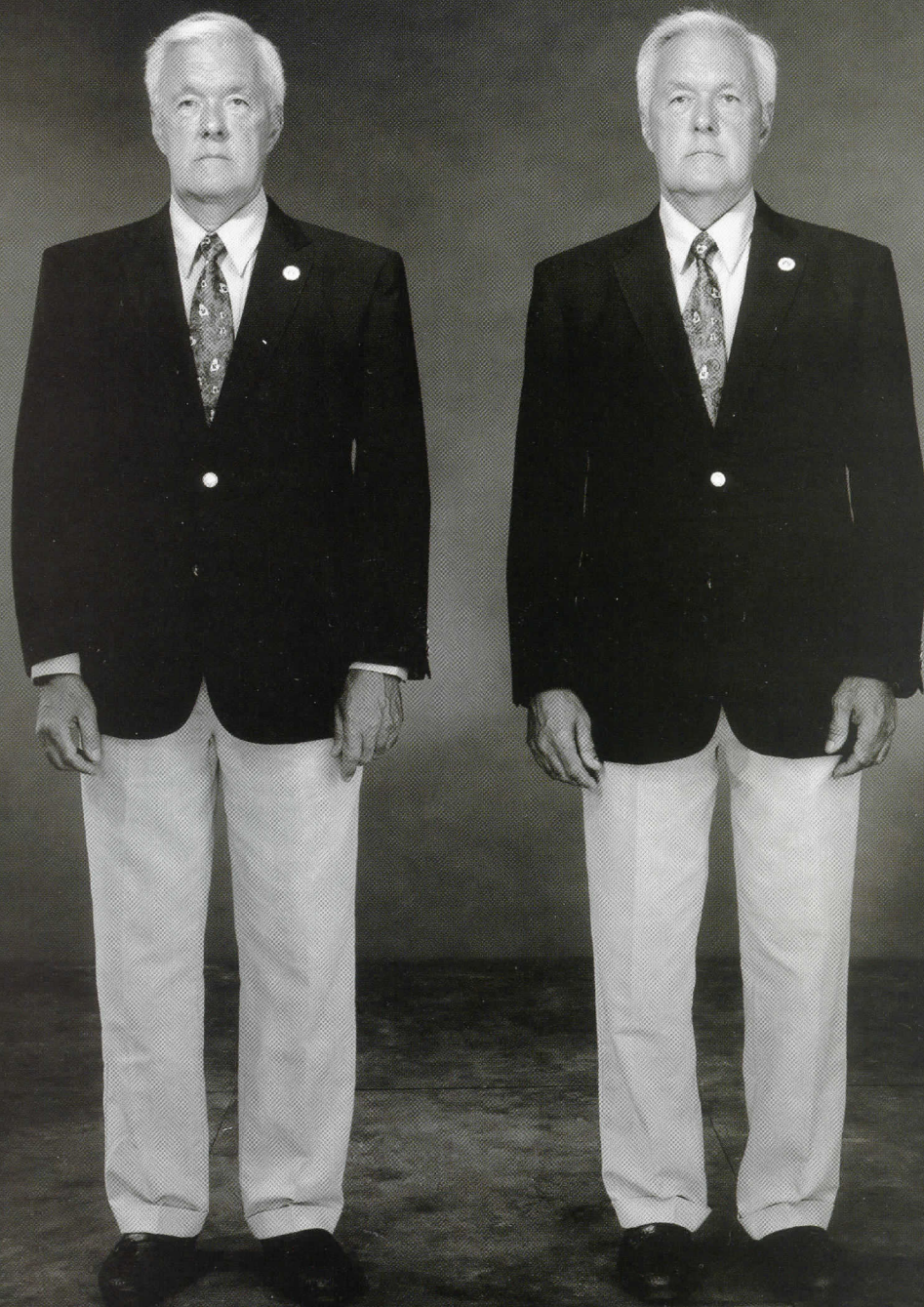


A R T I S T R Y



# DOUBLE VISION

Mary Ellen Mark's portraits of twins have to be seen to be believed.

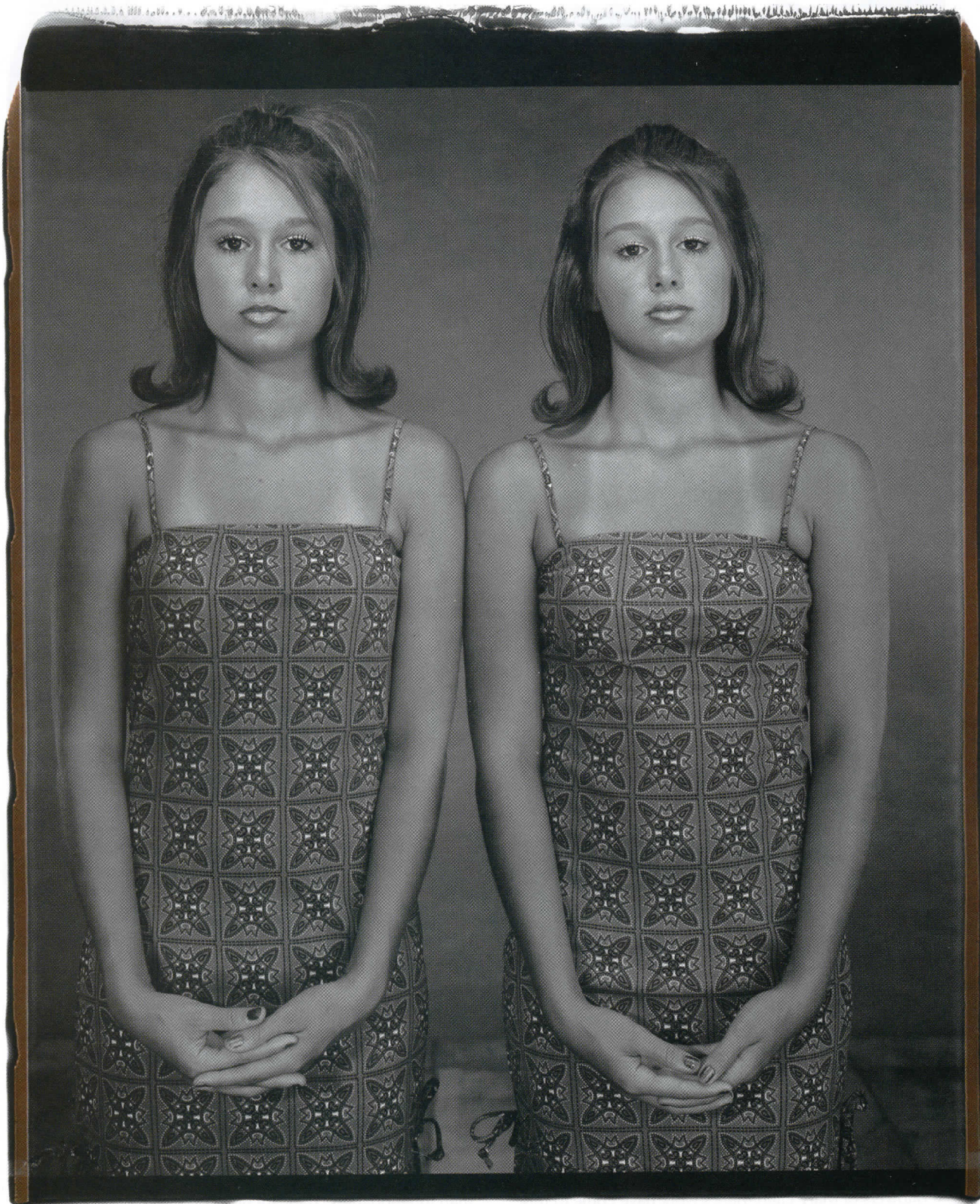


Opposite page: "Ronald W. and Roland W. Crummel, 62 years old, Roland older by 20 minutes, 2001." This page: "Caylan and Mylee Simmerman, 10 years old, Mylee older by two minutes, 2001."

Followers of Mary Ellen Mark's work have come to rely on the unflinching artistry of her composition. So it may surprise them that composition is not preeminent in the photographer's latest project, a riveting, tightly focused study of twins. Shot over a couple of years at the annual Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio, the pictures are rigid in their visual formula. No tilted frame or cropped body parts here: Mark's twins all stand side by side, facing the camera. They're usually presented full-length, but no less

than three-quarters. They are often dressed the same way, apparently the custom at the festival. ("People wrongly think I styled all the pictures," says Mark.) And though they posed in subtly different ways, even Mark's approach to that was hands-off: Some kept their arms clamped to their sides, others held hands or struck a pose that had something to do with their shared interests or outfits. "The twins had a better idea how they should look than I did," says Mark.

Thousands of twins attend the three-day festival to cele-



This page:  
"Erin and Erica  
Cunningham,  
17 years  
old, Erica older  
by 63 min-  
utes, 2002."  
Opposite page:  
"Don and  
Dave Wolf,  
44 years old,  
Dave older by  
six min-  
utes, 2002."

brate their twinness at a variety of events. (There's even a science tent where they can get their DNA checked to see if they're fraternal or identical.) "It was an amazingly visual experience and at the same time, very strange and frustrating," writes Mark in the foreword to *Twins: Photographs and Interviews* by Mary Ellen Mark (Aperture, \$50). "I felt somewhat isolated not being a twin." After the shock of

seeing double abated, Mark's team scouted the festival for promising subjects, shooting on-the-spot Polaroids so that Mark could narrow down the choices. Mark would then visit the twins' nightly gathering places to find the pairs she wanted and set up portrait appointments with them.

Mark's photographic technique matched the straightforward presentation of her subjects. She (continued on page 90)



## DOUBLE VISION

(continued from page 82) didn't just throw seamless onto the side of a barn: The portraits were made in a tented studio with controlled lighting designed by Mark's husband, filmmaker Martin Bell. And many thousands of watt-seconds were needed—in fact, the local electric company had to be called in to specially wire the tent, and Mark worried that rainstorms would zap the whole enterprise—because Mark's camera was the 20x24 Polaroid.

Mark rented the massive camera, trucking it to Twinsburg with all her lighting gear and a 12-member crew. It occurred to her to use the big camera after shooting the festival a year earlier with a mix of 35mm, medium format, and 4x5 and preferring the more formal quality

The viewer looks from one twin to the other, in search of subtle differences.

and greater detail of the view camera portraits. The 20x24's exquisite sharpness and huge scale, combined with the invariable directness of the images, invites a degree of scrutiny that is unprecedented in Mark's work. The viewer looks back and forth from one twin to the other, without distraction, in search of subtle differences—the tilt of an eye, the density of freckles, an extra wrinkle. What saves the pictures from any monotony is that Mark varies the subject's distance from the camera. Some figures are small in the frame, though not just children; some fill the frame, and not necessarily grown-ups.

Yet Mark's choice of camera made the task photographically arduous. "Working with the 20x24 in black and white is the most difficult medium I've ever used," she says, recalling that the hardship was compounded by summer heat that turned the tent into a sweatlodge. "When you shoot a negative, you can correct your mistakes when you make the print. But with the Polaroid, you're making the picture and the print at the same time."

Once the shooting was over, Mark spent hours on the phone talking with the twins she had photographed. Squibbets of her conversations are printed with thumbnails of the images at the back of her beautiful new book. They affirm the bond that's powerfully evident in the portraits. One exchange is with the only twin Mark photographed by himself, who posed with a picture of his dead brother. He says he's looking forward to seeing his twin in heaven. ■



Tip #46:

## Check file size before sending.

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