

camera—Interview Man Ray

By Paul Hill and Tom Cooper



Q.: Why did you take up photography?

M. R.: I was a painter many years before I was a photographer. I got a camera one day because I didn't like professional photographers' reproductions of my work. At just about that time the first panchromatic plates came out and you could photograph in black and white preserving the values of the colours. I studied very thoroughly and after a few months I became the most expert photographer for reproducing things! What interested me mostly were people, particularly their faces. Instead of painting I began to photograph people and I didn't want to paint portraits anymore. Or, if I painted a portrait I wasn't interested in making a likeness, or even a dramatic thing. I finally decided that there was no comparison between the two, photography and painting. I paint what cannot be photographed, something from the imagination, or a dream, or a subconscious impulse. I photograph the things that I don't want to paint, things that are already in existence. I got tired of painting, in fact as I've often said: 'To master a medium you've got to despise it a bit too.' That means that you've got to be so expert and sure of yourself in that medium that it is no longer amusing or interesting to you—it becomes a chore. So I began to paint without using brushes, or canvas, or palettes. I started painting with airbrushes, an air gun and compressed air. It was a wonderful relief to paint a picture without touching the canvas. I painted practically in three dimensions because with the air gun if I wanted a thin line I'd approach closely to the surface and then if I wanted to model a shade, I went moving into a third dimension. That was a marvellous thing at the time, it relieved my depression about painting, especially as I was being so much attacked for doing abstract painting. So it became another medium, and when I satisfied my curiosity, or just satisfied myself on that, I would stop and maybe went back to painting for a while. But I continued to make photographs—reproducing my work and doing my portraits of people that came into the studio. I hoped

one day that I would be able to make a living out of it. All pupils ask the classical question: 'How do you become successful and famous?' I've talked to thousands of pupils and there's one in ten thousand that will probably come through, and that requires simply time and persistence, and a certain passion—a certain mania.

Q.: What has been your passion? What has been your mania? Somehow it seems like play is a very important part.

M. R.: Well, it's all play. The motive? What am I after? The pursuit of liberty first. When they said I was ahead of my times I said 'No I'm not, I'm of my time, you are behind the times'.

Anyhow I continued. I jumped from one to the other, or did them both simultaneously. I had my hands full and that was enough to keep me going. Then when I came to France I immediately met all the young revolutionary crowd, Dadaists, and so forth. I brought a certain number of works and they thought it was absolutely in line with what they were advocating. So I collaborated with them and we published magazines and we gave exhibitions. I was always invited to those manifestations but now those things are historical. I tell the youngsters now, 'You are all going back 40 or 50 years. Why don't you create a new movement of your own. Find a new title for it, that's what you should do, not go back to the past.' I'm not a historian, I was always the lowest in the history class. I was a disgrace to my instructor. He kept me in school one day after the examination which I had failed miserably. He gave me a list of questions, told me to look them up and write down the answers. He passed me to save his own skin.

Q.: Did you feel isolated in America because of the sort of work you were doing?

M. R.: Practically. I began to paint and exhibit a bit around 1912. My first big show was in 1915 in a gallery on Fifth Avenue that was devoted to young American painters, but they just didn't know what I was driving at.

Q.: What was the name of that Gallery?

M. R.: Danielle's. Danielle was a prosperous man who had a big saloon and he had a lot of money, and a friend of mine—a poet—persuaded him to open an Art Gallery. He said that that was the coming thing. The whole New York School were involved in that. They were all very nice people, but I was on an entirely different track. When I got out of school and started reasoning with it, I decided that I must do the things that you're not supposed to do. And that was my slogan.

I was invited to the Armory show in 1913, but at that time I didn't have anything I thought was important enough to put up, and I was glad when I saw the Armory show that I hadn't sent anything there. There were all the Cubist paintings of Picasso and Picabia. Enormous Picabia paintings, and Duchamp's work, and all the riots the 'Nude Descending the Staircase' had created. I said to Duchamp one day, 'You know if you hadn't put the title on the canvas "Nude Descending a Staircase" that picture would have passed unnoticed like the Picabias did'. So that gave me a hint, and I've always attached titles to my objects. They do not explain the work but add what you might call a literary element to it that sets the mind going. It doesn't do it to everybody, but the few people that I expect to respond to it do.