scene is less than idyllic. There is a haunting, mysterious quality to his work, created in part by the use of Prussian blue, and heightened when one learns from the introduction that the artist has limited vision due to AIDS-related eye damage. The photographs of this collection display an inventiveness that moves firmly away from any naïve representation, as from the idyllic longing of Michals. Their readings of Calamus suggest a text, like a natural world, already corrupted, of loss alongside desire, of the fragility of a dream.