STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

The New York Times

From a Studio in Arkansas
A Portrait of America

By Philip Gefter August 22, 2005

Courtesy of Steven Kasher Gallery and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

Dead for half a century, Mike Disfarmer, the eccentric portrait photographer from Heber Springs, Ark., has drawn modest yet respectful attention in recent decades. From the 1920's to the 50's, he photographed a steady stream of townspeople in his Main Street studio in an American Gothic style of portraiture that was singularly his own.

Now, a trove of recently discovered vintage prints is generating renewed interest in his work. In a hush-hush entrepreneurial race to the finish, two photography collectors from New York have

separately bought up about 3,400 vintage prints stashed away in the attics and basements of relatives of Disfarmer's subjects.

The only prints of his work previously known to exist were made posthumously from about 3,000 glass negatives found in his studio when he died in 1959.

The New York collectors, Steven Kasher and Michael Mattis, began acquiring the vintage prints last year after a young couple from Heber Springs who had relocated to Chicago offered Mr. Mattis 50 family pictures taken by Disfarmer. Word of the sale traveled back to Heber Springs, where residents realized that their family pictures might also be of value. Several people tracked Mr. Mattis down to offer their pictures for sale. That's when he saw gold - well, silver (as in silver prints) in them there hills.

Around the same time, other Heber Springs residents began contacting Mr. Kasher, a dealer who once worked for Howard Greenberg Gallery, which sells prints from Disfarmer's glass negatives. That piqued Mr. Kasher's interest in buying up as many vintage prints as he could find.

What makes these postcard-size prints of unknown people so valuable is their authenticity. A vintage print, one made by a photographer around the time the picture was taken, will be closer to the way the photographer wanted it to look. Because the photographic paper dates from when the picture was taken, the print is a genuine artifact of its era. Disfarmer's clients often ordered several copies of their pictures, so Mr. Mattis and Mr. Kasher realized that a single image might be in the possession of more than one friend or relative.

Now, fresh from the foothills of the Ozarks, several hundred of these newly discovered portraits are the subject of simultaneous exhibitions opening on Sept. 8 in Manhattan, at the Edwynn Houk Gallery on the Upper East Side and at the new Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea. Two books are being published in conjunction with the shows.

"It's always a good way to make a big statement, and it's definitely a marketing strategy," Mr. Kasher said of the exhibitions and books.

Mr. Houk is less enthusiastic about the simultaneous timing of the shows.

"It's not particularly a good thing," he said. "In fact, it would be better to do it sequentially." But Mr. Kasher had decided to time his Disfarmer show with the opening of his new gallery in Chelsea, so the two dealers agreed to work together.

Mr. Kasher is pricing his Disfarmer prints from $10,000 to $30,000. Mr. Houk's will range from $7,500 to $24,000.

Mr. Kasher said he had bought 400 prints over all, and Mr. Mattis said he had acquired 3,000, selling about 1,000 of those to Mr. Houk.

Mr. Kasher would not say what he had paid over all for his photographs. Mr. Mattis would only say that he had invested a seven-figure sum in the process of acquiring his vintage prints.

"Michael and I were both doing the same thing at the same time," Mr. Kasher said. "Sometimes we were competing. Sometimes we were cooperating more, just like any two collectors who were interested in the same subject." He added that they even traded prints.

In his quest for the vintage work, Mr. Mattis mounted a show of Disfarmer prints from the glass negatives at the Cleburne County Historical Society in Heber Springs and put advertisements in the local paper seeking vintage Disfarmer prints.

Mr. Mattis hired half a dozen residents to go door to door, because he said he thought they would be more likely than New Yorkers to gain people's trust when asking about their family photos. He found some scouts by searching for the Heber Springs ZIP codes on eBay, others by word of mouth.

He trained his scouts to identify good prints from bad. "There is image quality and there is print quality," he explained, saying he preferred subjects wearing overalls instead of suits, and with serious expression rather than smiles. If the print was yellow, creased, flushed out in the highlights, or had a flat tonal range, he wasn't interested. Eventually, he said, his representatives in Heber Springs were giving him "the same kind of condition report you'd get from Sotheby's or Christie's."

Representatives scanned the Disfarmer prints they gathered from residents, and e-mailed them as digital images to Mr. Mattis.

Mike Disfarmer, formerly Mike Meyer, was viewed as a maverick. To drive home his individuality, he adopted a contrarian surname. (In German "Meier" means dairy farmer.) Farmland surrounds Heber Springs and farmers make up the majority of the local population.

As a bachelor, loner, atheist and the only person in town to practice studio photography, Disfarmer was in fact very different from most people there. Notice of his name change appeared in the local paper under a headline, "Truth Is Stranger than Fiction," which included Disfarmer's account of his origins - something about being delivered on his parents' doorstep by the winds of a tornado.

According to an essay by the writer Richard B. Woodward in "Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints" (Powerhouse Books), published for the show at Edwynn Houk, the photographer "paid far more attention to people as artistic problems to solve, sometimes taking as long as an hour to make a portrait, than as individuals with lives outside the studio."

Mr. Woodward cites one subject, Charlotte Lacey, photographed by Disfarmer in her school band uniform during the early 1940's. Disfarmer wasn't friendly or talkative, she recalled. The studio, she said, was "this big empty room" with "damp walls," and he was "very spooky and scary" when he vanished under the camera cloth for minutes at a time.

"There wasn't much of a greeting when you walked in, I'll tell you that," another subject, Tom Olstead, is quoted as saying. "Instead of telling you to smile, he just took the picture. No cheese or anything."

In a telephone interview last week, Sandra S. Phillips, curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, said of Disfarmer's images: "He's not an expansive voice, but he's carved out a very small field for himself, which is studio portrait photography of ordinary people. He's great at what he does when he does it well."

His images, with their stripped-down, no-nonsense quality, focus directly on the individual as specimen. In that era, of course, self-consciousness was less about how to play to the camera than about the shyness of posing in front of it. With his outsider's eye, Disfarmer captured that awkwardness, and provided a record of people from a particular time and in place in America.

Courtesy of Steven Kasher Gallery and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York