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Mark Armijo McKnight

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In the artist's new show at the Whitney, a convergence of desire and mysticism, the human body and the natural world.



Mark Armijo McKnight: Decreation, installation view. Courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

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Dozens of metronomes—dark pyramidal shapes, ticking out of sync—appear as a scattered, otherworldly flock perched on a stretch of stunning badlands rock formations. The little machines, placed so incongruously and carefully in the barren landscape, serve as a powerfully poetic image and, I get the feeling, a kind of spiritual metaphor for Mark Armijo McKnight. His captivating eleven-minute black-and-white film, *Without a Song* (2024), shot on 16mm in New Mexico’s Bisti Badlands / De-Na-Zin Wilderness, shown here as a grainy, wall-spanning projection, is the heart of his spartanly edited exhibition, *Decreation*, at the Whitney (which otherwise includes just five photographs and a pair of limestone blocks, etched with sundial faces, that can be used as seating). The moving-image piece is aurally as well as spatially commanding, its sound reaching every corner of the museum’s lobby gallery. Inspired by a 1962 event score for one hundred metronomes by the composer György Ligeti, Armijo McKnight uses the tempo-keeping devices as the main component of his soundtrack, their staccato clamor cresting and gradually winding down. The tick-tick of a final oscillating pendulum recalls the systole and diastole of a racing pulse, a countdown, absurd increments of infinity. When it stops, visitors are left with the white-noise roar of desert wind and a sun-flooded wide shot of stark and fantastic Southwestern geology.

A quotation by the radical French philosopher-mystic Simone Weil—a deep influence on the artist—appears in the explanatory wall text for *Without a Song*: “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.” (The show’s title, *Decreation*, refers to Weil’s notion of self- or ego-annihilation, a transformation that opens one to God’s grace.) The writer’s impossible longing, to gaze upon a natural world unchanged by the intrusion of her presence, might echo one of Armijo McKnight’s, whose photographic practice has, for years, taken as an enduring subject the sublime vistas of Southern California, Arizona, and New Mexico. But the artist—who grew up brown and gay in the mostly white and conservative city of Santa Clarita, in the high-desert periphery of Los Angeles—is best known for foregrounding other



desires in his images.

The four-by-five-foot gelatin silver print *Somnia* (2024)—one of the four larger photographs on view—named for the sons or “dream shapes” of Somnus, the Roman god of sleep, features three entangled nude figures, of various skin tones, spooning and groping one another on uneven ground, their faces hidden. The textures of their hirsute limbs and smoother torsos, their creased and puckered flesh, and the arcs of their interlocking forms echo the curved silhouettes and craggy surfaces of the boulders in the middle distance, as well as the crooked horizon line where buttes meet sky at the dramatic composition’s top margin. The passionate grips of the models on one another make this arrangement as active and libidinal as it is sculptural, while the solo scene depicted in *Anti-Mater* (2023) is more explicitly sexual: a woman, lost in ecstasy, in a spread-legged and foreshortened pose, masturbates in a flowering meadow, her vulva at the dead center of the roughly symmetrical picture.

The frank depiction of queer sex and intimacy (or solitary pleasure) and the centering of culturally unidealized bodies using traditional black-and-white photographic methods is by now something of its own tradition, but the transposition of these scenes onto the fabled backdrop of the American West is more pointedly territorial. In the past—like in his 2021 exhibition *Hunger for the Absolute* at Klaus von Nichtssagend in New York, which featured (as the press release describes) “queer, Brown, fleshy protagonists” in scenes suggesting fucking and BDSM—the photographer’s pairing of figure and setting was perhaps more

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confrontational. But there's still a detectable tension here, too, in how Armijo McKnight recasts Manifest Destiny's prize, the idyllic spoils of genocidal expansion depicted in nineteenth-century survey photography and cinematic cowboy lore, as a frontier of *true* freedom. And in how, as an outsider historically, he positions his practice in a lineage of Modernist avant-garde artists, one that includes Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe, who both, differently, used soaring landscape as a springboard into abstraction.

Armijo McKnight's figureless image *The Black Place (ii)* (2024), which shows another magnificent stretch of rock formations, distinct in shape from those in the film, was shot at one of O'Keeffe's favorite painting locales, some 150 miles west of Abiquiú, New Mexico (where she had a home), and is titled after her own name for the spot. The strange topology of the area—with its kneaded, mammalian volumes, marked by curving fissures—is depicted disorientingly in both her paintings and in Armijo McKnight's exquisite photo; few clues are given as to the size of the rocks. Such ambiguity aids the artists in their shared impulse to highlight recurring forms that appear in nature at vastly varied scales—like hills that recall reclining or curled up bodies and transient shapes in the sky.

In contrast to the picture-window-size prints here, the photographer's *Clouds (Decreation)* (2024) is tiny. At just sixteen by twenty inches, it takes on a talismanic or mystical role, like a portal, or a portrait of a saint, though Armijo McKnight's subject—a cumulus puff

and a few nearby wisps—is unremarkable. It becomes special, portentous and seraphic, thanks to the eerie high-contrast effect of the black-and-white image, which turns the sky into an inky ocean. *Clouds* was shot a century after Stieglitz turned his camera upward for his series *Equivalents* (1922–34), to test the potential of clouds as fodder for nonobjective photography, as a means to capture gestural, stippled, or washy fields of nowhere-ness. The formalist project was also meant to reflect his “philosophy of life,” as he said, “to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter—not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone—no tax as yet on them—free.”

Armijo McKnight's body of work, which emerges from the force of desire and a complementary, Weilian humility before nature and God, likewise captures clouds (and rocks and cliffs) to show what is there “for everyone.” In this numinous exhibition, he affirms a stance regarding his Modernist forebears, one that is less oppositional in its queer revisions than it is practical: the artist takes from them what works and rings true. In images of ecogasmic harmony and wonder, he asserts his and his human subjects' belonging—not their claim—to the wilderness, the world, to the silence of heaven.

