Umso mehr ist es ein Verdienst dieser Ausstellung wie auch des bereits im Herbst 2013 in der Fotohof edition erschienenen Künstlerbuchs, welches neben den Fotografien auch elf kurze und assoziative Texte Otmar Thormanns beinhaltet, die Arbeit dieses Künstlers wieder genauer in den Blick zu nehmen.

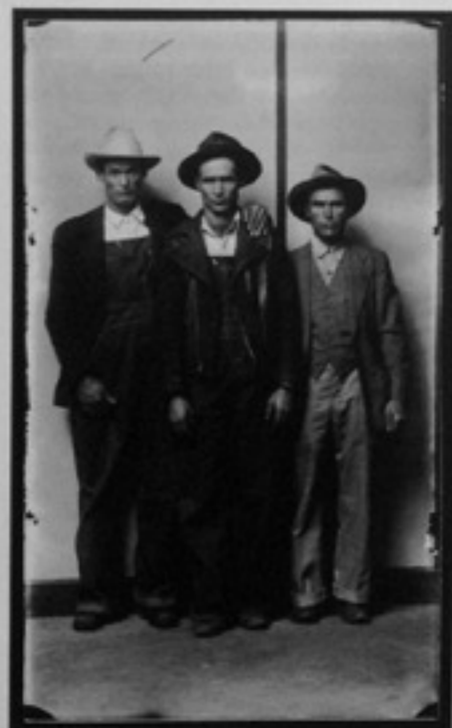
1 »Otmar Thormann«, in: *Elephant* (London), # 15, 2013, S. 162–167, hier S. 167. [Übers. d. Autorin]
2 Ebd., S. 162.
3 Otmar Thormann, »Onkel Willi«, in: Rainer Iglar, Michael Mauracher (Hg.), *Otmar Thormann. Ursprung*, Salzburg: Fotohof edition 2013, o.S.

Becoming Disfarmer

Neuberger Museum of Art, New York,
9. 11. 2014 – 22. 3. 2015

by Rupert Goldsworthy

Karl Marx and William Blake were largely unrecognised during their lifetimes. The huge significance of their work was realised after their deaths. Sometimes great work takes time to register—and how the author's work is later consumed usually varies from the intention of its creator. The photography exhibition "Becoming Disfarmer" at the Neuberger Museum of Art in New York, curated by Chelsea Spengemann, presents a similar phenomenon in its survey of a small-town Arkansas portrait photographer, Mike Disfarmer (born Meyer, 1884–1959).



Mike Disfarmer, John, Clifford, and Andy Killion, brothers, ca. 1939–46 (printed later). Silver gelatin print, 45.1 × 26.7 cm. Courtesy: Peter Miller.

This exhibition commemorates the work of Disfarmer almost a hundred years after he established a commercial portrait studio in Heber Springs. Disfarmer was not a famous photographer during his lifetime. He was only ever known in central Arkansas, where he ran his business for forty-five years.

Disfarmer is now celebrated in the photography world for his bold, unflinching studio portraits of rural farmers and their families pictured on a day out at the local county fair in Heber. These images were initially only ever intended for a limited market, the family members, and their future generations. Disfarmer's original wallet-size keepsakes sold for pennies at the time.

"Ed and Mamie Barger" (1939–46, reprinted in 1976) is a well-known Disfarmer image of a married couple clinging together, looking at the camera in steadfast hope. The Bargers reputedly had their picture taken to send to their son, a soldier injured during the Second World War, recovering at a hospital in New York. The image presents the touching innocence of country folk. The couple reminds one of a simple, healthy life before television, fast food, and freeways. Their expressions are wide open, innocent, unworldly. They look like extras from a 1930s movie. They are tanned and worn by long years of hard work in the fields. The Bargers gaze directly at the camera with gentle curiosity. The camera is there to record their presence, not to interrogate.

Disfarmer posed his models in a manner that hides nothing. The family group portraits seem to unfold like mini-novels, each character telling a differing story. The portrait "Edith and Joe Bittle with Ken and Tatum, Ada Mae and Clyde" (ca. 1939–46) shows handsome, clear-eyed faces stranded in the poverty and repression of small-town America in the early twentieth century. Disfarmer tells us something intangible about everyday life in rural America. His vision remains fresh and contemporary.

After his death in 1959, much of Disfarmer's huge archive of glass negatives was discovered in a house clearance in the early 1960s. This lost record of Arkansas was then brought back to life. In the mid-1970s, a local journalist, Peter Miller, enlarged selected images from the Disfarmer negatives to medium-size format and then reprinted them in a style that resembles the look of the fashion work of Richard Avedon. In Miller's hands, these were no longer tiny family keepsakes, but powerful portraits that appear to precede Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon in their bleak modernist aesthetic. Subsequently, Disfarmer's legend grew due to a number of exhibitions featuring Miller's 1970s reprints.

The poignancy and honesty of Disfarmer's vernacular portraits as reprinted by Miller have drawn comparison to photo legend August Sander and to the Malian commercial studio portraits of Seydou Keita. Avedon professes a great admiration for the Disfarmer/Miller prints. Disfarmer's work reputedly inspired Avedon's iconic series "In the American West" (1979–84).

But as critics noted in the 1970s, we are looking at Disfarmer's images not as they were intended. These private images, which were intended for family members, have now become iconic photographs of Dust Bowl America of the Depression era. Disfarmer's genius as a photographer is actually back-engineered. The realisation of Disfarmer's brilliance and prescience as a photographer is dampened by the awareness that what we initially presume to be genuine and old is actually a much repackaged object. Since Miller's discovery, a small selection of Disfarmer's orphaned, uncopyrighted work has been disinterred, re-cropped, and reprinted by top New York printers, and also exhibited, valued, fought over, sold, and authenticated by the New York art world.

Spengemann's show is the first full survey of Disfarmer's work, and it covers his complex odys-

Mike Disfarmer, Picola and Iola Harper, sisters, ca. 1939–46 (printed 1976). Silver gelatin print, 29.9 × 19.1 cm. Courtesy: International Center of Photography, New York.

sey. It's a fascinating exhibition because it provides a broad archaeological view of his oeuvre, and also of his contemporary milieu in Arkansas. It likewise includes images by other portrait photographers who were active in the area at that time. Spengemann focuses on Disfarmer's original tiny 1930s prints as much as Miller's 1970s larger reprints. Arguably, without Miller's reprinting, reframing, and resizing of Disfarmer's work, would anyone really care much about an archive of small, greyish, early twentieth-century family keepsake photographs?

This is where things get complicated—but familiar to those in the business. It's a particularly American narrative, rags-to-riches after death: "Art worth millions discovered for pennies in yard sale." In another grand American tradition: "Where there's a hit, there's a writ." Half the work in the exhibition was withdrawn right before the show opened, and an edition of 2,500 colour catalogues had to be destroyed after two major Disfarmer collectors removed their work from the exhibition in a disagreement over what they felt constituted his work.

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Spengemann's exhibition deconstructs and unveils Disfarmer's myth, and the show's installation problems highlight broader issues in the global struggle between capital, copyright, and fair use. Unlike Marx, there is no Engels or a guiding family foundation to mediate and protect Disfarmer's legacy. Like many artists, Disfarmer died alone. His work became a ward of state, and prone to the whiles of commerce.

With Disfarmer, part of the appeal is due to the authenticity of images of the poor transmuted into beautiful, expensive objects. It's a guilty pleasure. A hybrid product. Ironically, limiting the estate of Disfarmer will prove tricky because during his lifetime he had thousands of clients, and his original prints are still emerging from family archives across Arkansas, a state long known for its poverty. Disfarmer's archive retains a strange, aporetic integrity in its afterlife due to its inherently fluid and incomplete nature.