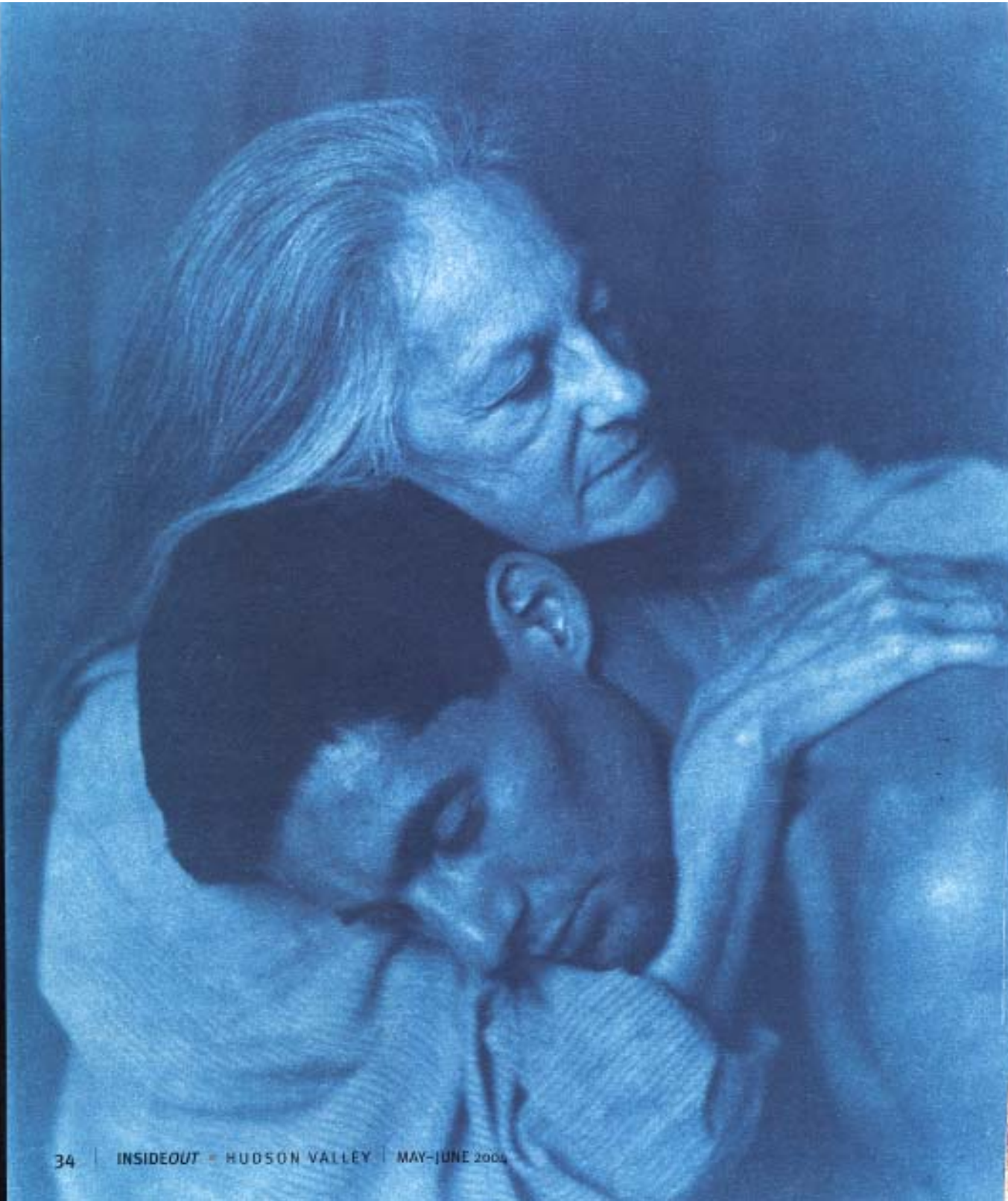


John Drysdale's



Windows on the Soul

John Dugdale focuses his spirit
eye on a prolific, gifted life

by Jorge S. Arango

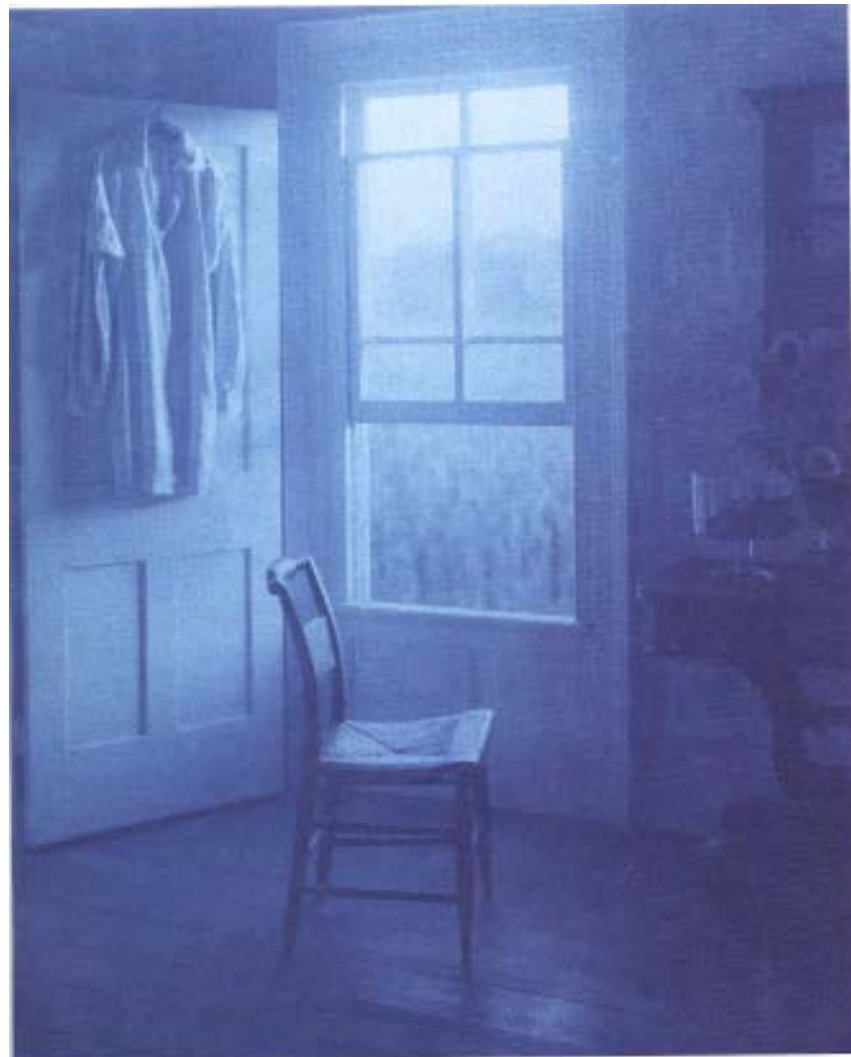
For years I have known John Dugdale's house in Stone Ridge. I have seen the afternoon light ricochet off the Victorian bell jars in the summer parlor; admired the Rubenesque curves of its Empire furniture; watched the corn in the field outside the windows sprout golden silk tresses, then wither and dry.

For years I have known Dugdale's loved ones. I've caressed the beautiful musculature of his brother's naked body; watched the nipples on his sister's breasts bubble up and stiffen with a passing draft; heard his mother sigh at

LUMINOUS GLASS, Stone Ridge, 1996, which took Dugdale four hours to focus by himself.



◀ THE ARTIST'S MOTHER, 1994 (cyanotype). Dugdale calls this photograph "my epiphany." His brother and sister are also frequent subjects.



EMPIRE CHAIR IN THE GLOAMING, *Stone Ridge, 1994, one of Dugdale's most famous images, which he recently reproduced in an albumen print version.*

the end of the day when, like an aging, modern-day Rapunzel, she let down her luxuriant, long gray hair.

Yet I never physically visited the house until last month. I've met his brother in passing at an exhibition, but never spoken to his sister or mother.

These images and the intimate acquaintances I made with his family and friends came to me over the years in the form of hundreds of pictures Dugdale created using 19th century photographic techniques. For me, depending on the technique, they were tinted blue or rosy brown or silver. And Dugdale, though virtually blind, sees them even more clearly than

SELF PORTRAIT, *Roundout Creek, 1994.* ▶
"I came into the world nude," says Dugdale, "and I wanted to go out nude."

I because they live in his memory in ripe Technicolor. They are indelible rooms, indelible people. You can smell them, taste them, feel them brush against your skin.

Twenty years ago, Dugdale was a highly successful commercial photographer, shooting catalogs for Armani and Ralph Lauren and making our mouths water with his pictures for the food pages of *The New York Times* and other publications. In 1985, he bought the Gothic farmhouse in Stone Ridge. It was set several acres back from the road in the middle of a cornfield. A few months later, he was diagnosed with AIDS. It was a horrible shock, but Dugdale continued to work, he says, "through five bouts of pneumonia, thrush and KS." He felt in his heart he should do something more meaningful with his art, but it was just a feeling back then.

"What really changed everything," he recalls, "was the day I woke up and had a stroke that paralyzed me. Then the CMV really kicked in and my sight quickly deteriorated." CMV, cytomegalovirus, robbed many people of their eyesight in the early days of AIDS. But Dugdale depended on his eyes for his work. It was time, he decided, to take stock of things.

He spent a year in the hospital. "When I was paralyzed, with IVs stuck in both my arms," he remembers, "I paced the house and the property in meters and

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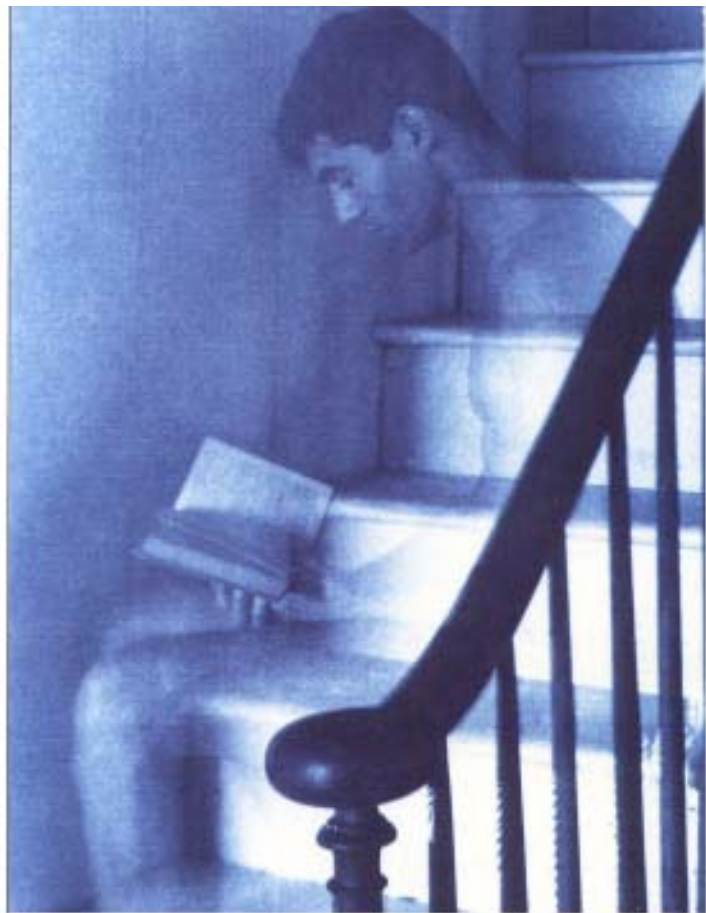
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CSA

bounds in my mind. It kept me alive." Gradually he improved, checked himself out and stopped taking his eye medications. "I was taking a risk," he admits, "but I felt I'd rather go blind doing my art work than lying there."

Dugdale's friends and family worried. The house was hardly equipped for someone on a terminal trajectory. "The electricity was decrepit and dangerous," he explains. "So I ripped it out thinking I'd replace it. Then I didn't." Shortly after his arrival, the heating gave out, too. He spent \$3,000 to replace it, then ripped that out as well because he hated the noise it made. "I traded my furnace for a wing chair," he says with some pride. He used an outhouse and, in the summer, bathed outside in a tub. "If you left a bowl of fruit in the kitchen overnight, it would freeze," Dugdale adds.

He hadn't set out to live like a 19th century ascetic, he insists. "It happened organically. And I loved the quiet. When the sun went down and it got dark, I was more connected to the universe. Something transcendental happened the day I realized I only needed one cup, one teaspoon and one bed." He had, in fact, read all the Transcendentalist writers—Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, St. Vincent Millay—and had long been devoted to the period. He was a good friend of David McDermott and Peter McGuff, conceptual artists popular in the 80s who lived in Manhattan like eminent Victorians as part of a continuous performance piece. He had also worked as a docent at Bethpage Village, answer-



THE CLANDESTINE MIND, Lockwood Farm, New York, 1999, part of a series that reflects on Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of an "Oversoul."

ing tourists' questions while dressed in the period clothes of a farmer or a milliner and marching in temperance parades.

It was another 19th century artifact that redirected Dugdale's work. An 8 x 10 inch plate camera that had been a studio prop now became the vehicle for his art. Deprived of most of his sight—no vision in one eye and only 20 percent in the other—the camera allowed him, with the help of special eyeglasses and a magnifying loupe, to continue to scan and compose photos. He mined several 19th century techniques, including cyanotypes (invented in 1842 with ferrous salts that turn the prints blue), albumen prints (which incorporate egg whites, invented about 1845), gelatin



| SUMMER BATH, *Stone Ridge*, 1993 (Dugdale bathes outdoors in the summer).

chloride prints (circa 1865–70) and platinum prints (popularized by Alfred Stieglitz at the turn of the century).

The cyanotypes made him famous. "What I hadn't counted on," he explains, "was the incredibly visceral reaction people had to blue."

But it is more than the blue (or the silver of the platinum prints or rosy browns of the gelatin chloride prints) that makes these pictures extraordinary. It is the place they come from that elevates them beyond romantic nostalgia. And that place is deep in Dugdale's soul. They convey a way of seeing that has nothing to do with physical sight. It is the reason the work resonates so deeply, the reason I feel I've met his family, lived in those rooms, even

smelled John's body on the tumbled sheets of his bed. They capture the soul of those people and objects, and souls need no introduction; they simply are, and they speak wordlessly to each soul that beholds them.

"I devoted myself to my early photographs in a way that was obsessive," says the 44-year-old artist, "because I had to prove to myself and to the world that I was not without sight. I had 'in' sight, not 'out' sight. I make pictures from the inside out. They can be about something I touch or something I smell." The human pictures are almost all nude, which he feels is "essential for the purity and timelessness of the work." But it also harks back to his days at the hospital. "I didn't want to die with my clothes on. I came into the world nude and I wanted to go out nude."

It has been over ten years since Dugdale's stroke. He has had 73 exhibitions of his work, about 25 of them solo, and he has published four books, with another, *Tears of Apollo*, on the way. His work is in museums all over the world. He is fresh off a retrospective mounted by his dealer, the John Stevenson Gallery in New York. And he has a new lover.

But Dugdale recently lost more of his sight—he now has only 10 percent in one eye—and since it can take him four hours to focus a single photo-

graph by himself (as in the case of "Luminous Glass"), he's worked with an assistant for years. He's now taking time off to renovate his house and barn. He's made some concessions to modernity—a Maytag washer-dryer and a refrigerator, though he says he has insulated them "to within an inch" of their lives to reduce the noise. "I don't want the house to lose its spirit, but I have to save my energy for my illness," he says realistically. "I'm not going to pound my clothes on a rock."

When will it be done? "I don't have a calendar," says Dugdale. "I'm a Gemini; it's hard for me to pin even myself down until the last minute." Besides, he adds, "I feel like I'm on the ascending part of the second wave of my life." ▼