



Neuberger Museum of Art

735 Anderson Hill Road
Purchase, New York 10577
www.neuberger.org

Purchase College

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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**VINTAGE PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE DISFARMER FEATURED IN
BECOMING DISFARMER AT THE NEUBERGER MUSEUM OF ART OF PURCHASE COLLEGE
November 9, 2014 through March 22, 2015**

The first museum exhibition in the New York metropolitan region to include both vintage prints made during the Great Depression and World War II years, and enlargements made from Disfarmer's negatives after 1976

(Purchase, NY...October 17, 2014) For almost forty years, local residents of and visitors to Heber Springs, Arkansas could get their pictures taken for a mere 25 cents (50 cents for three) by one of the commercial photographers in town – Mike Disfarmer – an eccentric, whose postcard-sized portraits, made between 1915 and 1959, vividly and artfully depicted everyday people in rural America. Farmers in overalls, adolescents in prom attire, housewives in flowered dresses and thick hairnets, enlisted men in uniform, all posed for the pictures, which often made their way into family albums or bureau drawers. These “penny portraits” became more than simple photographs, however, as following their first major debut as artworks in 1977, critics believed they unfailingly captured the essence of their subjects and periods of history in which they lived.

Beginning November 9, 2014, the Neuberger Museum of Art of Purchase College, will present *Becoming Disfarmer*, the first museum exhibition in the New York metropolitan region to include examples of Disfarmer's restored and unrestored vintage prints, made between 1925-1950, enlargements made posthumously from 1976-2005 from his glass plate negatives dated 1939-1946, as well as audio clips, historical journals, newspapers, and other ephemera.

In this exhibition, the original function of the photographs as intimate family keepsakes will be acknowledged through an installation featuring the inscribed fronts and backs of several photographs. There also will be several unrestored portraits, sometimes valued more for their creases and tears than for their imagery. The exhibition, curated by Chelsea Spengemann, an independent scholar, is a critical examination of Disfarmer's work as well as the first museum survey to consider the ways in which Disfarmer's vernacular photographs have been revalued and recast. An illustrated catalogue

accompanies the exhibition with essays by the curator and writers Gil Blank and Tanya Sheehan. Generous support for *Becoming Disfarmer* has been provided by the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art and by ArtsWestchester, with support from the Westchester County Government.

Mike Disfarmer (1884–1959) was a curiosity – an eccentric and an outcast within his community. Born Mike Meyer, grandson of German immigrants, he changed his name in 1939 to disassociate himself with his family and upbringing. The name “Meier” in German once translated to “dairy farmer,” and because he wished to make the point that he was not (dis) a Meyer or a farmer, he took the name Disfarmer. Disfarmer moved with his mother to Heber Springs in 1914 and briefly ran a studio there with another photographer before opening his own business. He lived with his mother until a tornado destroyed their home in 1926. His own studio with living quarters where he worked until his death was built in 1925.

Disfarmer’s approach to photography was straightforward: he would position his subjects against either a plain or striped backdrop and have them stare into the camera, with the result that the focus was directly on the individual. He rarely captured them smiling. His skill was to elicit from these traditional poses consistently compelling images that are considered today to have strongly captured the spirit of a bygone era. Other than in Heber Springs and nearby towns, Disfarmer was largely unknown, until the early 1970s, when an editor at the *Arkansas Sun*, who had obtained some of Disfarmer’s glass negatives, asked readers if they could identify the subjects printed a weekly column “Someday My Prints Will Come”. In 1977, when expert black and white photography printers were commissioned to translate Disfarmer’s imagery into seductive oversized photographs for an exhibition, Disfarmer’s vernacular imagery was accepted as art. Thus, with the first public appearance of the vintage prints in 2005, a second reevaluation of Disfarmer’s portraits occurred, and a market was born.

“Many value a vintage print because they believe it is closer to the way the artist wished it to look and it is a unique object, whereas a posthumous enlargement is typically considered a manipulation,” Ms. Spengemann explains. “In fact, both vintage prints and enlargements of Disfarmer’s work as presented to viewers today, apart from their original context -- photos in a family album, are translations of his vernacular portraits, visually and conceptually.” How Disfarmer’s images appear to us today is a construction of their posthumous presentations, regardless, and that has not yet been acknowledged in relation to his work. “Considering the enlargements as part of Disfarmer’s work is as important as considering the vintage prints,” Ms. Spengemann points out. Therefore, *Becoming Disfarmer* invites viewers to consider the varied presentations of Disfarmer’s portraits and the meanings that are gained and lost with each.

According to Ms. Spengemann some collectors declined to participate in the exhibition because the majority of the vintage photographs that she selected for the exhibition were neither iconic nor in the finest condition, which those collectors understood to be

disparaging toward the legacy of Disfarmer, rather than important to the scholarship being presented about the vernacular history of the portraits. As Tracy Fitzpatrick, Chief Curator of the Neuberger Museum of Art, notes, “Close examination can’t occur in a vacuum. By showing only iconic work, you tell a very narrow story and wind up supporting some of the less positive forces of the art market. Disfarmer’s vintage prints in their current state, worn and handled, say something about their past function, about a community and a place. And showing them in combination with posthumous prints tells another story that is also important. Sometimes the past is made clearer within the context of the present.”

Becoming Disfarmer, then, is about the photographs and their histories, and the photographer and his posthumous reception.

The Neuberger Museum of Art has organized the following programs and events in conjunction with the exhibition:

Public Open House

Sunday, November 9, 1-3 pm

Free and open to the public.

Panel Discussion with the Curator

Sunday, November 9, 3 pm

Chelsea Spengemann discusses how Disfarmer’s commercial studio photographs, made between 1914 and 1959 in Heber Springs, Arkansas, were revalued and recast as art twice, in 1977 and again in 2005. Panelists Hava Gurevich, executive director of the Disfarmer Project; Peter Miller, conservator of Disfarmer’s negatives; and Tanya Sheehan, contributor to the exhibition catalogue and Associate Professor of Art at Colby College, bring widely varying perspectives to the discussion. Their conversation will address the meaning of Disfarmer’s portraits and locate them as objects from the past with resonance in a present, critical moment of thinking about photography.

Family Second Saturdays: Portraiture

Saturday, November 8, 1-4 pm (Free)

When Mike Disfarmer photographed local people in his Arkansas studio, he created portraits that could be used to tell a story. In this workshop, participants will create their own portraits, imagine a story to go with them, and share them with family and friends.

The Neuberger Museum of Art is an integral part of Purchase College, State University of New York. The Museum is supported in part by the State University of New York. Support for the Museum’s collection, exhibitions, publications, and education programs is provided by grants from public and private agencies, individual contributions, and the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art’s members and Board.

**The Museum is located at 735 Anderson Hill Road in Purchase, N.Y. (Westchester)
914-251-6100
www.neuberger.org**

Museum Hours

Tuesday through Sunday, 12 noon to 5 pm

Closed Mondays and major holidays

Group tours by appointment only on Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 am to 12 noon

For persons with special needs, designated parking is available at the south end of the Museum building. Call ahead for wheelchair accommodations.

Walk-in Public Tours

Tuesday–Friday, Gallery Talk, 1 pm

Sunday, Topic Tour, 2 pm

Sunday, Gallery Talk, 3 pm

Gallery talks offer fresh insights into the Museum’s special exhibitions and permanent collection, while Topic Tours explore different aspects of the permanent collection.

Museum Store

Open during Museum hours. The store features a broad selection of art books, art cards, handcrafted jewelry, children's items and one-of-a-kind limited edition gifts.

Admission

\$5.00 General Public

\$3.00 Seniors

Free admission for Museum members, children 12 and under, and Purchase College students, faculty, and staff

Directions

The Neuberger Museum of Art is easily accessible by car or bus, and may also be reached by Metro-North. By car: From the North or South - take the Hutchinson River Parkway to Exit 28. Head north on Lincoln Avenue to Anderson Hill Road. Turn right onto Anderson Hill Road. Left at first traffic light into Purchase College campus. From 684 - take Exit 2 South on Route 120 to Anderson Hill Road. Turn left onto Anderson Hill to 2nd traffic light. Turn left at Purchase College campus. From the East - take Route 287 (Cross Westchester Expressway) to Exit 8E. Take second left over Expressway onto Anderson Hill Road. Follow signs to SUNY Purchase.

Handicap Parking

On the Purchase College campus, park in Parking Lot #1 and proceed to the underpass at the Performing Arts Center. The handicap elevator is located across from the entrance to the Performing Arts Center. Take the elevator to the second level, then exit to the left. The entrance to the museum is located diagonally across, about a city block away.