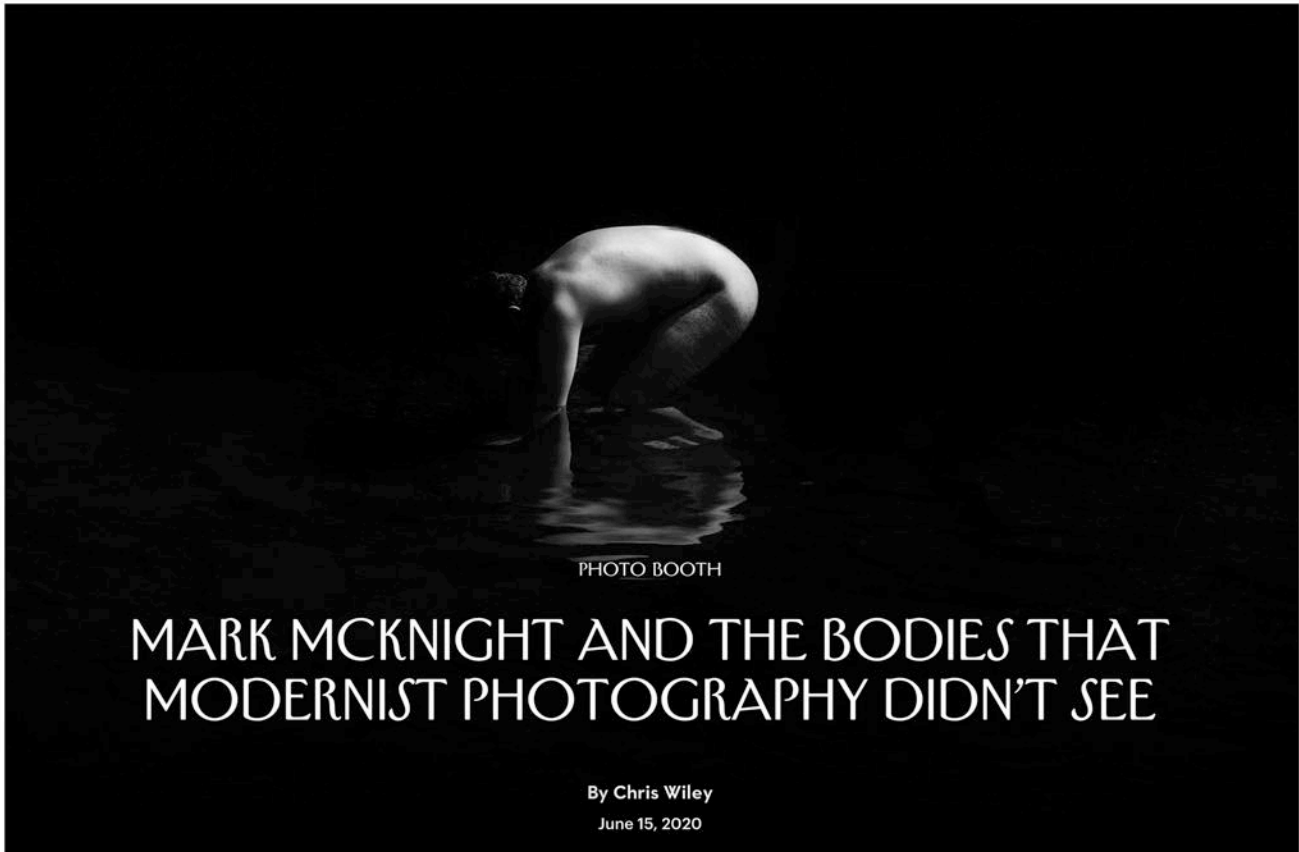


Mark McKnight
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THE NEW YORKER



“... if water forgets how to play mirror,” 2018.

To be a sexual voyeur is to teeter between empowerment and frustration. On the one hand, the voyeur establishes dominion over the scene on which he is peeping, like a sovereign watching a jester juggle for his delight. On the other hand, he is subjected to a kind of humiliating taunt, because the object of his desire remains stubbornly at arm’s length. It’s no wonder that voyeurism is so intimately wedded to photography in the popular imagination: we take pictures to create the illusion of possession (of an object, a person, a moment), but the things that pass in front of our cameras inevitably wriggle from our grasp.

Mark McKnight, a rising star in the photo world (he won last year’s Aperture Portfolio Prize, and this year’s Light Work Photobook Award), began making his piquantly homoerotic images with something like these paradoxes on his mind. His pictures—lush, formalist compositions mainly of nude men communing with nature (and sometimes with one another)—are hot with desire, the camera lingering hungrily over the mud-flecked ass of one subject, the gingerly held foot of another, or the spread-legged bodies of two men languidly fucking in a field of daisies. And yet, McKnight told me recently, his process principally consists of “standing at a distance and quietly observing things that I want to take part in.” Self-anointed as a perpetual wallflower, McKnight has become keenly attuned to the frenzy of want that’s kicked up when, as he puts it, “unrequited desire becomes part of the desire itself.”

McKnight, who is thirty-six years old, grew up in the conservative California town of Santa Clarita, the son of a *Nuevomexicano* mother and an Anglo-American father from Tennessee. Homosexuality was a foreign concept. “I grew up feeling like an alien,” he told me, adding, “embedded in my sexuality and my sense of desire is this constant refusal, that the thing I want is not a thing that I can have.” This feeling, McKnight said, painfully persisted into adulthood: he didn’t come out as gay until he was twenty-six. In taking pictures, he seems engaged in a ritual of retroactive healing; the amorous gaze that he long sought to suppress can now, through his art, be recast as beautiful.



"Ballerino," 2018.



"Flesh," 2018.

Like these artists, McKnight is attuned to the ways in which photographs reflect both the outside world and the interior landscapes of their creators. (See, for instance, McKnight's "The Black Place," an intentionally underexposed picture of a humped, basalt-colored sand dune, which telegraphs a mood of doom and gloom as well as any portrait could.) Also like these artists, as McKnight takes pains to point out, he is interested in photography as an expression of spirituality, which puts him somewhat at odds with today's slick and cynical art world. Some of his images, such as "Revealed (& Redacted)," a noirish-lit closeup of a person stretching the skin of their scrotum over their penis, so that it resembles the crowning head of a baby, are explicit enough to provoke discomfort in certain viewers. McKnight has engaged in continual battles with Instagram, to keep the platform from taking down his pictures; a printer once refused to produce a poster for one of his shows because it featured an image—"Eric (Voiding)"—of a man perched half naked on a rock, simultaneously peeling off his T-shirt and pissing into a river. And yet, McKnight said, perhaps "the most transgressive thing I could do is actually tell people that I believe in God."

The title of McKnight's recent project (which is ongoing, and encompasses the majority of the pictures he's made since 2018) is "Decreation," a concept propounded by the French mystic Simone Weil to describe an intentional effacement of the self in order to channel the will of the divine. At one point in our discussion, McKnight insisted on pausing while he dug up a Weil quote from her posthumously published book of aphorisms, "Gravity and Grace," from 1947. It would explain better what he was getting at in his work, with its mingling of erotic reverie, reverence for the land, and the quiet intensity of its creator. After a minute, he found it: "If only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place I disturb the silence of heaven by the beating of my heart."



"Burned Map (or: Body)," 2019.



"Destructive Distillation (Tar Cosmos)," 2018.



Culture

The Pornographic High Art of Photographer Mark McKnight

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

BY **GARTH GREENWELL**

September 29, 2020

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



Photograph by Mark McKnight



Photograph by Mark McKnight

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



Photograph by Mark McKnight

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.

Garth Greenwell is the author of two books of fiction, *What Belongs to You* and *Cleanness*. A 2020 Guggenheim Fellow, he lives in Iowa City.

1000 Words



Mark McKnight

Heaven is a Prison

Book review by Eugénie Shinkle

Eugénie Shinkle considers the ways Mark McKnight turns the distance of pornographic and landscape photography back on itself, grounding the gaze in the fleshy material of the body.

Earth and sky – and in between them, a horizon, suggested but not seen. The first two photographs in Mark McKnight's *Heaven is a Prison*, published by Loose Joints, sketch out a landscape in elemental form, drawing the gaze skyward and then down again, to the ragged outline of a fallen tree against a backdrop of distant hills. In the third photograph, two figures occupy the middle distance, their bodies locked in an embrace, their skin smooth against the parched vegetation. The camera moves closer, glancing towards this intimate scene and looking away again in a steady rhythm that feels choreographed – the slow circling of a voyeur creeping through the grass. Set against the expanse of the surrounding landscape, the pair of figures seem almost incidental.



Soon enough, though, it becomes clear that these two male bodies, engaged in an ungraceful act of lovemaking, are the subject of this work. As the camera draws nearer, the viewer is transformed from voyeur to participant, close enough to make out sweat and spit, hair and marks on the skin. But the faces of the two men are partially obscured, and their anonymity only serves to strengthen the intensity of the encounter. Is primal too strong a word? Maybe not. There's something monumental about these two bodies, a vitality that they share with the landscape itself.

In the accompanying essay, poet and critic Garth Greenwell describes the landscape in McKnight's photographs as a metaphor or an index of time passing, a backdrop for what is essentially a human drama. It is all of these things, but it's also much more. The landscape is an insistent presence in *Heaven is a Prison*. Shots of clouds and rolling hills punctuate the story again and again: they are more than tangential, more than just a setting for the minor transgression of al fresco sex. In Western culture, a landscape view – not the ground, rock or water itself, but the pictorial order we impose upon it – is a manifestation of power. When we look out over a landscape, we do so, implicitly, from a place of safety: *here*, the place where I stand, is always set out in relation to the *over there* of the horizon. This distance privileges the rational eye and gives a known form to the shapelessness of unaltered nature.



It's in his images of landscape that McKnight's much-vaunted debt to photographic Modernism is most clearly felt: Frederick Sommer, Minor White, Ansel Adams – each put their own distinct spin on the Modernist archetype, and each has left a trace on McKnight's practice. For Adams especially, the landscape was a theatrical space on which to stage the heroic expression of the self. Through his views – their classical structure bound to the Western landscape tradition – the rational gaze dominates space. McKnight's landscapes hint at this ideal form, except for the fact that the horizon – the eye's guarantee of detachment – is nearly always absent. For the viewer, this refusal of distance plays out as a kind of vulnerability: I can't see, I can't know, I can't find myself.

Along with this loss of perspective comes an invitation – or perhaps an imperative – to surrender to sensation. There's no shyness in McKnight's depiction of sex, and the forthrightness of his photographs requires the viewer to navigate a powerful series of affects. There are moments of real tenderness in *Heaven is a Prison*, but there's also hard fucking, chains and piss play – not glimpsed from a distance, but often, confrontationally close. The viscous stream of saliva running from one man's mouth into his partner's is exciting and disgusting in equal measure. It's visceral stuff, and the exact nature of the sensations that we experience – shock, arousal, joy – is less important than the fact that they are so clearly summoned.



As viewers, we do not observe McKnight's photographs from a place of safety. Instead, they meet the eye with acts so fiercely intimate that we are left with a stark choice: to be drawn in, or to look away. And if the earth, sky and empty pages interleaved with the more explicit scenes hint at a reprieve, what they really offer is a different kind of seduction – a slow, deliberate rhythm that lends these acts the solemnity of ritual. Looking through *Heaven is a Prison* is like witnessing an act of communion: earth, flesh and sky, merging into one another.



It's telling that McKnight lists Sommer and White amongst his most significant influences. Both utilised elements of landscape in their work, but abandoned its spatial conventions in favour of something less secure, less easily knowable. Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes* have no foreground or middle distance or horizon – nothing against which the viewing subject can measure themselves. For White, the abstract forms of water, clouds and other natural elements were ways of evoking a state of resonance or unity with the cosmos that surpassed rational knowledge. Both can be understood as invitations to unmake the self. McKnight's work shares this sense of transport, this euphoric dissolution of boundaries – between one body and another, between the body and the landscape, between the look and its object.



Heaven is a Prison is a book about lust, desire and sadomasochistic sex, but it would be a mistake to label these photographs pornographic, just as it would be a mistake to label this a book of landscape photographs. As genres, pornography and landscape are crude articulations of a power that relies on distance – the privilege of a bodiless eye. McKnight's photographs turn this distance back on itself, grounding the gaze in the fleshy material of the body. And if his work challenges archetypal images of queer bodies, it also touches on themes that are more ecumenical and potentially utopian: the idea that distance can coexist with closeness; that pain can be an avenue to pleasure and deeper intimacy; and that transcendence is a horizon that may only be approached by leaving a place of safety.♦

All images courtesy of the artist and Loose Joints © Mark McKnight

Eugénie Shinkle is a photographer and writer living in East London. She is co-editor (with Callum Beaney) of the photography platform C4 Journal.

British Journal of Photography

Sex as meaning-making in the work of Mark McKnight

written by **Hannah Abel-Hirsch**

Published on 11 September 2020

"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.

“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”

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.



“The wall becomes the poem’s page, so to speak”



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](#).

Art in America

PHOTOGRAPHER MARK MCKNIGHT TURNS QUEER BODIES INTO ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES

By Harry Tafoya

February 14, 2020 12:40pm



The “body as a landscape” is an infinitely renewable cliché in art, one that draws its power from the collision between shifting human passions and nature’s steadfast indifference. At its best, it inspires work that collapses the distance between our interior sensory world and the environment around us, either imbuing everything with consciousness or recognizing our own as a particularly freaky extension of nature.

In a recent discussion with Los Angeles–based photographer **Mark McKnight** held within his exhibition at **Aperture** (which had awarded him its 2019 Portfolio Prize), poet and novelist Garth Greenwell touched on what he sees as a great difference in the development of their respective art forms. At the genesis of American poetry was Walt Whitman, a figure who sowed the foundations of the canon with a queer approach to nature and spirituality. Conversely, a pioneer in American photography was Minor White, who depicted American landscapes and people in an expressive manner but sought to suppress his sexuality. As critic and editor Ingrid Sischy once wrote, White “obeyed the conventions of his time, and one of them was that if you were unfortunate enough to love your own sex—which he did—you controlled that information, and certainly didn’t advertise it in your work.”

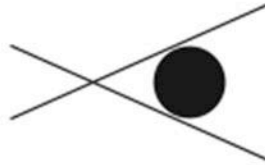
The photographs in McKnight's Aperture exhibition and in a second show at **Klaus von Nichtssagend** gave beautiful shape to the sort of queerness that White tried to contain, and to the aesthetic he might have developed had he been in full possession of his self. Portraying the body as formalist landscape and psychological landscape at once, McKnight marries two strains of image-making that on their surface seem like contradictions. If queer formalism in photography is most closely associated with Robert Mapplethorpe's ultra-kinky, mostly hairless, vaguely fascistic musclemen, McKnight carves his own path by capturing softer-bodied hirsute subjects whose folded flesh, wisps of fur, and pockmarked bellies become abstract landscapes that recall those of masters like White.

McKnight's work is as concerned with negation as it is with affirmation, his images not only exposing their subjects but also anonymizing them. His sleight of hand as a photographer is to confront viewers with the fact of his models' abjection while presenting it in the space of perfectly composed and gorgeously shot pictures. The twisted, fragmented flesh on display in *His Birth (or Black Egg)*, 2019, and *Bodyfold* (2018)—at Klaus and Aperture, respectively—has the gnarly corporeality of sculptures by Robert Gober, though it is given the classic gloss of the gelatin silver process.

One of McKnight's greatest strengths is in naturalizing the artificial and aestheticizing the natural, as seen in a number of works at Aperture. *Destructive Distillation (Tar Cosmos)*, 2018, is a portal to the stars found in a puddle of sludge, while the inflatable ball in *Spinning Away* (2018), with its amorphous red spot, suggests both Jupiter and a very puffy nipple. In *Eros (and Erosion)*, 2018, the camera looms over a backside speckled with psoriasis scars, the bruised flesh finding a sweet analogue with the warped desert earth it rests upon. In its formal beauty, ambient horniness, and casual psychedelia, McKnight's vision of rugged American landscapes is surpassed only by Georgia O'Keeffe's.

McKnight is not simply a romantic. The palpable warmth he feels for his subjects is paired with an unrelenting starkness of vision. Moral ambiguity lurks in the bleak terrain of pieces like *The Black Place* and the jagged cliffside of *Violence* (both 2019 and at Klaus). When an audience member at the Aperture discussion asked McKnight whom he considered to be the equivalent to Whitman in photography, he cited Frederick Sommer rather than White. For his classicism and refined touch, McKnight is a true disciple of Sommer's gorgeously delirious vision of the desert, merging the physical and psychic to depict the truth of a very modern nature.

This article appears under the title "Mark McKnight" in the March 2020 issue, pp. 83–84.



**In the male body and the physical world,
an unexpected seduction**

Garth Greenwell

“I think we’re all constantly on the precipice of becoming another thing,” the photographer Mark McKnight says. A logic of transformation—of metaphor—animates his defiantly analog, large-format, black-and-white photographs. A torn bag of asphalt suggests the broken flesh of an animal; a blistered wall rhymes with a man’s mottled back; the play of light across tar reveals a cosmos. Bodies, landscapes, buildings are depicted in a way that makes them nearly interchangeable, equivalent to the eye and also, disquietingly, to our sympathy, so that traces of adhesive on a wall might be scars from a severed limb.

The extraordinary energy of McKnight’s images comes from a harnessing of contrary, even contradictory, forces. McKnight, who was born in Los Angeles, in 1984, chooses as his subjects men he knows and frequently is attracted to,

members of his queer LA community. His photographs are redolent with intimacy, an extravagant tenderness. And yet, he photographs these men in ways that seem deliberately untender: starkly lit and in claustrophobic proximity, with every blemish displayed, frequently in postures, like that of *Ballerino* (2018), of literal abjection. It’s a treatment that suggests cruelty, though the pictures are never cruel; they are, it seems to me, the opposite of cruel. Almost always, the expected focus of tenderness and sympathetic attachment—the human face—is obscured, turned away from the camera or cropped out of the frame. McKnight challenges us to find grace in what might at first seem a graceless image, to linger on the elegance of the curves of a man’s flesh, to imagine, between body and shadow, a surreal pas de deux.

McKnight has resisted the idea that facelessness in his work stems from a desire for furtiveness or anonymity, insisting instead that it allows the men to be archetypal, figures of longing, time, vulnerability. But both anonymity and archetype are forms of abstraction, an abstraction that doesn’t cancel out the intimacy of the work but throws it somehow—as McKnight’s shadows, which he over-develops to an abyssal black, do for the surfaces that cast them—in starker relief. McKnight’s photographs of male bodies at once invite us close and ward us away; they are, in that way, mimetic of a particular experience of desire, a continually frustrating seduction.

“The pictures, like all things, are too complex to fully reconcile,” McKnight told me recently from his studio in LA. “And that’s something I appreciate about the pictures, not something that I run

Previous page:
Bodyfold, 2019

This page, below:
Ballerino, 2018; right:
The Black Place, 2019
Courtesy the artist



from.” McKnight’s willingness to abide with the irreconcilable gives these photographs their quality of inexhaustibility; it transforms them into objects of contemplation. Perhaps the contradiction in the work I can least account for, and that therefore feels most powerful to me, is the fact that although McKnight rejects so many of the usual sources of affect—facial expression, social context, identifiable narrative—his work is drenched in affect, supersaturated with emotion in a way that feels almost operatic, exuberantly queer.

Take, for example, *Bodyfold* (2019). The subject at first seems clear: a man sitting in the sunlight, his right leg folded over his left. But the details are

indeterminate: Is he sitting directly on the concrete, or perched somehow above it? Is that black triangle at the bottom of the image a shadow or a chair? He’s naked, and the camera gazes into his lap—it could nearly be, but isn’t quite, the subject’s own gaze—but what we might have thought would be the object of desire is hidden from us, the leg pulled tight against the body to hide his cock from view. Or maybe nothing is being hidden; maybe the man is indifferent to us, maybe the posture is for his own comfort. There’s a suggestion of self-sufficiency in the way he holds himself, his ankle gripped by his right hand, his toes by his left, the thumb stretched along his sole. The photograph’s erotic intimacy lies in that touch, I think,

its suggestion of pleasure given by and taken in himself.

Bodyfold moves me because of its subject, a type of body—hairy, thick, nonwhite—often excluded from the canons of beauty; but it moves me more because of the intricacy of its composition, the complexity of pattern that gives the photograph its compelling density. How curious that so much of the photograph’s affect lies in what might seem to be affectless geometry—but then, that geometry is the measure of the craftsman’s care, the claim to value we always make when we transform something into art.

It took hours for me to become conscious of *Bodyfold*’s most heartbreaking detail: the hairline crack in the concrete in the upper-left-hand corner of the image. It’s a little death’s head, I think, a touch of entropy, time’s signature: an organic curve that echoes the man’s body and reminds us of the transience that—voracious, indiscriminate—claims everything we lavish our care upon, concrete as surely as flesh.

Garth Greenwell is the author of *What Belongs to You* (2016). A new book of fiction, *Cleanness*, is forthcoming in January 2020.

Mark McKnight is the winner of the 2019 Aperture Portfolio Prize. His solo exhibition will be on view at Aperture Gallery, New York, from November 14 to December 20, 2019.

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Wednesday, September 4, 2019

“Automatic Door” at Park View / Paul Soto



(link)

The asinine quantity of pictures of bodies today, instagram influencers, lotion advertising, pornography. The vast amount of flesh smeared on everything, our stores full of them, our faces spread at 10 meter heights. Everywhere; a hall of mirrors. As if Bernd and Hilla Becher had foretold of a, this, complete surveillance, catalog, cars with more eyes than spiders to take everything and render it. And our bodies become so extracted, mined, and repackaged, that we start to feel like we don't have bodies at all. Just things, mocked as meat space, something stupid or without sense, or heat, or passion, or sensitivity, but whitened teeth smiles mined. And but then here a photo of a body still surprising, that can endear us to it, these weird incongruous things not yet fully extracted.

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