

The Ordinariness of Disfarmer

by David Serlin

Hats and buttons. Gingham dresses and military uniforms. Striped suspenders, starched long-sleeved shirts, and white summer shoes. The photographs taken by American portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959) comprise an impressive archive of images that preserve the details of the lives of several generations of rural Arkansans during the era following the Depression and leading up to the Cold War. More than merely capturing the iconic nature of vintage clothing or period hairstyles, the images impart details about ordinary life that bubble extravagantly beneath the photographic surface.

Lift their beautifully-composed black and white veneers, for example, and you can see wrinkled khaki slacks girdled by ill-fitting military buckles, perky gingham dresses hiding legs covered by scrappy bandages, old buttons popping off overcoats and workman's overalls, shoes too small for the feet of growing adolescents, and hats concealing the handiwork of hot curling irons or bangs still stiff with pomade. The details of ordinary life are sometimes charming, sometimes brutal, sometimes tender, and sometimes even embarrassing, but in their ordinariness they are always dignified.

What does the attention paid to ordinary life tell us about the person responsible for preserving such details—what, indeed, is the relationship between the ordinary life captured by Disfarmer's camera and ordinary life of the person behind the camera? One is confounded by a significant lack of information about Mike Disfarmer, save for a few sketchy biographical details that have been corroborated over time by surviving portrait sitters and former neighbors who remember him and were just as likely afraid of him as they were flummoxed by his enigmatic personality.

Born Mike Meyer in Indiana in 1884, the photographer moved south with his mother to Stuttgart, Arkansas in 1892, finally settling in Heber Springs, Arkansas in 1914. In the late 1920s, he built his own photography studio on Main Street after a tornado destroyed the home that he shared with his mother in 1926. Around this time, he legally changed his name from Mike Meyer to Mike Disfarmer, believing that his given surname was German for "farmer" and that his new surname's prefix would help distinguish him from the biological family that raised him. At some point during the 1940s, Disfarmer wrote a letter to someone he identified as his "foster-nephew," in which he confided about a doll in his possession that contained the bones of the person who was the real Mike Meyer.

According to some accounts, Disfarmer survived during the last year of his life entirely on beer and chocolate ice cream, which he purchased in copious quantities from Haywood's grocery store in town during his daily walk around Main Street. The ritual of purchasing and consuming these goods at Haywood's was accompanied by the daily resetting of the store's barometer, which Disfarmer did compulsively and without fail. In 1959, he was found dead by neighbors in his home studio, face down on a pile of newspapers. After his death, Disfarmer's portrait studio was torn down to make way for a parking lot for a local bank. The entire contents of his photographic studio – cameras, lighting equipment, chemical developers, and approximately six thousand original glass negatives, his technology of choice for decades – were sold off at public auction for the princely sum of five dollars.

The exhibition and publication of Mike Disfarmer's work in the 1970s represented for many contemporary critics and historians nothing less than the recovery of one of the great vernacular artists of twentieth-century portraiture. Disfarmer arguably provides the missing link in a genealogy of American portrait photographers that connects modern stylists such as Matthew Brady, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange with their postmodern progeny such as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Nan Goldin. Some critics want to position Disfarmer as the ultimate outsider artist, the hermit whose brilliance went unrecognized in his lifetime, the loner whose loneliness is redeemed by history. Perhaps this is because we like our artists to fit into the familiar generic spectacle of Artistic Biography: commercial struggles leavened by artistic triumphs; unrequited romances and frustrated family relations transformed by the magic of unconditional love; tragic personal obscurity relieved by the posthumous public recognition of misunderstood genius. Biographical works, after all, are supposed to illuminate the subject. In the end, however, we don't know any more about Disfarmer now than we did fifty years ago.

Typically, the attention lavished on a long-disappeared world of gingham dresses and hats falls sentimentally into what some identify as nostalgia, the etymology of which translates roughly to homesickness: the desire to return to a place that we seem to recognize as home, even if we never lived there in the first place. But what, exactly, are we nostalgic for in the world of Mike Disfarmer? He was a portrait photographer in a small town in rural Arkansas. He used outdated technology, not for aesthetic or political reasons but for purely functional, practical, even stubborn reasons. He was, for all intents and purposes, a photographic technician. Given these less-than-extraordinary facts, how much can we project onto the life of Disfarmer, let alone the lives of the numerous clients who sat patiently for their portraits and paid twenty-five cents for the privilege? The cumulative attention paid to the ordinary details of life that one sees in Disfarmer's photographs – all of those hats, all of those buttons – suggest that life is not about experiencing dramatic personal epiphanies or seismic social changes. More often than not, life is experienced while sitting at the same desk, developing the same photographs, drinking the same beer.

Dan Hurlin's *Disfarmer* doesn't try to tell us any more about Disfarmer's biography than we already know, and avoids any absolute sense of closure on the story of its eponymous protagonist. This is not meant to be a cynical response on Hurlin's part to Disfarmer's biography. Instead, it is a deliberate recognition of the limits of storytelling and a rebuttal to the naïve belief that such storytelling will save us from the dreariness of our existence. It's neither hopeless nor dreary to believe in the power of ordinariness. Such details, after all, had the power to keep Saint Augustine nourished in his asceticism and Marcel Proust warmed in his curtained bed, just as it kept Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange's hats firmly attached to their heads when everything around them was blowing in the dust. In the end, Hurlin offers us not so much a portrait of Mike Disfarmer as he offers us a finger capriciously stuck in a camera's open aperture.

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