



Newly discovered photos by the late Mike Disfarmer, the Heber Springs studio photographer who is the subject of two high profile exhibitions in New York City.

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Portraits of a MASTER

A Heber Springs photographer's black-and-white treasures move from attics and albums to museums and collections — and a New York photo collector leads the way

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It took years after Mike Disfarmer's death in 1959 for the art world to begin singing the praises of this eccentric and reclusive Heber Springs photographer who took portraits of locals in his Main Street studio.

Once discovered, Disfarmer was hailed as a lost master. Experts compared his guileless and arresting black-and-white photos (for which he charged 25 cents) to the work of heavyweights such as Diane Arbus and Walker Evans. More remarkably, Disfarmer's emerging reputation was based on a relatively small collection of his output — about 3,000 glass negatives that surfaced in the 1970s.

Until this year, the prints made from those World War II-era plates were all that the wider

world knew of the singular work by the quirky Cleburne County photographer who discarded his last name of Meyer and claimed a tornado had separated him from his real parents.

But *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946*, the book that set Disfarmer mania into motion in 1976, hinted that there might be more original prints tucked away in the stuffed closets and attics of Heber Springs homes.

"Basically the oxygen in the photography market is vintage prints and there were none [of Disfarmer's] to be had," says Michael Mattis, a professional photo collector from New York who is at the center of bringing hidden Disfarmers to light.

In a twist of fate, Mattis and his wife, Judy Hochberg, found themselves trolling for the rare and potentially valuable Disfarmer photos alongside

Steven Kasher, a New York gallery owner. Mattis and Hochberg's quixotic hunt and eventual buying spree — \$2 million for more than 3,000 prints, according to Mattis — would see them take out a mortgage on their Scarsdale home and line of credit with Chase Manhattan Bank.

A portion of thousands of Disfarmer prints that Mattis and Kasher bought ended up in Manhattan exhibits that opened on the same day in September.

Disfarmer had been discovered — again — and given the high visibility of a *New York Times* section-front story.

"To put back together again the complete work of a great American artist is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a collector," says Mattis,

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Disfarmer

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45. He and his wife, along with Elton John, have been listed by ARTNews magazine among the 25 top collectors of photography.

I Photo Central, a Web site for photo collectors, sees the newly unearthed Disfarmer images as a milestone: "In the world of portrait photography, the reclamation of Mike Disfarmer's vintage prints might be viewed as something akin to the discovery of the Titanic on the bottom of the Atlantic back in 1986. Less dramatic, perhaps, but no less rewarding than sunken treasure, Disfarmer's prints are among the great art relics of the 20th century."

GOOGLED

For Mattis, his journey to becoming a major collector of Disfarmer's photos began with a phone call.

"Lorraine Davis, an art appraiser in Santa Fe, [N.M.] contacted me in February of 2004 to see if I would be interested in seeing 50 original Disfarmer prints," remembers Mattis.

Davis had the photos thanks to a Google search by David and Ashleigha Pratt, a Cleburne County couple who had recently moved to Chicago. While in Chicago, the Pratts discovered their old photos done by their hometown photographer might have some value. At first Davis was unsure what to do with her Disfarmer prints.

"She went to an art fair in Los Angeles and asked a bunch of art



Mike Disfarmer charged only 25 cents for his photos in his Heber Springs studio. New York City galleries are now charging thousands for his prints.

galleries if they would be interested in buying the prints, and the galleries all said no," notes Mattis. "These are like the people who turned down the *Harry Potter* book."

Soon Davis was pointed in the direction of Mattis.

"A friend of Lorraine said to call me because I like to buy whole collections," says Mattis. "There aren't too many collectors who do that. My wife and I looked at [the Disfarmers] and we immediately agreed to the price."

Word of Mattis' photo purchase spread quickly back in Heber Springs. Mattis started receiving regular calls from Arkansas.

"Within a few weeks we were contacted by several entrepreneurial types in Cleburne

County who offered to find more Disfarmers for me," says Mattis. "Some of them just looked as far as their own family albums and several others decided to turn it into a full-time job."

Even with Kasher also combing Heber Springs for Disfarmers, Mattis ended up with a treasure chest of portraits. The pictures came from early and late in Disfarmer's career and provided a wide-angle look at the development of an artist.

"I thought I was in for about 500," says Mattis. "In the end I got over 3,100 pictures. I think I would have taken a long, deep breath had I known there was this many."

Mattis certainly bested Kasher with the amount of Disfarmers he was able to buy. In the *New York*

Times story on the dual Disfarmer exhibits, Kasher admits to buying 400 prints.

"I sold a large group of my duplicates to the Edwynn Houk Gallery and got a lot of my money back, but by no means all of my money back," notes Mattis.

The Houk and Kasher galleries have published books to accompany their Disfarmer shows and are selling prints for \$7,000-\$30,000. Mattis is quick to point out that his newly discovered Disfarmers won't just be displayed in tony galleries in New York.

"I intend to work to put together a touring museum show from my collection," notes Mattis. "Just like I promised the people [who I bought the photos from] I would do."

A LARGER SLICE

A signed Ansel Adams original bought for a song in the early 1980s set a young Mattis on the path as a collector — although it would be a while before the diversion turned into full-time work (and Mattis' wife still works full time as a teacher). The Adams purchase was done when the photography market was relatively new and, as Mattis notes, before "you couldn't go to a coffeehouse without seeing photos on the wall."

Mattis, a former Los Alamos, N.M., physicist, says he was aware of and struck by Disfarmer's stark portraits through *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946* but never imagined he would be in a position to own originals.

Sifting through a mountain of prints has only deepened Mattis' appreciation of what the photographer was able to do. He stresses the fact that art critics and collectors were assessing Disfarmer from a small slice of his career.

"That's a pretty important point," says Mattis. "Remember, those original glass negatives were only from a seven-year period. I have dated prints going from 1917 to 1958. In the photos [from *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits*] you see the sons of the farm heading off to fight World War II. Now we also see a similar phenomenon back to World War I."

Seen together, the new Disfarmer prints reinforce the photographer's high reputation but also are important for historians. The march of time is apparent in the way the clothes of Disfarmer's subjects change.

At first glance it would seem that Disfarmer approached each portrait the same way with the

same dark background and the way the men and woman often stare straight at the camera and don't smile.

Mattis disagrees. He says there is an evolution of Disfarmer's style that is apparent when looking at the entire career.

"The biggest change is that his earliest pictures were taken in a much more prop-filled studio," notes Mattis. "There was a gradual stripping down of the accessories and the props. By 1940 and beyond, he was left with two backgrounds — the black backdrop or the white backdrop with the black strips. His career evolution is marked by a gradual stripping down of the complexities and artifice of the studio interior. And that allowed him to focus ever more intensely on his subjects."

And what of the critics who, while acknowledging Disfarmer's genius, charge the photographer with shooting a narrow range? It is true that Disfarmer only rarely wandered outside his studio to take photos.

"I would say that most great artists have a narrow range," Mattis notes. "There aren't too many Picassos in history. I think Disfarmer had a wonderful career evolution."

As for Mattis, he says he is still interested in seeing and perhaps buying more Disfarmers, but he is going to be much more selective at this point. Still, his journey with Disfarmer enralls him.

"Even recently I've gotten pictures from Cleburne County that stopped my heart," says Mattis. "There are surprises right to the last."