

# ARTFORUM

JUNE 2017

## Sam Contis

BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE (BAMPFA)  
2155 Center Street  
May 3–August 27

Sam Contis's photographs of Deep Springs College, one of the last all-male liberal arts colleges in the United States, fragment and shroud their ardent subjects. Located in a remote desert near the California-Nevada border, Deep Springs is a fever dream of American masculinity, where young men both study and raise cattle for slaughter, among other frontier-style activities. The artist's always-askance gaze rests on the unavoidable trope of the cowboy through the figure of an African American teenager in modern glasses and an old-fashioned straw hat (*Cowboy*, 2014): What story does he tell himself about this place? The images in the exhibition feel slightly out of time, angled equally toward the past and the present.

The central contradiction of the show lies in the fractured landscapes and portraits: Abstract conceptions of autonomy and ruggedness run up against the deep fragility and precariousness of the environment and its human and nonhuman actors. Contis brings a restricted framing and intimately observed distance to images of the students and animals, as well as the land, displaying them all for our gaze, as in the erotic *Shoeing*, 2013, where a cow's hoof is held tightly between the thighs of an athletic undergraduate.

Among such sensuality, voyeurism is unavoidable. But the artist consistently stops short of the explicit, and the images withhold as much as they reveal, often in the form of physical veils and membranes blocking subjects, as in *High Noon*, 2014, a perplexing picture of an isolated arm holding closed a bloody sheet that surrounds an illegible form. Alongside such constraints, archival photographs of Deep Springs, chosen by Contis for inclusion here, are brusque and naked by comparison.



Sam Contis, *Shoeing*, 2013, gelatin silver print, 12 x 9 1/2".

— *Monica Westin*