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Sex as meaning-making in the work of Mark McKnight

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"I am arguing for sex as both meaningful and meaning-making. It's an uphill battle but I think the pictures help"

Sex has got lost in what society says it should be. It is private — doors are closed, curtains are drawn, the lights may even go down. And it is perilous — something overshadowed by the potential for pregnancy, infection, and, especially, initially, the likelihood of getting it wrong. With queer sex this intensifies. It bears the burden of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and is victim to the prejudice that pervades so many people's minds. But, even with its easily-avoided risks, consensual sex should not be perceived, nor experienced, as so. Sex can be beautiful and complicated; it is personal, multifaceted, imperfect, transcending any strict definitions, and it should be regarded as so.

This transcendence is what burns through the pages of Mark McKnight's *Heaven is a Prison* — a poetic series of elegant black-and-white images depicting two men copulating amid the terrain of Southern California's high desert. They are alone, and their forms fuse and rupture in moments of intimacy and domination; dancers rolling, crawling, and kneeling amongst swathes of arid grass and endless sky. "I wanted to challenge myself to make an 'explicit' (I hate that word) picture of sex," reflects McKnight, "which was so undeniably graceful that the beauty of the image would eclipse anything supposedly 'taboo' about it".

"To whom does 'heaven' belong? And what constitutes a 'heaven' or a 'prison'? The work would suggest that they are two sides of the same coin"



McKnight liberates sex, bringing it outside both literally into the desert, and metaphorically into the pages of this publication. Indeed, the work is about 'sex', but, it is also about these two men's sex — together in these moments and this space. So much is on show, but so much is also concealed. Their faces are largely obscured allowing us to project shreds of our experience onto them, but protecting the encounter as ultimately their own. "Sex is a circumstance in which one can truly see a person, while also completely objectifying them or unconsciously transforming them into a proxy — an image, really — that reflects one's psychology, needs, anxieties, desires, etc.," continues McKnight. In this way, the publication also becomes emblematic of intercourse: we observe these men, while consciously or unconsciously, projecting our sexual perceptions, experiences, and fantasies onto them.

And there are no fixed meanings here. Just as the copulating couple's fluid forms move and shift, how we feel and what we think — in relation to the work and in relation to sex — should remain in flux: sex becomes a space for exploration, a space to learn, a space to meaning-make. As the writer and poet Garth Greenwell articulates in the text that accompanies the series: "Much of the commercial pornography produced today intends to elicit a singular response—that, like propaganda, it wants us to feel a single thing. Interesting art, art that has enduring force, never wants us to feel a single thing ... McKnight's photographs resolutely deny us a singular response." And sex should do too.

Below, McKnight discusses the conception and making of the work — what it means for him and what he hopes it might mean to us.

What motivated you to make *Heaven is a Prison*?

For several years before *Heaven is a Prison*, I had been working on an ongoing project titled *Decreation*, which received the Aperture Portfolio Prize in 2019. As you might imagine, Aperture opened the door to a wider audience, which included Lewis Chaplin and Sarah Piegay Espenon at *Loose Joints*, my publisher. They reached out within a few weeks of my receipt of the prize and asked to have a conversation. It just so happened that I was about a third of the way through a ‘side-project’ that would later become *Heaven is a Prison* — a much larger and more significant body of work than I think they, or I, anticipated.

It felt fated. I had envisioned this project as a book, somewhat uncharacteristically, from the beginning. When we started chatting, I already had design ideas. For example, I knew that the book needed to come sealed in one of the cloud images. It necessitates being torn open and penetrated to access the book itself. It felt like an important conceptual gesture: it forces viewers to defile the otherwise pristine object and also makes them complicit in the act of being voyeuristic. It’s my little nod to Stieglitz and equivalency — in a sense, that is equal parts homage and iconoclasm.



How did you conceptualise the idea?

In *Decreation*, I was describing subjects in ways that were ambiguously suggestive of my desire, and this was purposeful. But, around the time I started making what would become *Heaven is a Prison*, I was asking myself a lot of questions, which were namely focused on my hesitation to depict the act of sex itself. I wanted to know what the root of my reluctance was.

Very early on this question of ‘pornography’ came up, which just begot more questions: What constitutes ‘fine art’? ‘Pornography’? And why are the designations still mutually exclusive? More importantly, who decided sex was not meaningful? Why is an intellectual response to an artwork privileged over an unconscious or somatic one? For instance, arousal?

It’s not that the work is anti-intellectual. It is quite the contrary. However, I always want to argue for complexity, the more lenses through which to look, the better. Among other things, I wanted to insist on the lyrical beauty of these bodies, these acts, and this landscape, which are, coincidentally, subjects that have not historically been depicted as such.

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Can you explain the title?

I think of the work as poetry. The title is a metaphor. It feels sort of vulgar to undress it! I will say that you could just as easily replace the words ‘Heaven’ and ‘Prison’ with any number of things: ‘Love is a Prison’; ‘Intimacy is a Prison’; ‘Heaven is a place-that-feels-suffocating’. But, if you like being choked, would that be so bad?

I am acting facetious of course, but I do think the work begs some questions: To whom does ‘heaven’ belong? And what constitutes a ‘heaven’ or a ‘prison’? The work would suggest that they are two sides of the same coin. Hence, my interest in depicting BDSM, a fetishistic form of sex that is essentially about pain, submission, and bondage as vehicles towards ecstasy and ultimately transcendence.

The whole thing is actually very Christian!

Why did you select Southern California's high desert as the location for the work? How does the landscape affect and shape the series?

I was born and raised on the high desert periphery of Los Angeles, which is where I made all the photographs. This place is very personal to me; my relationship with it is decades-long. I hope the care I've taken in representing it is suggestive of this affinity.

People often mischaracterise the desert as desolate, empty, and blank, especially outsiders. In actuality, it's none of those things. By all appearances it is austere, and beautifully so, but it's also very rich. Perhaps that's one of the things I find so attractive about it? It's a landscape that keeps its cards close.

In the book, the landscape exists two-fold. It provides as a stage on which these acts take place, and acts as a third-party to the intimacy I'm describing, which is why the photographs rarely confer a horizon. It's an aesthetic decision but it's also a psychological one. It forces a claustrophobic intimacy with the terrestrial while paradoxically suggesting that this landscape extends infinitely into a purgatorial or Edenesque otherworld — another reason why the desert landscape was so crucial. If it was overgrown, lush greenery, the landscape would lack important equivocality; it would read exclusively as utopic.

Can you shed light on your process? How did you select your subjects and did you direct them?

I have been photographing Nehemias, one of the subjects in the book, for forever. He is a bit of an exhibitionist, which has been of great benefit to my art practice! He and Chris are not primary partners but they have this very beautiful friendship and sexual relationship that was blossoming around the time I asked to photograph them. Honestly, I thought Chris would say no. I didn't know him that well at the time. He studied photography, so perhaps he was sympathetic to the request? I should call him and ask. Another gift of this project has been getting to know him and getting closer to Nehemias. They are the most special people.

In truth, this project wasn't a project when I made the first pictures. I had an impulse, and I pursued it. I wanted to challenge myself to make an 'explicit' (I hate that word) picture of sex, which was so undeniably graceful that the beauty of the image would eclipse anything supposedly 'taboo' about it. After I made the first picture, it felt like the work was begging more of me. I nervously asked Chris and Nehemias if they would do it again. To my surprise, they agreed. The work started making itself. At a certain point, I knew it was a long-term project, but I don't think I let them know for fear that it would be too big of a commitment or freak them out. So I just kept asking, kind of piecemeal. And they kept saying yes, and getting in my car, and driving out to the desert. One year, several sunburns, a couple of flat-tires, and dozens of trips later, I had completed the images of them, and, at some point, I finally told them about the book. I finished the last shoot a day or two before I moved to Arizona. I returned throughout the year to make images of the landscape alone — many of which I made during the earliest days of the pandemic when I came home to quarantine with my partner.

What is your 'origin' story, and how does it play into and shape your practice?

I received my BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. I'm sad to report that after 150 years, it has announced that it will be closing in the next months. It was home to the first fine art photography program in the country, which was started by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. It became a kind of home-base for *f/64* and a distinctly American brand of *Modernist* photography. Those ideologies seemed held-over somehow in the form of a kind of collective worship of *New Topographics*, and suffice to say there was a lot of interest in notions of 'pure' description and 'objectivity'.

It would be many years before I got out from underneath all of that. Don't get me wrong, I had an exceptional education at SFAI, also, I love those pictures and those photographers have been and continue to be influential in many ways. But, the notion that anyone is 'neutral' or that description could be 'pure' is delusional. That this ostensibly 'objective' approach to picture-making is frequently referred to as 'straight' seems apropos. It seems to reflect the lived experience of most of its practitioners, which is why the language around 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' is suspect.

My desire to obfuscate details — to bury information into the black of a shadow — is a reaction to that. It's a means of soliciting speculation rather than purporting photographic fact. It's also a way of illustrating the limitations, even failures of the medium while illuminating its suggestive, affective, and poetic potential. In *Heaven*, sequencing emphasises these interests: some of the pictures rhyme, there is repetition, refrain, break. In exhibitions, I use scale and installation to do that. The wall becomes the poem's page, so to speak.



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The photographs largely obscure the faces of those depicted in them. Instead, we seem to develop an understanding of the men through their bodies and relationship to one another. What led you to this approach?

In recent years, I have been invested in the archetypal. The subjects in *Decreation* were armatures on which I draped my desire or even my own personhood. There were no faces whatsoever. In *Heaven*, that has shifted. Perhaps I wanted to have it both ways.

Understanding and/or appreciation of the work isn't contingent on a viewer feeling like they know the subjects of these pictures personally. But, it was important to me to show their faces fragmentarily as a way of signalling the experience — or at least my experience — of intimacy and especially sex. Sex is a circumstance in which one can truly see a person, while also completely objectifying them or unconsciously transforming them into a proxy — an image, really — that reflects one's psychology, needs, anxieties, desires, etc.

I also hoped the interplay between the copulating subjects and the unpeopled landscapes would suggest memory, something that would be emphasised by the fragmented representation of their faces. I wanted the subjects to feel at arm's length — as though we are eternally on the cusp of recognition. The desire to fully apprehend them remains unrequited. The images refuse us.

Would you say you present bodies as landscapes and landscapes as bodies in both this series and throughout your work? If so, what is the significance of this approach?

Yes and no. As an artist, I'm interested in confusing and complicating all kinds of distinctions. On an existential and even cellular level, we are all constantly on the precipice of becoming another thing. I'm interested in formal and figurative flux. It's about transformation.

In *Heaven*, that happens more specifically through the synonymous description of landscape and body because they happen to be the literal subjects of the book. I mentioned earlier that I wanted the landscape to feel like a third-party to this intimacy. Anthropomorphising it and making it more human was a strategy for doing that, and vice-versa. I wanted to make legible our relationship to the natural environment; how the landscape inscribes upon and is inscribed by our histories, traumas, intimacies, and subjectivities. But there are also moments in which the landscape in the book resembles waves or water. An arid landscape momentarily becomes a fluid one.

So, in *Heaven*, there is a pronounced focus on landscape and body. But, no, in terms of my broader art practice, it's not exclusively a body-landscape quandary. I'm broadly interested in producing metaphor and suggesting transcendence: of language, of the body, of surface, of the literal, even of the image. I always want the photographs to point beyond the confines of the frame and towards something greater. I recently heard someone in a Quaker meeting refer to this as "the burning one-ness binding everything". That sounds about right.



In the essay that accompanies the book Garth Greenwell writes: “Much of the commercial pornography produced today intends to elicit a singular response—that, like propaganda, it wants us to feel a single thing. Interesting art, art that has enduring force, never wants us to feel a single thing ... McKnight’s photographs resolutely deny us a singular response.” This is such an interesting point, and I wanted to ask if this was your intention: did you set out to create a series that would complicate viewers’ responses to the image of two men having sex, and, if so, why?

Yes, it is my intention. I’d also like to add that I think most photography — even art for that matter — wants to elicit a singular response, typically to the detriment of author and audience. It’s a pervasive contemporary attitude toward imaging that encourages mindless production and consumption rather than curious, critical or meaningful engagement. It brings to mind Moholy-Nagy, who very presciently claimed that photography would be the lingua franca of modernity. I regret that he was right. I’m not interested in photographs superseding language. I’m compelled by the medium’s capacity to give form to those things that exist outside of it.

To bring it back to Garth, because he is so brilliant, we gave a talk together some months ago in which he said of his writing that it was “a tool for thinking, not a container for thought”. I couldn’t agree more. As such, I don’t have a roadmap to offer for interpreting this work. Garth also wrote very recently in The Guardian that “sex is a crucible of humanness,” a statement that he pre-empted by discussing how sex is often the circumstance in which we are paradoxically at our most vulnerable, performative, generous, selfish, physical, and metaphysical. Similarly, I have a desire to highlight some of these contradictions and subsequently what it means to be human. I am arguing for sex as both meaningful and meaning-making. It’s an uphill battle but I think the pictures help.

Heaven is a Prison by Mark McKnight is published by Loose Joints & Light Work and available to purchase [here](#). A hand-silk-screened print from the series, created by Loose Joints in collaboration with Mark McKnight, to fundraise for REACH LA — a non-profit organisation providing HIV prevention education and support — is also available [here](#).