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PHOTOGRAPHY

In the small mountain town of Heber Springs, Arkansas, in an America of long ago, an eccentric photographer who called himself **Mike Disfarmer** roughed out a living by taking portraits of local farmers, sweethearts, children, and soldiers home from war—anyone who walked into his Main Street studio with the cash to pay for his services. In doing so, he created what is now considered one of the great bodies of work of American photography—images that seem to bore straight into the souls of his rural subjects, revealing the aspirations, fears, pride, and accumulated hardships of the generations who faced economic depression and world war. Until now the art world has had to consider Disfarmer's work only by way of modern prints made from the glass plates left in his studio when he died in 1959. But in one of the most unusual acts of connoisseurship ever attempted, photography collector Michael Mattis recently uncovered some 3,000 vintage Disfarmer prints by searching through the family albums of the residents of Cleburne County. The prints are now being featured in an intriguing exhibition and new book that will certainly elevate Disfarmer in the hierarchy of 20th-century artists. See *State of the Art*, page 21.





S T A T E O F T H E A R T

VINTAGE DISFARMER

THE ECCENTRIC ARKANSAS PORTRAITIST IS REDISCOVERED—
AGAIN—THROUGH ONE COLLECTOR'S DOGGED PURSUIT
OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S ORIGINAL PRINTS. BY RUSSELL HART

Anuclear physicist-turned-photography collector, Michael Mattis has both a probing eye and a scientist's determination for acquiring meaningful images. Together with his wife, Judith Hochberg, he has assembled one of the world's finest collections of vintage Edward Weston prints, noted for both their transcendent craft and their stratospheric prices. More recently, though, Mattis has turned

his attention toward a less familiar American master whose work had never been seen by anyone in the art world in its vintage form—that is, in prints made by the photographer himself soon after he took the pictures.

Now, in one of the boldest acts of connoisseurship in the history of photography, Mattis has changed all that. In the process he has shed new

light on the strange life and exceptional art of the photographer, Mike Disfarmer.

As different from the self-conscious, worldly Weston as any photographer could be, the eccentric, insular Disfarmer was "discovered" in the 1970s through a series of happy accidents, starting with the purchase, after his death in 1959, of the entire contents of his Heber Springs, Arkansas,



DISFARMER'S VINTAGE PRINTS HAD ALL BEEN SOLD TO CUSTOMERS AT THREE FOR 50 CENTS, A PRICE THAT INCLUDED THE PORTRAIT SESSION.

portrait studio by a local realtor, who reportedly paid five dollars for everything. Some of Disfarmer's images, which endured only as a few thousand glass-plate negatives stored for years in the realtor's garage, were later sent to a local newspaper that had issued a call for old pictures of the area. The newspaper's publisher, a former New York City photographer named Peter Miller, submitted the plates to Julia Scully, then editor of *Modern Photography* magazine. That in turn led to the publication of 180 of the images in a book, *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits 1939–1946* (Addison House) in 1976.

In that much-praised monograph Scully found

common ground between the small-town photographer's wartime studies of Heber Springs residents and the slightly earlier portraits of German society by August Sander, though Disfarmer clearly lacked Sander's scope and typological agenda. "Compared to Sander's, Disfarmer's milieu was limited," she wrote, "yet he succeeded in presenting this small stratum of society as symbolic of a larger one." Scully even saw a kinship between Disfarmer, who often placed his subjects against a plain background and shot them by north light, and Irving Penn, who used the same simplified approach to photograph subjects ranging from New Guinean mud men to London

chimney sweeps. It is still hard to find the line between Disfarmer's artistry and the powerful, unadorned presence of his subjects, but none other than Richard Avedon considered *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits 1939–1946* one of the greatest photo books ever published, and it inspired him in his own iconic portrait project, *In the American West*.

Around the time of the book, Disfarmer's work was shown at New York City's International Center of Photography. Later, Manhattan's Howarth Greenberg Gallery began selling it. Today, you can purchase 8 1/2 x 11 prints of the photographer's greatest hits for \$800 apiece at disfarmer.com. Bu



Disfarmer posed his subjects, yet avoided sentimental clichés.



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those prints, as well as the bigger, more expensive prints sold by the gallery, are all modern, posthumous enlargements made from Disfarmer's original postcard-format glass-plate negatives. (Disfarmer shot 3¼x5½-inch glass plates until 1952, decades after all but the most antiquated photographers had switched to film.)

There were, in fact, no *vintage* Disfarmer prints to be had. Those had all been sold to Disfarmer's faithful customers, at 50 cents for three copies—a price, apparently unchanged for decades, that included the portrait session itself. (Each additional print cost four cents.) For a collector, especially one with Mattis's passion for the print as a fine object, that situation was irksome if not intolerable. At best, Disfarmer's original prints were glued into family albums throughout the Heber Springs area and its diaspora. At worst, they had been discarded with the passing generations.

Vintage prints or no, Disfarmer became a minor legend in the fine-art world. It helped that he arrived with a ready-made mythology revolving around the figure of a reclusive, atheistic bachelor who legally changed his last name from Meyer to Disfarmer in order to distance himself from his agrarian family, and perhaps the entire Ozark-foothills community in which he spent most of his adult life—a man from whom, in his later years, local children would flee in play-acted terror, and who was finally found dead in his live-in studio after subsisting, said one neighbor, on an exclusive diet of chocolate ice cream. Artist Toba Tucker was so moved by the work that in 1989 she undertook a sort of rephotographic survey of Disfarmer's social landscape, living in Heber Springs for two years and producing *Heber Springs Portraits: Continuity and Change in the World Disfarmer Photographed* (University of New Mexico

Press, 1996). Though that book provided a new wealth of biographical detail about Disfarmer, he remains to this day an elusive personality.

Early last year the Disfarmer story entered yet another chapter, when Mattis got a call from an art broker representing a couple who had recently moved to Chicago from Heber Springs. It was only in the big city that they learned Disfarmer had put their small home town on the art world map; the couple had pooled about 50 of the photographer's original prints from the photo albums of relatives back in Arkansas. When the broker showed the prints to Mattis and Hochberg at the annual AIPAD convention in New York in 2004, they bought the lot—all 3¼x 5½-inch contact prints on rich, smooth-toned silver chloride paper. "We figured these were the first and probably the last vintage Disfarmers we'd ever see," says Mattis. Then, *(continued on page 92)*

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(continued from page 29) however, news of the sale reached Heber Springs. "Two enterprising young Heber Springs men said, 'Hey, we think we have Disfarmers in Granny's album,'" Mattis recalls. "They put them on eBay trying to find me. I ended up buying those prints, and then I said, 'Guys, have I got a project for you.'"

Mattis's idea was to go door-to-door in Cleburne County, Arkansas, asking to search through family photo albums for other vintage Disfarmer prints. It wasn't an entirely new notion: He says he has heard rumors that in the late 1970s, after Disfarmer's work was discovered, some New York art dealers went to Arkansas in search of vintage material. Perceived as "Yankee carpetbaggers" by the locals, they found door after door slammed in their faces. Realizing that the two young men he'd met on eBay could provide an inside track, Mattis hired them to find as many original Disfarmer prints as possible. They in turn subcontracted four local acquaintances to create a team of six.

"I told them to start with the low-hanging fruit and ask their friends and neighbors," says Mattis, "then to go down every dirt road in Cleburne County." Mattis trained his team how to identify the prints, evaluate their quality, and make fair offers to buy them. The team scanned the prints and e-mailed images to Mattis for his approval ("We couldn't have done this project without the Internet," he says), but he ultimately dispatched a full-time curator/coordinator, Hava Gurevich, to oversee the final six months of the enterprise and conduct interviews with sellers who had knowledge of Disfarmer. "The whole process evolved organically," says Gurevich, who has just left her job as director of New York's Gitterman Gallery to work full-time on projects for Mattis. "We'd even have Disfarmer parties, where everybody would bring the prints they had."

"In many respects, this endeavor has resembled an ambitious archaeological dig more than a standard project on vintage photography," says Mattis. The concerned collector even organized a Disfarmer display at the Cleburne County Historical Society, and recently launched a Website, *disfarmer.org*, overseen by Gurevich, to serve as an online community Disfarmer resource. (It will also sell modern prints and contribute profits to Heber Springs charities.) "One very important thing about this project has been the educational aspect," he says. "We wanted people to know they had Disfarmers, and pay a fair price for them if they were willing to sell, rather than pretend to buy random prints from family albums. We weren't looking to rip off the community."

Indeed, by the time all the available prints had been gathered, Mattis and Hochberg had made what he calls "a seven-figure investment in the economy of Heber Springs." Seeking a financial



Disfarmer's career can now be traced back to WWI.

partner for their still top-secret project, they turned to Manhattan photography dealer Edwynn Houk, known for his expertise on another arguably naive photographic genius, Frenchman Jacques Henri Lartigue. Houk purchased a third of the prints acquired by Mattis and Hochberg and has just concluded an exhibition of them. (A concurrent exhibition culled from a smaller set of prints acquired by Steven Kasher is being shown at the latter's Chelsea gallery.) Houk has also co-produced, with Mattis, a handsome new book, *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints* (powerHouse, \$60).

"It is quite fair to say that in almost thirty years in the field of photography, I have never had an experience comparable to the discoveries which make up [this book]," Houk writes in the foreword. "We have, I believe, rediscovered and redefined a body of work by one of the medium's great artists." Mattis, the physicist, quantifies the achievement: "The totality of vintage Disfarmer prints has gone from zero to 3,000," he says. He and Hochberg will donate most of their 2,000 remaining prints back to Arkansas institutions—including the Arkansas Art Center in Little Rock—keeping a select group for their own extraordinary collection.

In doing so, they instantly create a new market for material that was previously unknown. The going price for a postcard-size, vintage Disfarmer print? Anywhere from \$7,500 to \$28,000.

More important, the Disfarmer Historical Reclamation Project, as Mattis has come to call it, has redefined Disfarmer's career. The original negatives used for the modern prints were all made around World War II, but the people depicted in the new collection's images range from men in World War I military garb to late-blooming bobby soxers, and show the devolution of Disfarmer's art direction from painted backdrops and Persian carpets to an austere late-career background in which dark, widely spaced vertical stripes intersect his subjects in seemingly gratuitous ways. Yet there is a remarkable consistency of approach (some might call it a vision) in which nearly all of Disfarmer's subjects stand right up against the background, often full length, with their feet planted firmly on a floor in need of cleaning, and hardly ever smiling—as if Disfarmer knew on some level that a grin would only mask character and distort the stories told by hardscrabble faces.

"It was an age before television," critic Stephen Perloff wrote in a 1978 issue of *The Philadelphia Photo Review*. "[Disfarmer's] subjects were working class people who didn't read fashion magazines or even *Life*. They did not know what they were supposed to look like in a picture.... They faced the camera openly, unafraid, because they did not know what the camera could do." ■