

BOMB

INTERVIEW

Mark Armijo McKnight by Ksenia M. Soboleva

The movement of light and shadow.

DECEMBER 16, 2024



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Somnia*, 2023, gelatin silver print, 48 x 60 inches.
Courtesy of the artist. © Mark Armijo McKnight.

In an art world where queer intimacy has become marketable, I find it increasingly rare to encounter images in which such intimacy feels genuine. Mark Armijo McKnight is one beautiful exception, as his solo exhibition *Decreation* at the Whitney Museum affirms. Whether photographing sexually engaged bodies or soft clouds, McKnight imbues the image with a yearning that carries a palpable poetry beyond language. Capturing the movement of light and shadow with the subtle intensity of black-and-white film, McKnight delineates that photography is a form of magic, making him a magician of the queerest kind.

Ksenia M. Soboleva

I have such a soft spot for photography that engages with the American landscape as a site of queer desire, particularly Tee Corinne's and Laura Aguilar's erotic explorations of the lesbian body merging with the landscape. I am drawn to the way you approach the landscape as a body and vice versa. When did you first bring your camera into the landscapes you were inhabiting, and how did the camera shape your experience of it?

Mark Armijo McKnight

I don't think I was aware I was photographing the landscape in this way until someone pointed it out. It's a natural byproduct of having an intimate relationship to the landscape. So far, all the photographs people know of mine were made in Southern California, where I was raised, and New

Mexico, which is an ancestral home and also a place I lived. How could the photographs *not* be intimate? I feel very connected to the natural world, particularly in these places. It's in my DNA.

Simone Weil writes that "attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." I would argue that it's also a form of love. I have reverence, something like love, for the subjects I'm photographing; this finds its way into the image so that we have the capacity to see the supposedly insentient mountain, river, tree, or cloud in the same way that we see our own species: as something to which we can relate, as a subject capable of generating something like desire.

I started looking at the landscape as an undergraduate. There was a collective worship of New Topographics and its offshoots, along with the sense that being an artist-photographer meant feigning objectivity and celebrating the quotidian in pastoral or suburban America. I did this for a long time, and I love a lot of this work. However, I also want to problematize this mode of image-making or what it has, even if unintentionally, come to represent: "neutrality," "indexicality," "objectivity," and "truth." Whose truth? I want to foreground my subjectivity.

KMS

What drew you to Weil's idea of "decreation" as the title for your solo show at the Whitney?

MAM

I've been working with the title *Decreation* since 2018. In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil defines decreation as "to make something created pass into the uncreated." It's distinct from outright destruction. I'm interested in human and nonhuman subjects that appear to be on the precipice of some physical, psychic, or spiritual transformation. Transformation is often seen as ascendant. I like that decreation suggests an undoing, what we might otherwise refer to as destruction, but instead Weil views it akin to evolution or transcendence; she specifically ties this to God. I do, too, but I'm also interested in the transitory nature of matter, and it rubs up against some strands of my thinking around ecology and the global climate crisis. On my better days, I think about the world's unraveling in terms of Weil's decreation, which is to say: with a sense of hope and meaning. I want to believe transcendence is waiting for us inside of what often feels like an abyss.

KMS

The term *pornography* frequently appears in discussions about your work. As Garth Greenwell said in his essay for your photobook *Heaven is a Prison* (2020), pornography is an "endlessly elastic" word. I often think about the flawed nature of it, how it's practically useless on its own. Simply referring to the pornographic when describing an image is like a



Mark Armijo McKnight, *The Black Place (iii)*, 2024, gelatin silver print, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Mark Armijo McKnight.

Simply referring to the pornographic when describing an image is like a dinner menu just featuring the word *sauce* in the description of a dish. You want to know what kind of sauce it is! Pornography can be so versatile when contextualized, yet it still tends to be interpreted in a narrow and limited way. How do you navigate this with your work?

MAM

I agree; it does feel like an empty word. In the context of art, I understand the word *pornographic* as either a kind of trigger warning or a way of categorizing, typically in ways that are delimiting. I want a poetry-loving audience. And I hope that whoever is viewing the work, queer or otherwise, resists seeing it in terms of category—for example, gay photographers picturing sex—because that always feels reductive and unnecessarily forecloses meaning. What's wonderful about being queer and having a queer audience is that I don't think we take sex or sexuality for granted. To have to "come out" is to bring one's sex life into the public sphere, into the discourse. I think it gives us an inherent level of comfort with discussing sex that allows us to go beyond surface-level conversations around explicitness or transgression, which is really what the word *pornography* superficially implies. Overall, I think you don't have to convince a queer audience of the psychological complexity of sex and that it can be a venue in which meaning is made.

Since we're on the subject of Garth, he calls sex "a crucible of humanness," a statement that he connects with the ways in which sex is often the circumstance in which we are paradoxically at our most vulnerable, performative, generous, selfish, physical, and metaphysical. Similarly, I have a desire to highlight some of these contradictions and, subsequently, what it means to be human.

KMS

What drives your commitment to black-and-white photography?

MAM

Being color blind! Printing color photographs was always such a nightmare! More importantly, black-and-white photography allows one to make a world. I've always been perplexed by the enduring relationship between documentary and black and white. I'm interested in black and white because it's *not* how we see. It transforms the world. In the case of my work, it produces a kind of charged, psychic landscape or otherworld. I exploit the malleability of black-and-white film and print to very particular ends that aren't possible in color photography. It allows me to draw formal and figurative parallels between a variety of seemingly disparate subjects; it facilitates a kind of metaphor and brings me closer to poetry, which is what I'm really trying to make.



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Clouds (Decreation)*, 2024, gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Mark Armijo McKnight.

KMS

Your show at the Whitney includes a new 16mm film. What prompted your turn to the moving image?

MAM

I wanted a challenge, to work more collaboratively, and to try something new. Photography is static. I have ideas that involve movement of the body and/or camera. I also wanted to explore sound. It's not just about moving image, but the relationship with sound. In the installation at the Whitney, the audio is in four channels. Your experience of the film's sound is contingent on where you are in the space. As a photographer, I'm uniquely aware that people view images quite passively. Historically, I've exhibited photographs at various sizes as a way of combating that. It's a way of activating the viewer's body and forcing one to move to and from—to experience the work in the round, so to speak. I also hope it produces an experience in which meaning is constellated in that the viewer doesn't just stand in front of the work and wait for it to announce its reason for being.



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Without a Song (solo ii)*, 2024, 16mm film transferred to video, black and white, sound, 11 minutes, 19 seconds. Courtesy of the artist. © Mark Armijo McKnight.

KMS

As a dedicated mixtape maker myself, I was delighted to discover you had made a digital mixtape in conjunction with this show, and it's truly been a pleasure to absorb. Can you tell me more about the role that music plays in your life and work?

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MAM

Nothing inspires me more than music. It's direct. It doesn't have to be theorized. It's visceral. I want people to have the kinds of experiences of the work that I can have with music. How often does a great song or album necessitate a two-page press release? As a closeted, brown, baby queer on the conservative periphery of Los Angeles, the mixtape was essential to my sense of self and community. Making meaning with and through music and its accompanying visuals was formative. I traded mixtapes with strangers from chatrooms and this thing called Usenet newsgroups. Making and trading mixtapes was an early form of community and an activity I have continued into adulthood as a part of my practice. I released a mixtape in 2020 alongside the publication of my first monograph. My first museum commission at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson, was accompanied by a cyan-colored audiotape full of songs about the color blue.

For me, what you see in the room and the titles is the work. Like an album. Everything else is background information. I think I'd be happiest if there was a list of titles somewhere but no words otherwise. Having grown up far from any museums, the music video was the first form of art to which I was routinely exposed. I have this really vivid memory of my dad calling me inside the house because Tarsem Singh's video for R.E.M.'s "Losing my Religion" was on MTV, and he thought I needed to see it. That was high art for me. It still is.

[Mark Armijo McKnight: Decreation](#) is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City until January 12.