

The

P H O T O REVIEW

\$6.00

Volume 18

Number 2

Spring 1995

*... a knowledge of
photography is just as
important as that of
the alphabet. The
illiterate of the future
will be ignorant of the
use of the camera and
pen alike.*

László Moholy-Nagy
1936



David Lebe
Hands, 1989, silver print, 20" x 28"

An Interview with David Lebe

By Richard Kagan



Copyright © 1979, David Lebe. All Rights Reserved.

"You have to allow an ambiguous place for the mind to fill in the thing that isn't there on paper, the magic stuff."

After a career change in 1988, I became a darkroom assistant to David Lebe as he was just beginning the 16 x 20" prints from the Scribble series, his metaphoric light-drawings reflecting on life, death, and AIDS. (Later some were printed at 30 x 40".) At the time, I was enrolled in a very tight photo program and found Lebe's approach refreshing--much more intuitive than technical. He prefers to have an assistant rock trays, leaving him free to do the more creative work. We often discussed his decisions.

To walk into his house, at that time, was to walk into one of his still-life photographs. In the kitchen, adjacent to the darkroom, six cylinders of newly unpacked oatmeal were stacked in a pyramid, red and blue labels all oriented forward--a small construction probably done without thinking or concern for the fact that they would be placed in a cupboard only a while later. Throughout the wonderfully designed interior of his center-city townhouse were ever-changing arrangements of fresh or dried flowers, post-cards, shells, pebbles, dried fruit, found objects, or anything else that could be assembled, collected, or collaged. What ultimately appears in his photographs is often only an extension of the process by which he lives his life.

Lebe is one of those rare individuals who present themselves to the world without artifice or guile--as they are. The museum curator, the plumber, students, and friends all see the same person. Although originally a New Yorker, Lebe settled in slower-paced Philadelphia after attending the Philadelphia College of Art (1966-70), where he subsequently taught for eighteen years. He studied under Ray K. Metzker and Barbara Blondeau, placing him historically in the experimental lineage that starts at the Bauhaus, the seminal German art school, in 1918, and traces through Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind at the Institute of Design in Chicago, where Metzker and Blondeau both studied. Somewhat of a technophobe, he only reluctantly calls himself a photographer.

Rather, he is an artist who sets up a process using a repertoire of photographic techniques. Beginning with lens-less cameras a long time ago, his pinhole method influenced the way he would later work with other techniques. His attitude toward art and life may have much relevance for photographers and non-photographers alike.



Copyright © 1979, David Lebe. All Rights Reserved.

Lebe is currently at work on new figurative images and has begun to reprint a comprehensive collection of photographs done between 1976 and 1992 for a possible book project and exhibition. David Lebe's work is represented in the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Allentown (PA) Art Museum, The University of Maryland Baltimore County, and Haverford College, among others, and can be seen in numerous books including *Flora*

Photographica, William A. Ewing, Simon & Schuster, 1991; *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*, Allen Ellenzweig, Columbia University Press, 1992; *Fully Expose & The Male Nude in Photography*, Emmanuel Cooper, Unwin Hyman, Ltd., London, 1990; *The Visionary Pinhole*, Lauren Smith, Peregrine Smith Books, 1985; and the catalogue, *Truth Fantasy: David Lebe Photographs*, published by the Albin O. Kuhn Library, University of Maryland, 1987. He is represented by Paul Cava Fine Art, Bala Cynwyd, PA, the Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, and The Vantage Gallery, Amsterdam.

The following interview took place in early September, 1993, in Lebe's upstate New York studio in the house he and his life partner Jack Potter had just had built. Additions and clarifications were done by letter and telephone during the first few months of 1994.

Richard Kagan: How did you get started with your earliest body of work, the pinhole photographs?

David Lebe: It was an assignment in school, part of a class where there were a number of short assignments. I made a camera and I did pinhole photography for the rest of the class. I never did any of the other projects.

RK: What was the subject matter? And what year was this?

DL: The first ones were of myself, and then of my friends and myself. I started the last year at PCA (Philadelphia College of Art, now University of the Arts), 1969-

70, and kept using pinhole cameras for the next three or four years after I was out of school. That was pretty much it, except for an occasional picture. '75 was when I did the last one.

RK: What was it about pinhole photography that attracted you, that made you continue working the rest of that semester and afterward?

DL: Well, ...at first it was just that I was excited by it. It was fascinating. It was fun. I wasn't familiar with any other pinhole work that was being done, and I was discovering a lot. I think I got a real sense of what a camera was for the first time – an experiential sense of what a camera was. I was very comfortable using my 35mm camera, but it was an alien object. With the pinhole camera, it was something that I had built. It was magic. And yet it was clearer. I also liked being able to change the given, the basic structure, the format of the image that was made. The first thing that I did was to start doing multiple pinholes. And then the whole way of working was completely different. I had to relearn the whole process of photographing. With the 35mm camera, it was a matter of scanning and finding imagery. With the pinhole camera, I couldn't do that. First of all, I didn't have a viewfinder with my early nine-pinhole camera, and second, I couldn't move the camera around very easily. I had to be near a darkroom, and the camera had to stay still. So, I think part of the excitement for me was learning the new process, inventing it in a way. Not that I was the first to do it, but nobody was telling me how it was done, so I was inventing it, and that was exciting. Instead of scanning, I was working intuitively within parameters I had set up. It became a basis for the way I continue to work even now. I also was able to walk around and get into the picture and that was, I thought, a lot of fun. Instead of being a "decisive moment," the photograph became the decisive twenty minutes. My later photographs, the light drawings, were--in a way--a continuation of that. I learned that a photograph wasn't necessarily an instant but could be a longer length of time--could be a whole event.

RK: You've worked with a number of very different processes, each in a very individual way--first, the pinholes, and hand-coloring, then photograms and light drawings.

DL: The diversity of form in the body of my work is something that I value very much. Not having acclaim early on, or even later on, made it easier (*for me*) to change the form of the work, and to work in ways that looked different at first glance, but to me often seemed very connected. There are many connecting visual threads as well as spiritual connections, and connections as to the intent or to the process.

RK: Would you describe your work in general, then and now, as process-related and perhaps more process-related than standard ways of working in photography?

DL: Technique is something I don't pay a lot of attention to, but process is. I don't worry so much about whether it's a good camera or what kind of film I'm using. I think more about how I'm going to set up the picture. How am I going to interact with a model, if I'm using a model? How am I going to work to develop ideas? What's going to be predetermined? How much am I going to work intuitively? How much is going to be structured before I start to work? How much is going to happen as I'm working? That's what I think of as process--not so much about how long I'm going to develop the film. I use process to get at content. If the process is structured right, it can allow meaningful images to happen. I'll leave it to someone else to talk about how that's different from other ways of working.

RK: What are some of the other forms you use now?

DL: The two types of photographs that I started making after pinhole photography were photograms and what I call light drawings. Right now I'm doing a lot of still-lives, set-ups in the studio, working in front of the camera to build a picture, very much like I worked with pinhole photography. I make light drawings by drawing with a flashlight in a darkened room while the film remains exposed for an extended period of time. In a way, it's like the pinhole process when you open the camera and walk around in front of it and do something, although the light drawings are a much more animated process. With pinholes, you just sit there or move a couple of times. Again, it's an extended kind of time frame for making the image. The photograms are a different way of building the image right on the paper. At the moment, I'm doing still-lives, many of them with light drawing, some without.

RK: Can you describe a little of your technique for doing light drawings? What do you do? Do you open the lens and then walk into the photograph with a flashlight pointed at the camera?

DL: Right. The camera's on a tripod, and I walk around in front of it with a flashlight and either draw freehand, or I outline, or I do whatever I'm going to do with the flashlight--move it different ways, at different speeds, point it in different directions. Sometimes, I'll walk out of the picture and turn on another light source, a strobe, or a hot light of some sort to illuminate objects that are in front of the camera. I might do that with two light sources. Or whatever. Then, I'll close the camera and repeat the photo five times, because you never know quite what's going to come out, and if you do it five times, you're more likely to have an image that you're happy with.

RK: What led you to begin making light drawings?

DL: When the idea struck me, I was at home making self-portraits, wanting to be someplace else. That was 1976. I was shy and withdrawn and spent a lot of time alone in my small apartment where I did most of my work. Turning out the lights allowed me to eliminate the confinement and clutter, and also to imply the larger spaces or even vistas that I longed for, to place a figure in. The figure, of course,

was me. By 1979, I started outlining other people outdoors. And then, later, I started drawing freehand.

RK: Let's talk about the photograms. Most others that come to mind, including the well-known ones by Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, are two-dimensional studies in composition. It's interesting that many of yours are landscapes that not only create an illusion of space, but also imply movement and time. Why landscapes?

DL: At the time, I was very much rooted in the city. I had bought a townhouse in 1977, and made the photograms from plants I collected from my tiny roof garden and, later, from trips to the country. I was creating the gardens and landscapes I longed for. Along the way, other ideas got expressed.

RK: When I first saw them, the photograms appeared very serious. Now they seem whimsical, as well.

DL: Well, it was the opposite for me. When I was doing them, I thought of them as gardens and fantasy landscapes and was conscious of their whimsical and playful nature. I worked on them intensely but didn't think much about the meaning until later. There were certainly sexual connotations suggested by the phallic forms. Also, I had this kind of secret notion that the things floating in space represented spirits, perhaps that had left the body. But it wasn't an idea that I ever really talked about. I didn't even know anybody who talked about such things. So, yes, there was a serious element, although I didn't consciously put it there.

RK: Both the photograms and the light drawings seem like departures from the street and pinhole work you had been doing. What led to the change?

DL: Well, the first photograms and light drawings started after Barbara Blondeau, my friend and former teacher, died on Christmas Eve, 1974. Barbara had given me the original pinhole assignment, and she later gave me my first teaching job. It was my first experience with serious illness and death, and very painful emotionally. It had a strong effect on me.

A short time later, I was instrumental in putting together an exhibition and editing a catalogue of her work. Undoubtedly, my contact with that work was an important influence. Barbara had used a wonderful variety of playful techniques, and she often combined them with implications of death. Almost immediately and for the next year and a half, I began searching and experimenting with different forms--handcoloring, photograms, light drawings. Looking back on it now, much of the imagery in those experimental photographs reflected ideas of death, as well as sexuality.

RK: Coming back to the pinhole work, you said that not having a viewfinder forced you to give up control and stop pre-visualizing. Instead, you learned to set up situations to work intuitively and spontaneously within the limitations--and

you started constructing images in front of the camera. I'm paraphrasing slightly. It seems interesting, your way of working and how it came out of the pinholes--that it isn't about the moment. It's about creating a situation in which you could be creative, spontaneous, and responsive to a whole lot of things that were going on. Perhaps, in some ways, more standard methods can stop or intimidate or prevent spontaneity, whereas the pinholes and light drawings may encourage it.

DL: It worked for me. In a way you have to find your form - what feels right, what works for you. You have those images within you, and you need to find a channel to get them out. It's not necessarily the same channel for each person, or the same channel for each person at all times in his or her lives. Everything can change. Everything does change. And what will channel out images this week is not necessarily what's going to channel them out next week.

RK: Where many photographers try to control the images, you seem to set up the process having only an idea of what's going to happen.

DL: Not always a clear idea.

RK: But trusting your intuitive response in the situation?

DL: Yes. It's something that I had to learn--to trust. It didn't come right away, and I still don't always trust that things will work. But I've learned over the years that probably something will happen. ...You have to learn to trust that something is going to happen and allow it to happen. You have to learn to let go. More recently, AIDS has taught me to let go in other aspects of my life--a great lesson. My experience with photography may have helped me there. It's a hard lesson to learn, to let go. It is for me, anyway. Maybe it's not so hard for others.

RK: I suspect it's very hard for photographers, in particular.

DL: Some photographers, yes, do tend to be very tight. I've learned to appreciate accidents, also. ...Many of my photographs, you might say, are controlled accidents--accidents somewhat under control. Learning to recognize a good picture on the contact sheet is important, as important as learning how to make the picture.

RK: Your method of working sets up a discovery of visual images and also seems to set up a self-discovery. Can you talk about that connection and how self-discovery has been important for you?

DL: A lot of the work has been, in a way, about self-discovery. Often, I don't know what my pictures are about until after I've made them--sometimes quite a bit after I've made them. ...I had to learn to trust that the pictures are perhaps about something. And I don't necessarily discover that right away. Sometimes I discover it while I am working on them, sometimes not till after I'm done making them.



Copyright © 1983 David Lebe. All Rights Reserved.

RK: The Scribble series, for example?

DL: Yes. With the Scribble series, I made all the pictures and then put the contacts and negatives away, thinking they were just frivolous nonsense, only to discover close to a year later that they were really significant pictures. I made them at a time when my former lover and close friend Barry, was dying of AIDS. I knew he was very close to death. I knew I needed to keep busy,

and I felt a very strong urge to work--almost a compulsion. The last things I had done, some months before, were still-lives with flowers, and I thought I would add some light drawings. Every day I would buy and then photograph the flowers and do the light drawing. It kept my mind busy and kept me working for a week or so. Then, one day, I forgot to buy flowers and dinner was over, and I wanted to work. I was quite annoyed. ...It occurred to me that I didn't need the flowers, I could just work with the light. Out of that came the Scribble series, which I think is one of my best series of work. In the course of my doing this work, my friend died. I stopped the series. I had printed a few pictures but thought they were frivolous and silly, and that I really had a responsibility to be making work that dealt with AIDS as a topic. The work should be about depression, about pain, about anger--about serious things, not playful patterns of light. Anyway, I put the Scribbles away for some time, and then, months later, when I was feeling more positive, I got interested in them again. I put some prints up to look at and think about. I listened to how people reacted to them. I realized, finally, that the pictures really were about AIDS. The light was spirit, and the vases represented bodies or funeral urns. The pictures were really a defiance of the fear and the pain, a kind of celebration of the spirits of so many who had died. They are an affirming memorial coming from my experience of knowing so many.

RK: Do you think you could have done the work had you started out wanting to express those concerns and feelings that you ultimately discovered after doing the work?

DL: No, the work would have been very self-conscious. Trite. Maybe somebody else could do it that way, but I can't. If I have an intellectual thought or idea, a concept that I want to make pictures about, the picture becomes illustrative and often trite and obvious and loses its magic and its mystery, its soul and its spirit. It just becomes too plain and superficial. At least when I do it. Maybe other people can pull it off. There's a lot of that work out there that seems self-conscious and obvious. People like it. It's popular. It's easier to understand and talk about, but I don't find it very interesting.



Copyright © 1979, David Lebe. All Rights Reserved.

RK: It sounds like your work is set up for discovery - to be discovered.

DL: Well, yes. Also, I think there's something else working here. I hope I can express it. I have a very strong feeling that there's a visual language that's very different from verbal language. It's not something you can make a dictionary of and translate like English to French. You can't say this color means that or this gesture expresses whatever. It's on a different level of thinking and understanding. It's on a more intuitive level. I don't know if it can ever be translated no matter how smart we get or how much research is done.

RK: Or how much the critics try.

DL: Yes, or how much the critics try. There's a visual understanding when you look at something that is its own kind of language. It doesn't have an equivalent in the verbal, and I think a lot of that has to come out of an intuitive response. You can't sit down and write out what you're going to do, because it's not words that you're dealing with, and it doesn't translate very well into words.

RK: So, you don't try to force an idea or a narrative onto the work, but allow whatever it is that percolates up from pre-consciousness to guide you?

DL: Well, you have to have restrictions. You can't be too loose. You have to have boundaries. And the tighter they are, sometimes the more creative you can be. And, you have to learn how to do that. There's nothing worse than aimlessly walking out the door with your camera, just wanting to make pictures, having no idea what you're going to do. But if there's something you're looking for, or if you say, "I can only photograph from my doorstep and I can go no further," then you'll have a better chance of making good pictures.

RK: In the Scribble series, each time you opened the shutter and walked to the background facing the camera, were you aware of what the configuration, what the gesture of your movement would be?

DL: Well, sometimes, and sometimes not. I often had a starting point. I have a lot of trouble with inertia. Once I'm in a situation, I'm fine. I might know that I'm doing a spiral or an upward motion, or I'm going to start out a particular way, and then once I'm moving, it just happens. Sometimes I'll walk out there without any idea, and as I am walking out there, I'll think, "Okay. I'm going to do this or that." Or sometimes, once I get something that's working for me, I'll consciously repeat it many times--refine it. If I do a picture with a spiral, and I see it on the contact sheet and I find it interesting, I'll go back and do spirals for a whole night.

I don't really pre-visualize what the picture will look like. It's more the feeling of the gesture that I think about.

RK: Your work uses elements of your life--often self portrait, often details of your house, your friends, your objects, and yet, it's neither documentary nor a narrative about your life.

DL: I often say that my work comes from my experience of living. That's the catalyst. The way I experience life is the catalyst for making the pictures. And that I work with familiar things and familiar people seems correct. It's hard to talk about, because it's not something I do consciously. It happens.

RK: In the past, you've cautioned students against falling into the easy trap of just cataloging their lives.

DL: I think for work to be universally appealing or interesting to a large audience, it has to be very personal. If you get too general, you say nothing. Nobody's interested. It's boring. Being very personal or specific, you say something that somebody else can identify with. Often when people think about getting personal, they tell the story of their lives: what they had for breakfast, what their house looks like, or their cat, or their mother, and that tends to be boring, too. It's like someone who just chatters on. Somehow you have to get to the essence of the experience. And maybe you have to use familiar things. I work using what's familiar around me, but then it has to transform somehow. It has to go beyond just story.

RK: Transform?

DL: You have to allow an ambiguous place for the mind to fill in the thing that isn't there on paper, the magic stuff.

RK: Is vulnerability important in your work?

DL: I think artists have to be vulnerable. There are artists who put up armor and they are great artists, and they do wonderful work, but in some way they don't even realize they're being vulnerable. They're letting us in, even if they think they're not. You have to be out there--if not consciously, then unconsciously. For art to happen, somehow you have to put yourself out there and open yourself up. You have to let others look inside.

RK: When you started doing homoerotic photographs, was it a challenge for you to show them to the world? To be that open? To be that vulnerable?

DL: Well, it paralleled my life. In a way, I used the pictures to make myself come out.

RK: You found it easier to come out in your work rather than saying, "I am gay"?



Copyright © 1982, David LaBe. All Rights Reserved.

DL: It's what I could do, could manage at the time. I felt the need to make photographs about male sexuality, which is what I was interested in, obsessed with, if you want to say that. It was my focus then, the crisis in my life.

RK: Let's put this in context, what year was it and how old were you?

DL: ...I guess I started doing homoerotic work right after college, 1970. I was twenty-two. By the mid-seventies, the need was more pressing. The pictures became more open over a period of five or six years. I kept feeling the need to make the art, and I was still a little afraid to. Eventually, I started making it thinking I didn't have to show it, but of course once it was made, showing it seemed like the thing to do. Besides, it seemed cowardly not to.

And then I felt that politically it was the thing to do. I do believe the phrase "silence equals death," which wasn't around at that time, but I think the way to be effective on a personal level politically is by living your life the way you believe things should be. For me, that meant being open and honest about being gay--not being ashamed, not hiding.

RK: It was a very active time – the early seventies right after the Stonewall rebellion in New York, and there were a lot of gay groups throughout the country. What was happening as far as homoerotic images in photography are concerned? Did you have any models or were you, as far as you knew, totally on your own at the time?

DL: That's a good question.

RK: There were certainly other people working at that time, though the work may not have been exhibited. Mapplethorpe was approximately the same age as you. He was starting to do homoerotic images but was just out of school, so you probably wouldn't have been familiar with him.

DL: I remember when I first became familiar with him. It was around the time he was showing in that gallery on Broadway in New York, 1979 or '80. That was after I had been doing openly gay work for a while. There had to be other people, if not other people, certainly individual photographs. I don't have any model that comes to mind.

RK: Were you aware of Minor White's homoerotic images?

DL: No. I didn't know about those until several years ago with the show at the Museum of Modern Art. I don't know anyone who did.



Copyright © 1987, David Lebe. All Rights Reserved.

RK: How about George Platt Lynes?

DL: I was aware of his work, but not...the obviously homoerotic work--certainly a sensibility about it. The same with Duane Michals. I recognized a sensibility and wondered. It was a frustration.

RK: How were your more homoerotic images met with in the art world?

DL: I don't know. The people who liked my pictures told me so, and the others shut up. So, you never really know, do you? My show and the catalogue at the University of Maryland stirred less controversy than expected. Most of my shows have been pretty quiet, and I've gotten pretty positive

responses. But then the work didn't get shown a lot, either. Sometimes, I think straight people are willing to show, and can accept, more outrageous gay images because they don't relate to them personally. Also, outrageous images play to preconceived notions. Everyday, matter-of-fact images that anyone can identify with, perhaps, can be more threatening.

RK: But your images are not exactly matter-of-fact. Yes, there is an everyday directness to your work. Wherever a visitor to your house might look, they would see the same kinds of still life compositions as in the photographs. But they're also personal and revealing, very much a part of your life. There is no mask, no persona. No *other*.

DL: Is that so different from other people? I don't know. I wonder. Was Mapplethorpe like his photographs?

RK: One would presume that he was to a certain extent. His work is more outer-directed, more about appearance and attitude, than yours.

DL: I heard Mapplethorpe speak once. He didn't have much to say except, "I took photos of these people because I knew them. They were friends of mine. I wasn't trying to shock. I was just trying to photograph what was there." Of course, that wasn't what was there for me. It was something very different.

RK: You have a different eye. There's a different kind of honesty about your work--quieter, more inner-directed. Let's address the whole area of honesty--honesty about being gay, emotional honesty, and vulnerability in your work. Do you see them as connected?

DL: They are connected, of course. In some ways, I was able to do in photography what I couldn't do in my life. It took me ten years to start to come out. Except for a neighbor, with whom I had a brief affair, no one knew I was gay, from the time I first understood at fifteen until twenty-five, when I came out to some friends. And they were quite miserable years. I was never able to justify the hiding. I always felt it was dishonest, not what I wanted to be doing, but I was doing it. And, also, I witnessed the painful effect the closet could have on artists I was close to.

RK: In what way?

DL: Well, Barbara Blondeau led a deeply closeted life....

RK: Your friend, your former teacher?

DL: Yes. I only discovered this just before her death. At that time, I was just coming out. We never could even acknowledge our gayness to each other, although we both knew. I witnessed her illness and death being made so much more difficult because of her secret life. Also, in spite of the fact that I understood her fear of coming out, I felt angry at being denied an important connection between us that could have been so supportive. All this was very distressing. It became a strong motivating force in my wanting to become openly gay in my photography, as a teacher, and in my life - something I wasn't able to do yet. But I made photographs in private moments when I was alone, and slowly, I allowed my gay feelings to come out. In some ways my life followed that lead.

RK: This is similar to something we were talking about earlier concerning your other work--that rather than having specific ideas which you pursued, you set up a situation in which you let the images come out of you. You set up a process. It sounds somewhat similar.

DL: Well, yes. I think the first experience I had like that, where I understood that, was when I was a senior in college, and Ray Metzker was my teacher. There was a great deal of discussion about each picture, each part of each picture--composition, form, the flow of energy, tonality. Ray was a great teacher in that respect. He was the finest teacher I ever had and made a tremendous difference for me. But I can't remember any talk about content or emotion or meaning, or how making pictures could relate to your life, or why you were doing this work. Not that I could have spoken about that if anybody had asked me. I couldn't have. The point is, I was hardly even aware that those were issues, because we were so involved in the formal aspects of the pieces. So, I did this body of work that was heavy in shadows--figures that were disappearing, bleached-out figures, totally white or black--kind of secret images, shadow images. I was very proud of the work. I showed it around. The first year I was out of school, I was at an emotional low point. I realized that this was really life. I was either going to be gay, or I was going to be something else, and I couldn't be something else, and I really had to face that issue. I thought about suicide a lot.

I was going to a therapist for a brief time and he asked me to bring in my photographs. He asked me to talk about them, and he started asking me questions. "Well, what do you see here that is like what you're feeling?" "What does this empty figure mean?" It all just sort of clicked together. I saw that the pictures were about hiding and being empty and having an empty life. I saw all those empty shadows, and I saw shadows that were hiding something very important. It was so clear; it was terrifying to me. It was at least a year after that before I could show the work to anybody. I would take the work out, start to show it and practically throw up, and I would have to put it away. I think that was a great lesson for me. If I allow myself to work with concentration and intuition, being honest to my vision--that is, if I keep making choices and decisions with integrity, intuitively and clearly, even if only thinking about formal, graphic ideas--then I could trust that there might be some meaning there that was related to my life, and that someone else could relate to their life.

RK: Let's talk about the last six or seven years. You've done three groups of work.

DL: They all came out of AIDS. First, knowing people who had it, people who were dying and who had died, and being aware that it was likely that I was infected but not knowing. Then, later, in 1987, knowing that I was--the reactions I went through. The first body of work that came out of that experience was the Scribble series, a tribute to the spirits of the dead. We've already talked about that work. The next group was the Scott series, which were pictures of Scott O'Hara--very sexual, erotic pictures of one model. They came later, after I had been diagnosed and was dealing with AIDS for quite some time. Attitudes had started to change about sex, not just in the gay community, but in America and other parts of the world. When I was in my twenties, when I first came out, sex was a great celebration, particularly among young people in general--the sexual revolution of the seventies. Then, in the eighties, because of AIDS, that started to close down. Personally, I started to close down, also--not for rational reasons, necessarily; I was psychologically blocked. I became angry, because there was a loss. I guess I did the sexual pictures as a defiance of that--to reclaim, to celebrate sexuality and reaffirm it. It's a wonderful part of human life. I think that was the impulse to do those photographs. They are very up front and direct, out there - in a great part due to the wonderful model I had who felt similarly. In a way, it was collaboration.

RK: And the third group?

DL: I'm still working on them now. They're still-lifes done in my studio--pictures of vegetables, food--and a lot of them incorporate light drawings, parts of the body floating in the air--hands, mostly. The truth is, I'm not really sure what they're about yet. They came out of my interest in macrobiotics.

RK: Can you say more about that?

DL: Macrobiotics was a wonderful discovery, a total transformation in my life. Just after my life partner Jack and I met in 1989, we started exploring a macrobiotic diet as a way to deal with AIDS. At first, we thought of it as just another treatment to try, but it became a new way to look at the world. Our lives changed physically, emotionally, spiritually. We lost a lot of fear and became more centered, more peaceful. Strangely, these last years have been the happiest of my life. So these pictures are a celebration of the power of food. They came about because of AIDS.

RK: But they appear more than just a celebration of food--the elements that enter--almost energy fields ...

DL: One of the things I'm slowly starting to see is the energetics of food, and the play of yin and yang to create balance. I've become more in touch with how I'm connected to the rest of my environment, the rest of the world. When that becomes clearer, that's a very spiritual thing. I think that's reflected in these photographs. I think the light drawings, in general, are my most spiritual pictures--even the early ones that go back to 1975, well before I had discovered macrobiotics.

I always had a sense that when I outlined figures in light I was dealing with a kind of energy--that I was talking about that border between the outside world and the inside world and the energy that happens there. And, maybe there isn't such a separation, that it's really a continuum with just a change in energy of some sort. It's not like these new pieces just happened out of nothing that came before. There's definitely a spirituality and a wonder. You know, I think art should be playful and life affirming. There's so much death art.

RK: Cynical art.

DL: Cynical art. Intellectual art. To me, that's not what it's about. It's about celebrating life, affirming life, the wonder of life, the mystery of life, To me that's what it should be about.

RK: I see that concern as a strand running through all your work.

DL: Well, thank you. That's good. I appreciate that.

Richard Kagan is a Philadelphia/New York based photographer and has exhibited nationally and internationally.

Copyright © 1994, 1995, 2000 Richard Kagan.

This interview originally appeared in the Pinhole Journal, August 1994 and was revised for The Photo Review, Spring 1995 and Apogee Photo Magazine, February, 8, 2002