

METAL



MARK MCKNIGHT
LANDSCAPES, OBJECTS AND QUEER BODIES

Poetically captured on a large, clunky film camera, Mark McKnight's presentation of both queer bodies and the Southern Californian desert in his new book, *Heaven is a Prison*, is intimate and beautiful. An illustration of the artist's desires, this series of photographs takes the viewer on a voyeuristic journey while using metaphor to compare physical sensation and spiritual transcendence. Ultimately, it speaks to a universal binding. The book has been released in collaboration with *Loose Joints* and also contains an essay by novelist Garth Greenwell.

For those not familiar with your work, could you tell us a bit about yourself? What is your artistic background like?

I was born and raised on the high desert periphery of Los Angeles. I think my close proximity to the culture in Los Angeles proper and the sense of boredom I felt being on the geographical margins of it (not to mention the sense of isolation that was compounded by being young, brown, and gay in a predominantly conservative, white neighborhood) were instrumental in the formation of my identity.

I was introduced to photography via a high school photography class where we learned to print in the darkroom. I've been working with the medium ever since. It's mind-blowing to think that I'm here now because of a mandatory arts requirement and the encouragement of an art teacher I met at 16 or 17. After high school, I went to a community college for a couple of years and later received my BFA at the San

Francisco Art Institute. I did a Fulbright Scholarship in Finland a year or so after. I got an MFA at UC Riverside.

I use a large-format view camera and make silver gelatin prints. Through installation and scale, I draw formal and figurative relationships between a multitude of seemingly incongruous subjects: landscapes, objects, queer bodies. I'm attracted to the poetic potential of photography and use editing, sequencing, and arrangement to foreground that.

Your work is often associated with modernist art, although some elements are wildly different. What is your relationship to this genre?

Fraught! I mentioned I studied at The San Francisco Art Institute; they've been in the news recently because they announced they are closing after 150 years, which is heartbreaking. SFAI was the first fine art photography program in the country. It was also

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central to F/64 and a distinctly American brand of modernist photography that celebrated ‘pure’ description and ‘accurate’ representation – ideologies that seemed held-over somehow in the form of a kind of collective worship of New Topographics. They’re also notions around photography that would later become a point of internal contention, ideas I have a desire to resist.

As I mentioned, I’m interested in foregrounding the subjective, lyrical, and affective potential of the medium. Don’t get me wrong, I had an exceptional education at SFAI. Formally speaking, American Modernism and New Topographics are influential in many ways, but also, there’s something about calling description ‘pure’ that sounds fascist. I recall reading a Lewis Baltz quote when I was younger that was something like “all good art is without art or author.” I think the suggestion that one could divorce themselves of their personhood is delusional.

Feeling ‘neutral’ is the result of extreme and blind privilege. It’s almost offensive. That this ostensibly ‘objective’ approach to picture-making is frequently referred to as ‘straight’ seems apropos. It definitely reflects the lived experience of most of its practitioners. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that I love Lewis Baltz’s photographs and American Modernist photography.



***Heaven is a Prison* is such a loaded statement and such an inviting title for this project. What does the name mean to you? And how did you decide on it?**

I titled it *Heaven is a Prison* with the intention of evoking Judeo-Christian notions of paradise, but it’s not a reimagining of The Book of Genesis. The work is not a narrative in any conventional sense. I’m attracted to the mythopoetic. I love origin stories. I’ve always been fascinated by the way that The Bible, one of the most widely read religious books in history, begins with a creation myth that involves free will, intimacy, shame, desire, pleasure, punishment, paradise, access, devotion, and slavery (to God!) as a form of salvation. It’s reminiscent of BDSM.

I think the subjects in my book are actually quite Sisyphian. I wanted a viewer to imagine these men and this landscape as being bound, for better or worse, by a kind of universal cycle. Aren’t we all? Among other things, this book is about describing love and intimacy: emotional spaces that can resemble the purgatorial and the Eden-esque, sometimes simultaneously. The protagonists are alone together, an experience I’ve certainly had of love, for better or worse. Whether their isolation is by design or exists as a byproduct of their intimacy is not made clear, and intentionally so. It could be heaven, it could be prison.

Your photography, especially in this project, is tender yet harsh, simultaneously beautiful and shocking. Does finding this balance come naturally to you?

Such is life! Thinking this way comes very naturally. I’m interested in paradox, duality.

I love the metaphor that you’ve created using physical bodies and physical land. Do you see bodies in landscape everywhere you look?

If I’m looking hard enough!

Undeniably, your work has a political force. Your use of large, non-white and hairy bodies rejects traditional standards of beauty, straight and queer. What

is your motivation for engaging in this discourse, and what do you hope to achieve?

I think the political force you're identifying is a byproduct of the work. Occasionally, someone will call me 'brave' or thank me for 'making room for other kinds of bodies.' I'm thrilled if the work is making people feel comfortable in their own skin, but that's not why I made these photographs. It's not a Public Service Announcement.

I actually kind of hate the words 'body-positivity' and 'inclusion.' They apologetically suggest that one has decided to forego representing actual beauty in order to represent these other people – out of some moral imperative. Fuck that. I want to be clear: I'm not soliciting anyone's acceptance. These photographs are an illustrated record of my desire. There are no bodies I would rather look at than the ones I'm depicting. It's not about bravery. It's about my libido.

And where does fetishism come into this?

I think it's fairly evident in several of the photographs! Chains and physical domination are often the literal subjects of the photographs, but they're also important signifiers. It's not just about Eros, but also poetry and psychology. I wanted to describe the ways in which pain and pleasure are often vehicles for deeper intimacy as well as the ways in which intimacy can be both liberating and binding, for better or worse (and sometimes simultaneously!). I hope the chains signal that. The same way I hope the recurrent use of clouds suggest transcendence, among other things.

I think the design of the book emphasizes my interest in fetish. It comes wrapped in a printed image of a cloud that you have to tear open. I am forcing a viewer to defile or penetrate the pristine book-object in order to appreciate it. I think I wanted to upset the photo book collector, the one who fetishizes the book... You can't look at this book without de-filing it. You have to get your hands dirty, penetrate or ravage the thing. Of course, you could own the book and choose not to open it... but then it would sit on your bookshelf as an emblem of unrequited desire and control. That would also be ok



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with me. This book isn't just a vehicle for content, it is the content. It's an art object. How you engage with it is totally up to you.

***Heaven is a Prison* is also accompanied by an essay by novelist Garth Greenwell. How does it feel to read such an in-depth analysis of your own work?**

Like a dream come true. Garth is a brilliant thinker and a beautiful writer. No one else could have written the text for this book. If any of your readers haven't read *What Belongs to You*, or his most recent novel, *Cleanness*, I can't recommend them enough. They are absolutely breathtaking.

Garth's essay draws many comparisons between your photography and poetry. How do rhythm and rhyme translate to photography, for you?



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Garth wrote a great deal about the poetic in my work. He did that so wonderfully that I'm not sure I have much I can add. He really understands what I'm doing in the most profound way. So much of this book is about rhyming forms in order to collapse distinctions – between one body and another, between landscape and body, even between two landscapes.

For example, the rock-solid topography of the high desert, which resembles not only the corporeal but also waves in this book, a seemingly impassible, expansive, arid landscape is reduced to water through a confluence of light and shadow. It's about metaphor. And suggesting flux as the only constant in a way that signals my own spiritual or existential quandaries.

You've mentioned that doing a book was out of character for you. How have you found the experience? Did you learn anything unexpected?

In recent years, I have made work almost exclusively for the wall. Installation is a really integral part of my practice. In exhibitions, I employ scale as a means of drawing parallels between a multitude of photographic subjects. The prints can vary dramatically in size, a strategy that allows me to transform the macro into the micro, and vice versa. That's where a lot of the affective power of the work lies, in a viewer being compelled to move throughout the space of an exhibition. The deci-

sions I'm making are equal parts aesthetic and psychological: certain images necessitate distance through the grandeur of their scale, while smaller works may draw you near, only to refuse you in their blackness.

Forcing an audience to move to and fro is a way of activating a viewer's awareness of their own body, a reminder of one's own corporeality that inevitably solicits empathy, speculation, or curiosity about the content I'm depicting, which is often similarly corporeal. I make considerations with respect to the architecture of a given venue. There are moments in which I want someone to turn away from a photograph only to be met with a kind of figurative or formal echo of that image in a picture of something else, something seemingly unrelated. I think it's those decisions that make the inherent poetry of the work legible.

So how different was making this book from previous projects?

This project was uncharacteristically conceived, first and foremost, as a book. That meant forfeiting the use of scale in the ways to which I had become accustomed. The trade-off is the inherent intimacy of a book, which in my case, is relevant to the content. As I mentioned, privacy, intimacy, and transgression are things that I knew needed to be emphasized through design. I wanted to produce an experience for the viewer that was both physical and psychological.

The book format allows for a profound level of control with sequencing in ways that the space of an exhibition doesn't. In a gallery, people can always start looking at the work in the middle of the room. You don't get to decide what the beginning and end are in the same way that a book permits. It's something I love about exhibitions. But the book really gave me license to be a total control freak! I decided the exact order of everything, and so there are especially significant moments at the end of the book where there is a kind of marriage of sky and horizon: two subjects that are otherwise depicted solitarily throughout the rest of the monograph.

The sequence of the book feels purposeful; the viewer

goes on a journey and it includes blank pages, pauses. How did this come about? Did you always know what you wanted the finished version to look like, or did you go on a journey yourself?

I had certain elements in mind from the beginning – the book needing to be wrapped and penetrated, for example. I also knew that this book was essentially a poem and that it needed to be broken up into stanzas, that we needed to use white space. But also: this book would not be what it is without the collaborative efforts of Lewis Chaplin and Sarah Piegay Espenon at Loose Joints, or my friend Nich Hance McElroy, who all helped co-edit. Lewis and Sarah are also exceptional designers. Their contributions were indispensable.

If there was a journey, it was realizing that a book could be a much more collaborative process for me than an exhibition in ways that were extremely rewarding. I can't thank them all enough.

I know that the subjects of these photos are your friends, Chris and Nehemias. What was the atmosphere like behind the scenes?

In many ways, not unlike the acts depicted: exhausting, fun, painful, erotic. We made some of these photographs in 100+ degree heat. We all got sun-burned. I ended up with mild heat-stroke on one of the days.

It's worth noting that I made a majority of the photographs on a large-format view camera. For your readers who may not be aware: that's a large, clunky film camera that necessitates the use of a tripod. Nehemias and Chris would be engaging in a sex act, essentially performed for my camera, and then I would pause them, rearrange things, move my camera, refocus, change a lens, wait for a fly to land on someone's back... all while they were begging for a break. They held these incredibly uncomfortable positions for ten, twenty, thirty minutes as I made these obnoxiously minor (but also incredibly necessary) adjustments. The second they heard the shutter click, they would release the tension in their muscles and just collapse into the dirt from exhaustion. In other instances, they would fi-

nally have the freedom to finish fucking while I stood and watched, which of course became research for the production of subsequent photographs.

Nehemias especially loves to give me a hard time about how hard I worked them. By his own admission, he also really loved it. In some ways, it felt like the master-slave dynamic characteristic of certain BDSM relationships. In that way, I was the un-pictured third-party to their intimacy. I'm sure it goes without saying, but the pictures are as much about me as anyone.

Finally, what can we expect to see from you in the future? What would you like your next project to involve?

The subjects of this book, Chris and Nehemias, are good friends of mine. Nehemias has a husband, Johnnie. I've been using all of them, as well as my own partner, to make large-scale cyanotypes. I'm exhibiting several of them at a museum in the fall. In early 2021, I'm exhibiting the work from *Heaven is a Prison* at my gallery in LA (Paul Soto/Park View) and my gallery in New York (Klaus von Nichtssagend). In addition, I'm in the planning stages for a couple of not-yet-announced projects... I will say I'm working with sculpture and architecture in ways that speak to my broader interests in light, time, body, landscape, presence, absence, and the erotic. And I'm always looking forward to picking up my camera again.

