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by Gary Michael Dault

MIKE DISFARMER AT THE STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY

Until Jan. 31, 1026 Queen St. W., Toronto; 416-504-0575

The eccentric American photographer, Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959), was born in Arkansas as Mike Meyers, the sixth of seven children in a German immigrant family. It is an early part of the extraordinary biographical drama surrounding Disfarmer that he first shifted his name away from Meyer ("*die meierei*" means "dairy farm" in German) and then, considering himself no farmer of any kind - rechristened himself a *dis*-farmer. That is to say, a Disfarmer.

The work is as hauntingly strange as his name. And it is only through a series of happy accidents that we have it in the first place. Disfarmer - who was apparently remarkably demanding and irritable - built himself a studio in Heber Springs, Ark., during the 1930s. His subjects, which he shot using glass plate negatives, were simply local townsfolk and neighbouring farmers. After his death, a retired army engineer named Joe Albright bought Disfarmer's studio - and his storehouse of more than 3,000 glass plate negatives - and (thankfully) stored them carefully away. It was not until 1974 that photographer Peter Miller, who had come to Heber Springs to publish a weekly newspaper, discovered the Disfarmer treasure-trove. Miller sent copies of them to Julia Scully of Modern Photography magazine. The rest, as they say is ...well, you know.

Could Disfarmer's photographs withstand the drama of their rediscovery? Oh yeah. They are wholly remarkable things: quiet, searching, graceful portrait studies - usually full-length - of ordinary people photographed in ordinary, natural light, but so intense that to confront them one by one (and the Bulger exhibition is of rare, vintage prints, so they seem even more immediate) is to feel you have learned something new about the human experience.