

DOCUMENT



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Mark Armijo McKnight's 'Decreation' undoes the self

The artist's solo exhibition at The Whitney invokes existential landscapes as sites for unbecoming

Photographer Mark Armijo McKnight is widely known for his sharp, black-and-white photos depicting queer people alone and together in desert locales. These photos are not so much *about* the erotic, as they deploy the erotic as a site to ask questions about embodiment, time, art history, and image making itself. For *Decreation*, an ongoing body of work inspired by French philosopher Simone Weil's theories on the self, McKnight conceives images—as well as a sculpture and a 16mm film from a project inspired by György Ligeti's

fluxus composition *Poème symphonique*—to undo his self. Not to deconstruct, but to decreate, to eclipse the ego with compassion, per Weil. The photos depict embracing nude bodies among desolate desertscapes, soft mountains of the New Mexico Badlands pliable like dough, and ominous goat skeletons. Select works from *Decreation* are on view at The Whitney Museum until January 2025.

For Document, McKnight joined The Whitney Museum's Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography Drew Sawyer to discuss the philosophical mysteries of the landscape photograph.



Drew Sawyer: The title of your show comes from a concept propounded by the French activist, philosopher, and mystic Simone Weil (1909–43). How did you first come to Weil’s writing and why does it appeal to you (and so many others in more recent years)?

Mark Armijo McKnight: We are living through very challenging times, as was Weil. She understood suffering, both voluntary and involuntary. Among other things, her writing points towards affliction as requisite for transcendence. She suggests that our suffering has meaning, and she does so in such beautiful language that it feels irrefutable. Paradoxically, she gestures toward the void, toward oblivion, but as a form of salvation. Her simultaneous sense of existential destitution, yearning, but also her enduring faith is radical. It resonates with me. I’m not surprised that other people respond to her, too.

How I found her... I can’t remember! If I was to guess, it would have been through other spiritual texts? For several years I was attending unprogrammed Quaker Meetings in Los Angeles, and so thinking about subjects that are paramount to Weil: silence, collectivity, social justice, and light. She very famously wrote, ‘Love is not consolation, it is light.’ Maggie Nelson ends *Bluets* with this quote. It’s also quite possible that was my introduction to Weil.

Drew: You’ve also named an ongoing body of work

Decreation. How do you understand the idea of decreation and how do you relate it to your work?

Mark: I started using decreation as a title in 2018 for an ongoing body of work. More recently, I’ve been joking that it’s the title for my entire creative endeavor! In *Gravity & Grace*, Weil coins and defines the term decreation which she says is ‘to make something created pass into the uncreated.’ It is not to be confused with outright destruction. Weil is very specifically interested in the undoing of the self toward God. I’m interested in this as well, but my conception of God is quite different. I like to think about decreation in terms of an undoing of the self or the world, towards something truer, a kind of base state. I’m interested in decreation as it relates to flux, and the ways in which all things are in a constant state of becoming and unbecoming. Matter as transitory.

There is an entropic quality to a lot of my photographs. Images of scars, blemishes, erosion, abrasion. These are all words I use as shorthand for what I’m really interested in, which is something like decreation. What is imperfect, degraded, abject, is often quite beautiful to me... I want to celebrate temporality. Maybe it’s a way of coping with my own mortality.

I think a lot of my photographs have a very primordial quality, particularly the landscapes. In the show at The Whitney there is a photograph of a seemingly inhospitable, black landscape that extends for miles and fills the entirety of the photographic frame. It looks like a landscape undoing itself. Or perhaps, a landscape on the precipice of regeneration. There are ways in which it feels like the forms of these hills are billowing outward, towards us, but the landscape also appears to recede away into this dark, horizonless otherworld.

Another image of a young woman pleasuring herself might suggest an erotic undoing of self. Something like *la petite mort*. Wildflowers appear to spring up around her and suggest life, but there are also bugs crawling up her leg and towards the orifice, the very site of this pleasure in which she is lost, suggesting death or decay. Even in this state of ecstatic aliveness, there is this little

reminder of her finitude. The film and sculptures gesture similarly towards this kind of undoing, descent, or obliteration, but in ways I hope suggest beauty or transcendence. I'm not a nihilist.

Drew: Your choice to use a large-format film camera puts you in certain lineages of photography, particularly within the tradition of landscape photography in the western United States. First, why analog photography now? Second, You've been working in the high desert of California, near where you grew up, and in New Mexico, where your family is from. What do these locations mean to you and what do you hope viewers might also bring to your images?

Mark: I came of age in a period where digital was still relatively new. Analog was probably the obvious choice to make as an art student. I learned to make photographs on film and print them in darkrooms. I don't privilege the analog in the work of anyone else, but it does feel essential to my work right now. I love silver gelatin. Working in large format is also very slow. It allows me to attend to every single corner of the frame. I have an awareness of my own decision-making process that I wouldn't have otherwise. The style in which I print is the product of spending years in the dark room. I am deliberately burying descriptive details through under-exposure of my negatives and over-exposure of my prints. I also employ a rudimentary process called burning that darkens certain areas of the print and allows me to manipulate the appearance of the photograph, and subsequently the overall mood. There are comparable processes in digital photography, but I find they are underutilized, particularly by people who weren't trained in a darkroom.

Regarding geography: I am of two minds. These places are home. I'd like to think that the reverence I have for them is evident in the photographs I'm making. There are certainly ways in which my work pushes against various traditions. I am not interested in the surveillant, dominating approach to the landscape that is endemic of early landscape photography and that you might find, for example, in 19th-century photographs of the American West. It feels like an extension of the settler-colonial project. Nor am I interested in the de-

tached, 'neutral,' purportedly objective approach to the landscape of which I was a student (and from which my identity, experience, and perspective were often painfully absent!) My subjectivity, psyche, and imagination are all I've got. I'm interested in metaphor. Sometimes this means employing the landscape to describe a psychological condition. Other times I'm interested in the landscape as archetype, wherein the image of a given site becomes a surrogate for 'the natural world' writ large.

Drew: While we were preparing for the show, you talked a lot about wanting to explore archetypes and metaphor through your images of people and landscapes. Photography has often been conceptualized through a belief in its indexical nature—meaning a literal transcription of reality—but you attempt to resist such fixed meaning. What is the relationship between photography and meaning for you?

Mark: You're right. I'm hesitant to foreclose meaning. I trust that the work has something to communicate and that I don't always know what that is. Photographs I made years ago continue to reveal things to me. I'm also suspicious of an art world that feels increasingly didactic. If the work is an illustration of the gallery text or the press release, I'm not convinced that it is art at all. If you can say something that clearly, be a writer. I got into art because there are ways in which language fails.



A lot of my thinking on meaning making has to do with my experience of analysis and [reading] Carl Jung. I increasingly see my work as a collaboration between my unconscious and lucid selves. To paraphrase Jung: the unconscious speaks in images. My task is listening to those images ‘speak.’ Sometimes this is achieved by simply bringing a mental image into reality through the production of a photograph. Other times, it occurs through the process of sequencing photographs for books and installations, an activity in which I extrapolate or manufacture meaning. My process is dictated by the belief that if I trust my intuition and remain curious and attentive to the work and the world, the point of my pictures will always, eventually, become clear. In this way, my practice is also about faith. Making my work requires a deep faith not only in the potential of my unconscious mind to communicate meaningfully, but also in the enterprise of meaning-making itself: that there is an underlying meaning to experience that is worth pursuing at all.

Drew: For the show, you’ve expanded your practice to include film and sculpture. What was it like working in new media? Did you learn anything in the process that changed how you work?

Mark: Yes. When you take a chisel or a sledgehammer to a 5,500-pound piece of solid limestone, there is no reset button, no Oops, I’ll get another sheet of paper like in the darkroom. It’s exhilarating.

Making a film with a team of people was equal parts brutal, frustrating, refreshing and invigorating. I learned to trust other people with my work. I also learned when to defer to other people’s expertise. I felt like Trevor Tweeten, the DP on the film, really understands what I’m after, and where the work is coming from psychologically. It’s sort of wonderful to be seen by someone in that way. My friend Jason Evans at Ecstatic Static and Sophie Luo, who co-produced the film, were also incredible. The experience isn’t necessarily going to change the way I make photographs, but I did really fall in love with filmmaking.

Drew: How do you see these new works relating to your photographs? What did you want to accomplish

in these media that you felt you couldn’t do with your photographs?

Mark: Going back to this idea of the primordial... the sculpture in this exhibition, titled *Duet* (2024) is comprised of two 5,500 pound slabs of solid aurora limestone that have been carved to resemble medieval ‘scratch’ or ‘mass’ dials, a type of crude sundial that predates the use of the clock. This type of dial is frequently referred to as a mass dial because it revealed the time for mass and other church services. It is often referred to as a scratch dial because it so crudely scratched into the stone. The hole in the center is where one places a gnomon (pronounced *no-mon*) that would cast a shadow, revealing the time.

I was attracted to the religio-spiritual connotation of the mass dial, and crude means by which they are produced. The scrapes suggest desperation. Among other things, I am compelled by the sundial because it gestures towards the elemental. It is also a distillation of my concerns as an image-maker. What is an image but a confluence of time, light, and shadow?

I think there is a monolithic quality to my photographs, often in terms of the way I depict the body, but also in terms of the way I use scale. It’s nice to get to make sculpture that behaves similarly. Where you can really feel the literal weight of the thing. This is something a photograph can’t offer. Similarly, the film is really about the sound, and it’s split into 4-channel so that you experience it in the round. You’ll have a different experience of the work depending on where you’re standing within the installation.

For The Whitney show, the gnomon belonging to *Duet* are conspicuously absent, and so there’s this little void in the center of each dial. As someone who has spent the last few years photographing things that suggest the void, or an orifice, or both, it’s nice to do that in three dimensions. Also, the show is so much about the terrestrial. It felt important to have these intractable slabs of earth in the room. Which are also a place to sit while watching the film.

Drew: The film is actually part of a larger film project

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that will feature other musical scores. Can you tell us a little more about the work in progress?

Mark: Sure. I want to make a 60-minute film that centers on a fictionalized, silent, unprogrammed Quaker meeting for worship. The film will function as a constant within a larger installation, acting as an armature for shorter films that poetically interweave ideas around silence, voice, darkness and light, collectivity and isolation, queerness, ecology, time, secular spirituality, and grief.

I've been in dialogue with some poets, singers, artists and performers I really admire, and I'm excited about the prospect of continuing to collaborate. I really love that aspect of filmmaking. We start shooting again in spring. There are also two more completed metronome films that I'm really proud of, and excited to exhibit in the not-too-distant future.