

# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

## DECREATION AND DESIRE

### MILLER SCHULMAN ON MARK ARMIGO MCKNIGHT AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

*“Decreation” refers to the ongoing body of work by artist Mark Armijo McKnight, currently on view in a show of the same title, as well as to the concept developed by the late French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil: decreation as a deliberate destruction of the self. In his review of Armijo McKnight’s exhibition, Miller Schulman situates the artist’s work in relation to discourses on contemporary queer photographic practices, the legacy of modernist landscape photography, and the feasibility of queer critique, thereby drawing out the limits of the curatorial framing.*

In *Human Personality*, French mystic philosopher Simone Weil wrote that “the only way into truth is through one’s own annihilation; through dwelling a long time in a state of extreme and total humiliation.” [1] This characteristically bleak aphorism indicates a concept emergent throughout much of Weil’s writing: decreation, or the deliberate undoing of self. “Decreation” is also the title of Mark Armijo McKnight’s focused and disquieting – though not necessarily bleak – multimedia exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The compact show contains five black-and-white photographs, two sculptures, and one video. In one of the images, titled *Somnia* (2024), three naked figures lie with intertwined limbs and concealed faces in the foreground of a rocky New Mexican field. From the tightness of the hands’ grips on bare skin, the mood of this image is compellingly ambivalent, split between evocations of eroticism and dread. Are these people shielding themselves? Is our gaze welcome?

Another photograph, titled *Anti-Matter* (2023), shows a person with a slightly obscured face touching themselves in a field of wildflowers. The rest of the works in the exhibition are devoid of figures. I suppose this absence of human beings suggests Weil’s philosophical



“Mark Armijo McKnight: Decreation,” Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024

search for truth through annihilation. Yet, this weighty conceptual framework distracts somewhat from the achievements of this exhibition – and of Armijo McKnight’s work generally. In his images, videos, and sculptures, a potential alternative can be seen to a field of queer art-making that is saturated by figuration, and the subsequent concerns of (auto)biography. Instead, Armijo McKnight’s work proposes theoretical concerns around temporality and indigeneity, as well as a queer intervention into the history of landscape photography of the United States.

Armijo McKnight’s work is refreshing to see in large part because the field of queer photography feels so listless. Broadly speaking, the template established by photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans and Ryan McGinley in the 1990s and early 2000s – of candid, glossy documentary photographs and portraits of vibrant queer life – has been readily and widely adopted by younger generations of photographers. A boon of this proliferation has been an expansion of representation of bodies, sexualities, and gender identities as photographers depict their own communities. The downside is that queerness increasingly seems to have a singular way of being presented in similar exhibitions of photography in cities all around the world. In such contemporary photography, the relationship between nature and

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queerness is often limited to the act of cruising for sex on certain beaches or in major city parks. Queerness is, of course, a lived experience. Documentary portraiture, and its biographical associations, is an excellent way of representing this. But queerness is also a social relation. It is formed in opposition to prevailing norms and cannot be materially located. Queer photographic practices, and perhaps queer art writ large, does not have to be limited to exclusively capturing subjecthood and sex; it can also be focused on capturing tone and affect. Armijo McKnight understands this very well. In his startling images of landscapes, natural phenomena, and naked figures, he offers a feeling of generative ambivalence – of being and feeling more than one thing at a time.

Armijo McKnight's depiction of such ambivalence offers a critical intervention into the history of modernist landscape photography. The dramatic tonal variation and absence of human civilization seen in Ansel Adams's early 20th-century photography of the American West is a clear influence on Armijo McKnight's practice. Adams used the medium to emphasize the intensity of geology and nature; highly pronounced contrasts in shadow and light spoke to the idea of untouched majesty and ebullience of the North American outdoors. Armijo McKnight's images capture this imagined grandeur while also suggesting an underlying feeling of terror and desolation. Part of this tension is associated with a judicious use of Armijo McKnight's

own biography in conceptualizing the work. In a 2021 essay published on the platform *This Long Century*, he considers his recent move to New Mexico, which is “the site of many historical traumas,” including colonization, forced displacement, and sexual violence. He then connects the violent history of the land to the sexual violence faced by his Indigenous grandmother during her marriage. [2] In the exhibition's audio guide, Armijo McKnight discusses his upbringing as a “closeted queer kid in a relatively conservative suburb at the edge of Los Angeles.” He describes how many of the photos from the *Decreation* series were taken in a landscape he is very familiar with, “not far” from where he grew up, just outside of the city. When he was younger, Armijo McKnight writes, “this little enclave was a place in which to take respite.” There is a compelling complication in these images of the often-interrogated relationship between the city-as-queer-refuge and the inhospitable hinterland. For Armijo McKnight, nature is queer, but it is far from utopic. Through this line of inquiry – of nature as a place of both becoming and unbecoming – a connection to Weil's idea of decreation is most clear.

This is not to say that Armijo McKnight's work is entirely somber. Some of its queerness can be traced in its surprising playfulness, and the shift in dynamic from the naturalistic subject matter to the artist's humorous way of depicting it. Part of this approach involves a purposeful exaggeration of the legacy of Georgia O'Keeffe. A photograph titled *The Black Place (ii)* (2024) shows O'Keeffe's “favorite painting site” in the desert near Nageezi, New Mexico, which she remarked had a striking resemblance to “a mile of elephants.” In Armijo McKnight's image, the distinctive, leathery hills that captivated O'Keeffe are presented with stark, black-and-white intensity and do indeed look like the skin of elephants. In the aforementioned photograph *Anti-Matter*, he takes O'Keeffe's vulva-like paintings and photos literally. Where O'Keeffe abstracted female anatomy into floral forms, Armijo McKnight shows a person touching themselves atop a field of flowers, genitalia front-and-center in the photograph. This dry, forthright humor, of contrasting metaphor with an often-erotic directness, extends beyond this Whitney exhibition. In a 2018 image titled *Earthskin*, Armijo



Mark Armijo McKnight, “Somnia,” 2023

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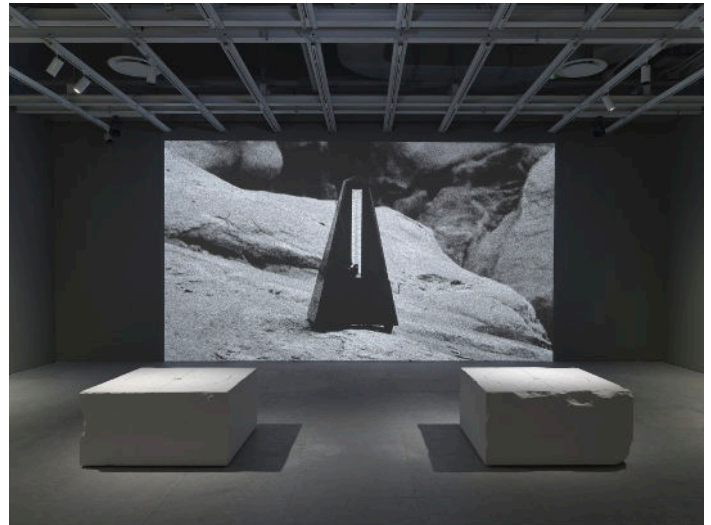
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McKnight aerially photographs a pair of desert craters as dark, opaque holes, which is, of course, redolent of innuendo. The near obviousness of the jokes in his work is almost obfuscated by the plainness of their delivery.

However, certain elements of the exhibition's conceptual framework remained out of reach. Specifically, the exhibition's curatorial writing described how Armijo McKnight's use of a large-format camera, "in the tradition of early survey photographers and modernists," is complicated by his "queer refusal of the medium's disinterested gaze." I would not describe the landscape photography of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston – or even Timothy H. O'Sullivan's 19th-century survey photography of the American West – as "disinterested" by any means. They imbued their landscapes with dramatized emotions that speak to an intense interest in documenting, indexing, preserving, and possessing the depicted land. Armijo McKnight complicates the legacy through an even more exaggerated emotional register, emphasizing the historical tension and associated violence between documentation and occupation.

I searched for the idea of queer refusal in other segments of the exhibition and found indications of the futility of the concept in the show's video component, titled *Without a Song* (2024). Reimagining Hungarian composer György Ligeti's 1962 work *Poème symphonique*, Armijo McKnight places dozens of metronomes amid the impressive geological formations of the Bisti Badlands/De-Na-Zin Wilderness in New Mexico. The projected video plays on a loop, and its totalizing sound within the exhibition space is a constant reminder of time's inexorable march forward. Themes of time and mortality are creeping around other sections of the exhibition, including in the photograph *Ez Ozel* (or: *Father Figure*) (2023), showing a closely cropped image of a partially buried animal skeleton, and in the limestone sculptures in the center of the gallery, which resemble poured-concrete sundials. Temporality, chronology, and queerness are regularly considered in relation to one another. Family models and posterity are often the object of queer critique, but Armijo McKnight's installation instead implies that time cannot be refused, queerly or not. In his much-celebrated treatise on queer futurity, *Cruising Utopia*, the late José Esteban

Muñoz declared that "the future is queerness's domain. The here and now is a prison house." [3] Decreation, as Weil imagines it, offers transcendence through the destruction of the self. Yet Armijo McKnight's exhibition proposes that the here and now is all we have, and that nature is at once seductive, terrifying, queer, and indifferent to our undoing.



Mark Armijo McKnight, "Without a Song," 2024

## NOTES

- [1] Simone Weil, *Human Personality*, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (Penguin Classics, 2005), 90. Originally published posthumously as *La personnalité humaine, le juste et l'injuste* in 1950, *Human Personality* was first published in English in 1962.
- [2] Mark McKnight, "Mark McKnight," *This Long Century*,
- [3] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.