

jim dine photographs

The Contemporary Arts Center



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jim dine photographs

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Editor: Leah Stoddard

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Acknowledgements

The tradition of the exhibition catalogue is a long and useful one, serving the dual functions of documentation and celebration. A typical example of such a catalogue was originally intended to accompany this first American museum presentation of the photographs of Jim Dine. But when a very fine book was published in France covering the same territory (*Jim Dine: Photographies Récentes* [Paris: Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 1998]), it seemed fruitless to attempt to duplicate the effort. Instead, we have chosen this hybrid form of exhibition document, which can be kept together as a record or redistributed, part by part, through small acts of selection and communication.

The Contemporary Arts Center is indebted to Jim Dine for his extraordinary support of both this project and the institution in general. Would that the example of generous cooperation set by this much-in-demand international art figure were followed by others far less busy or prominent.

We thank Lynne Meyers Gordon for her encouragement of the Center's growth over many years, and particularly for the contribution that made this exhibition possible. Her fellow trustees, listed elsewhere, are also to be applauded for their continuing efforts in support of the CAC mission.

Among all the CAC staff members, each of whom deserves credit for a part of this effort, Associate Curator Leah Stoddard must be singled out for her attention to the many details

of the exhibition and publication and for her thoughtful advice and assistance. In addition, Jeff Arnett transcribed the interview and performed other important tasks.

The artist's photography gallery, PaceWildensteinMacGill, and its staff (director Peter MacGill, Linda Fiske, Kimberly Jones and Jennifer Pivano) were professional and helpful beyond our expectations; David Adamson of Adamson Editions also provided assistance. Finally, we thank the staffs of the participating institutions for their support of the artist and the exhibition tour, particularly Stephanie Wiles, curator of the Davidson Art Center, Wesleyan University, who has supported this effort from the start. -CD

A Conversation with Jim Dine

Charles Desmarais

Jim Dine's Greenwich Village home is a tasteful carriage house, recently renovated following a design by his son Nick, with a studio on the street level and a loft-style apartment above. It is a pleasant space, an airy retreat from the international art scene that has alternately carried him high, like a victorious general atop a stallion parading into town, and dragged him behind like a bolted rider with one foot caught in a stirrup.

Dine is enormously likable, the kind of confidently macho guy who can dismiss the feeble and the stupid with an easy curse, while nevertheless speaking frankly and easily about his years of psychoanalysis. He has become a wealthy man over the course of his career, a fact that by itself makes him suspect in the more esoteric circles of art criticism. Yet he has reinvented and rejuvenated his art on so many occasions that no critic concerned for his or her own credibility would ever dare write him off.

Born in Cincinnati in 1935, by the age of twenty-five Dine was making waves in New York, showing with Claes Oldenburg, Lucas Samaras, George Segal and others, and helping to create an art of narrative and humor that would eventually break the austere spell of Abstract Expressionism over the museum and gallery scene.

With cues from the influential artist and teacher Allan Kaprow he was, in the early 1960s, among the first artists of our era to reintroduce the pre-war Dadaist forms of installation and performance art. During that time, too, he made assemblage works that incorporated actual objects into his paintings à la Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and began a career-long investigation of a wide range of printmaking techniques. Even as he developed a distinctive style of painting and drawing, he has made sculpture since 1965, taking it up in earnest in the 1980s.

He has published a book of his own poetry (1969); designed an avant-garde Shakespearean production (1966) and an entire hotel interior down to the lamps and carpets (1975); and produced monumental public art for sites in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Cincinnati, New York and London.*

* For an excellent outline of Dine's career see Jean E. Feinberg, *Jim Dine* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995).

Now, at the moment when the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is planning a full-scale retrospective exhibition of his earliest work, Dine has taken up a new tool: the photograph. His work in the medium is not ground-breaking technically, nor is it meant to be; indeed, even his digitally generated photographic works have the look of fine prints on rare papers. Like the paintbrush or the etcher's burin, the camera is a tool for Dine. Like painting and printmaking, photography is a system of notation that his dyslexia will not disrupt, a way of communicating complex feelings without resort to speech. But unlike the other media he has mastered, photography, with its scientific relationship to the details and outlines of things, both grants him new freedoms and holds him newly accountable.

I talked with Dine in his New York home on October 15, 1998. We discussed the two basic techniques he uses for these new works—photogravure, a copper-plate printing process as old as photography itself that begins with a traditionally-made negative, and ink jet prints produced from digital information captured on a high-tech camera back. Works made by either method are printed in specially formulated inks on fine papers; they are tactile, subtle in tone and color, with surfaces utterly unlike the hard and shiny coatings we know from most photographs.

As we spoke, it became clear that such technical refinement is of great importance to Dine. Indeed, by overcoming what he calls "the flatness of silver printing" he feels he is able to bridge the distance between the photograph as depiction and the photograph as a new piece of the world. "With these two techniques I use, I just feel closer to [the photograph] as an object," he told me.

But it is the image, above all, that captures this artist's imagination in his work in all media. During our discussion, we could not put a finger on the precise function photography serves for Dine, but it is clear that dreams have a lot to do with it. The difference between a photograph and an image made by any other technique is simply this: We know, logically, that we can trust the photograph no more than we trust our dreams. Yet our experience of the photograph remains as tangible, as stubbornly believable, as the nightmare that leaves us sweating in our beds in the dark of night.

[Charles Desmarais]: In all your work you're a consummate craftsman. But there's a casualness to the way that you draw and paint that isn't in the photographs. The photographs become almost precious: they're so carefully put together.

[Jim Dine]: Well, I know what you're saying, but "precious" is not a word I would use. I would have said specific—or accurate—depictions of my unconscious. I can't do that in drawing and painting because that's not the type of drawing and painting I do. To access my unconscious I have to go through a lot of stages. I erase. I let show the tracks of the erasing. Whereas in photography, I would take two pictures and choose the one that worked the best. I don't fuck around with the [negative or] gravure plate; that doesn't interest me. Nor does it interest me to mess around in the computer with Photoshop.

We looked at one or two that you did that way and we both said it really doesn't make sense.

It's mannered-looking to me. It doesn't work. What works is for me to sit there with the computer screen and preview the image before I capture it. I preview and preview and some photographs take me all day. Yesterday, I worked on a photograph the whole day and I'm not finished yet; I'm going back on Tuesday. I had this vision of what I wanted to do. I wanted to photograph some objects, then have [my technicians] print up the photograph. I put the same objects in front of the photograph and photograph that, and print that out. I keep on changing the lighting, and just keep on photographing. So now I've got four layers in one photograph. And it's a mysterious sort of rebus of skulls. Every skull looks different now and it's almost like a glossary of terms. I couldn't do that in some other medium.

It's interesting that you talk about this as a route to your subconscious or your unconscious. The first thing I think about when somebody is trying to get to their unconscious through art is Abstract Expressionism: this really hand-oriented, very direct thing.

That's working it out in public. That's expressing. This is a different thing. This is depicting my unconscious without too much conscious thought about it.

I realized what I was doing on two different occasions. One, I realized it when I saw that my painting was getting softer, not so harsh and hard-lined. (I'm talking just technically.) I have a self-portrait that I did recently, a drawing. I couldn't have done it had it not been for the photographs because I trusted my hand more just to let it be. Let the thing sit there. I don't have to bring it to full depiction of reality.

The other time I realized it: When I moved into this new place, I rediscovered a book I had. It's a book of children's photographs from Appalachia. A teacher asked kids, like, 8 to 14 to photograph their dreams. And it is so moving and it is so...convincing that you are seeing what they see. Because how else would you know if they hadn't set something up? They've set it up, so that must be their dream. That's what they think their dreams are, anyway. And I realized that it's sort of what I do, that I'm photographing my dreams. Not specifically my dream life, but that which exists in my body. It's the most accurate way to access it I've ever seen. And it sort of thrills me every time it happens.

What if there's not an object out there in the world that you want for your dreams? When you make a photograph, you need something to start with.

Absolutely. Usually I use things that have struck me in my painting—the objects I've used. Or objects I see that strike me, that are part of my glossary of terms, or have been in my bag of imagery. But I use them in different ways.

So that's the relationship between the photographs and the paintings?

Well, I'm certainly working the subject matter in a different way. For instance, in 1994 I was in Berlin and I was painting ravens. And I had a raven, a stuffed bird that I had bought from a taxidermist. Now, I used that raven. I sat it on a chair at eye-level and I painted from it and I kept referring to it.

But there were times in the middle of the night when, as is my wont, I'd get up and paint. Or there were times when I came into the room after being outside and without looking at the raven I corrected, as is my method: I'm constantly changing, constantly changing until finally either fatigue sets in or I realize I've lost it. That I did with the raven. That was the relationship to the taxidermy.

In photography, what I try to do is to use that same raven. But I use it. I go right to it. I'm not interested in photographing it as though it's a dead bird. I'm interested in making it alive, like I've always made things come alive. I mean like bathrobes come alive. That sort of thing.

Someone pointed out that the live things [in your art] generally look more static and the inanimate things look alive.

That's why I love the Pinocchio story. You know, from this talking stick comes this boy. It's a kind of Pygmalion idea. It's a mythic idea.

So, to get to what turned you on about photography: You'd been surrounded by it. You produced a book and a portfolio of prints with the photographer Lee Friedlander.* And I saw some awful nice photographs that your wife Nancy did.

Nancy's a very good photographer. And my eldest son is an excellent photographer. He designs websites now but he was [Richard] Avedon's assistant. I've been involved with photography all my life and I've been a fan of it. But I always felt that physically it wasn't enough for me.

Physically? You mean the object?

The object itself. I was just as happy with a well-printed book of photography. I didn't need the object.

To me, photography was somewhere between literature and painting. I was never clear what it was. And it wasn't until I got to Berlin and took a camera with me. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to make an effort now, thirty-five years later, to make photographs.'

And I hated what I did [at first] because I was getting silver prints back. Then these two technicians I was working with, former students of Dieter Appelt, they produced for me a heliogravure. They just said, 'Try this. What do you think of this?' And immediately I saw that it had enough physicalness, that I could touch it like an object. That's what I needed to go ahead. And I never looked back.

The Iris print is also something similar because of the ink jet. I use the same paper I use to print etching on.

* Lee Friedlander and Jim Dine, *Work from the Same House: Photographs and Etchings* (London: Trigram Press, 1969).

But it's such a different thing from the much freer brushstroke of a painting. Or the pencil lines [in a drawing] where you erase some of it, but you don't erase it all because your brain is working too fast. Besides, you have said you want to have some of that [partially erased line] still there.

Photography allows me to purely make an image. And I am an image-maker. Every time I've tried to make an abstract painting—I would love to do it because I'm a fan of abstract art—it always turns into something. It's phony abstract art.

I'm still really struggling with [your use of photography, considering] how expressionistic you're able to be with the brushstroke or the pencil line. That's a kind of weighing of emotion. You've talked about how you really didn't want to make paintings that had a subject of sadness or joy; you want the paint itself to somehow convey that. And I think I know what you mean: that the whole look of the thing, even the paint and the brushstroke, can convey those emotions. You're losing all that with the photographs, right?

Right. But I'm getting a lot of emotion—I know that. I showed about thirty photographs in London, and people were leaving the room. I mean, they came to look at hearts. They would walk out the door, and they were really scared by it. I never even thought about that. I'm depicting a nightmare sometimes. And obviously other people must see it too. This has not been a huge financial success, I can tell you. They're difficult objects to have. They're not decoration.

Do you accept photographs as being true?

No. Do you mean as a document? No, not at all. I mean, to me they're just like painting. It's the same intention. I'm an artist. I'm an artist who makes images and I figure that I can use anything I want.

So, is Lee Friedlander, an old friend of yours, a photographer?

He's an artist, but he's an artist-slash-photographer. I'm an artist.

And the distinction being...?

Well, do you call me a sculptor? Do you call me a painter? Or do you call me an artist? I'm an artist, that's all. It's a small point.

Well, I'm wondering if it is, because you talked about the relationship of photography to literature, and I think Friedlander is one of the most literary photographers.

Yes, I do too. I'm always being accused by critics of being too literary, of being too involved with memory, which I am. That is true. I do have a special relationship to words and to language, which was pointed out by some friends of mine who are poets. I feel that the same thing goes into all my work, including photographs. This is not necessarily literature to be read, but it is, in a certain way, a literate point of view.

Of course, there's *literally* a literature in these photographs, too, because you actually write [on a blackboard] and then photograph the words. How does that change the writing? I mean, you could just write it on a piece of paper.

And I have put it on a piece of paper. This summer I took some of those things and I set them in type into a little book I'm making of etchings and poems. So some of those things I wrote for the photographs become poems. It changes them totally. But, first you look at something that's 30 x 40 inches, and then you read it if it's in your language. If it isn't in your language, you just look at it and think, well, it's pleasing to me or it isn't pleasing to me, or I get an emotion from that. And I hope that that's what [people will do]. You will look at it first and then read it. Therefore, it's another layer of content.

We have had a whole century of language being important in plastic work. So, I don't think it's such a new idea.

*I started it with a gravure in Walla Walla. * I painted a corner of my living room black, and I photographed some things in front of it, and it looked like a blackboard. So, I started to write some of this stuff on the blackboard and put the things in front. And then I photographed it.*

* Dine maintains a home and studio in rural Washington state.

The writing was slightly out of focus. It was quite an interesting photograph, but it isn't what I really wanted. So, when I got down to Washington [DC] to the digital camera, I started to write again.

On a big scale, it's a very good way for me as a dyslexic person to correct, to see the words big and how they're going to fall on the page. And so I was able to correct with this chalk. And I realized that I was getting something very beautiful, like a landscape.

You talked about how these pictures are your dreams but [in the past] you also have talked about how all of your work is tied up with your personal life. You photographed your wife Nancy in ways that are full of a sense of pathos.

I think so, yes.

How do we read these pictures? Are they revealing too much?

Well, I never know what that means, when people think that you reveal too much in art. I can understand if it's journalism, then you can reveal too much. If the model is willing—and obviously I'm not holding a gun to anybody's head—then I think that the subject has to understand that you get what the artist sees.

I've been married to Nancy for forty-one years. Many of those years have been about drawing her. I have depicted her in various states of emotion, but also age. And I have chronicled her age as I have chronicled myself. And now I've done it with photography. Right now, because we are estranged, I have not had the opportunity to photograph her, which I miss. I don't think it would be appropriate.

Just like with Pollock, with so-called non-objective painting, you bring something to this thing and read it a certain way emotionally. What's pathos to some people is not to others.

It might be what we bring to it, but people will accept someone in a painting as a subject of a painting. When they look at a photograph, they see it as the person. Those pictures could almost be seen as mean.

Mean? Interesting. I've never been accused of being mean. But then, of course, even when I made drawings of her, people would say, 'She's much more beautiful than that. Why have you done this to her?' The only thing I can say back is that I'm drawing honestly.

Joel Gray is in some of the photographs too, and here is somebody who is very recognizable as a famous person. How do you deal with that?

It's okay with me. I don't see him as a famous person. I see him for just what he is in those photographs, since he's a friend of mine. He's just a subject for me. I've drawn him also; just a good friend. And I have used those things most familiar to me.

You mentioned that some of the things that show up in the paintings and the prints show up in the photographs—and it would be odd if they didn't, knowing your work. That's how you work: in themes. And yet, in the first selection I made of the photographs, I tended to choose photographs that had recognizable Jim Dine themes. And you objected, and we changed the show some because it was too "art historical."

Yeah. I don't want to constantly have to make it easy or comfortable for the viewer. To make viewers feel like, 'Now we know where we are. This is territory we've been in before.' Why not be a little off?

But somehow that hasn't be an objection for you in other media. Why is it an issue with photography?

I don't know. [The specific discussion was about a photograph of tools, and it might have been different] if it was a photograph of tools that I liked. I just don't think it came off and when I saw it I was embarrassed by it. It was too much me photographing a Jim Dine—what was expected of me. It was cliché. I had not transformed it.

You used to collect photographs. What work attracted you?

Well, the people that meant the most to me were the people around Friedlander, because he's the first photographer I really knew. I consider Friedlander a great artist. He introduced me to [Garry] Winogrand, and I consider Garry a much more interesting artist than Lee. It really enhanced my art knowing Garry from the very start.

And Diane Arbus: I actually think that she stayed with us in London. Although she was the least interesting of the photographers that everyone was freaking out about. I think it was sort of obvious, a lot of her work. But a good idea. And I liked her a lot; she was smart.

But Garry had a casual quality that was profound. In the casualness was profundity.

How did you get to know these guys?

I got to know Lee because I saw photographs by him in Harper's Bazaar, in about 1961 or '60, of those TV sets in hotel bedrooms. I was blown away. I couldn't believe it. I thought that this was a great idea, a really great idea to photograph a television set.

So I wrote in care of Harper's Bazaar and I bought a photograph. He delivered it and brought me a present. The present was a famous photograph by him of Cincinnati. And he didn't know that I was from Cincinnati. It was, like, weird.

It doesn't surprise me that he was in Cincinnati. It's a typical place he would have been in his quest for redneck-ness.

Did he know who you were?

I don't think so. Well, at the time, I wasn't. The same with him. He was better known, because he had done all these record covers. But I think he had asked who I was. That's how I got to know him and he introduced me to other people.

So, because of knowing those photographers, I really got into photography. I started to go to Witkin [Gallery] and see things, and I bought Frederick Evans. I don't know where I bought them, but I had beautiful Atgets. I went to the Museum of Modern Art Lending Service and bought the Steichen of Gloria Swanson. Imagery always meant a lot to me.

Andy Grundberg points out that a lot of the artists you were associated with early on took up photography themselves—in fact, earlier than you did. Did they have that same interest in the art of photography?

I have no idea. I can't imagine Lucas Samaras even knows who Walker Evans is. I can't imagine Chuck Close cares. I think Hockney is aware of it. I've known David for thirty-five years. He's a really smart man and I'm sure he was aware of European photography. I'm sure he was aware of Bill Brandt. And Julia Margaret Cameron.

Clearly, you understood the connection of an Atget or Walker Evans to your work. That idea of isolating, elevating the everyday.

Absolutely.

And giving life to inanimate objects.

*Yeah. Also, I looked a long time at portraits. From Nadar to Carjat. I never saw a bad portrait. In fact, I collected for years when I lived in Italy. I would go to flea markets and collect cartes de visite. * Just of anybody: babies...*

So what do you look for? There's so many of them, you could have carried them out by the bushel basket.

I bought what struck me. Somewhere it struck my heart.

* The carte de visite was a common format for portrait studio photographs in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The photographs were mounted on stiff cardboard roughly the size of a business or "visiting" card, whence comes the name.

Checklist of the Exhibition

**All works courtesy the artist and
PaceWildensteinMacGill, New York**

Berlin as It Was in Winter 1996
photogravure
21³/₄ x 27³/₄ inches, edition 8

Diptych (Self Portrait) 1996
photogravure
19¹/₄ x 35¹/₄ inches, edition 8

Hand and Crow #2 1996
photogravure
21 x 18³/₈ inches, edition 8

Light 1996
photogravure
22¹/₂ x 18⁵/₁₆ inches, edition 8

Nancy #5 1996
photogravure
18⁷/₁₆ x 19¹⁵/₁₆ inches, edition 8

Ape and Cat in Focus 1997
photogravure
26¹/₄ x 30⁵/₁₆ inches, edition 3

At Home in the Shadows 1997
photogravure
18¹/₂ x 22¹/₂ inches, edition 3

Bonfire 1997
digital ink jet print
40 x 30 inches, edition 3

The Boy 1997
photogravure
30¹/₄ x 26³/₈ inches, edition 3

D.C. Darkness 1997
digital ink jet print
40 x 30¹/₂ inches, edition 3

The Fingers 1997
digital ink jet print
40 x 28¹/₄ inches, edition 3

Nick's Mother Smoking 1997
photogravure
30¹/₂ x 26¹/₂ inches, edition 3

Paris, July 1997
photogravure
26³/₄ x 26¹/₂ inches, edition 3

White Street 1997
photogravure
26⁷/₈ x 26⁷/₈ inches, edition 3

The Brakeman 1998
digital ink jet print
39¹/₈ x 31 inches, edition 3

Dinner 1998
photogravure
39¹/₄ x 38¹/₂ inches, edition 12

Grey Rain 1998
digital ink jet print
40 x 29 inches, edition 3

In the Care of Animals 1998
digital ink jet print
29 x 26¹/₂ inches, edition 3

Landscape Painting 1998
digital ink jet print
35³/₄ x 29⁵/₈ inches, edition 3

Rose of Sharon 1998
digital ink jet print
40 x 29 inches, edition 3

Summer 1998
three digital ink jet prints
44¹/₁₆ x 31 inches each,, edition 3

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