



Captured and Released: Mark McKnight

BY
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A fistful of love, broken with tenderness. A slippery trail of spit drips from mouth to mouth under an unflinching sun. Fingers dig pools of darkness into creased skin. The shadow of chains on parted thighs. A single fly crawls over a naked back. Burned with the permanence of cyanide blue, a man plummets, broken chains above him; is his release a liberation, a fall into the unknown, or both? A collapsed tree, two branches prop the emptiness of its trunk, an open invitation. Balls clutched with vicious desire, an engorged cock slips between spread cheeks, ass bent toward an inky black sky cruised by clouds, diaphanous, bursting with sun, sublime. The most delicate wisps of those clouds, each leaf and blade of grass, every curling hair on these hirsute bodies, is carved from bone with light. I could cut myself on every flickering edge.











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Him, Shadow, 2019.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles

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Earthskin, 2018.

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Tear, 2021.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles

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Untitled, 2021.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York

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Dapple, 2021.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York

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Eric (Voiding), 2018.

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Clouds (Opening), 2021.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York

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Untitled (Tree Void), 2021.

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Voidpull (detail), 2021.

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Crest, 2021.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York

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Ballerino, 2018.

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Flesh, 2018.

© Mark McKnight. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles

(Above) *Hunger for the Absolute* installation views at Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles, 2021.
Courtesy: Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder



A hustler once told me that only after having sex with men for money did he truly understand male homosexual desire. That the desire born in isolation and oppression didn't often have a true face, a real and consenting human to explore its shape. The furtive nature of gay sex for many was faceless. A dream lover met somewhere shadowy, playing out a craving born in locked-door bathroom handlings and bedtime under-sheet trawlings, was too often a fantasy. For the men who picked him up and paid for his services, the hustler was helping his clients consummate an unrequited desire, planted so deep that perhaps no amount of real men could satisfy the ache of their long-unrealized yearning.

Even with sexual liberation and consenting lovers, with all the complexity of unique humans, the old dreamy desire touches the new, fantasy twines with the real, like limbs clenched and locked. I keep thinking of Jean Genet. Kicked toward saintliness, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it. I remember the one-handed Spanish pimp Stilitano roughly fucking Jean in *The Thief's Journal* (1949), and how tender and sacred the passage plays in my memory. As I look at these pictures, the title of Genet's book *Prisoner of Love* (1986) flows into Mark McKnight's *Heaven Is a Prison* (2020).

Nothing and everything is hidden in McKnight's photographs. Every blade of grass has an intense personality, cut to perfection, rendered absolutely itself. Every single hair on these bodies is so perfectly visible, you could almost reach through the picture plane to pluck it. "He loves me, he loves me not." The protuberant, busted bag of asphalt titled *Flesh* (2018) is not a bag but a back arched in pleasure, glistening with sweat; where it is broken open, it is like an eruption of the spirit and each tarry grain bleeding out is tactile, sticky, alive with pain tautly released. The shattered stones and spiky plants and pierced earth of his desert landscapes cut and crease with the wear and tear of a nature in undulating rise and collapse. And though I can't speak for other uses of Vaseline, there is none on the lens. The puckered scars on the back of one man mark his dark skin with the ravages of disease and healing, ridge and texture captured with uncanny precision. The clarity and detail are almost overwhelming.

What is seen is truly seen. And what is not seen disappears into total darkness.

In a few of his paean to McKnight's work, writer Garth Greenwell uses the phrase "abyssal black."¹ A black so deep it holds no bottom. Light does not disappear into it, but never existed there. It is the darkness beneath and behind all things, the kind that always exists where light will never touch. And those abysses are just as sharply rendered as the light that cuts so deeply and truly. The mercy of shadows allows for deeper mysteries. Although the bodies of the human subjects (all shapes and colors, but uniformly masculine) possess so much precise and individual detail, their faces are always tucked away—sometimes just a fraction seen, the whole always just outside the frame. Roland Barthes's mythic face of Greta Garbo in bodies so terribly particular that they become iconic. Icon and iconoclasm.

The texture of violence and tenderness, fantasies tangling with real sex, the seen and the unseen rub together with such potent friction that the smooth sheen of the photograph's surface becomes a pool of water for a submerged world of intense contrasts more real than the one we see it from.

Academia made me suspicious of the formal—suspicious that it manipulates feelings such that they seem intellectually dubious, not quite serious. And even aside from the hard theory of art school, formal photography was for me ruined by repetition and commerce. Open any commercial how-to black-and-white photo magazine and you'll see moodily lit rock formations and perfectly articulated cactus spines, fissured and crevassed stones and ravaged trees in cleanly captured fields. In artier quarters, even, too many clichés handed down to us by Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen and Ansel Adams get dutifully copied,

evacuated of their predecessors' astonishing grace and originality. The idealization of bodies I found in Helmut Newton's impeccably produced photographs had a whole constructed system of looking (at bodies in particular, especially women, through his cis-straight man's lens) that never permitted me to truly enjoy them. Newton could surely make his subjects into icons—alluring, anointed, nearly celestial—but he never made them feel real.

McKnight's formal majesty bears a relation to that of earlier modernist photographic masters. And photography of queer male desire has its own canon. But there is something else that is particular to McKnight's histories and landscapes—a subtlety or nuance that even while it expresses awareness of past artists is all his own. The bodies in these photos are furry with matted hair, punctured with scars, bulging with life, never stiff statues. And though the male figure found fans in the undercover queer physique pictorial magazines of another era (I am thinking here of bulky musclemen in loincloths posing with faux-classical decor for the likes of Bruce of Los Angeles and Bob Mizer), the fleshy particularity of the men in McKnight's photos gives desire a different form.

And even if many of the acts these men perform with others are explicitly corporeal, they appeal to some metaphoric realm that never makes them feel, well, dirty to me. Or voyeuristic, for that matter. It doesn't feel as if I'm seeing something furtive, private, or forbidden.

And certainly there is something radically political in these pictures, about brown and black male bodies of all shapes and varieties freely enjoying their pleasures. It's done so quietly and naturally in the flow of its aesthetic, I could almost forget how readily these images would have been condemned not so long ago (and in some quarters still surely are). I keep releasing into the grace of their freedom, knowing how difficult it is for so many to feel fearless and free in their bodies. Bought with suffering and pain, alienation and violence, such moments are so precious—a country whose boundaries I hope expand ever outward. I am always grateful to visit, if even just in a picture.

Writers always use the word "capture" when talking about photographs, a word easily swallowed into the power dynamics of BDSM. Are the chains in McKnight's photos another capture, a double bind? Do we, like consenting subs, wish to be captured too? But then again, the sexual theater of bondage, domination, and sadomasochism never felt precisely sexual to me, either. It touches upon some deep world of fear and trauma, unfolding with consent, accompanied by such lush sensuality that it transforms that fear and unwanted pain into an elected pleasure, allowing its practitioners to sublimate into feeling and bodies. Bondage enables us to let go. Rules and boundaries can create a safety that allows for an otherwise impossible freedom.

I've never been able to let go so much as when I've been tied up.

Bodies tangled in desire flow into one another and then outward into landscapes. The stones become fluid, the wavering grass an ocean, a moment of true intimacy that even when we are distinct, the ecstasy of it all makes it all one. It is almost holy. Such moments of sublimity are so rare as to be sacred. Perhaps what has been so often denounced as anathema by homophobic church fathers and repressed politicians only served for queer practitioners to be ever truly the exact opposite. The profane shudders into the sacred with a moan.

Without a lick of idealization, a man folding his shirt above his head, hairy body exposed, a perfect stream of piss leaving his cock, is seen with such care that it is something truer. Call it soul. Pissing is dirty, gross, disgusting, right? Flow, fluid, liquid. McKnight's pictures are often severe and perfectly cut, and they are also so viscerally vivid. Literally, in the wet liquid of bodies—piss and cum and sweat and blood—but also in the way consciousness or perception can leak and flood. In his photographs, McKnight brings together what seemed to be opposing forces into lucid harmony, flowing wetly and hotly with life.

MARK MCKNIGHT (b. 1984, Los Angeles) currently lives and works in Los Angeles. Recent solo and two person exhibitions include: *Hunger for the Absolute*, Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles (2021); *Hunger for the Absolute*, Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York (2021); *In this temporarily prevailing landscape*, Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York (2020); *Aperture Portfolio Prize*, Aperture Foundation, New York (2019); *Turn Into*, James Harris Gallery, Seattle (2018). Among group shows: *Working from Home: Recent Commissions*, MoCA Tucson (2020); *A Time for Monsters*, Fort Gansevoort, New York (2020); *Voidpull*, Koppe Astner Gallery, Glasgow (2020); *The Procession*, VACATION, New York (2020); *Automatic Door*, Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles (2020); *Shadow & Shadow of Shadow*, Roger's Office, Los Angeles (2019); *Close to Home*, Shulamit Nazarian Gallery, Los Angeles (2019); *Defining Photographs and Radical Experiments in Inland Southern California, 1950 to Present*, California Museum of Photography & Riverside Art Museum, Riverside (2019); *Monotasking*, Gallery Luisorti, Santa Monica (2018). McKnight's first monograph, *Heaven Is a Prison*, was published by Loose Joints in September 2020, with support from the Light Work Photobook Award.

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