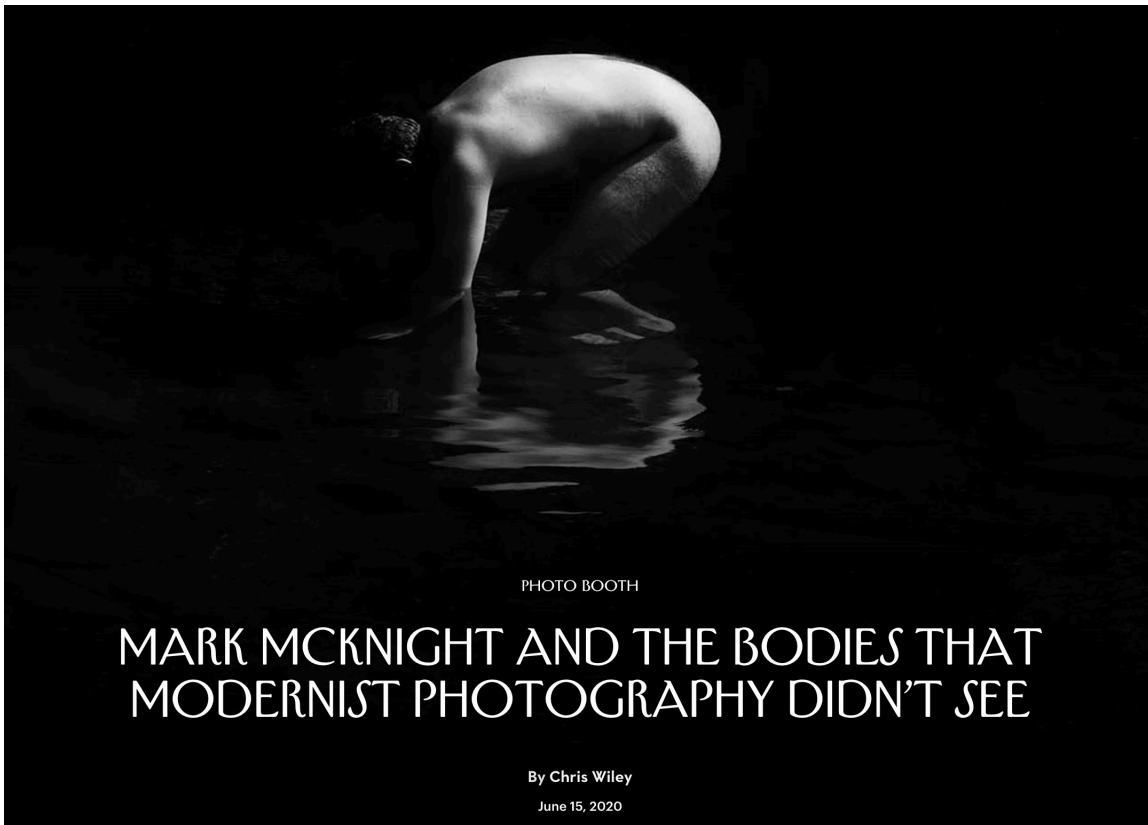


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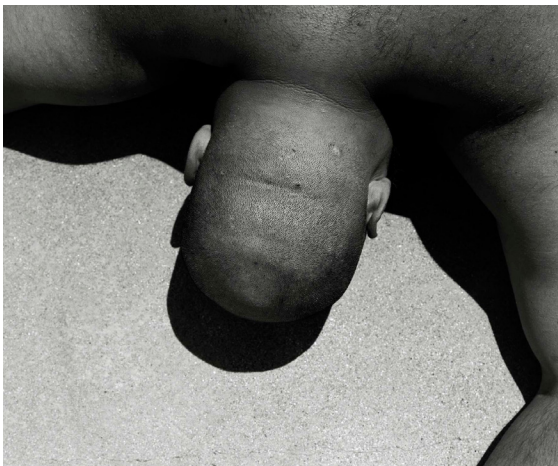


To be a sexual voyeur is to teeter between empowerment and frustration. On the one hand, the voyeur establishes dominion over the scene on which he is peeping, like a sovereign watching a jester juggle for his delight. On the other hand, he is subjected to a kind of humiliating taunt, because the object 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.

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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.

McKnight trained at the San Francisco Art Institute, in the school's famous Ansel Adams-founded photography department, and his work wicks up a host of visual cues from modernist masters such as Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz: brooding, operatic tones of black and white; faceless figures who are transformed into archetypes by dint of their anonymity; sweeping natural vistas. But the kinds of bodies that McKnight photographs fall outside the confines of the canon. They are Latinx bodies, hairy bodies, corpulent bodies, gay bodies. In the trendy parlance of our time, McKnight is "queering" modernism, a tradition in which, as he has put it, "white, cis, hetero subjectivity gets routinely valorized." McKnight nevertheless harbors an unambiguous reverence for the work of the modernists, especially Minor White—who remained closeted throughout his career, despite his penchant for photographing nude men—and for the great, under-recognized Frederick Sommer, for whom McKnight is something of a starry-eyed evangelist. (Until recently, he taught at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, in part because the school is home to Sommer's archive.)

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."