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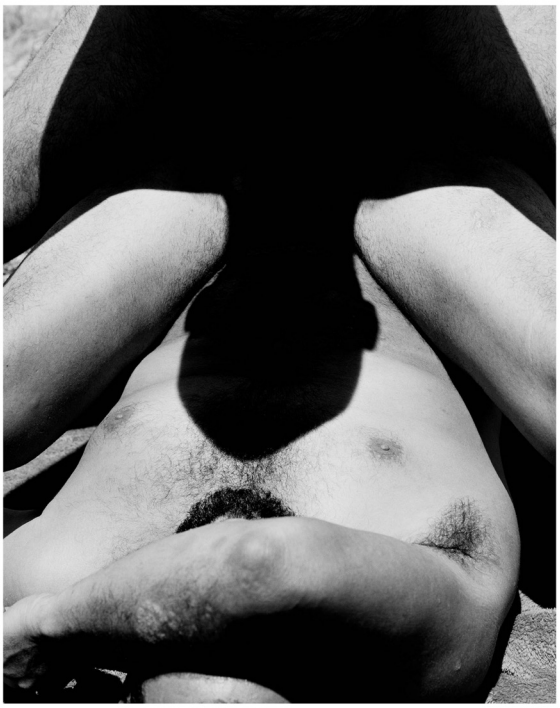
PAPER JOURNAL

Mark McKnight – Heaven is a Prison



"In the book, our attention is moved around the landscape as if it were a body, and the bodies themselves become landscapes. This changing focus is a way for us to share in the experiences that are being depicted because it does not place us statically outside of them as voyeurs. In its discontinuity, our restless point of view meshes with those of the two lovers at the core of this work."

Historically speaking, there has been a persistent visual association between the bodies of women and the natural world, usually by picturing women in the landscape or through depictions of the landscape as somehow feminised, with flowing curves and other, typically 'female' attributes. The effect of such associations was to suggest that women, in general, belonged to nature, and, like the natural world, they too can be possessed, shaped by a stronger, implicitly masculine will.

This includes the visual mastery by which they were shown, itself another kind of possession. But as feminist art historians have demonstrated, this is an association that sought to reconcile women to their place in the world by suggesting that it is 'natural' for them to be subjugated, or indeed that subjugation itself was their natural function. Representational codes of this kind reflected the conviction that women should conform with roles no less an authority than nature 'herself' had assigned to them, which also meant that culture – everything that is not nature – was seen as belonging essentially to men.

The attitudes that produced representations of this type reach insidiously into the modernist tradition as well, if perhaps less overtly. Mark McKnight is a photographer very conscious of the tradition in which he works, particularly the legacy of modernism in photography, which has deeply influenced the stylistic vocabulary he employs, as well as the materials he favours. The use of large-format cameras alongside fine black and white printing play a significant part in defining the way he relates to his subjects. But this is driven by an awareness of the role that these material strategies play within the tradition he has aligned himself with – and crucially, against – rather than by a simple appreciation for their qualities. McKnight's new book, *Heaven is a Prison*, published by Loose Joints and Lightwork, uses those materials and the stylistic markers of modernism with a range of subjects that at first glance don't entirely diverge from the concerns of that tradition; figures, textured surfaces, intense tonal contrasts, but he also brings new elements into play. Specifically, this is the depiction of male bodies eroticised in ways that run counter to the values of his chosen photographic idiom.

The landscape appears as an essential element in McKnight's work as well, largely shown – and read – through its association with human bodies, either directly by placing people in the landscape, or by bringing out qualities that call those same bodies to mind. The difference, of course, is that in McKnight's case the bodies, both present and implied, are those of men rather than women, rupturing the association that has long existed between female bodies and the landscape in the context of modernist photography, as well as in Western culture more generally. The deliberate confusion of codes between the anthropomorphic landscape and the kind of bodies that serve as a focus for this association constitutes a key effect of McKnight's work. The bodies that we see here are not those normally valued in the traditions of art or visual culture as a whole; instead, McKnight's favoured human subjects are generally large, heavy-set men from varied ethnic backgrounds. And these are not just images of male figures 'in the landscape' either; in this case, we're looking at a series of sexual encounters between two men.

Pointedly though, these encounters are not given the kind of progress we might expect from typical pornographic representations, moving in sequence from arousal, to penetration, to ejaculation – a progression that in itself could be taken as duplicating familiar patriarchal structures of pleasure. McKnight presents an alternative to this, encoded in the very

structure of the book as the lack of a definite narrative arc: no beginning, middle or end; no obvious climax – in both senses of that term. Instead, we seem to loop through time, illustrating how it can be experienced in different, non-linear ways. In the book, our attention is moved around the landscape as if it were a body, and the bodies themselves become landscapes. This changing focus is a way for us to share in the experiences that are being depicted because it does not place us statically outside of them as voyeurs. In its discontinuity, our restless point of view meshes with those of the two lovers at the core of this work.

Despite their intimacy and how close we get to their coupling, McKnight's subjects are shown in quite an impersonal fashion, without the particularities of a social identity, perhaps because pleasure – like pain or intoxication – involves a loss of individuality, negating the line that divides one person from another. This notion of pleasure as something that dissolves boundaries and identities is underlined by one of the most striking images in the series, which is also featured on the cover of the book. One of the men lies on his back, legs spread, while the other stands over him so that his shadow falls across the abdomen and genitals of the prone man, who also has his arm thrown over his face. Though we don't see it, the position of the two men implies penetration. In any case, it is a scene of an intense interchange where both are rendered anonymous and yet it doesn't read as a loss; it is instead a moment of freedom where the line between self and other is breached. This is represented by how the 'image' of one man (his shadow) is superimposed on the body of his partner, which might also be taken as a witty visual allusion to penetration itself.

However, concerning acts of apparent transgression, there is often the tacit assumption that what, precisely, is being 'transgressed' constitutes a fundamentally normative form of sexual behaviour, an attitude that can inadvertently serve to reinforce the norm rather than call it into question. Our desires have histories and are framed historically, given meaning – made possible, even – by the context in which we experience them. Ultimately what is perhaps most radical about McKnight's work here, to the extent that it needs to be understood as 'radical' at all, is not the specific acts shown or that they occur between men, but that they are depicted with genuine tenderness, and in a way that accords them value in themselves as acts, as expressions of desire, even in the case of one man urinating on the other, which might otherwise seem to be degrading. They also achieve value as photographic subjects, taking their place in a visual tradition that previously held no space for them, or made them visible only as a distant subtext. Here they become, if not the text itself, then at least the centre around which it is organised, expanding the parameters of the visual language McKnight has inherited.

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The images of clouds and the sky that punctuate the sequence of the book are also a forthright reference to a major landmark in the history of modernist photography, a group of pictures by Alfred Stieglitz titled *Equivalents*. The implication of this work for Stieglitz was that meaning can be carried even by pictures that appear to have no definite subject, and by being released from crude physical reality, the artist can come that much closer to the sublime.

Conversely, McKnight is placing a claim on the dematerialised territory of modernism, refusing its tendency to abstract out living bodies, by bringing it (metaphorically) down to earth, while also respecting the essentials of the tradition, at least as a point of departure. These skyward looks are surely also a reference to the 'heaven' in the title, which is treated with some ambivalence by McKnight, given the suggestion that it imprisons. Perhaps what seems so restrictive about the heavenly is the notion of perfection, of bodies without specificity, without history. Incapable of being affected or of affecting others, these heavenly bodies have boundaries that can't be changed, so the identities that they define are immutably fixed.

At the same time, McKnight doesn't 'queer' the modernist canon in a simple way of showing bodies or acts that haven't otherwise been represented. Rather, he finds within this canon a resonance that was already queer in the sense of lying across categories, latent visual or thematic possibilities, so that he brings to the fore desires and states of feeling that in the past could only be addressed covertly, if at all. We might think here of the relationship between the classically modernist photographic abstractions of Minor White and his images of other men, the first struggling to articulate what the latter makes plain. However sincere White's visual poetics might have been, there now seems to be a quality of disavowal to so much of his abstract work, and beneath this, the genuine struggle to find ways of voicing what could not be declared openly. In a wider sense the opportunity for White and his modernist contemporaries to make such declarations in their art – or indeed, their lives – were limited by the institutional frameworks in which they had to operate. What was described, with retrospective irony, as 'straight' photography displaced the strand of modernism that White espoused and also seemed to preclude any kind of social consciousness in its emphasis on formal values.

It is the coding of McKnight's images that is queer as much as their content, and the opening of spaces within a visual tradition for both his own desires and the notion of desire itself as a refusal of categories. This isn't a matter of rewriting the tradition, but of rediscovering what was occluded within it. Indeed, that sense of a 'blind spot' is graphicly illustrated by a pair of images in the series featuring a sort of orifice that registers as a seemingly unreadable black space, perhaps echoing the image with the man's shadow, already described. Yet this blackness is not simply dead or empty either; it is productive, a space one can enter or emerge from interchangeably – a space of possibility, which is responsive to the experiences of the bodies that McKnight has depicted. Like so many of his ostensible landscape images, this is another surrogate figure, dramatizing how bodies can be transformed through rethinking their representation, a change of frame that shakes us loose from the limiting assumptions we carry about what is desirable – and even what 'desire' itself can be.

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But it also brings us to a recognition of the fact that the body itself is a site where the cultural and biological are almost inextricably linked, one written through the other, so that it becomes difficult to say where one begins and the other ends. The several images that feature a chain between the two lovers are perhaps an attempt to indicate this, as a conventional marker for relations of dominance and submission. In his afterword to the book, Garth Greenwell describes this chain as visualising "the shifting lines of power active in any sexual encounter," which is certainly an insightful reading. At the same time, these images introduce a theatrical element that seems at odds with the complex relationship portrayed in the rest of the work, where the changing dynamics are keyed by the physicality of the couple themselves. Perhaps one way of looking at their place in the project, then, would be to consider how such cultural forms and the history that they carry with them can be reappropriated for new modes of expression, new opportunities for pleasure.

It has to be said, too, that the loss of self always involves a certain risk. By taking us beyond known boundaries, intimacy has the potential to violently undermine our stable selves, as well as sometimes being an occasion for actual bodily violence. There is every chance that the effort of putting yourself back together – of holding the self in cohesion once more – will simply be too much. In navigating this risk, though, there are also real opportunities for transformation, in discovering what lies outside the boundaries we have drawn (or that were drawn for us) to function in the world. The self that we return to is in a fundamental sense different from the person we were before. But for all that, the final image in the book, showing one man lying on top of the other, united and yet distant in that they're not facing, appears to suggest we can't always overcome the reality of our separate existences. It is this acknowledgement that indicates the utopian character of McKnight's work, marking out space where such possibilities can come to exist, both on the level of individual experience and in a wider social context.

Written by Darren Campion / Published 29 October, 2020