

Art in America

JUNE 2002

Jerry Spagnoli at Edwynn Houk

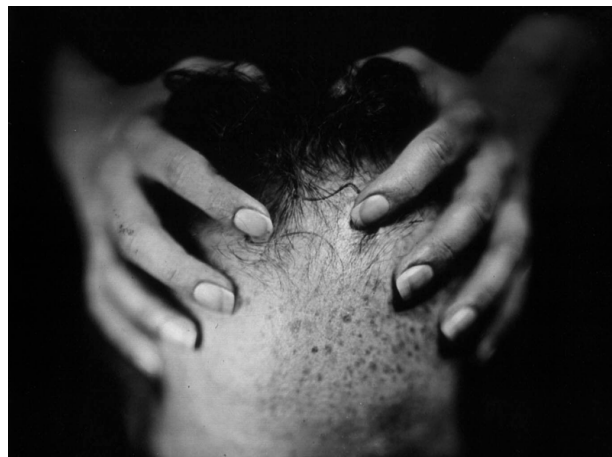
Jerry Spagnoli is foremost among a handful of contemporary daguerreotypists who have blown the flea-market dust off this earliest form of photography. Invented in the 1830s, the daguerreotype process of recording images on metal plates coated with silver reached its zenith in a decade and was all but obsolete by 1860. It is a testimony to the mesmerizing quality of Spagnoli's work that it makes the eclipse of the daguerreotype seem utterly incomprehensible.

Artists such as Adam Fuss, Mark Kessell and Chuck Close (with whom Spagnoli collaborates as a technical expert) have recently extended the daguerreotype's imagery, but it is Spagnoli who has understood best that the "dag" is not merely an object but an optical event. This exhibition included over 30 such events, and the cumulative effect was more like video or performance art than still photography.

The fundamental properties of the dag are its grainless clarity and its evanescence. The light reflected off the plate's surface can make the image seem to float and, when seen at the wrong angle, to disappear, leaving you looking at yourself. Spagnoli exploited these properties to create a primer of seeing. Most of the works depicted parts of the body hands, eyes, breasts, faces, hair and feet with preternatural precision. Among the first images inside the door of the gallery were those of elegant and precise hand gestures of signing for the deaf, which seemed to hover on the mirrorlike silver surfaces of the daguerreotypes. Mounted in black leather cases on pedestals or on shelves extending from the gallery's muted walls, Spagnoli's images appeared to emerge out of nothingness into full dimensionality, like ghosts in a frame.

Several of the gestural fragments suggested elements of Caravaggio's paintings, a connection that revealed the ambition of Spagnoli's project. Formally, Caravaggio was concerned with the use of light to carve the body out of encroaching dark. Spiritually, as a Catholic, he was preoccupied by the impossibility of transcending the body. For Spagnoli, too, the body is the measure of reality, and light is the sculpting tool. But

because the daguerreotype is made visible by light reflected around and through the image on the plate, viewing it approximates the original act of photographic seeing. The dag solicits our participation in a repeating spectacle, always the same, always original in the instant of our viewing. Thus, these views of the body were not just represent-



Jerry Spagnoli: Untitled, 2001 from the "Anatomical Details" series, whole plate daguerreotype, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches: at Edwynn Houk.

ations but episodes of visual resurrection -a second-order victory for art over circumstance, but a victory nonetheless.

Seven large paper photomicrographs positioned on three walls above the daguerreotypes underscored the point. The images of tiny falling figures, captured at a great distance with an ordinary lens, were isolated from a conventional negative and rephotographed under a microscope, then blown up. The grain of the film at such low resolution reduced the legibility to near abstraction, to the point at which the image seemed about to dissolve. This zero-degree photography embodied the opposite pole of the daguerreotype's infinite clarity. Between these two scarcely explored extremes lay all the possibilities of photographic vision.

—Lyle Rexer