

# Michael Spano

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Michael Spano's *Diptychs*, made on the streets of New York with a hand-held 4x5 camera, fuse two distinct moments in a single negative. Spano creates his diptychs by exposing only half of a sheet of film. He then looks for another image that relates visually or thematically to the first and exposes the second half of the film. As a result his compositions are formed by deliberate selection as well as by chance. At first glance some of these diptychs read as a single photograph; differences in the scale of elements at times suggest the foreground and background of one image. Spano says, however, that he is not trying to make two photographs look like one; rather, he fuses two images so that connections between the subject and form of each create new compositions and meanings.



*Shielding Eyes*, 1985

Spano's compositions, Like the urban environment they represent, are densely packed and vertically composed. When the two images are combined, shapes, forms, and lines come together at odd angles with odd relationships in scale. Many of the pairings are ironic. In the image *Suit and Tie*, 1999, a man wearing a suit and tie is juxtaposed with the image of a mannequin bust in a shop window also dressed in a jacket and tie. In his composition *Two Generations*, 1999, a glamorous young woman with long blond hair is paired with an image of an elderly woman, her hair dyed platinum. Some of the irony in Spano's images comes from this juxtaposition and consequent interaction of formal elements. He plays with text and subject matter and relationships of size and scale. For example, people are often dwarfed by signage.



*Daily Dancers*, 1985

Spano is intrigued by the theatricality of the urban space. The connections he weaves between unrelated people and events form a fragmented narrative on the urban experience. Spano likens the juxtapositions he creates in his camera to implicating someone in a scheme in which he or she is not really involved. Though his subjects appear to occupy the same space at the same time, most of these diptychs were made several minutes apart and in different locations. Some of his subjects appear as clearly defined types--the businessman, the policewoman, the mother with child. The image *Hats*, 1999, juxtaposes the image of a policewoman wearing a black officer's hat that has a silver badge at center with the image of a woman, with two small children, wearing a straw hat with a large sunflower. Our understanding of these people is superficial. Like players in a drama, we know them only through their clothing, personal ornamentation, expressions, and gestures. Smoking, waiting with hands on hips, walking, talking on cell phones--they are not engaged in traditionally dramatic or "decisive" moments. Rather, Spano's camera isolates everyday actions. Although these photographs were made in public, they capture personal moments of people on the street who often seem unaware they are being observed. The unknowing subject is isolated on film, recontextualized, printed large (30x40), and presented for our examination and judgment. The viewer of Spano's *Diptychs* is placed in the position of voyeur.

Spano says that in past bodies of work he has looked at the urban environment in several ways, altering the style, content, and format of his images to make "pictures that work." His experiments have included using

a panoramic camera with a moving lens to capture a 140-degree view of the city. He also photographed using a multilens camera that creates a sequence of eight frames on one sheet of film over a period of thirty seconds. In the mid-1980s Spano made a series of portraits on the streets of New York that he altered by solarizing them during the printing process. Solarization reverses select tones of the print, which causes the subjects of these portraits to appear isolated from the background of the photograph.

Michael Spano's photographs are held in several collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, among others. Born in 1949, Michael Spano currently lives in New York.