TAKE 3

DUREAU ON DUREAU
Video Vérité

Monday, April 8, 1991
6 PM-8:30 PM

EXT. NEW ORLEANS. TWILIGHT.
THE SECOND-FLOOR PORCH BALCONY
OF GEORGE DUREAU.
OVERLOOKING THE FRENCH QUARTER

Jack Fritscher: You are known as a photographer, but you began basically as a painter.

George Dureau: I've always been a painter. As a child, I drew things that children draw. My mother told me to draw courtyard scenes, magnolias, and I drew them. I didn't have any art training in high school at all. When I went to college, I studied all abstract things. I became an abstract painter. In the late 1940s and 1950s, I did very non-objective sort of Paul Klee, Miró things. Just when the whole world was convinced that's what they wanted, I was convinced I didn't want it. I was doing advertising and such like.

So in 1960, I just switched right over back to figurative work, still life and landscapes, aiming at doing figures. For the first five years of the 1960s, I, little by little, moved into figures by way of doing some landscapes and things to get my brush going on figurative expression. By the middle of the 60s, it was pretty obvious that the figures were going to take over as they moved up closer and closer, and became, I guess, what people call "Baroque."

Actually, it was just that I was so intense about the figures that I would articulate them and warp them, and try to make them

express what I was talking about, and so they got to look "Baroque." I guess that's how "Baroque" gets to happen.

Fritscher: Isn't there a story about you out on location painting landscapes? There was a gentleman in your neighborhood who appeared in the landscapes and all of a sudden…

Dureau: Yes. I had a house in the country that I shared with my friend Chris. I would paint the levee in front of the house, the levee on the river. And all of a sudden, my neighbor across the street, a black man in this little country town, he came over and sat to watch me. So I painted him into the picture and that was the end of that. The figure took over the landscapes after that.

So by the late 60s, my paintings were almost always dominated by figures. I realized by the end of the 60s that although the pictures were beautiful and decorative and even sumptuous sometimes, I wanted the drawing to be more precise—not so much "tight precise," but explosive and expressive. And so I took up drawing again, although I had not done drawing since my days in college.

When I was in college, they didn't teach drawing. Well, there was a sketch class, but no one in it sketched as well as I did so it wasn't doing me any good. I mean I already drew better than the teachers did then. So I kind of had to invent how to do representational painting. The painting I did in college was abstract. I had to invent what figurative painting was going to be for me.

I pretty well had a broadside, big slabby sort of, actually kind of West-Coast-looking kind of painting. Big, buttery paint, a little like Diebenkorn, I guess, if Diebenkorn were painting Edward-Hopper-type street scenes. My street scenes, however, were always hotter and more interested in the people than Edward Hopper would ever be, so New England-y in his crispness. Mine were always a bit gushy. I would jump into the ditches that people were digging.

So I took up drawing everybody in the late 60s, and it surprised people. It surprised people because drawing, although it was respected, it was respected in a hushed kind of way. People would go to museums and see beautiful drawings by someone who was dead, right? And they never thought of drawing as it has turned out to be

for me: that is, my everyday thing, like writing notes to yourself, writing notes to anybody. I draw some pictures seriously and some more casually, but it's a handwriting.

But that way of looking at drawings isn't known to most people, even educated people who don't seem to know that the drawings are done with style most of the time. The reason Michelangelo's drawings, and Leonardo's and Raphael's and Rembrandt's and Rubens's, and all of those drawings seem to be related, one to the other? They are all so truthful. They seem to be talking about things that are real, more than the paintings do.

The paintings frequently drift away into some sort of novelty or operatic style whereas the drawings always are telling what the people are concerned about. My drawings always tell you more where I am at than the paintings. The paintings, frequently, because there is more money involved, have to go into a place, have to suit some thing, have to have a reason for getting sold. Although, as a rule, I don't paint a picture just because somebody tells me to paint such and such. Still you know you are creating this Big Opera, and it's going to have this style, and this bombastic effect.

In a drawing, because it is just paper and charcoal, in my case, you just do it, and if you have to throw it away, you just throw it away. And you don't think about that if you draw every day a lot. You just go and draw and if it's good, maybe you'll sell it, maybe you'll put it on the wall, but it's just like writing notes to yourself anyway.

Actually, it's my drawings that motivate everything. The drawings are at the middle of my career, and I go this way [through the drawings] into painting or that way into photographs.

It becomes more operatic and more involved with art elements when I take a subject and bring it into painting. If, on the other hand, I decide that I am fascinated by the person who I am drawing or thinking about, I'll turn to the camera because it provides a sort of clinical [take], [because of] the overwhelming talent that the camera has for capturing things. Now, I'm not particularly fond of sitting and capturing every detail of people, and sometimes you'll have a model who is fascinating in a lot of ways, although you don't

care to sit and draw them all: the texture of skin or the hair or something like that.

So then I'll use the good offices of the camera and do that. That's the way I began photographing. I had absolutely no experience with cameras at all. I never even knew how to use Kodak. I was never interested in photographing anything. Anything! Because I drew and painted. I wasn't even interested in the history of photography. Nothing about it interested me.

I had models who were wonderful looking to me. They came out terrific in my drawings and paintings. And people didn't believe that they existed. They thought that I had just imagined these people. So I bought a cheap camera, two-and-a-quarter, very cheap one, and started making some pictures with just some advice like, "Oh, use such and such an f-stop when you shoot inside this window" and such like. I began making photographs that were almost exactly the compositions, the format and the attitude, that was already in my drawings. So I was just telling the camera how it was supposed to behave.

The camera, it seems to me, has the talent to capture any and everything. Therefore, photography, for me, anyway, is an "editorial art" or an "applied art" as opposed to the *total* creative art that drawing is. You don't have it if you don't make it. The camera just has to be throttled and controlled and made to do just those things that you want it to do, and not do anything else, otherwise you wipe it [creativity] out somehow.

Jack Fritscher: Once you set up the camera, sometimes it has to be told, "Just shut up."

George Dureau: Exactly. I spend all my time moving things out of the picture, it seems to me. I'm constantly—I'll start taking the picture, and then I'll start getting more out of it, or reducing the light so as to not see so much. Lately I've been cropping some pictures, but I used to not even crop them. So I spent a lot of time emptying out the frame because I wasn't going to crop them down as most photographers do.

Actually, I think it is a kind of nonsense about thinking that it's so pure to have used the entire frame. People used to rave on about, "Oh, he never crops." So what? I never cropped for fifteen years. Now I do crop sometimes when I want to. I think it's nice to have the knowledge and forethought and wisdom to be able to shoot without cropping. It's nice to be able to do that.

Sometimes, however, you capture something that's great and the whole composition is not that good, and so you might as well just crop it, even as you might as well crop a painting if that happens, if you have a gorgeous middle to it. Manet should have done that. In fact, he did, in *Dead Toreador*. He just cut the top off. He never could solve that. He couldn't solve anything more than this distance from the middle of the picture. I think he must have had a visual problem.

So photographs are just one way of seeing people for me whereas painting is another way, both of them just spinning off of drawing which for me is always the best.

I love line. I love the definitive, decisiveness of line, even though my lines are sometimes thick and thin, soft and smeared, but also, and maybe this is why drawing is not as popular anymore, now that photography is all over the place, there isn't that line in nature. You're creating that. There's a difference between this surface and that surface where this one ends and that one starts. But there's no such thing as line. It is a totally intellectual pursuit. So you might have some flourishes, some chiaroscuro, some effect in your drawing that makes it look a bit like real, but never looks real like a painting does or real like a photograph does. It's always an abstraction.

That may also explain my tremendous attraction to black-and-white photography, although I also do some color. I'm not that much interested in color. I'm more interested in the abstraction that black and white is. You're taking only line and form, and shapes between things, and negative shapes, and making them into your picture when you do black-and-white photography whereas once the color comes in, there's also festivity and distraction and other things happening, and there's an imitation of life, an exact imitation of life with color, and it's not so in black and white.

That's always been very strange that in movies, as in photography, we have this interest in black-and-white photography, and we think it is more realistic. We associate it with documentation. Black-and-white photographs that were very documentary. Black-and-white film seems very hardcore and documentary. It's very funny because it is missing one of the things, color, that makes it look like life. It's as though we want to believe what the author, the artist, the documentary director, whatever—we want to believe what they have found out.

It's an intellectual interest we have in seeing Humphrey Bogart with his gun shooting somebody in a dark alley. Instead of seeing it in color, we want to see it in black and white. And it seems more real to us. I don't know. Everybody didn't grow up at that [mid-century] time, but the people who learned black and white to be a documentary kind of hardcore picture found it very hard to see the thing in color, and believe it as much. That's very strange. Black and white 8x10 photographs of the way we saw criminals, or events in the 1940s and 50s…

Jack Fritscher: The movies of the 30s were black and white. German Expressionism. Leni Riefenstahl. Italian neorealism after the war, and Hollywood *film noir*. The dark beginning of the *Wizard of Oz*. The black and white of Tennessee Williams' kitchen-sink drama *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

George Dureau: I don't know why [Italian actress] Anna Magnani [who won an Academy Award starring in Tennessee Williams' dramatic black-and-white film *The Rose Tattoo*] stirring tomato gravy pasta sauce in black and white is more convincing to us than it is in color. I know I like it better, but I don't know why that is so convincing.

I know that in printing photographs you have a different latitude for printing. You can make more drastic changes, or, I can, because I don't know much about doing color. But you can make serious poetic and orchestral changes in black and white so that you're always dealing in a sort of abstraction. If you emphasize purple, it doesn't suddenly look like the flowers are a different color. If you

darken something, it isn't giving an added meaning somehow. You can work with the poetry of what's already there without adding anymore elements into it. I don't know. That's a really hard one to resolve.

Jack Fritscher: I've always thought that black-and-white photography has the quality of moonlight. Just the way we believe our experience in the actual night, we believe black-and-white film because there is no color in the night, and yet it's all real, and somehow more magical.

George Dureau: But isn't it funny that black and white can be used—you said *moonlight*—and it made me think *romantic*—either in a beautiful seductive way, or it can also be harder than color.

In my photographs, my first photographs that I took of black men, they're not much different from the ones I take today, almost twenty years later. The first black-and-white pictures were so velvety. The people's flesh was so velvety and the backgrounds were white, maybe plaster, maybe dirty brick.

I tried a bunch of different papers, trying to decide what to do, and they were so prettified and yummy when they were warm like Portriga portrait papers.

> [George Dureau's assistant Jonathan Webb told me: "Agfa Portriga silver gelatin printing paper, which is no longer made, had a particularly warm finish to it. I got George to switch to Ilford Galerie which had rich deep neutral tones, but still gave very good blacks and whites and detailed contrast.]

I decided then that I needed the harshness of very white paper and very black printing to make the thing less romantic and less sentimental. So we have this kind of clinical printing of my pictures with a few yummy flourishes on it, but it's a sort of hard clinical thing. And then, by the lighting now, I make it happen. But I never let it happen in the darkroom. The picture becomes a soft romantic kind of thing. I'm a "camera photographer."

Mapplethorpe was too. We talked about that many times. We totally loved directing, nursing the people, wringing them out, getting out of them what we wanted, although I wanted much more humanist things and he wanted much more formalistic things.

But my formal training is always there and it never changes one way or another. I've been drawing and painting forever, and my drawings were always so classical, and my paintings were always so classical and fixed that that's a regular thing with me. So I assume that somewhere in my head is my predilection for shapes. I am inclined to orchestrate.

I imagine like a movie director does.

I make people do things that they didn't expect they were going to do. On a roll of film, I always try to get into it [the photograph] what they think of themselves, that *primarily*, or I should say *originally*. And then I move into what I think of them. And I hope I can pull the two of them together. Anyway, I'm crazy about working with the person and pulling something out of them that is unexpected to me and/or to them.

I don't like the darkroom at all. Robert didn't like the darkroom at all. He hated it. He thought it was really degrading.

Jack Fritscher: He always sent someone else in there with the film.

George Dureau: Exactly. Jonathan [Webb], a friend of mine and a photographer, prints my pictures with another photographer. They know what it is I want. The most I do is reject them, or say, "I didn't want that," or "I wanted to burn this a little more." I worked in the darkroom when I first did them, but now I hate the darkroom.

I like the distance. Other photographers will hate me for saying this, but I feel that the *distance* keeps you more an artist. Because *distance* keeps me more an idealist/artist who is doing photographic art with "art" in mind, not with "technique" in mind.

I think you can really lower your aims when you're thinking about what happens with chemicals and what not. I guess it makes a difference that I know what I want to say about people. I very seldom have been happily surprised about what happens in the darkroom.

I don't want to be surprised. I want the picture to say what I want the picture to say.

A friend of mine, Gene Thornton, a critic from the *Times* in New York, said he liked my photographs so much because I have something I want to say about everything, and I either say it with a pencil or a camera or a brush or whatever. But I already have the thing I want to say. And he says that most photographers study "photography" and then go out and photograph "photography." They don't photograph something that's in their head. They see something, "Oh, that would make a good picture."

I've never had that feeling. I see somebody, and I say, "Oh, I'm going to tell such and such about him." Or "I'm going to tell about his plight by doing this thing." Or "I'm going to show how absolutely seductive and overwhelming this person can be when I pull him up close. When I tickle him."

But I've always had my own individual, greedy, demanding things that I expect the camera to do, and if it doesn't, I'd just as soon hit it with a hammer.

I mean I really have no interaction with the machinery of it at all. I have two Hasselblads, two lenses and two bodies, and I only have that much because people have screamed at me because there is dust in my camera and it is about time that I get it cleaned. I had one lens and I used it for about eight years, a normal lens, until somebody convinced me that I would, really would, do better by having a portrait lens for some of this stuff.

I used to actually bend the people to make them not do "fisheye" kind of things. Everybody in my earlier pictures is sitting like this.

> [George extends his arms and hands on the table, forward and wide toward the camera] in the picture to make them look like this [arms up close to the body]

Which is just crazy. I knew nothing about [the fact] that I could go get another lens.

It's funny where this advice came from. There is this really wacky photographer boy who just did journalistic stuff for one of the little trash papers. I said to him that I wanted to photograph my models,

and they're just going to be, oh, they're velvety black figures against a white wall. The contours just like in my drawings, essentially silhouettes with some kind of detail in them. I said, "What kind of camera could I get?"

He said, "Oh, you go get a two-and-a-quarter."

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "That's what old farts like you like. Very stodgy."

So we went and bought a $68 Mamiya and I used it for a couple of years with no light meter even.

I asked people, "Should I do this a little darker?"

Some of my really good pictures, some people's real favorites, were done on that camera, as a matter of fact. When I first got the Hasselblad, it was so much better than my early one. It took months for me to get the pictures right. They were so hard looking and had so much more "depth," it seems to me, and I didn't want "depth." I'm not very fascinated by deep spaces.

My photographs and my paintings all sort of suggest a bit of Piero della Francesca [1415-1492]. Sort of four feet back there is a figure and then [he gestures farther back] a figure and [farther back from that] another figure sort of at the end of the architecture, or there will be another figure coming across, but there is a shallow stage, on props, sort of. They [the pictures] are like performances in front of a curtain.

I very seldom paint or draw very deeply. I can, but it doesn't intrigue me to pierce the surface very far. I like very often to do pictures that have the front in focus and the back to four or five feet all in focus, I like to do that, but I don't go beyond that.

I have a flat wall back there. I just have no interest in what we probably have going here right now [with the camera on him and not the trees behind him]. Behind me there are you things you can't read exactly. I like to read everything [foreground and background] in my pictures, I guess. If it's not worth reading—*wwwwwwwik!*—out it goes.

Jack Fritscher: Rather like peripheral vision fading away when the eye focuses on something distinct.

George Dureau: I like everything [I put] in the picture. It's so "left brain" of me to be telling a story. It can simply say that this is photography being done in the front room of my house on Esplanade and it says it's there because there's the corner of the mantelpiece, and then that mantelpiece appears in another picture as the main item, and then you're seeing just an edge of the mantelpiece in another photograph because there is the corner of the mantelpiece again. And the mantelpiece appears as a main item in another photograph.

Some of the earliest photographs I did were [set up] in front of the back of canvases, my painting canvases. And I thought that was keen because that showed [told the story] that I was a painter, right? And then I got some bigger canvases that I just hung down the wall.

I've never liked the surfaces of paper. Maybe because when I was younger, I was made to do display windows [at Kreeger's women's fashions department store on Canal Street] and there was that wretched seamless paper to deal with everyday. But I always have real canvas. I don't care if it is dirty or has fingerprints on it or grease or what. I love fabric.

At first, I would do these big canvases and there was a little space on the side and it became quite typical that my pictures would have a little lap space on the side where you see [I've included] pieces of my walls. You saw how tall were the baseboards or a little pipe coming up, a little gas pipe going to a gas heater sort of thing. Those little details were in the picture. I called them "Velázquez details" because, unless I'm mistaken, one of the coy things Velázquez did was to leave things in the picture that told that the picture was a lie, like the little prince on the horse, and then you have a rug on the bottom, or the backdrop stops suddenly, and you have a floor coming out.

I think that's fun to do. Maybe not in every picture. Sometimes you want to give the picture an illusion of something. But I love to give an illusion of something exotic or perfect or marvelous and then give it [the seriousness] away and say, "Oh, I'm just kidding. It's really my living room." I like to do that.

It's in most of my photographs. In this present series that I did, the photos were going to be very deceptive, very convincing illusions

of people buried in the sand, or buried in water, such as that. When you first see them, they look like that. The printer thought they were very convincing.

People asked me, "How did you do that?"

In the pictures, you can see the canvas wrinkled up around the people because I didn't bother to hide it. I feel funny about being completely illusionistic. I'd rather just do what they call "telling the lie." I just like to tell that I'm "lying" here and there. I'm not interested in being a seamless illusion. I don't know why.

Maybe I'm not much into fantasy. I'm a real earth-sign person, I've been told. Even when I was a child, my idea of a divine and wonderful life would be going swimming in the bayou with the man who lives down the street or something.

And you know that in my drawings all of the angels have very big feet and hoofs. That's because they have to land [come in for a landing], I think. I'm very earthbound.

The other thing that has a big play in my art, I think, is my being so cerebrally ambivalent. I'm left brain, right brain, and there are some aspects of over-orderliness. Some of my things are just incredibly orderly. I'll peruse real tidiness and real explicit details of certain things or structures and then I'll bust it all up with a passion, a kind of romance. So there is always the classical-romantic always fighting each other.

I believe that's what good art is made of and I just have to go with that. I'm being Géricault [French painter Jean-Louis Géricault (1791-1824)] half the time and I'm being Ang [the Filipino painter and figurative expressionist Ang Kiukok (1931-2005)] another part of the time. I think that's why we like what we like in Michelangelo, and in Rembrandt and Rubens. I don't think you should have to have romance without classicism. You shouldn't have to give up all formality to have wonderful expressions of things, and vice versa, I don't think you should throw away all expression just to make things tidy.

How do you know your video sound is good?

Jack Fritscher: It'll be good. I'm trying to mask out a little bit of the wind when it blows in. You're doing very well with the traffic because

when it goes by you kind of pause. Sound is really funny. When you shoot outside, you realize how much noise there is.

George Dureau: Here there really is a tremendous amount of noise. Saturday morning is much quieter. Sunday mornings are too. If this evening [Monday] were calmer, it would be less of a problem, but at the same time, it gives you a context that I think is worthwhile. Won't you eat something?

Jack Fritscher: Later, thanks.

George Dureau: I recently, just last summer, and then again just last month, I did a set of photographs which are different from what I am usually known for. My best work has always been, I think, those photographs which you might call "buttery portraits" in the sense that Manet's closeup, straight-on portraits were where the person is focused on you. They just invite you or challenge you to jump into their personality and see what they are about. Those photographs are very simple in composition, but hard to work out. Usually a head or shoulders, what is ordinarily called a bust, or else, which is much more complicated, going down to mid-thigh because then they become both a naked picture and a portrait.

If I have contributed something strong to photography, that is probably it, my ability to picture the model's sexuality and his brain, or his life as told through his face at the same time. So my photographs have almost always been the fact that there is this barbative back-at-you look of the people talking back to you, that the observer is observing you. Looking back at you and questioning you even as you are questioning him.

I recently departed from it, not for any particular reason except that I wanted to make some studies similar to my drawings and paintings of people that are just torsos. Just sort of sitting nowhere or sitting in the sand or somewhere like that. I thought I would express something you find more in my drawings and paintings than you do in my photographs. Probably just because I don't wish to involve myself in all that trickery of the arrangement.

But then there are the frustrating photographs of the vanquished or the dispossessed or the defeated, the abandoned, and the best way

to do that for me was not to let them look back at you, because I usually in my liberal and generous spirit, invite the person to share the camera with me, even as I do in painting, and have them look back at you and tell them your story, as much as I get to tell mine, and probably more.

But in this case I did these frustrating, I thought, pictures of my models, Glen [Thompson], Troy [Brown], and other people, who are known for how wonderful they are, looking into the camera. I did them [laughs] as a piece of meat, just sitting there, being just torsos, just, just behinds, and torsos, just the two of them sitting there, sometimes with a strap on them, or something demoralizing. I think it was the war.

I *know* it was our recent war that brought that on. Then surprisingly and practically, something that doesn't happen all the time, those photographs became very important to that big painting I just finished against the Gulf War. [His epic twenty-foot-tall unframed canvas, *Mars Descending*, for the *War Exhibition* at the New Orleans Art Center, April 1991.] A big war painting, that canvas incorporated a lot of what I had done already in the photographs. It expanded and did things that photographs don't do for me because I'm not going to sit there [with the camera] and concoct the trickery [like the easier 3-dimensional effect in the painting] so you have people coming at you and such [out of the photo]. That's something [I could do in painting] that I could never have done in photography because I don't care to stage all of that.

Anyway, that series of photos is a very different series for me because it is frustrating, very unsatisfying. I guess most people would think the figures are *classic* in some kind of way. I think they are very limiting and frustrating, but I like them a lot because it's just another thing for me to do with the camera. I'm not very interested in doing a lot of things with the camera. I'm not very experimentational. I don't care to see all the things the camera can do.

I'd like to do some video soon. I'd want it to look pretty much like my photographs. I guess I'd be pretty foolish if that's all they looked like, if I didn't do anything different [from my stills]; but

maybe I'll [figure] some sort of thing where there is—what is video called? The hot medium?

> [He's thinking of Marshal McLuhan who said cool media require participation from users; hot media require low participation. Film director Haskell Wexler called his participatory film of the police riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, *Medium Cool*.]

Maybe it'll be hot on you and then go cold and settle down to [look like] my "still" kind of scenes, my "still" kind of portraiture, a fixed kind of pictures; but maybe I'll go through some active things to get to it. I don't know if that can work.

Jack Fritscher: I'll think you'll find video a very expansive and imaginative medium.

George Dureau: But I'm not…

Jack Fritscher: Go around and work with it. Find your own role.

George Dureau: It's funny how I resist that. I must say I'm not very open to influences or suggestions.

I have gathered some things from other painters in the last ten or fifteen years. But they probably hang around in my head for ten years before they ever find their way into my art. I'm just not much influenced by people. I'm not very interested in going to art shows. I never remember what I saw. But if I go to New York and just see a couple of Manets, I can be happy with that for five years. It's awfully stodgy of me, but I seem to have what I want to talk about in my painting.

I'm an artist. I grew up thinking what an artist is *supposed* to be, and, that is, I live a warm, involved, humanist sort of life. There are lots of people passing through my life. I have exciting experiences and learn things about people and they always go into my art. It is amazing; I cannot have an experience and not have it get into my art. Sometimes by the next morning, sometimes the same evening.

I had a friend. He's dead now. [New Orleans painter Robert Gordy, AIDS (1934-1986)]. He was a wonderful artist, but he went into a very dry period, and he said, "I just don't know what to do."

I said, "Well, just sit around and draw."

He said, "I don't draw."

I said, "Of course, you draw. You have wonderful looking drawings."

He said, "Those aren't drawings like *you* draw."

I said, "What are they?"

He said, "Those are pictures. Those aren't like you draw."

At the time, I hadn't clarified in my head what that difference was; and, about a year after, I realized what it amounted to was I draw from life and he drew from art.

So if he drew, it looked like a Léger or Léger-Picasso-Miró, and they were gorgeous, but they were concoctions. And when I've drawn over the last fifteen years, I don't know what it is going to look like. I'm looking at it, but I'm drawing from some process of going from real three-dimensional life, or some story that goes through my head, and comes out as line and shade. That's not the same as making pictures. It's not saying what the picture is supposed to look like. It's saying what the picture is supposed to tell. It's like writing. You don't picture what the page is going to look like or how many adjectives you're going to have on the page—unless you're a computer—when you're saying quickly what you did yesterday.

Jack Fritscher: I also think of writers who take writing classes that ruin them for writing because it interferes with their own natural expression.

George Dureau: You see that people don't understand that about my work because they think that I work in some style like the "Michelangelo style." And it's not so at all. I just draw that way. And if the person has a certain kind of boxy, heavy, or muscular look, it might come out *looking* like Michelangelo. If the person is a dwarf, it might look to them, not to me, like Velázquez. If a person is sinewy like a lot of the black people are around here, it looks "Signorelli" [Luca

Signorelli (1441-1523)]. I know it looks "Signorelli." They might not know that.

Drawings and paintings in their own time are done by an artist who knows what people look like and knows what particular people look like. It goes through him and it becomes an art, and it is done over and over again. Now it is being done by me, and if that looks like someone else's, it doesn't have anything to do with my looking like that artist. It has to do with us doing the same thing. I know how different my drawings are. They're not at all like the artists that people think they are like.

You know it's just it's Baroque or it's coming at you, or something, but I know that there are no tell-tale things that look like that person's art. My drawing of a hand like this [gestures with his hand] is very strange and awkward and a different kind of thing as I see them, not the way Michelangelo saw them, not the way Caravaggio saw them. Not at all. If I sit and try to do what Caravaggio did, it irritates me, even if it works, because it is not the way I see things. I see them much more chunky and bombastic, and I guess more *butch*. I see things that are sort of carved out of space and jerky. Even my sinewy things will end up as boxy and bombastic.

It's very strange. It's hard to influence the camera to do those things. To make a drawing, for example, one [simply] has to change the perspective of a leg. But, say I'm photographing someone from the top of their head to mid-thigh. To keep it from having the photographic verisimilitude of fading out at the bottom away from the lens, the way it looks to us, going down smaller, I have to make it look more like I've always seen it on paper: flattened out.

I then have to have the person bring his leg forward, his arm forward, or something such as that, so that it flattens the space. So my photographs are not half so naturalistic as they look. They are very posed as a rule. I get some startled or natural look on the face to make you think that the person is just caught there, but they are always very posed. I don't think I've ever done a photograph that wasn't very posed. Always posed. Sometimes the posing gets in the way and then you just don't print that.

Jack Fritscher: With your dual reputation as painter and photographer, do you find it difficult dealing with people confused about you and your work?

George Dureau: I find it very hard to deal with. People make assumptions that just aren't fact at all. They think I made photographs and then I learned to draw from the photographs which you can see is absolutely crazy. I've been drawing for fifty years or more, and painting that long almost.

I don't know if they should see the similarities between the things or not. I don't know. I think there is a very unnatural and uncomfortable interest in photography today. I'm certain that when I started making photographs I had absolutely no interest in becoming a famous photographer. No way! I was making some little records of those people because I was crazy about those people; and I knew that my drawings [of them] in their aesthetic delight and in their craziness were not [true] records of the people. And so I wanted to record the people, as well as the fact that I had expressed them in my drawing. I thought it would be fun to go back and look at them later.

It became interesting to me when people told me I made wonderful photographs because I couldn't imagine why photography or any art field could be in such bad shape that they would think that mine were good—when I didn't know how to do anything. What it amounted to is I transposed from my drawing and painting. All that knowledge came over and I put an overabundance of a kind of wisdom on top of the photographs. It wasn't photographic wisdom. It was art wisdom.

There were several classical things happening in my photographs that people didn't understand that the camera could be made to do because we had been through those wonderful photographs of the Farm Security Administration [with its pictorial record of American life between 1935 and 1944], and then the war and all the wonderful documentation that had been done. So people were astounded to see these "monumental" photographs, which is what they seemed to be.

I jammed the people up close [to the lens], but still I kept it all in repose, all in focus. So you had this monstrous person looking down your throat, telling you his story. But always seemingly classical and composed and held in.

It tremendously influenced Mapplethorpe. He was absolutely shocked by them, because until that time [we first met in person] in 1979, he had never seen compositions that he didn't understand, I think, at first. But it all came out of art history. It didn't come out of photography history. It came out of painting and drawing history, my photographs. Because that's what I brought to photography. I brought the knowledge of postures, of poses, of things that had happened in the Renaissance, etc.

Not that I'm such a careful student of art history. I'm not, but I am an observer of art history. So I brought to photography all these tried-and-true ideas of presentation of the person, and it had nothing at all to do with what the camera does well or what the camera does other than what I wanted it to do. Nothing to do with the various things the camera can do. It had only to do with how, if you want to tell about a person, you want them to come across, how to direct them, how do you frame the thing, how do you work out the negative and positive shapes so that positive shape looms at you, but the negative shape supports it.

Those are the things I had been doing in my paintings of heads and torsos all along. I didn't do anything different in my photographs than I had been doing for twenty years in my paintings. My paintings were buttery, close up, strong, carved-out portraits with very strong contours. Sometimes naked, sometimes just heads. The photographs were exactly that type of thing.

Jack Fritscher: That must have startled Robert when he first saw your work.

George Dureau: He always had scenarios, nasty scenarios, in mind. What kind of scenarios, what kind of hanky-pank will catch people's attention? As far as I know, up to that time, there was always some kind of activity that was unnerving or shocking or exciting in his pictures. There was sort of a "things-happening-in-a-room-sort-of-look"

in the photographs that he showed me. We swapped some photographs then. In the ones I picked out, I was looking for ones more like mine—filled with space, contours important, shapes important, and them some presence in the person.

His photographs before that were more like slices out of an intimate movie. The ones of him with the whip [up his bum, *Self Portrait with Whip*, 1978], boys in the room doing different [S&M fetish] activities, and what not. His were more like figures in a space, and mine were more like the big figure occupying the space totally and just leaving small negative spaces parked around the thing.

He loved the ones that were close-ups of deformed arms, the boy looking at you. Things like that had strong lighting, but the bodies were always sculptural and immediate. The immediacy in my pictures was also kind of sociological, appealing, and solicitous. You were brought into the person's plight or his beauty or whatever. It was solicitous in the sense that I was saying that this person is wonderful and you're going to want to know about him, or this person is terrible and you're going to want to know about him.

That immediacy for him was a way of scaring people even more. So the early ones—in which I may have had some influence—would have been those in which he had his same scary subject matter, and he made it more scary by moving them in tighter and composing more tightly as I did.

Judging by the pictures that he bought from me at first, that's what he did. That is to say he bought my pictures which I immediately saw reflected [in his photographs shot immediately after]. Heads real close and leaning over, but the eyes still looking at you.

That [eye contact] was a funny thing. I never would have thought that art photography, even as I was turning to it, didn't do the same wonderful thing that candid photography does or painting did. That is, capture the person by looking straight into their face, right?

But art photography before that always seemed to be someone staring off somewhere into space being instructed not to look at the camera. The only instructions I ever gave were: "Stay looking at the camera" or "Look into the camera." That difference was very strange because my pictures had maybe the arty finish and the modeling,

the shape and form, made from another kind of art, but they had the straight-on look of a [personal] photograph of your little boy or your wife. So they had that funny [hybrid] look about them.

Now the first ones [of my photographs] were mistakenly said to look like Diane Arbus when what they were was "anti-Arbus." They were so close-up, because all I had was a short lens, and I didn't know that. They were very close-up. So the very first pictures were thought to be scary like Diane Arbus. And since a lot of my friends were dwarfs or people with missing limbs, people who were handicapped in some way, because I've always known a lot of them, it was believed that my pictures were like hers in that way. It was absolutely opposite because mine are so solicitous and the people are presented always [kindly]. You want to know more about this person whereas she did the "Bang! Shoot One! Kill Him and Get Him out of Here" approach to people. Diane Arbus, um, Diane obviously, really and truly thought all those people she photographed were just freaks. I mean she really and truly believed that. Just freaks. Don't blame me. Susan Sontag said that to me. She said, "Arbus is a middle-class New York woman and those are freaks to her."

There's a real "Walt Whitman" air, I guess, to my photographs. [Whitman's famous inclusive line in *Leaves of Grass* is: "I am large, I contain multitudes."] I now allow myself the luxury of composing more, and making more prettified pictures, without the portraiture being so strong, and *that* may be Mapplethorpe's influence back on me, doing that sort of thing.

But I always did that in my paintings anyway. On the other hand, there are some people who are so wonderful to look at straight in the face, I find that I can't turn them away. There was a big difference in that Robert's orientation to people was so much, I'm afraid, shallower than mine. He had much less patience with people whereas the people you see in my photographs, you'll see them again ten years later. I have photographs of people, for instance, of Troy, over twenty years. You might see them again just six months later when you might see them in a different kind of way. But I don't think Robert had the patience to put up with people after he shot

them dead once. It's very funny, isn't it, that you "shoot" people and you "shoot" pictures.

Jack Fritscher: And presidents.

George Dureau: The camera can be very mean, very disturbing, very dispassionate, really hateful, and it can be adoring.

Jack Fritscher: Don't you think that perhaps your romantic approach as opposed to his slick fashion photography…

George Dureau: What we now call his "slick fashion photography," I'm not so sure that he didn't develop that off me and Berenice Abbott and other people like that, and [Irving] Penn and [Richard] Avedon; but it wasn't there, I don't think, when I first met him in 1978 or 1979.

My photographs were never slick and fashionable, but they have a rich velvety air and careful composition. Sometimes they might have a false candor. A person might be coming at you like this.

> [George crosses his arms with left palm on right shoulder, and right palm on left, and leans forward on his elbows, ready for his close-up, tight into the video camera.]

George Dureau: Am I too close? [Laughs] I had been going through two rolls trying to get the arms into the right position for that, right? So there was a mock candor to mine, as there might be in a Manet portrait. You might say, "Oh, the candor in a Manet portrait!" Well, that candor took Manet six months or six years to get in that picture. So it ain't so goddamn candid. Well, that's how my candor is too. Sometimes you work at it, you build it, you get it there, and then you blow it all in an act of love of getting the eyes right.

Maybe it took you six months to get to that point. In my photographs, sometimes I keep moving the person [the protagonist in his photo narrative], nudging him into position. [Leaning into the video camera] Am I too close? [Laughs] And then trying to get the focus right. "Put your head a little bit higher, a little higher, a little lower."

I would take two, three, or four rolls of the very same pose because I *knew* the pose was right. I just had to *get* it right. But Robert was doing more scenarios [that were] kind of wacky. [It was as if Robert were saying,] "Didn't I surprise you with this?" Those weren't quite up to slick photography. Not that it should have been; but I think his slickness developed after taking the classicism from me and from some other people like me.

Hmm. Are there any other modern photographers, contemporaries that he seems to have shared something with? Because we know how influenced he was. [There are] the pictures of his that are definitely reminiscent of George Platt Lynes, and, certain muscle photographs that we all grew up on twenty-five years ago in cheap magazines [that he found in adult bookstores on 42nd Street]. But he's taken all of those things and given them a certain slick beauty.

Jack Fritscher: He liked 1950s physique photographs [in pocket magazines like *Tomorrow's Man*].

George Dureau: But I don't know any others [influences]. I'm trying to think. Are there any contemporaries of his? He knew, liked, and admired my photographs, right? Were there any others that were like that to him?

What he did with the others, he would take muscle photographs that would appear in leather magazines and he would improve them

> [To build his first collages at Pratt, Robert cut photos out of magazines featuring muscled leatherboys sold "for artists who can't afford models" shot by gay Chicago photographer Chuck Renslow at Kris Studio and published his pocket magazine, *Mars* and *Triumph*, both founded 1962. Influenced by Renslow, he was well steeped in leather when I assigned him to shoot the cover of the leather magazine *Drummer* in 1977.]

George Dureau: He would take the subject matter, just the funny wacky, sleazy style, and he would glorify it. What's funny is that in mine he would take [my], what I would have called "moral nudes," what Kenneth Clark calls "moral nudes," meaning nudes that are

non-sexual. Those moral nudes talk about values—like a chorus, like Greek things do, like true classical art does.

He took those and made them more, I guess you could say, *contemporary*, but that's not so. By making them more *sleazy* or more *common* somehow. I would have details in mine that would maybe say *who* the person was, or *where* they were from. He would put details in perhaps that would say what *act* they were going to get engaged in or something. He put in cruel sorts of details that would speak sort of *using* that person. And mine would be details that would say where that person is from and what he's like: maybe a tattoo would say that, or some piece of luggage under an arm—but [my photographs are] not what I was going to do with him, or what you [the viewer] might do with him.

He made pictures that appealed to the rich, conservative, or fascist gay audience that he was appealing to. He would put [cast] anybody in his pictures if they looked like somebody you could buy, or use, or handle. And mine would not look like people you could buy, or use, or handle.

I know his friend Sam Wagstaff was offended by the fact that I liked my models so much and they were permanent underclass kind of people. He thought that was not right for Robert to be interested in; but it was alright for Robert to be interested in these people if they looked like they could be used by the people who would buy the pictures.

And knowing who buys the pictures, that's what worked. They were publicized. His whole career has been further publicized and bought by people who are usually well heeled, or look like they are, or wish to be well heeled. People who can buy and sell the stuff that's in those pictures.

Whereas there is always that look of "other" human beings that you have to tolerate in my pictures. I'm shamelessly humanist—and it's all over the pictures. It makes mine a lot less saleable and sometimes a little less bearable because my pictures flush you into a corner sometimes by being full of problems, social problems and political problems and such.

Jack Fritscher: Robert formalized those people, stylized them into something beyond themselves.

George Dureau: I think he bought people more than I did. I pay people a certain amount of money to pose for me, but I don't pay them enough so that [unlike Robert who paid too much] I'll never have to see them again. We discussed prices a lot; and there was the major difference that in New York people [models] know who you are and they know what they can get out of you. And they say, "$500." In New Orleans, somebody would say, [he smiles lovingly]: "Gee, ah'd like to be in yo pictures, oh yeah." So then I'd pay them for taking the picture, but I'd see them the next day and the next year and four years after that when their momma would tell them, "I have to pay the electric bill."

I paid less for the modeling fee; but I would pay more later in friendship or closeness or just our village co-existence. But Robert felt very threatened by the people that he photographed. He wanted them never to come back again. He would get furious. He would give them a signed photograph and they were supposed to go off and sell it, but [instead] they would say, "Oh, it rained, or it [the photo] went down the toilet," or something, and they would come back for another one and he was furious that they would keep bothering him because he just wanted them to go away.

Jack Fritscher: He wanted them, like his tricks, for the moment.

George Dureau: Do you know? I have a friend in New York who once talked about an early Louis Malle picture, *Lucien Lacombe*, I think. Anyway, the actor had been discovered—the star of that movie was a non-professional; he was a wonderful-looking peasant boy. Louis Malle discovered him. The boy got lots of money, got a convertible sports car, raced it down the street, went off the road, and was killed. And my friend said, "Oh, what a wonderful way! He [Malle] didn't have to put up with him making more movies." And it's true. I think Robert felt that way [wishing]: "I want them just to exist in this picture and don't want to see them again."

There were very few of his models he'd would get a crush on so much that he wanted to carry on with them. There were some, of

course. Unfortunately, I'm capable of carrying on affairs with everybody on earth at the same time. Not successfully, but energetically.

I know the sons of people that I've photographed back in the 1970s. I've drawn people in the 1960s that I now draw the children of. It's a very strange thing. I'm not saying it's the only way to do it, but once you're doing that, especially if you're a sort of "classic art creature" which I am. I live my life and it's reflected in my art. My art tells what I've learned or failed to learn. It's very hard to give that up and say, "Oh, I'll just go someplace where I don't know the people and I'll see some different kinds of faces."

Jack Fritscher: He liked shooting new faces of leathermen in San Francisco.

George Dureau: I think New Orleans is about the size that Paris was when Paris was great, yeah, I mean for creating art, for knowing your subject matter, for knowing the people you're dealing with, for reusing them and them being there when you need them for reconsidering things, for redrawing a picture and throwing it away and doing it another way. The people are there the way you know the grocer you've known for thirty years.

I don't know if it's insecurity on my part, but I really like the fathers of, the brothers of, the children of, the wives of [my models] to think of me as that nice artist who drew their daddy.

They don't have to like all the pictures, but they come in, sometimes, people who I've photographed or drawn, they'll come in and say, "Man, you see me better than I do." Or "You just know how that kinda dude thinks."

To me it is somehow more comforting than having a critic say, "He did that well," when I know the critic doesn't know what I did well because he probably doesn't have the experience I have.

My pictures are frequently experienced and shared with the models. Only I know a lot about what they are and it goes into the pictures and only they can verify it. Not that I spend all my time getting it verified, but it's comforting that things regularly get verified. You can move along knowing that you've done a human activity which is attractive to yourself, that you're proud of.

Jack Fritscher: Some critics struggle to fit "what's new" into the traditional principles they studied years before in school.

George Dureau: We have an energetic and very serious—you met him the other night—critic here in town. But I don't really expect him to know all of what I'm doing. He's the one [local] critic and it's kind of hard for him to like all the things I do. It's very hard for a critic in a place like New Orleans who has been looking at the same artist for fifteen years to find something new to say. So all of a sudden critics get negative. Simply because they got tired of being *positive*. They can't keep saying the same thing year after year. They wish you would change, but I'm not going to. I want to improve, but I don't hope to change.

Jack Fritscher: A new set of critics is needed?

George Dureau: Change the critics, but keep the artists. That would be good. You could shift critics around from town to town.

Jack Fritscher: Many artists in many towns would be happy if that were to happen.

George Dureau: I really haven't been damned much. I've been praised a lot. I think my work is a great deal more sound than people know. We live in this age of novelty because of galleries and sales. Galleries cannot keep paying the rent if they don't have novelty.

It's the same as in the fashion industry. I once was a "window dresser" in the fashion industry and it's exactly the same thing. You have to convince window shoppers that this new thing is better than last year's. So you have to damn last year's wonders in order to convince people that they're going to want this year's horrors. I'm not going to change for those reasons. I doubt that I'd do the right thing for me and my talent and I just have to pursue it and improve it.

Jack Fritscher: What drove you initially to physical disability, to men with missing limbs?

George Dureau: Charcoal! [Laughter]. Since childhood I've been more than fascinated, just *drawn* to people who are handicapped,

but particularly to people who are triumphant though being handicapped. I've always loved tough dwarfs. Always. I can remember "Long John Silver" kind of creatures. The buoyant, tough, or wild drunk on one leg. I've always thought that the pirate-y kind of person was always the most fascinating to me. I've explained it to myself, but it's too hard to explain in public. But I've always been attracted to little people who act strong and big. It's just super triumphs that I like: heroes!

I guess that's one of the things that made people like Sam Wagstaff un-attracted to my work. He kept saying how wonderful it was, but he wasn't about to buy any. I saw him a great deal. He would pick out the things that were all right for Robert to be influenced by, but…

Jack Fritscher: For Robert to build on.

George Dureau: Right. Exactly. Because Robert loved my stuff, and had already bought a number of things. Wagstaff picked out some things from one of my shows, but Robert just absorbed them. Wagstaff didn't buy them. Robert bought them, a lot of my stuff. So he had about sixteen pictures [before we met] because that's what he bought from me, but it turns out [George alleged] that the gallery we're both in, in New York, the Robert Samuel Gallery [in which, Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick reveal in their 2016 book *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, Mapplethorpe was an "active business partner"] must have paid off some debt to him or something with a bunch of my photographs because a whole lot of photographs that I never sold have gone through the auction houses and some of them have ended up on the West Coast. There's a gallery out there that Robert showed with, a big, very flashy gallery that had, apparently, a bunch of my photographs that were 8x10s that I never had sold. They were just proofs that the gallery in New York had.

I think something inexplicable happened in the 70s and early 80s and a lot of photographers' work got picked up by somebody mixed up in a, I don't know, some kind of shady deal, and then the pictures got spread out again. People were paid off. A lot of people got my work that they did not buy, as such, because they were kind

of like reimbursed for investment in the gallery, or something like that. It's hard to make galleries work what with high overhead, and the gallery directors sometimes just turn bad. Although they may not have started off bad, they turn bad thinking that they're going to make it work for all of you, you know. "Oh, it's all going to be all right, darling. Just don't worry about it. We're going to pay you back eventually." And it goes down, down, down, and nobody gets paid for anything. But I didn't pursue that [West Coast] gallery. Mapplethorpe did pursue it, but I didn't. I wasn't going to be retaliatory about it.

Jack Fritscher: Where do you think you're going to go in the 1990s with your painting and photography? A balance between the two, or do you have a feel for…

George Dureau: I'll always do more paintings and drawings. I think. In terms of time, still photography takes so much less. Say, if I was doing two sessions a week, three or four hours each, I was just burnt out from doing it. First of all, because I don't make up a lot of stories that I want to do in photographs. I have a lot of stories already that I want to do in paintings—and photographs are almost always hinged on the presence of some person.

Even in these, where I've messed around with the people and used them in a sort of *repertory* way, turned them around and photographed their asses instead of their faces, even in those it's the person because [I ask myself] will Glen [Thompson] want to do that? Does he mind? Does he mind being used this [way] one time, knowing that the next time I'll do a wonderful job of looking into his eyes?

But anyway, it just exhausts me totally to do more than two afternoons of photography because we really work hard and intensely at it.

Jack Fritscher: How's your painting as far as timing goes? Do you find that you go on great binges of painting and then there's…

George Dureau: Sometimes I'll paint through a long time. But I paint in stops and starts. I'm painting a lot right now, and I'll get out of it for a while, and do photographs and drawings. [George

effectively stopped shooting photographs in 1988.] Part of it is making a living.

I make the most out of small paintings and big drawings. But I just love drawing and I do it every day. So it is the link. Line and form as they are in my drawings are always going to hold the whip over everything else.

How I draw in the morning is going to influence how I pose someone in the afternoon. The contour from the head down to the leg as done in the drawing is probably going to come up in the pose somewhere, in my photographs, or in my paintings. Because drawing to me is always the backbone of what my head is doing.

Jack Fritscher: Your home is wonderful. How long have you lived here?

George Dureau: I've been here for about five-and-a-half years, almost six. Before that I lived in a house that was gigantic, but the rooms weren't as big as this. This [house and studio] is what we affectionately call "Queen Anne front" and "Mary Ann behind." It looks like a wonderful typical French Quarter house although it has a bigger balcony than all the others from the front. But when you go inside, it is relieved in a sort of Soho loft sort of way by the fact that it has always been a warehouse. It was gutted about one hundred years ago. I never would have gutted a house like this. They're too fragile, these little brick houses. I never would have dared to take out five or six walls, but since they did it and its still standing, I went ahead and kept it that way.

So I have two huge rooms with smaller rooms off them, and they function wonderfully because I learned in the other house that you need "back away" space.

In photographs, you have to back the stuff away from you.

In painting, you have to move the paintings away if you want to do another painting. You want to move them away if you want to work on something else. We didn't put walls in. We just left it. So it is a kind of family house with a huge porch wrapped around it and generous windows and comfortable furniture. But at the same time it has the flexibility of a little factory. So I can move my big bed and

my little bed and my sofas to another spot if I want to as I'm going to do when we've changed that stair [stairway entrance]. We're going to change the orientation of the front room.

Jack Fritscher: You've lived in New Orleans all your life and you don't travel.

George Dureau: I lived in New York once for about nine months [in the 1960s]. I liked it while I was there. But as soon as I got home I thought, "Oh, thank God, I'm home." I'm not aggressive. I might be dominating, but I want to be told that I'm the one that dominates. I don't like to knock on doors and have to go tell someone that they're supposed to love my painting. I don't want to do any of those things.

If somebody invites me to go somewhere and do it, I'll do it. But I am not a traveling salesman. I cannot knock on the door.

I guess I'm kind of *grand* in that I expect to have a place in society that's comfortable. I expect to have a certain amount of respect, and I expect to work very, very, very hard all the time and not to have travel time, to be working all the time. So although I expect position and respect in my community, I work so hard for it, I don't feel bad about it. As Michelangelo said, "If they knew how hard I had to work to achieve my mastery, they wouldn't think it was so good."

Jack Fritscher: Since we're in the second year of the 1990s, the last decade of the century…

George Dureau: Yes, I'm the *fin de siecle* artist. *Fin de siecle*, here I am!

Jack Fritscher: Can we tie this up and can you project for me where you find art, painting, photography, you, what's expected of you. You've just joined this very political New Orleans exhibit in response to the Gulf War, a wonderful piece.

George Dureau: I like to do things political, and I'm glad that I'm just as happy to do that now as I was in the 1960s. When I do something political, it usually has a broad universal kind of aspect to it. I'm not very particular about things. I did all kinds of "integrated"

pictures all through the 1960s and I also did pictures, if you wished to see them as "homosexual," yes, they were homosexual in that there was only one sex in the picture sometimes.

But I also did pictures that had women in them, and I also did pictures with just women in them.

But I like to make statements that I guess are political or sociological. Although most of my pictures in the house are not political, I'm not apolitical. There's always a certain politics to them, my own human politics, but I was once at a lecture and some critics and some art historians were talking, and my friend Edward Lucie-Smith asked them, "Now what is your favorite painting in the whole world?"

They went around this group and each came up with a painting that he thought the most wonderful painting ever painted.

And I said, from the audience, "May I have one question? Well, one statement? I think this is really strange because I never noticed it before, but every one of the paintings that you mentioned was a political painting, and we always think, 'Oh, painting is trivialized by bringing politics into it.'" They were *Guernica, Liberty Leading the People, Death of Marat*.

I mean, every one of the pictures, I can't think of them all, there were eight pictures, and they were all political pictures from their time. In their day, they were all some sort of a placard or banner.

All through the time I was in school in the 1940s and 1950s, we thought, "Political painting is trashy." You're supposed to be above that [because] that ruins you. But in truth it seems to raise the pictures above the ordinary. So I hope I paint a good political picture here and there.

Jack Fritscher: I think you do because of the consciousness raising you are bringing to the 1990s. Taking people who are physically disadvantaged and in a sense glamorizing them, helping them transcend stereotypes.

George Dureau: That's always going to be in my pictures. That's my gut politics. It's always going to guide what I paint. But it's nice too, and it gives you a nice *young* feeling to politically organize

your thoughts behind a "Big Complaint." Once in a while a "Big Complaint."

Jack Fritscher: What would you see as the "Big Complaint" on the horizon as the century clanks to an end?

George Dureau: Unfortunately, I'm that artist who is content to paint the same pictures over and over, but better, he hopes. I'm sure that complaining against military police power, a police state, and police control in shaping of the world, is going to be something to continue to complain about and continue to chip away at over the next few years.

Because I have the feeling that we are getting into [government] controlling the way other countries do business. We are not just using "military might" to keep a peaceful order.

I'm afraid that we're on a tear now, that we've discovered where we've failed economically, and where we've failed politically and morally. We [think we] can clean all that [our national moral failure] up by using our guns and make "ourselves" like "ourselves." We really look like we're on that path.

Somebody said recently, "Oh, we Americans find it very easy somehow to turn success into moral right." Because we were successful in the Gulf War, we're bound to tell ourselves that "You see! We were morally correct.'" And unfortunately, I think we're going to do a lot of that [moralizing war] thing soon.

But my mainstay always will be painting pictures of particular people, of particular sets of people, or particular things that happen to people. bringing them to the fore so that they can be enjoyed and understood and shared.

Jack Fritscher: So you let the world go by while you continue with your art.

George Dureau: Well, presenting what is good about human beings is my particular talent. I know it is. It's why I sell. And I sell a lot! I don't sell pictures at New York prices, but I sell them at the top of New Orleans prices. The people who buy my pictures buy them in spite of themselves, half the time. That really makes you feel good

because you know they bought it because they really had to have one of those. Even though it was going to be a bit unpleasant and they would have trouble explaining it to their teenage daughter or their own mother. They still had to buy the picture. And people would say, "I don't know why she bought that picture, but of course he's a wonderful artist; but I don't know why he paints those pictures either."

Jack Fritscher: Wasn't there a young couple who married, and all they had was a kitchen table, and a couple of chairs—and a Dureau?

George Dureau: Yes. That's one of the wonderful things. Wonderful collectors. I guess that's one of the things you give up when you enter a vicious—it's hard to think of "New York" as the mainstream, [more like] the "main eddy." I always think, I'm the mainstream in New Orleans and they're a serious eddy down the road over there.

One of the things you hate to give up [if you sell at New York prices] is selling pictures [cheaper] at not too terrible a price to wonderful people who share an intelligence with you, who share your beliefs or your humanity, people who are not necessarily very rich and people who don't necessarily follow art trends. But you say something in your painting that may be similar to what they think in their philosophy, or in their medical practice, or what they may be interested in, their poetry or story writing. I really like appealing to intellectuals other than art groups because you never really know why people who are art junkies are buying your pictures. Sometimes you go to their house and there's the one Dureau and the one so-and-so, and the one so-and-so, and the one so-and-so.

Jack Fritscher: The baseball collection card approach.

George Dureau: Yes. The full set. But I like my customers a lot. That really makes me happy.

Jack Fritscher: You mentioned you like your clients to come to your studio to look through your work because you get a chance to…

George Dureau: It's exhausting sometimes. It draws you away from your work and keeps you from doing things. But, on the other hand, I've met some of my very best friends by being patient and letting

people visit me because they wanted to see my studio and see what it is I'm up to, to see why they like my photographs or my paintings.

It is kind of a problem to have someone want to come and see your work, and want to meet the people that you draw and paint. I find it very hard to not say, "Thank you. I'm glad you like me," when somebody really is devoted to my art.

Jack Fritscher: You also get a chance to watch the psychology at work as they make a decision between painting A and painting B.

George Dureau: Yes, and it's amazing. Not that one should paint according to that, but you learn some really interesting things about your own work when you do this. Some people pick tougher [photographs], and sometimes people make rougher and braver choices than I would make.

It's the reverse of what most people would think. The people who swim the moat, so to speak, the people who pick up the telephone and call you and say, "I didn't know I could get you on the phone. I would love to see your work, but I don't want to disturb you."

If you have them over, sometimes it is very strange. You can find out, in some sense, that they have better taste than I have. I might average out or normalize my work in my head. I'll be thinking that they're going to buy down-the-middle, something that is not too wild and disturbing and something that is not too sweet and gentle. Not so. They might fool me completely. They might like the unfinished drawing that is really tough and scary and I never would have shown it in a gallery.

Frequently, pictures that are bought from my home are pictures that never would have made it to the gallery. Not that my gallery doesn't have good taste, because he [gallery owner, Arthur Roger, who preserved Dureau's archives for posterity] certainly does, but in talking with him like a marriage where we talk things out, we might drop a photo. And it might not be his fault. It's me thinking it's not slick enough or pretty enough or frameable enough. When people come to my house, they sometimes buy something that is a

lot closer to my roots, a lot closer to my bloodstream than I would have shown in a gallery.

Jack Fritscher: What's your lifetime estimate of how many paintings and photographs you've done?

George Dureau: I've done thousands and thousands of drawings. I've done little thumbnail drawings. I do drawings like storyboards for my photographs now. I didn't do that at first, but if I know I'm photographing two guys and doing them together, which isn't too frequent, I'll do a bunch of drawings, just so I don't forget what I was thinking about when we get into the heat and craziness of doing the shoot.

Some of those drawings I love, and I'll do little sketches like that. Regularly I do charcoal on rag paper. Every day I keep a couple of easels about and I draw faces, poses of several graceful women's bodies together. I'll do some fornication scene. I have all these things going all the time, and I begin an immense number of things and then finish them slowly over a period of time when I get an another idea of what to do next.

I work very fast so there are literally thousands of sketches lying around. And the photographs? I have them neatly filed away because you have to do that. It's the only way. You have to have negatives put away neatly and archivally. I guess there are hundreds of thousands. I don't know. If someone is worth shooting, I will do ten rolls of twelve. So there are 100 to 150 sometimes of very similar exposures of anybody I find worth photographing.

Jack Fritscher: We mentioned movies earlier, and since you are including storyboarding as a procedure, and since you mentioned video as an interest, might you take up shooting moving pictures as the century draws to a close? Perhaps a new dimension of Dureau's photography?

George Dureau: Storyboarding is just visual note making. I'm what they call them a natural-born adult note-maker. If I'm going to call somebody, I don't want to waste their time. So I make a list of things I want to talk about. That's hysterically boring, but that's

what I do. And that's what you do in drawing too. You make some little sketches of what you're going to do. I draw them real fast. It's very easy for me to draw quickly to a certain satisfaction. Finishing something to make it elegant, poetic, and wonderful to look at, that's something else. But I draw well and fast. So why not draw all the time? Drawing is something you get nothing but better at the more you do it. Better!

Jack Fritscher: Can you summarize your own career at this point?

George Dureau: I may have said it in that [last] line. It's funny. I would have thought when I was in college, and right after, that my art was going to be this exquisite, somewhat austere, magnificent stuff out there, and that's happened, although it's big and Baroque and operatic, and it is to me exactly like my life. It's an extension of my life!

I don't know if anyone told me that's what I was supposed to do: live a life and reflect it in my art. But I think the paintings are a lot like I live. Although I live a conservative life, in its safety, I don't do drugs and lie around in the street, which I may have come close to in the 1960s, but I'm fairly self-preserving about how I live and what trouble I don't get into.

But there is a lot of warmth and passion, a lot of dinners and candles in my life.

I think it is in the art. When I get to the end of this century and look at my work, I will always know exactly what was going on when I look at a picture. It's not like looking at some abstraction. I mean I look at my pictures and I know all the people I've painted and I say, "Oh, that's Troy," but I had to use so-and-so's hand. Oh, wait, that's my hand. I know that hand. I painted my own hand in there. So everything in my art is something chopped out of my life and put into paintings. And some things that I put into my paintings, I then go ahead and live them out. Some stuff starts in my drawings, but then I make them come true.

I did drawings in the 1950s that I then made come true in the 1960s. And things I drew in the 1960s I know I made come true in the 1970s. That's a funny idea, but I know it's true. I guess it's the

same brain, both sides of the brain are always thinking all the time both in the way I live my life and the way I do my art.

Jack Fritscher: So to young artists you might say what?

George Dureau: I don't know how they do it today. Life looks so dangerous. I'm glad I lived earlier. I don't know how I made it through the 1940s and 1950s. I really miss the 1960s though I don't go around acting like a 60s person, I suppose. But I really miss all the commitment and all the nerve endings hanging out in the 1960s.

And that's why I say it's fun, more than fun—great!—to once in awhile get really mad at something and put all your talents together and do a painting. I do it in drawings too, of things that I'm really mad at or really concerned about. I think it's wonderful to work with a great deal of concern.

Jack Fritscher: Are you frustrated by concerns sometimes? [Referencing a rumor in which Dureau vented discontent in front of witensses] Do you throw pots? Pre-Columbian pots?

George Dureau: No. If I get angry nowadays, it's because I'm frustrated about not having enough time in a day to get done all the things I want to. Too many careers going on, I think sometimes. And that gets me mad. I used to get drunk and frustrated back in the 1960s, but I don't do that anymore. I'm very controlled about eating and drinking.

Jack Fritscher: How old are you now? I'm fifty-one.

George Dureau: I'm sixty. I'll be sixty-one in December

Jack Fritscher: Do you think you're going backwards in time in terms of your youthful energy? Your energy level seems incredibly high.

George Dureau: I'm getting a lot cuter.

Jack Fritscher: That helps.

George Dureau: I'm in good shape, very healthy. It takes a certain amount of taking care of oneself.

Jack Fritscher: So that "self-destructive artist syndrome" is not part of your personality?

George Dureau: I outlived that. It's funny. I turned my Scots/Welsh/French and German [genes] in the right direction. I started out being drunk all the time. I just turned it around and decided to get mean in my own behalf. I'm very well controlled. I just wish the rest of the world weren't so boring.

Jack Fritscher: It's the decade. It's the end of the century.

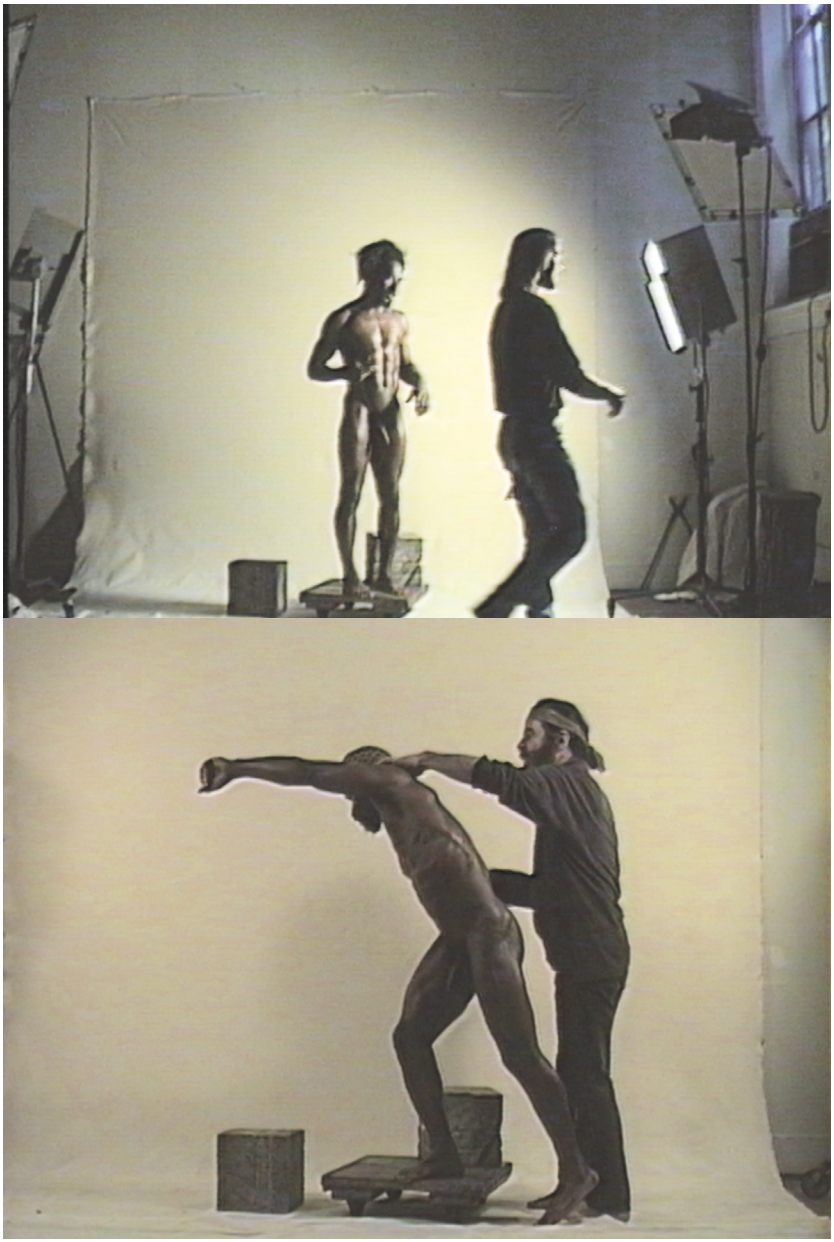
George Dureau: Don't you think that we've said everything?

Jack Fritscher: If you think so, I think so.

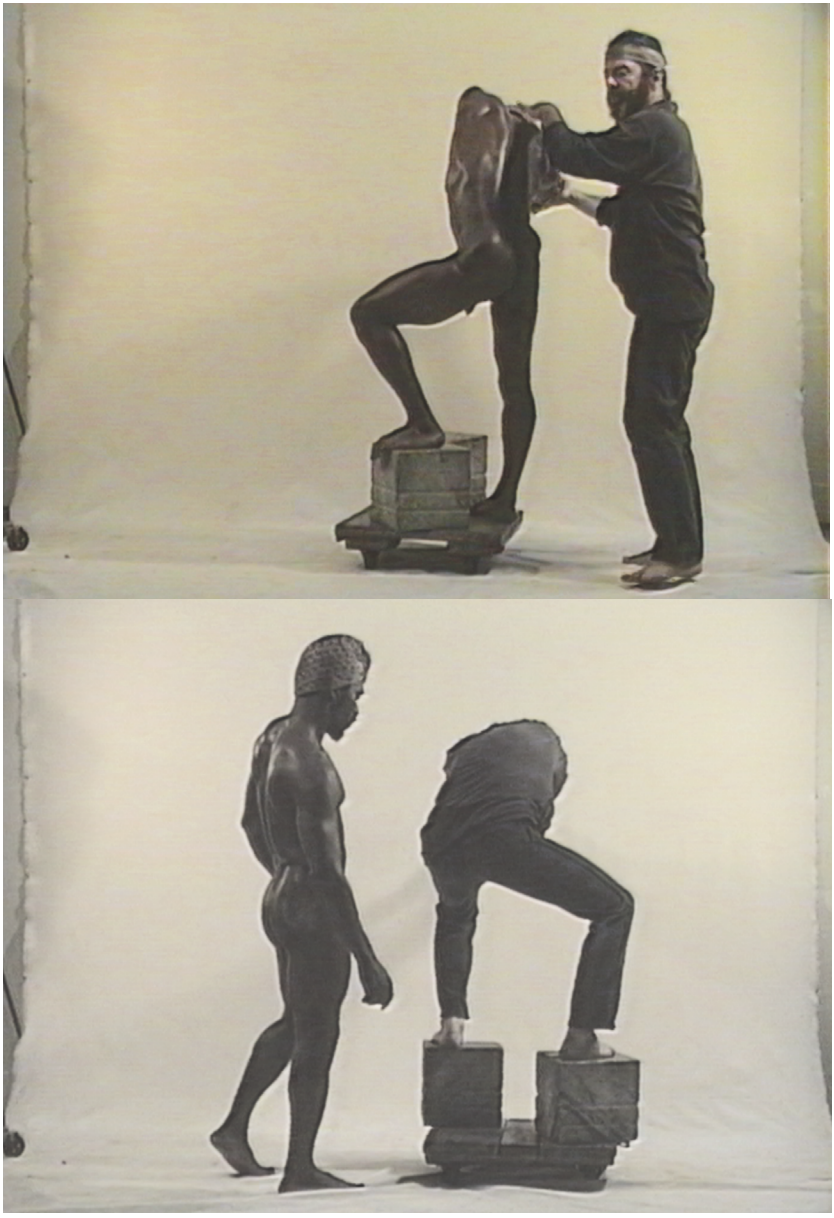
George Dureau: Thank you. It was wonderful.

Jack Fritscher: Thank you. It was wonderful.

DUREAU IN STUDIO



George Dureau, who choreographed all his pictures, directing Glen Thompson in his Dauphine Street studio for the documentary *Dureau in Studio*, April 10, 1991. Six video photos by © Jack Fritscher



(Bottom) Dureau mounting two moveable dais blocks to demonstrate the basic pose he wanted Thompson to build upon in the photo they were creating together. "My camera gives my models voice. I frequently, always, let them do a couple of their own poses because they seem to crave something that they've been saving up for years. I give them space, step back, and kind of rearrange their ideas and hope for a compromise between my idea and their idea."

(Top) Dureau was a master of Optical Illusion. When shooting whole-bodied men, he often posed models with their healthy limbs folded away from view to evoke the beauty of broken Greek statues.

(Bottom) Glen Thompson, with George's hand on his shoulder, was an experienced figure model who responded patiently and creatively to George's gentle direction by holding physically strenuous poses until his muscles quivered. Glen Thompson was the first model George shot on video.