



Culture

The Pornographic High Art of Photographer Mark McKnight

How can these images be both so filthy and so
clean?

BY **GARTH GREENWELL**

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Each time I turn to the work of Mark McKnight, a 36-year-old Los Angeles–based photographer who won last year’s Aperture Prize and has become a kind of phenomenon in the fine art world, I find myself confronted by the same questions that bewildered me on first acquaintance. How can these images be so cold and so hot at once, so restrained and mastered and also so utterly unbridled? How can they be so expressive of both abjection and exuberance? How can they seem—entirely independent of their subject matter—so filthy and so clean? Most profoundly: how can images that reject so many of the usual sources of affect—psychological narrative, social context, the expressivity of the human face—nevertheless be so saturated with affect, so nearly operatic in register? My initial, immediate sense of the work has not faded with familiarity. Its achievement lies in holding these contraries not in stasis but in a kind of vibrating suspension, and this suspension conveys the sense of inexhaustibility, the bottomlessness necessary in all art that commands enduring attention.

Heaven Is a Prison, his debut monograph, out from Loose Joints Publishing this month, shows the essential qualities of his work: the exquisitely modulated black and white photographs shot in sometimes punishing natural light, often exposed and printed so that details are obscured and shadows attain a kind of abyssal black; the dramatic use of the desert landscapes of the American West; the sensual depiction, sometimes tender, sometimes a little cruel—often both of these things at once—of bodies that are often excluded from the canons of sensuality in art; everywhere, a commitment to beauty, though beauty of a challenging, even an adversarial kind. But these new photographs also mark a departure. Never has his subject matter been so assertive as in these photos of sex portrayed with pornographic explicitness; never has the style been so sustainedly lyrical in individual photographs or so ambitious in its use of sequence. Images are arranged and counterpointed with white space, with visual silence, to generate meaning through poetic effects of juxtaposition, rhyme, and refrain.

All of these dynamics are heightened in the kind of sadomasochistic sex McKnight takes as his subject in these photos, in which the shifting lines of power in any sexual encounter are manifest in chains, the effacement of self all sex risks theatricalized in acts of degradation. The photographs are remarkable for their voraciousness, their desire to show us everything, often from multiple perspectives and to very different effects.



Photograph by Mark McKnight

The photographs are pornographic, if by that word we mean sexually explicit, hiding nothing from view. (In fact these photos hide many things from us—but not genitalia, not penetration, not the exchange of fluids.) The problem with that endlessly elastic word is that no one can ever be sure what it means. When used in a pejorative way about representations of sex in art it is often a symptom of puritanism, a kind of tepid morality, irrelevant to serious judgment. (Surely it is ridiculous to suggest that so huge and central a territory of human life and feeling is somehow prohibited to art.) But there is another way of using the term that conveys a more plausible criterion, as Roland Barthes does when he defines the “erotic” as “a pornographic that has been disturbed, fissured.” It seems fair enough to say of much of the commercial pornography produced today that it 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. This is what Barthes suggests, I think, in his image of fissures: that something has troubled a monolithic response, that affect has been interestingly fractured and multiplied.

McKnight’s photographs resolutely deny us a singular response. This isn’t at all to say that they aren’t sexy: Turning a viewer on is a powerful effect, and these photographs achieve it. But even at their sexiest they are full of surprises; having aroused us, they divert arousal’s rush to satisfaction. In what is to me the sexiest, the most arousing photograph (every viewer will have their own), a man lies on his back, framed by the legs of his lover standing before him. I’m surprised to be aroused by this image: the men aren’t touching each other, the recumbent man’s cock is soft. Perhaps it’s the face I find so sexy, with its inscrutable expression, a mixture of mastery and fondness—or what I read as mastery and fondness, it’s impossible to be sure. McKnight’s photographs have never shown faces before; facelessness has been one of their dominant effects, in images of torsos cropped at the neck, or men lying face down on concrete, or with their faces obscured behind painted glass. Even here the faces are only ever partial, often framed so as to render ambiguous any clear reading of affect.

I am seduced by this photograph, but its seduction troubles or distracts me from arousal. Maybe it is true of all art, or all serious art, that abstraction tugs at representation, the particular always yearning toward the mythic or archetypal. Certainly the most extraordinary element of McKnight’s image is abstract: its geometry, the standing man’s legs dividing the image into a central rough triangle and two inverted triangles on either side. As in all of McKnight’s work there is an exquisite play of textures, grass against skin against hair against metal. From other photographs I recognize

the recumbent man as the dominant of the pair, and another photograph will confirm that he is in fact holding the chains, not bound by them, but in this individual image that isn't clear. His posture might be domineering or prone, and the shadow chains that frame his cock suggest—shadows do a great deal of work in many of these photos—another kind of bondage. Another suggestion of submission: the man's eyes, which would allow us to read his expression more surely, are blocked from view by his partner's balls, a suggestion of submission present not in the scene but in the photograph. In all of these ways, the photo presents a more complicated power dynamic than the cartoonish dominance and submission a less nuanced portrayal of S/M's power theatrics might convey. The photo is richly, complexly psychological; it is, I'm tempted to say, novelistic. And so I have forgotten my arousal—or not forgotten it; it has become one among many responses, which taken together are too complex to be called anything other than properly aesthetic.



Photograph by Mark McKnight

Many of these photographs move me in ways I have difficulty explaining. Why is it that the images that strike me as genuinely filthy are not of bodies at all, but of the weathered trunk of a fallen tree, its jagged end suggesting an orifice blown open? (Also the mouth of a cave, also descent, also initiation.) Why is it that the photograph that is most explicit, most “hard-core” in its portrayal of the sexual body—the single image of anal penetration—of all the pictures in this book seems to me the most chaste? Is it because the faces are entirely obscured, one body cropped at the torso and the other turned away from us? (But porn often occludes faces without seeming chaste.) McKnight often rhymes organic and inorganic surfaces, so that, in an earlier project, craters evoke orifices, and an image of a torn bag of asphalt is titled “Flesh.” What is it about this image of penetration that makes these bodies seem *de*-fleshed, that suggests to me not flesh but metal or stone? This may be the most profound perversion McKnight’s work explores: that of transforming flesh into inorganic matter, as in this photograph of penetration, and of investing matter with the subjectivity of flesh, as in his orifice tree. The penetration image is even more stark in its geometry than the photograph of bondage discussed earlier, with the angle of the bottom’s legs echoed not just by the legs of the man fucking him but by the thumb and forefinger of each of that man’s hands, and by the angle between the index and middle fingers of his own hand, pulling his balls out of the way. (The furrows of flesh this creates, which rhyme with the indentations in his thighs, interrupt the chastity I feel in the rest of the image, and are the source of the photo’s greatest heat.) The site of penetration isn’t the center of the photograph, as it would be in an image meant merely to arouse us; it forms instead a fourth point with the three hands, less the focus of the photograph than an element necessary to complete a design.



Photograph by Mark McKnight



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These are also political images; McKnight's work has political force simply by its existence. By centering queer, Latinx bodies, by placing them in non-urban settings, by photographing them in a way that foregrounds beauty, McKnight pushes against prejudices in both the art world and contemporary American culture more broadly. By portraying explicit sex between men, he rejects the desexualization of queer bodies that has been the cost of mainstream acceptance in a culture that to a certain extent embraces same-sex marriage and parenting but recoils from the fact of men fucking each other. By centering bodies that are large, nonwhite, covered with hair, McKnight rejects standards of beauty that dominate both the straight and the queer worlds. And in presenting the scandal of queer abjection, McKnight complicates a too-easy, politically motivated discourse of queer optimism and pride that, as it becomes coercive, deformingly flattens the complexity of queer lives. In their portrayal of open-air fetishistic sex, these photographs challenge an idealizing, exemplary image of queer relation as consonant with conventional ideals of straight domesticity, as well as of easy notions of virtue and health. These photographs resist easy readings in all directions; they challenge all our pieties.



Photograph by Mark McKnight



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In their complexity, McKnight's photographs recall the density of great poems with their obsessive use of metaphor and motif. So grasses repeatedly resemble waves; a geological formation is made to mirror the furrow of a man's back; indentations in gripped flesh chime across photos like an end rhyme across lines. Rhyme is repetition with a difference, a technique McKnight uses throughout this series, sometimes to devastating effect, as when, in the third iteration of an image of a man servicing his partner, a fly appears on his back: a *memento mori*, a reminder of *vanitas*. Something similar happens with the images of clouds, which function as a kind of refrain, their suggestions of transcendence sometimes radically troubled (though not negated) by McKnight's day for night techniques. (Heaven is heaven, the photos say; also, heaven is a prison.)

A common, powerful characteristic of McKnight's photographs is a kind of claustrophobic effect achieved through tight cropping and the refusal of horizon. He seldom lets us see bodies or landscapes holistically; he sometimes troubles our sense of scale. This is true of the early photos in *Heaven Is a Prison*, but the sequence radically opens out, and the final group of photos includes the first in which McKnight has allowed a horizon. We have a glimpse of it, in the upper left corner of the first photo of this group; then it features in images of landscapes free of human forms; finally, bodies and a full horizon are presented together. There's a strange, equivocal sense of triumph for me in this photograph, in its sweep and openness, an expansiveness not just of image but of affect. Even as it portrays an act that some viewers may see as degrading—a bound man eating another man's ass—it conveys an overwhelming sense of affirmation. This is true, too, of the final image in this book, in which the two men lie in a flowering field, one on top of the other. It is as if the love of these men—a love often dismissed as deviant, frivolous, unproductive, sterile, a love acted out for us in dramas of domination, submission, devotion—has resulted in this eruption of florescence; fruitless coition has borne fruit. The men are not lying face-to-face, and the photograph recalls an earlier image of a body recumbent on stone, recalls too its suggestion of sacrifice. And yet it seems to me a kind of blessing, this photograph, a vision of queer sex made sacred. Look closely at the men: Obscured in flowers, almost hidden from view, their fingers are entwined.

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