

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA **PHOTOGRAPHS 1975–2012**

June 20 – September 8, 2013

WALL PANELS IN THE EXHIBITION

Photographs 1975–2012

American artist Philip-Lorca diCorcia is one of the most important contemporary photographers of his generation. Born in 1951 in Hartford, Connecticut, he studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from 1971 to 1975 before receiving his Master of Fine Arts from Yale University in 1979. He has been living and working in New York since the early 1980s. This large-scale exhibition presents the first opportunity in Europe to discover his oeuvre, beginning in the early 1970s to the ongoing series *East of Eden*. His first solo exhibition took place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1993, followed by others at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 2007 and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2008. To date, only samples from diCorcia's series have been presented in solo or group shows in Europe.

DiCorcia's images oscillate between everyday moments and arrangements that have been staged down to the last detail. In his works, realistic representation and the apparently documentary gaze are subverted by elaborate pictorial direction. One of diCorcia's principal themes is whether it is possible to depict reality, which connects his photographs, most of which were produced in series, with one another. The series *A Storybook Life*, which consists of seventy-six works, is being presented here in its entirety, while only individual images from all of the other series—*Hustlers* (1990–92), *Streetwork* (199–99), *Heads* (2000–01), *Lucky 13* (2004), and *East of Eden* (beginning in 2008)—were selected, in close collaboration with the artist, to be shown in the exhibition.

East of Eden

The exhibition commences with *East of Eden*, an ongoing series begun in 2008 and of which eight works are being presented here for the first time.

The heterogeneous nature of *East of Eden* and *A Storybook Life* distinguishes both series from all the others. Both titles contain literary allusions: while one implies the telling of someone's life story, the other refers to literary and biblical inspirations: *East of Eden*.

Here, diCorcia alludes to the greatest themes of all: the loss of innocence, the beginning of good and evil, and life outside Paradise. Each one of the motifs has been deliberately selected and conceptualized with reference to the title of the series, the compositions prepared and worked out in detail. Yet not all of the images can be placed into the overall context and decoded like the apple tree in *Upstate*, which manifests itself in all its tantalizing glory. Within the context of the title of the series, we know that beauty is deceptive and harbors danger. And so the ravishingly beautiful, tender, blonde *Lacy* is to blame, so to speak, for the loss of Paradise. Of course, *East of Eden* does not exhaust itself in images symbolizing passages from the Old Testament, which is clearly underscored by the individual titles. The series seems completely placeless and out of

time, which lends it universality. Whereas the images from the other series show fragments and are often accompanied by an almost mystical atmosphere, here one senses that this has been abandoned in favor of heightened imagery.

Streetwork

DiCorcia produced *Streetwork* between 1993 and 1999, a series in which unsuspecting passers-by are photographed on their way to work, to the gym, to the grocery store, on their way home, and so on. He carefully selected the location, the camera position, and the composition of the frame and installed a complex system of artificial lighting. The hustle and bustle, sounds, and rapid pace of big-city life have been frozen for a split second in these photographs. Thanks to the artificial lighting, the contours of the people are razor-sharp. The city, streetscapes, and intersections in the background have also been captured in exquisite depth and come across as backdrops for the events taking place in the foreground, where the protagonists seem to have been introduced to the stage afterwards. Time and duration play no role; instead, it is the transitory nature of the moment that is underscored. The people captured in a particular moment seem completely withdrawn into themselves, regardless of whether it is a crowd at Times Square, on a street in Hong Kong or in Mexico City, or whether they are individuals like the businesswoman in Tokyo or the elderly man in Los Angeles.

There is a long tradition of street photography in America. When diCorcia began his studies at Yale in 1977, the faculty was strongly influenced by its former head, Walker Evans. For one of his projects, Evans took pictures of subway passengers using a hidden camera, creating a critical portrait of what was then contemporary North America. But diCorcia is not interested in depicting "real life in the big city." "Anyone studying the big city today with a camera is investigating ritual, staging, the production of pictures," writes catalogue author Christoph Ribbat. DiCorcia's visual fictions demonstrate "that the directness of the photographic act is just one of many fictions."

Lucky 13

"Lucky 13" is an American colloquialism used to ward off a losing streak. The series provides superficial insight into the seamy milieu of strip joints and gambling halls. Yet *Lucky 13* is not about documentary photography in the sense of a sociological study on sexuality and exploitation. The protagonists not only clearly demonstrate their nakedness and our voyeurism, they become metaphors for the impermanence of the body, of luck, of the moment. DiCorcia is not fascinated by the red-light district but by what its protagonists are willing to venture: "People who live on the edge put themselves at risk on multiple levels. And that is what I'm attracted to." The pole dancers in *Lucky 13*, seemingly in free fall, powerfully convey the painterly quality of diCorcia's photographs. The dramatic lighting distinguishes their athletic, naked bodies from the dark background. The frozen movements contain a sculptural plasticity, as if the firm bodies have been chiseled in stone. In contrast to the street photographs, the women, like the *Hustlers*, are cognizant of the camera, the photographer, and therefore the viewer. Their physicality is emphasized not only by the lighting but also by the nearly life-size format of the images, in which deserted bars, stages, and neon lights are visible in the obscurity of the backdrop. Yet the bodies in *Lucky 13* do not promise eroticism or sex. Instead, they are toppling, overturning bodies that bespeak the finite nature of the moment

Hustlers

DiCorcia produced the *Hustlers* series between 1990 and 1992, photographs he shot of male prostitutes along Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. The titles of each of the photographs relay the name, age, and birthplace of the men as well as the amount what diCorcia paid them for posing for the picture. Contrary to what looks like an objective documentation of Hollywood's hustler scene, here, too, the artist staged every last detail of the backgrounds and lighting. Although the location and the person in the image and the information in the title are evidence of their actual existence, the male prostitutes slip into the roles of fictional people from the artist's imagination. *Gerald Hughes (a.k.a. Savage Fantasy), about 25 years old, Southern California, \$50*, poses in a motel room, wearing only a thong from which a key ring is hanging. His accessories, his naked skin, and the motel room clearly suggest a sexual context, although neither here nor in the other motifs in the series is sexual activity ever depicted explicitly. The hustlers represent the flip side of Tinsel Town. Individual stories coalesce almost automatically against this backdrop, and the men being depicted become palpable symbols of ruptured dreams. The viewer cannot help but be moved by their fate. Even if diCorcia rejects the sentimental aspects of the medium, in the context of *Hustlers* he remarks: "There is an emotional tone to the work. You can't take it lightly. You can dislike it or dismiss it. But you can't really just ignore it."

Heads

The *Heads* series (2000–01) was also produced in public space. DiCorcia once again worked with a complex lighting system, waiting until passers-by walked into the image and releasing the shutter at the right moment. This time he focused on the faces of individual people, fading the background, buildings, streets, and other passers-by to black. Unlike in the photographs in *Streetwork*, time actually seems to have come to a standstill in these close-ups. Those being depicted step out of the maelstrom of the big city, the crowd, the flurry of activity, and time, thus becoming insignias of themselves. While the lighting draws the individuals into the center of the image and the viewer's attention, they nevertheless appear isolated and almost lonely. Their identity is unimportant; the titles do not supply any information about them but contain numbers only: *Head #10, Head #11, . . .* This is how one looks when walking unobserved and unprotected down the street, lost in thought. It creates the impression that the inner lives of these people are inscribed in their faces and therefore in the photographs. The portraits exude a meditative serenity, and the viewer can almost get lost in their introspective gazes. It seems absurd that just before and immediately after the pictures were taken, they again find themselves in an everyday situation, which they had in fact never left.

A Storybook Life

The artist himself selected the seventy-six images created between 1975 and 1999 for *A Storybook Life* before they were ever exhibited. Although the volume *A Storybook Life*, published in 2003, has no rigorous narrative continuity, it is characteristic that the sequence of images with the father has both a beginning and an end and therefore apparently plays with the suggestion of a (life) cycle. The collection of portraits, landscapes, interiors, still lifes, snapshots, and travel photographs represents a more than twenty-year period of artistic production. The images give the impression of being the recapitulation of a longer stage in life, a pithy inventory of pictures.

They draw a narrative arc, without, however, adhering either to a strict chronology or a discernible narrative. The titles of the images only provide information about the date they were taken and the respective location. What is contradictory about diCorcia's photographs is that the ordinary, intimate, and seemingly real everyday moments are staged. The supposedly spontaneous images are arranged from the outset accordingly to the artist's precise instructions: the pair of lovers about to kiss in front of a taffeta curtain, the dark-haired woman bending down toward her poodle, father and daughter at the beach flanking their sandcastle. The photographer is not on a quest for "true stories." His portraits are not documentary, even if they may seem so at first; rather, they are constructions of a higher-level truth capable of revealing photography's metaphorical process.