



Photo Books

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The simultaneous appearance of two new Disfarmer books has brought fresh attention to the Heber Springs, Arkansas, portrait photographer who's been a cult favorite ever since the 1976 publication and exhibition of pictures made from his rediscovered glass-plate negatives. The republication of that material by Twin Palms in 1996 confirmed Disfarmer's place as an avatar of vernacular authenticity—a self-taught eccentric whose pared-down work doesn't suffer from comparisons to Sander, Evans, and Avedon. But until now we've only seen posthumous prints of photos Disfarmer took between 1939 and '46, a narrow view of a career that started in the mid 1920s and lasted more than 30 years. After years of dogged research among the citizens of Heber Springs, that view has been both broadened and deepened. Together, *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints* (powerHouse) and *Original Disfarmer Photographs* (Steidl/Steven Kasher Gallery) reproduce more than 200 previously unseen vintage photos, all actual size and none larger than a postcard. Rick Woodward's terrific essay in the powerHouse book pins down the photographer's often peculiar, surely delusional personal history, but nothing is as fascinating as the photos themselves. Though Disfarmer may not have been especially ingratiating to his clientele, his unpretentious approach suited them perfectly. Standing before his camera, these handsome small-town men, women, and children look not just disarmingly elegant but vital, self-contained, and ready for anything the world would throw their way.

You couldn't really say that about most contemporary portrait subjects, many of whom wear their anxieties and illusions like armor. Because no one is innocent or truly candid before a camera these days, photographers either have to penetrate the facade—always a risky if not futile undertaking—or learn to exploit it. Katy Grannan tries both tacks in *Model American* (Aperture), and her results are at once subtle and shocking. Grannan's subjects are all strangers—mostly young, seemingly ordinary people she meets through classified ads. Although she works primarily in her sitters' homes, there's always something awkward and potentially volatile in their encounters, especially when these new acquaintances elect to take off their clothes. Grannan doesn't question their motivation, but her presence clearly provokes and sanctions these touching, often extraordinary performances. In an effusive blurb, Richard Misrach compares Grannan to Arbus, and though she's not yet as daring, she is nearly as fearless as the woman who changed portraiture forever.

Celebrity portraiture has its own set of conventions, many of which are determined by the degree of flattery involved. Mark Seliger and Martin Schoeller do their best to subvert and transgress those conventions, with varying degrees of success. Both photographers command prime editorial space in important magazines, so they have not just access but leverage. In Seliger's case, that allows him to open up *In My Stairwell* (Rizzoli) with Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Paul McCartney, and Bruce Springsteen. The uniformity of the setting—a brick-walled former elevator shaft under a skylight—encouraged collaboration and improvisation within established limits. The upshot: some knockouts, some pulled punches, and plenty of action. Schoeller uses an even more confining device in *Close Up* (teNeues), zooming in on his subjects' heads and cropping them tight. Bill Clinton, Britney Spears, Christopher Walken, and others, both famous and unknown, submit themselves to this merciless scrutiny. The results are riveting, but only the strong survive. □