

aperture



A Beautiful Friendship, Deepened by Artistic Intensity

After the novelist Garth Greenwell was assigned to write about Mark Armijo McKnight's photographs, the two men bonded over their shared themes of queer sex and intimacy.

Interviews - March 14, 2025
By Drew Sawyer



Mark Armijo McKnight has become known for his black-and-white photographs of nude bodies and the landscape in the American West. His solo exhibition *Decreation*, organized by Drew Sawyer and presented last fall at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, featured large-scale gelatin-silver prints along with the artist's first film and sculptural work. Armijo McKnight was also the winner of the 2019 Aperture Portfolio Prize. When his work appeared in *Aperture*, the writer Garth Greenwell contributed an article about the erotic intimacy and "extravagant tenderness" of Armijo McKnight's images. In January 2020, they participated in a public talk at the Aperture gallery in Chelsea, marking both Armijo McKnight's Portfolio Prize exhibition and the publication of Greenwell's critically-acclaimed book *Cleanness* (2020). The two have since become close friends and artistic compatriots. Armijo McKnight provided a cover image for the paperback edition of *Cleanness* and Greenwell wrote an essay for Armijo McKnight's first photobook *Heaven Is a Prison* (2020). When *Decreation* was on view, they reunited on stage at the Whitney, once again celebrating an exhibition and a novel, Greenwell's *Small Rain* (2024). In this conversation, which has been condensed and edited for clarity, they discuss sex, poetry, and how friendship can be an "agent of expansiveness."

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Installation view of Mark Armijo McKnight: *Decreation*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

Drew Sawyer: When we were brainstorming about a program in conjunction with the show, we immediately knew we wanted to invite Garth Greenwell to be in conversation with Armijo McKnight. McKnight's first monograph, *Heaven Is a Prison*, was published in 2020, by Loose Joints Press, to great acclaim, and it features a text by Greenwell. Greenwell is an accomplished critic contributing to numerous publications, including the *New Yorker*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *New York Times Book Review*.

You guys have had an ongoing dialogue. Garth, you've written about Mark's work. So, I'm just curious when you first became aware of each other's work?

Mark Armijo McKnight: I would be curious to know your version, also, Garth. So, in 2019, I got the Aperture Portfolio Prize, and I think the *Aperture* editor Brendan Embser connected us and thought of you for me. I think he wrote to me and said there's this author. And to be honest, at that point, no one had ever written about me, so, I would have taken just about anybody. *[laughs]*

But, when it ended up being you, we made a plan to chat a bit. The only novel that you had published at that time was *What Belongs to You* (2016). I was in Tucson at the time, and I know I've said this to you before, I was in my bed in Tucson, I got through the book in 24 or 36 hours. I could not put it down. I was holding my breath between pages because I thought the writing was so beautiful. That's still my experience of Garth's writing.

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We ended up connecting again in New York around the time you were finishing *Cleanness* (2020). I was at the beginning of working on *Heaven Is a Prison*. And I remember taking a walk and having a really wonderful conversation about sex in art and its value. I think, at a certain point, we just became friends—it stopped being like a professional thing and you just became like, a person I texted all day, every day. [laughs]



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Ez Ozel (or: Father Figure)*, 2023

Garth Greenwell: Yeah, that maps pretty much onto my memory of things. You know, Brendan, who is very kind, had written me several times after the publication of *What Belongs to You* asking me to write for *Aperture* magazine. And I always said, “Why would I write for *Aperture*? I don’t know anything about photography. Why do you keep writing me about this?” But when he asked about Mark, he was smart enough to include the images. So I opened the email and I saw these images, and I remember responding to him right away. I said, “Look, I don’t know anything about photography, but I actually do feel like I have a lot to say about these images.”

I just felt this immediate kinship with the work. I actually never feel that in literature, or almost never. Very seldom do I think in response to any contemporary art, “Oh, this person is chasing something I recognize,” where it feels like an endeavor that’s just immediately in conversation with my own

endeavor. But that happened with Mark, and the friendship has become really central to me and to my aesthetic life. Mark's work has become a big part of my life. I actually have two prints of Mark's that I can see from my desk. Writing *Small Rain* (2024), my most recent book, there was one particularly difficult scene that I'm not sure I could have written without the example of Mark's work. I remember literally texting him as I wrote—I would say things like, "I'm writing something that is really terrifying to me." It was helpful to have him on the other side of that exchange. It was really important.



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Bodyfold*, 2019

Sawyer: I brought in the cover of *Cleanness* because you used one of Mark's earlier images. I'm curious to hear you talk about why you selected this one in particular.

Greenwell: Almost always the first draft covers I get, especially for foreign editions, have the image of some adolescent nubile torso on a beach. And I'm always like, "What is this?" Like, you know, I don't write André Aciman novels. No shade to those novels! But those bodies are not the bodies I write about. One of the things I love about Mark's work is that Mark makes beautiful images about the kinds of bodies that I write about. This image in particular is so fascinating to me. The way that Mark typically obscures faces, how in this series of images, he's very explicitly and very obviously, intentionally, obscuring faces—that immediately resonated with my fictional practice, in which characters typically don't have names. *Cleanness*, especially, is a book that is full of people, sometimes

strangers, confessing things to each other. Mark's work captures that sense of both intimacy and anonymity. An image like this captures both a kind of giving, a kind of offering, and also a withholding. It just felt absolutely perfect to me.

Sawyer: That is beautiful. Mark, I'm curious, you mentioned that you had met when you were just embarking on this book project which came out in 2020, *Heaven Is a Prison*. So, I'm curious how you feel like those conversations shaped what the book became? Like, had you already been planning on this book before even reading Garth's writing or was it all coming together at once?

Armijo McKnight: Yeah, that's a good question. I don't remember the timing. I feel like *Cleanness* has more explicit moments. It was surprising to me when that book came out that it felt like we were on these parallel paths. And I would say the same thing about this show and *Small Rain* in that there's some different approaches to long-held ideas in our respective practices. That's really interesting to see. Maybe it just speaks to the ways in which we're similar and why our friendship makes a lot of sense. But in terms of this walk we took, back when we first met, I had just had a studio visit with a really good friend and she looked at the new photographs I was making and she said something like, "What makes this not pornography?" I was a little bit taken aback and I was maybe frustrated in the moment, but also grateful, in some ways for the question because it allowed me to ask other questions. And I think you and I spoke about those questions on that walk, which is like, "What constitutes 'art' or 'pornography'? Why do we collectively privilege an intellectual response over a somatic one, for instance, arousal?" I'm also remembering right now that we talked about Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) on that walk, which is so funny because now, we've been talking about Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) more recently. It was a really important conversation to have with someone I trusted and respected. And it helped give me a license to proceed with the production of the work and to trust my impulses, even if they weren't initially being received well.

Sawyer: Both of you became known for your projects that revolved around the explicit representation of gay sex and S&M. You already hinted at the kind of resistance to that content. Was your motivation to write about that kind of material its transgressiveness, or challenging the kind of expectations or genres that are acceptable—or was it something else that compelled both of you?

Greenwell: I mean, for me, it was not transgressiveness. Something that I feel really strongly is that I don't want anything to dictate what my art is going to be. I remember the first question I was asked in my first big interview for *What Belongs to You*, when it came out in the UK. It was a BBC interview. And the woman began by saying, "You know, after decades in which gay men's lives have been reduced to sex, why would you begin your novel in a cruising bathroom?" I remember being just repelled by the question, by the idea that my work should have to, in any way, respond to a homophobic narrative that suggests that men cruising in a bathroom reduces their humanity. The

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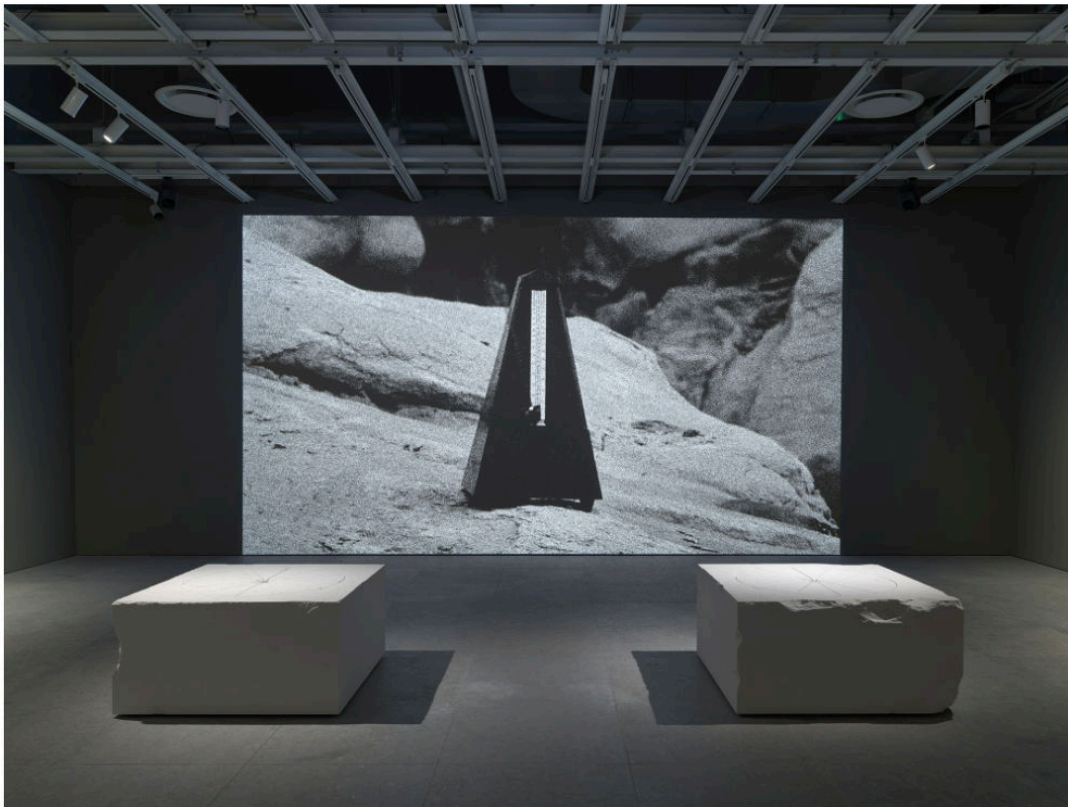
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idea that my work would be in response to that, that homophobia would frame my aesthetic process, is repulsive to me. And in the same way, the idea that I would sort of say, “Oh, I see some trend and I want to write against that”—that is just not how I work.

I am interested in embodiedness. I’m interested in the embodied experience of extremity. I’m interested in sex as a phenomenon—as a form of communication, as a form of meaning-making. In *What Belongs to You*, even though the response to the book overwhelmingly talked about sex, actually the sex in that book is quite demure. I was already working on *Cleanness* when *What Belongs to You* came out, and I knew there was so much more I wanted to do in the representation of sex. But it didn’t really feel transgressive to me, in part because my background was not in prose. In American prose, after an amazing efflorescence of especially queer writing in the 1970s, there was a kind of conservative backlash. Writers like Edmund White and Alexander Chee have talked about this—Alex has talked about being told in MFA programs in the 1990s that he shouldn’t write about sex explicitly. Queer writers were told that if they centered their books on queer experience, they would be writing into a gay ghetto—which is a repulsive idea and a repulsive metaphor. I just escaped all of that because my background was in poetry. The twin founts of American poetry are Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, who both wrote the queer sexual body in ways that opened paths for later writers. And also, my great mentor, from whom Mark took the title for his show *Hunger for the Absolute*, was Frank Bidart, who is among the most courageous writers of the queer sexual body. So, it just never occurred to me that writing sex, writing *gay* sex in this way, would be transgressive. It was obvious to me from the beginning that it was within the realm of art.

Armijo McKnight: The Bidart connection allowed me to get that poem for the introduction of my first monograph. It is Bidart, at the beginning, a poem titled “Hunger for the Absolute.” Please everyone find it and read it. He does in probably twelve lines what I take the entirety of a photographic book to try and do. He’s a genius. And then, Garth’s essay is at the end, which is equally brilliant.

To say more about the impact this friendship has had on my practice: There is a film in the exhibition here at the Whitney and it’s heavily influenced by György Ligeti’s 1962 composition “Symphonic Poem.” I only became aware of that work because just like on a whim, I accompanied you to Lincoln Center to see Ligeti’s *Études*. They began the evening with “Symphonic Poem” and it just destroyed me. And immediately knew I had to do something with it. So [to the audience] get a friend who takes you to stuff you wouldn’t do on your own.



Installation view of Mark Armijo McKnight: *Decreation*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024. Front: *Duet*, 2024; Projection: *Without a Song*, 2024. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

Greenwell: But that has also been a really crucial part of our friendship, that each of us has been an agent of expansiveness for the other, has expanded the other's horizons. Which, I mean, that's just what friendship is, you know. My first experience of Mark's art was that it was operatic and it turned out Mark had never been to an opera. So, over the past two years Mark has been my opera buddy, and we've gone to the opera twice a month.

Armijo McKnight: More than that sometimes.

Greenwell: Yeah, sometimes more than that. We basically saw every production that the Met put on over the past two years. But the friendship has been an education for me, too. I mentioned that when Brendan first wrote me, I would said say, "I know nothing about photography." Well now, I know quite a bit about the traditions of art photography, the tradition of modernist art photography in particular, which is important for Mark and also an important point of resistance for Mark. And that has all been really crucial to my work as well.

Armijo McKnight: I remember having this thought that Garth refers to often, this idea about "the irreparable." I don't think I had language for it really until Garth. But these notions around how queer life should be depicted in an artwork, I sometimes feel like there is a contemporary prescription

around what that should look like and that all representations should be positive representations. Ultimately, that is incredibly reductive and sucks us of our humanity and the complexity of our lived experiences. That was just another thing we've talked a lot about in relation to queerness. I think I say that because you were talking about cruising. Garth also has said this thing—I've quoted you multiple times, probably in print, talking about sex as a crucible of humanness. As a venue in which we can simultaneously be our most selfish, our most generous. That language was really important for *Heaven Is a Prison*. [To the audience] Everybody get yourself a friend who can give you language for things that you've only ever known intuitively.

Sawyer: Could we also talk a little bit about this body of work?

Armijo McKnight: Sure. It's two subjects, two friends of mine having sex in a landscape not very far from where I grew up. It's broken up into sections sort of stanzaically. In the book, I was really interested in using blank pages, open space, as a way of breaking the work into sections. Slash small poems. There are these little vignettes. Thinking about the work right now, there is a kind of cinematic quality to that book. It's sequenced in a particular way. I think it has a relationship both to poetry and to film. And the way the work manifests in exhibition format—to steal some language from the photographer Paul Graham—is like a kind of filmic haiku. I was really interested in scale and repetition and trying to emulate the cadence, repetition, and rhyme that are so essential to a lot of poetry.



Mark Armijo McKnight *Untitled (Tree Void)*, 2020

Greenwell: Something that I found endlessly fascinating in this work is that there are images of these two men having sex that have a kind of “pornographic explicitness.” There’s one image in the book that shows penetration. That image, which is, I guess, if you base this on subject matter, the most “pornographic” image—and yet in my experience it’s an image of absolute chastity. And then I look at this fallen down tree and gaping tree trunk and it’s just the filthiest photo I have ever seen. That tree is filthier than Mapplethorpe’s fisting photos. That is fascinating to me. How erotic charge is distributed in the photographs in surprising ways.

When I talk about sex being a crucible of humanness, I mean that sex is, I think, almost unique in human experience in putting under immense pressure what seem to me a series of interlocked contradictions that make up humanness. Like sex is something that reveals our generosity and selfishness, or sex is an experience where we are at our most animal, and also the human experience that is most culturally mediated. Sex thrusts us into our bodies, into bodily experience, and also is maybe our least mediated experience of something that we feel exceeds our bodies. Sex is the source of all of our metaphysics. Mark’s photographs themselves embody that for me. And these photographs do feel so deeply embodied to me, I don’t mean their subject matter, but the photographs themselves.

Peter Hujar would talk about wanting his photographs to have a taste and a smell. I feel that about the tree photo—I feel like I can taste that photo. But other photos, as I say, feel so stark, so almost scoured. Something that I love in all of Mark’s work is the way that the work is extremely austere and also lush. The photos feel at once, sometimes cool to the touch and very hot. They’re just saturated with emotion in a way that makes me experience them as operatic. I mean, when I look at these photos, what I see is something that I want to write. I see values that I want to put on the page. And that’s what’s so rare. I’m not sure that I can think of another living artist who makes me feel that so strongly.

Armijo McKnight: I did have this impulse to do things in the show that were not what people would have expected. I wanted to do something big. And I wanted to do something that opens up what people think the work is doing, or complicates that in some meaningful ways. The film, I think, was first and foremost what we talked about, and then we built out from there. But I knew the photographs needed to do something a little bit different. There’s more landscape in this show than anything. That felt really important to me. In part because I put out that book, and of course, there are images of explicit sex and gay men, but that book is also full of clouds and landscapes, and that seemed to go totally unacknowledged, at least to my satisfaction. So I felt like, “Okay. If people are not understanding that I’m deeply motivated by the landscape, then maybe I need to really drive it home.”

Greenwell: In some ways, my new book does feel quite different, but in others it feels like a kind of continuation. I’ve always been interested in the body in crisis. Sex is one kind of crisis. In *Small Rain*, there is a medical crisis. But it’s also true that when I finished *Cleanness*, I felt like I had gone as far as I

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could go in that kind of writing about sex. I don't feel that anymore; there are other things I want to do in writing very explicit sex. But having written a lot about forms of sexual sociality like cruising, and a kind of sexual adventure that has been, you know, central to my life, it felt like a challenge to write a different kind of eroticism, to write domesticity and the long project of trying to know another person over years. It felt like a challenge to try to write that a way that makes clear that that, too, is an adventure. For me, that's the arc of the book, the narrator fully coming to understand that domestic life and that project of long-knowing of another person is as accommodating of surprise and revelation and discovery as those earlier, more obvious adventures that had structured his life.



Mark Armijo McKnight, *Clouds (Decreation)*, 2024

Armijo McKnight: There are moments in *Small Rain*, these really beautiful things that you do that you haven't done before, these moments where the narrator is going back in time through memory, and it's like, almost—I'm wanting to choose my language wisely. But it's sort of Dada or stream of conscious, the language keeps moving. As a reader, I am on the precipice of losing the thread, but then you bring us back into reality very firmly in these ways that are masterful.

Greenwell: Thank you for saying that. That was really interesting to me as I worked on it. *What Belongs to You* and *Cleanness* are both very focused, very tight books. I wanted to write something that

was more wandering and that explored a different kind of thinking. I did feel that, at times, I was spooling things out as far as I could. And that was formally exciting to me, to have that shape on the page.

Greenwell: I'm interested to hear Mark talk about photography in this sense. Lyric poetry divorces the idea of value from duration. If you have spots of time, as Wordsworth talks about, that then light up an entire life with value. Or Louise Glück, who says, in one of the poems in *Meadowlands*, "We see the world once in childhood, the rest is memory." This idea that a single moment might have a value that is infinite and that can illuminate an entire life. Mark, how do you feel about photography in that sense, and the relationship photography has to time versus duration, or a suspended lyric moment versus—I don't know if duration is the right word, but you know, a narrative response to time?

Armijo McKnight: I think so much more slowly than the pictures would suggest. You know, holding a very simple position for thirty minutes while I awkwardly fumble around with the 4-by-5 under the hood, trying to figure out, okay, if I move this limb here, the shadow does this. I mean, that's mission accomplished if the pictures feel believable. They are very much based on lyric moments or things that have passed that I'm re-staging. For example, the photographs in the book, some of those were made on-site. I brought them into this landscape and said, "Okay. Have sex now." [Laughs] And I had a handheld camera and made some of those pictures without stopping them. And there were other moments where it was like, "No. This picture needs to have the capacity to be eighty inches wide and rival an old master painting in scale and be just exquisite in its print. And so, I'm going to have to break out the 4-by-5 and you're going to have to keep him hard for however long it takes to make this picture."

Greenwell: That is so sexy. Wow. Great. [Laughs]

Armijo McKnight: Yeah, it was. But I think filmmaking feels like it has more potential to offer me something in terms of duration that I'm really excited about. And I think that is why I will never not be making photographs, but I'm excited to be exploring film right now.

Greenwell: Something that I am fascinated about in Mark's work is how there is such a strong pull toward abstraction. One of Mark's photos that I have in my studio is a photo called *Bodyfold*, which is an image of a man's lap. But I experience it as almost pure geometry. That's something I love. I mean, in some sense, there is a creation/decreation dialectic happening there, too. A sense that, you know, there is a cherishable subject, but then there is also this kind of austere form. I think that tension energizes a lot of the work. And to me, that's part of what makes it feel so moving, to feel those impulses at once. Creation and decreation feel like they are in a meaningful dialogue, not just opposed to one another—or they are wrestling, maybe, but neither of them is winning.



Mark Armijo McKnight, *The Black Place (ii)*, 2019
Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery

Sawyer: I was going to add, Mark, of course, you are doing some of this in camera and throughout printing. I realize not maybe everyone in the audience is aware of some of the analog techniques that you are using that heighten some of the formal elements.

Armijo McKnight: All of the photographs at the Whitney, and my photographs generally, are made on a 4-by-5 view camera, with the exception of some pictures in that book we've discussed. It's an old way of working. I'm shooting by putting a hood over my head, the camera is on a tripod, the image is upside down—which means I'm seeing it almost as pure form, somewhat abstracted, divorced from the subject matter. But in addition to that, you know, I'm often underexposing my photographs. I'm really interested in the psychological charge of shadows and darkness and I like printing for the midtones. When we look at photographs, we often think about the shadow as a kind of "nothing" thing. As a byproduct of light. I'm really interested in the shadow as a form unto itself. It's an essential part of the picture and I'm actively seeking certain types of shadows and negotiating with the subject in the arrangement of a photo in order to achieve that. The shadow is perhaps a reminder of the medium's limitations. Not everything can be made visible. In this way, the darkened spaces in my

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photographs, the shadows, the voids, might suggest what I firmly believe—and something Garth and I have often discussed: Art can chase or gesture in the direction of beauty, but it's ultimately a kind of veil. You can never apprehend it.

Mark Armijo McKnight: Decreation was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, August 24, 2024–January 12, 2025.

Drew Sawyer is the Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



Mark Armijo McKnight *Tear*, 2021