

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY



THE NEW YORKER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

DEEP THOUGHTS

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For nearly forty years, Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959) was the only professional portrait photographer in Heber Springs, Arkansas. During that time, he made postcard- or wallet-size pictures of virtually everyone in the community—mostly farmers and their families, many of whom returned to Disfarmer's studio again and again, despite his reputation for ornery eccentricity. Disfarmer was gruff and abrupt with his subjects, and how he managed to turn out so many unaffected, unsentimental, and unself-consciously charming pictures is a mystery, but his body of work is astonishing. This week, both the Edwynn Houk and the Steven Kasher galleries are mounting shows and issuing books of recently unearthed portraits that for the first time allow us to see vintage images. (Previously, the only known Disfarmers were posthumous prints made from the photographer's original negatives.) Disfarmer was no genius, but this busy misfit illuminated the ordinary in a way that echoed Sander and anticipated Penn, finding down-home elegance and genuine soul on Main Street.