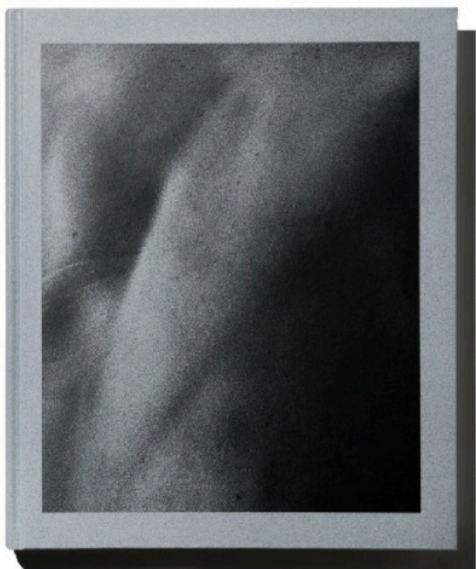


# The New York Times Magazine

## The Best Photo Books of 2017

By TEJU COLE DEC. 30, 2017



There are great photo books every year, and 2017 was no exception. But something about the strained times intensified my feelings about the work I saw this year. The role of art felt more urgent, both as a response to the general political disorder and as a refuge from it. I didn't merely like or appreciate the best work I saw; I needed it. The photo books that made my list range from large scholarly catalogs to poetic little volumes. They were published in seven different countries. Some were more conceptual in approach, while others were freer and more visceral. These winners all had in common the special qualities of great photo books: the pleasure of turning pages, the precision of thoughtful book design, the tactility of paper and the glow of the afterimages in the mind long after the book is set down.

Sam Contis, "Deep Springs." MACK, 155 pages, 99 images.

The young men in Sam Contis's "Deep Springs" look like taciturn farmhands and cowboys in a Hollywood film. They are in fact undergraduates at Deep Springs College, a small degree-granting institution in rural eastern California, near the Nevada border. The students at Deep Springs (all male since the school's founding in 1917, though that seems set to change soon) work on a ranch and a farm as part of the curriculum. Contis observes the boys with the same frank interest she takes in the landscape, horses and farm implements. Throughout the book is an unobtrusive tenderness, a submerged savagery and an elusive but insistent sensuality that one would call homoerotic were the photographer not a woman. Interspersed are archival photographs of the college and its terrain, made by early-20th-century Deep Springs students. They are sometimes hard to distinguish from Contis's own photos. A seamless, pensive, masterly book.