

Song to the Siren

Matthew Papa



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INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Bard



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for Andy

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The first time I was fucked was in my royal blue, '79 Chevy Nova late one summer night in my parents' driveway. It was just before my eighteenth birthday with my friend Monty, also a redhead but blue-eyed. Having both recently come out of the closet, we had pent-up sexual frustration in abundance. It wasn't planned so we didn't have lube. I think by this point I had already had my fingers up my ass so I had some inkling of what it might feel like. We got his dick in the old-fashioned way, with spit and some grit. I remember he was seated on the passenger side and I mounted him; it must have looked like any number of scenes from the soap operas I watched voraciously as a teen. I don't remember anything about the sex except for the moment when he pulled out and his dick was completely covered in my shit. He was repulsed, I was mortified and to make things worse there was nothing in the car to clean him up with... no tissues, no rag, no nothing.



DAVID, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches

Eyes of longing

In elementary school, my class went on a field trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts. I remember being a little intimidated and not quite knowing what to make of the things I saw. I felt quite small in this grand, expansive building with high ceilings. When we made it up to the floor with modern European paintings, I was suddenly jolted to some kind of recognition when I encountered *Self-Portrait with Carnation* by Otto Dix.

Relatively small at 19-½ x 29 inches, it nonetheless had a tremendous effect on me. Dix used oil and tempura on panel, an early Renaissance technique which lends richness and depth to the subject portrayed. Centered against a bright cyan blue background, a young male figure stares out at the viewer with an intense, confident gaze. He is handsome with angled features and a severe bowl haircut. He is turned slightly away from the viewer and holds a pink carnation in his beautifully rendered right hand. The textures of his corduroy coat invite careful looking, as the wide wale in the fabric hints at the form underneath. By using this old technique to paint a modern subject, Dix has created a tension in the image that I felt but didn't understand.

I can't say for sure what it was about this painting, but it made me profoundly aware of myself and my own feelings. Most of the things I encountered that day garnered just the few seconds of my attention required to take them in. That was not the case with this painting. I wanted to stay looking at it and I enjoyed the feeling of being apprehended. Perhaps it was primarily my desire that kept me looking—already at this age I had inklings of my attraction to other boys, but I think there was something more in it than that. Also around this time, I had become aware of my own artistic inclinations. I began drawing with the seriousness of a person much older than me; I rendered an image of a cat so faithfully from

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a how-to drawing book that my siblings all asked for their own copy. I was likely identifying with the subject who was also the maker of the work.

This image always stayed with me. I am drawn to the confrontational and unsparring style of Dix's portraits which is sometimes described as cruel and harsh, but I disagree. On the contrary, the vivid depiction reveals the particularities of the subject and it is our own judgment we project back onto the painting. In these works, the complexity of human life is not white-washed. Revealed are the struggles and miseries that define what it means to live.

In my portraits, I often depict my subjects gazing directly at the camera, and in turn, the viewer. When I am shooting, I don't limit myself and have the subject look at me and look away. Often when going through my negatives, though, an image with a direct gaze will emerge as the winner. It is a conscious decision that I make in order, I believe, to recapture what I felt beholding and being beheld by Dix's self-portrait. In making a portrait, I don't think I am revealing someone's soul. But it is important to me that my subjects are rendered with agency. Revealing their particularities makes them feel like real people.

In a few of my critiques, there has been a suggestion that my images would be more interesting if the face was obscured or the body not shown in its totality. A book of the collection of W.M. Hunt called *The Unseen Eye* has been suggested to me more than once. The premise of the collection is to only include photographs of "people in which the eyes are somehow obscured, veiled, hidden, blocked, averted or closed." The collection is huge and there is no shortage of arresting images. Throughout the book, Hunt's comments and asides run alongside many of the images. One passage caught my attention straight away:

"I am drawn to this sort of odd material. 'Straight' portraits are rarely compelling for me. Photographs of individuals in which the artist attempts to make a direct visual report on the sitter seem maddeningly unsuccessful. These might as well be ID photos for all the emotional life they impart. What is intended as a representation or interpretation of an individual offers no insight into the person. There is no empathy, no connection. You get the surface information—black, white, old, young, fat, skinny—but that is all."

I didn't understand this outright rejection. In the next paragraph, he laments the inability of many photographers to tell you anything about a subject. He draws a parallel between an individual's truth and their eyes, using the trope that they are the portal to the soul. His collection, he asserts, denies the viewer access to that truth. Viewers must then finish



CAROLE, 2015
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches

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the portrait by filling it with their own projections. This seems a similar sentiment to what's been suggested to me, that if I showed less the viewer can make it his or hers. But what if I'm interested in the particularities of a given person and that's what I'm intending to bring forth? Making the subject into an empty vessel seems like total objectification.

As an antidote to Hunt, I turn to Wolfgang Tillmans who feels like more of a kindred spirit when it comes to portraiture. During my graduate studies, I researched him for one of our critical theory seminars. It wasn't until I saw his exhibition, *PCR*, at David Zwirner Gallery in the fall of 2015 that I really started to take his work seriously and felt profoundly moved and inspired by it. There was something that resonated deeply with me in both the content of the photographs and the way in which he exhibited them. I realized there was a lot about him, and his work, that I didn't really know. I admire how he refuses to be pinned down and that much of his practice challenges assumptions held dear in the photo world. He's a generalist of sorts and doesn't confine himself to a single genre. He shoots still lifes, landscapes, abstract work, and reportage but he is also a very committed portraitist. Since the beginning, representing his friends and their social milieu has been central to his practice.

"Making a portrait is a fundamental artistic act—and the process of it is a very direct human exchange, which is what I find interesting about it.... The actual dynamics of vulnerability and exposure and embarrassment and honesty do not change, ever."²

I agree with Tillmans. I've come to realize that much of my desire to work with other people stems from a deep curiosity I have about human beings and relationships. In the past, I've had a hard time asking for something I want from someone else. With every interaction, I learn more about myself and get more comfortable navigating the divide between myself and another. I've become keenly aware of a tendency to please and push against it when the time is right. When I am photographing someone I try to remain present in the interaction, aware of my feelings and my subject's. In a way, every exchange is a lesson in living: sometimes I get what I want and sometimes I don't.

I ultimately choose my subjects for their uniqueness and imperfections, it is how I identify with them, so I see no shame in finding a way to depict them that reflects these qualities. It's as though Dix's ghost hovers over my picture-making. My photographs can be precise and meticulous, but I use it as a means for expressing the seriousness with which I take what I am doing. In an interview about his work, Richard Learoyd expresses a sentiment that rings true to me:

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"I think that maybe my search for detail or perfection in photographs is a desire to illuminate imperfection and humanness. The invitation to scrutinize another, which is undoubtedly in my work, inevitably highlights the loneliness of the soul and the depressing isolation of the human condition."³

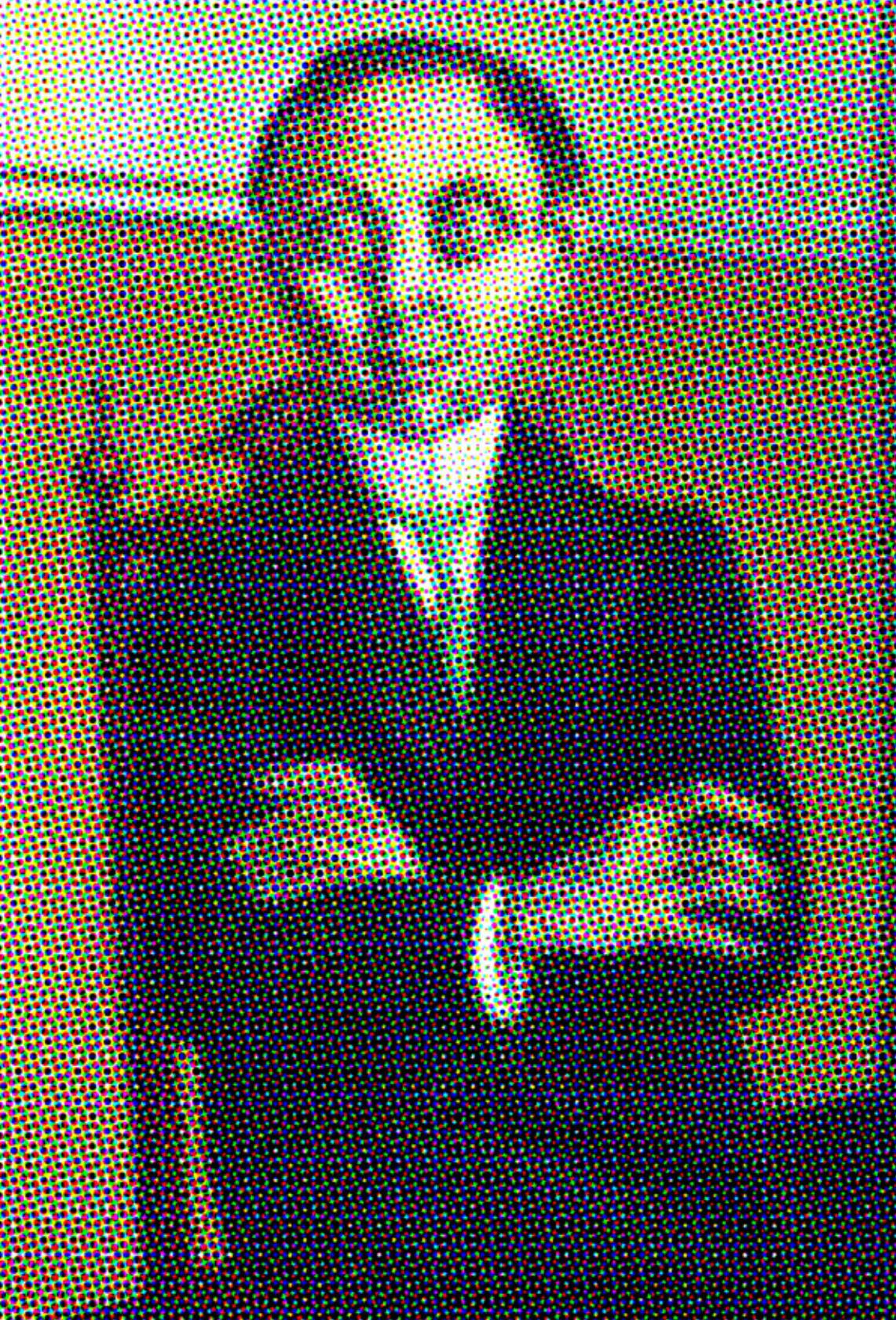
It's been useful for me to have these questions raised because it has made me look closely at my motivations and interests in regard to portraiture. I have more clarity about why making portraits is an important part of my practice. My graduate studies have exposed me to a wide range of artistic expression and my taste has grown. Nevertheless, that feeling I get from looking at another human being and being able to stare in his or her eyes continues to be a powerful experience.



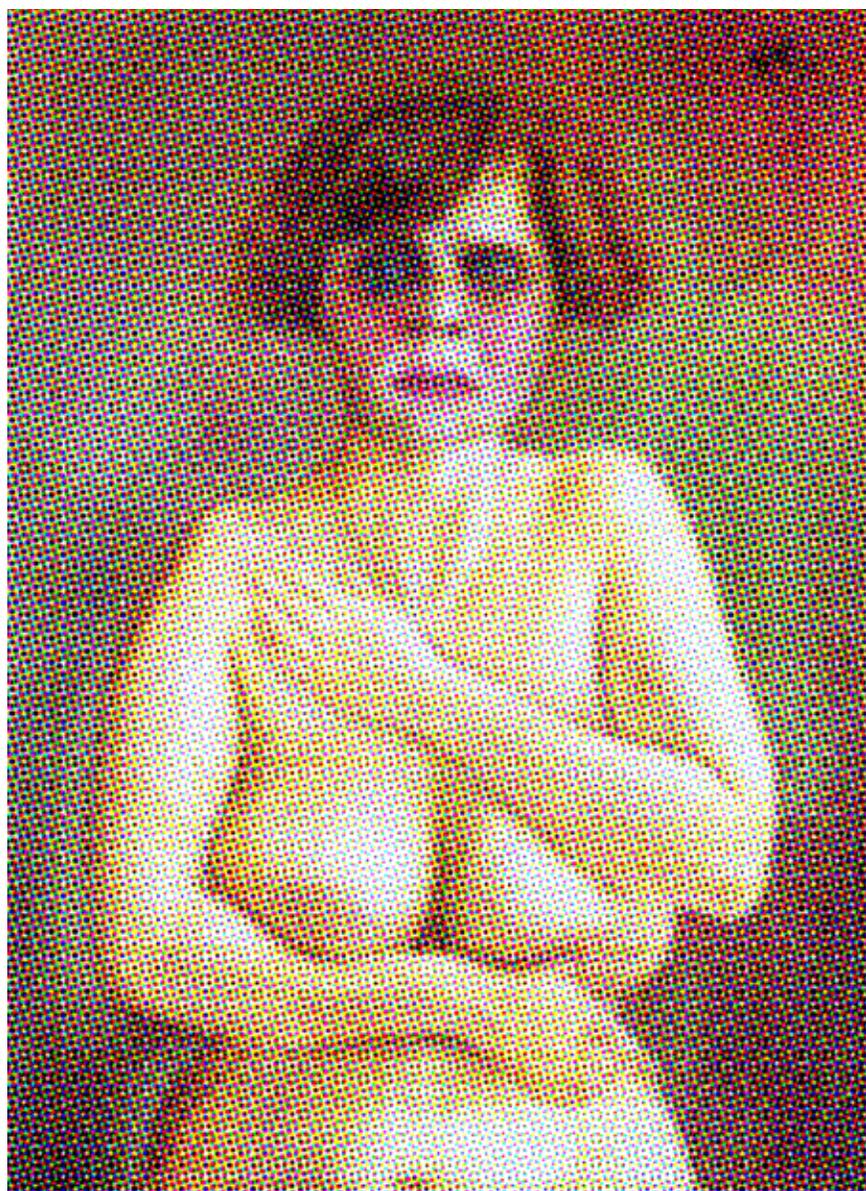
JEROME, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches

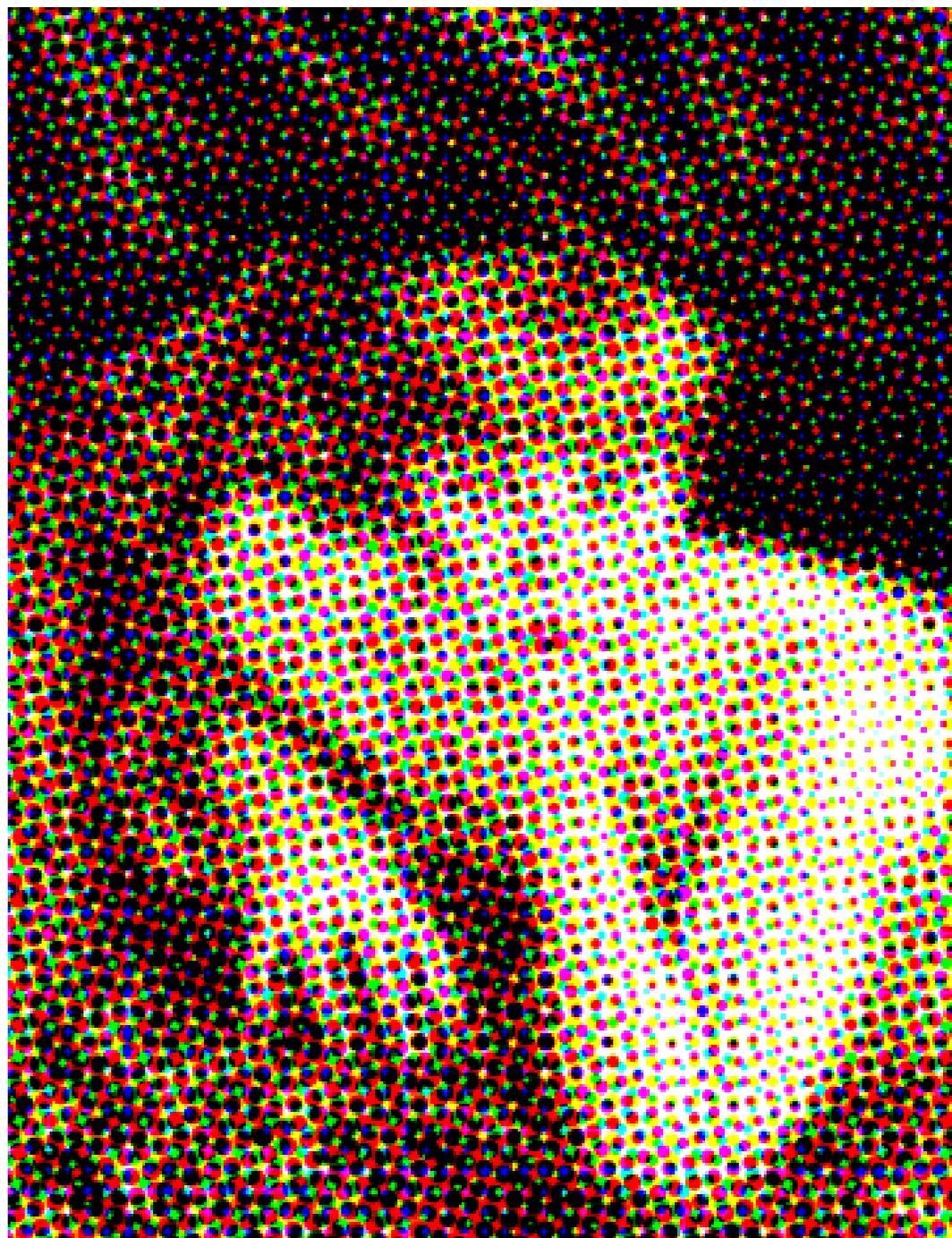


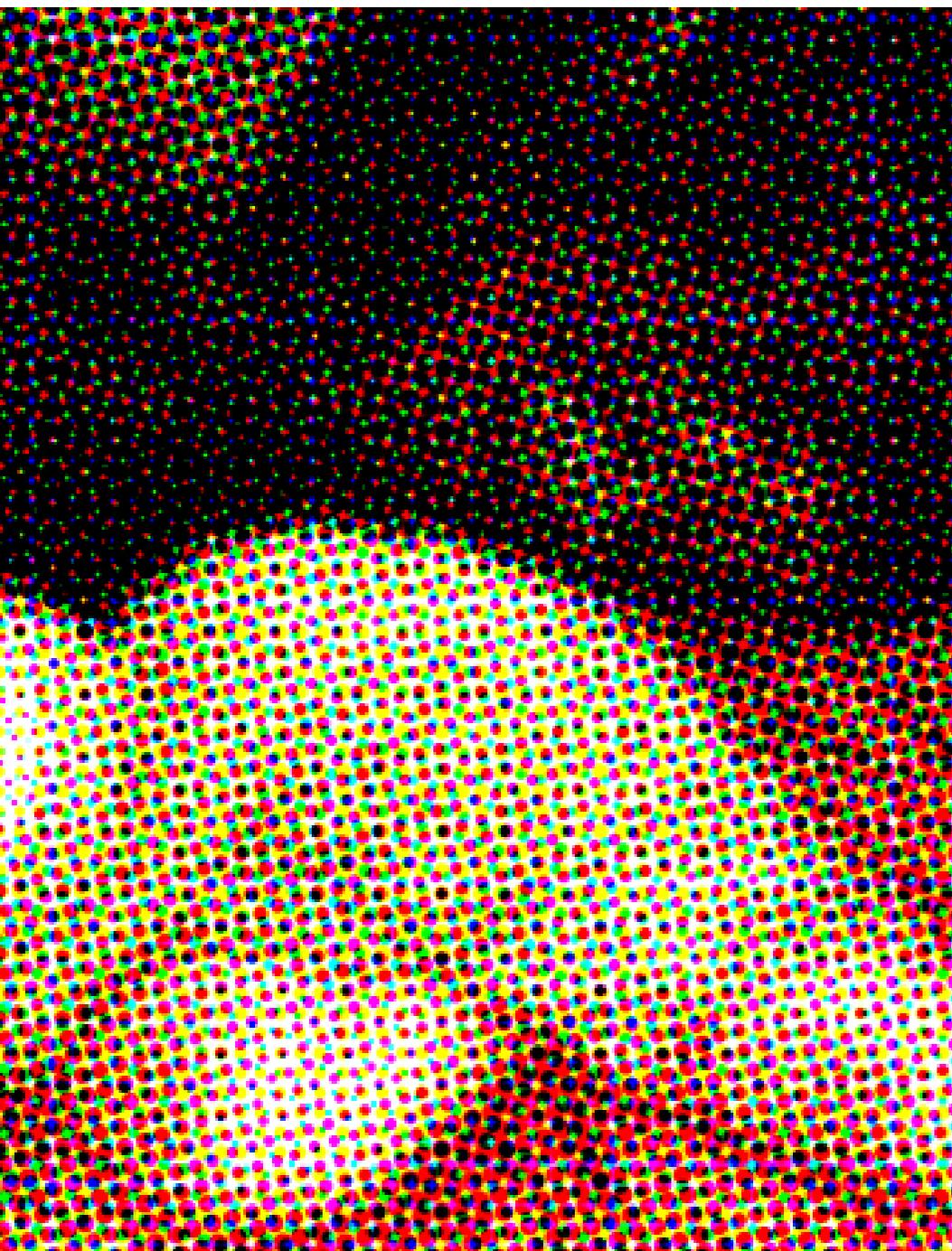
MARTHA, 2014
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches

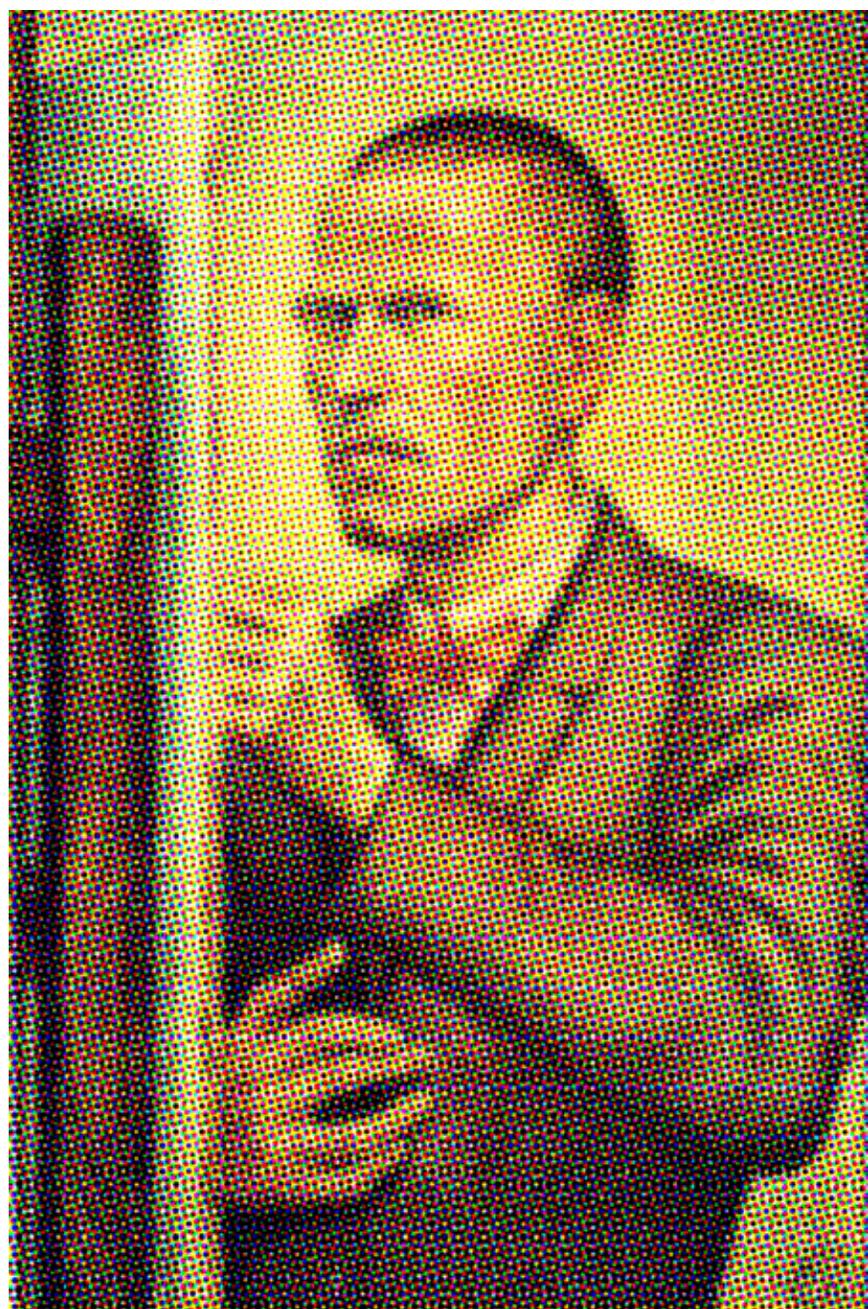


I don't need this picture to tell me everything about you. And I honestly don't care if it tells me too much. All I need is for my eyes to lock to yours. To leave the surface... to find a place in-between.

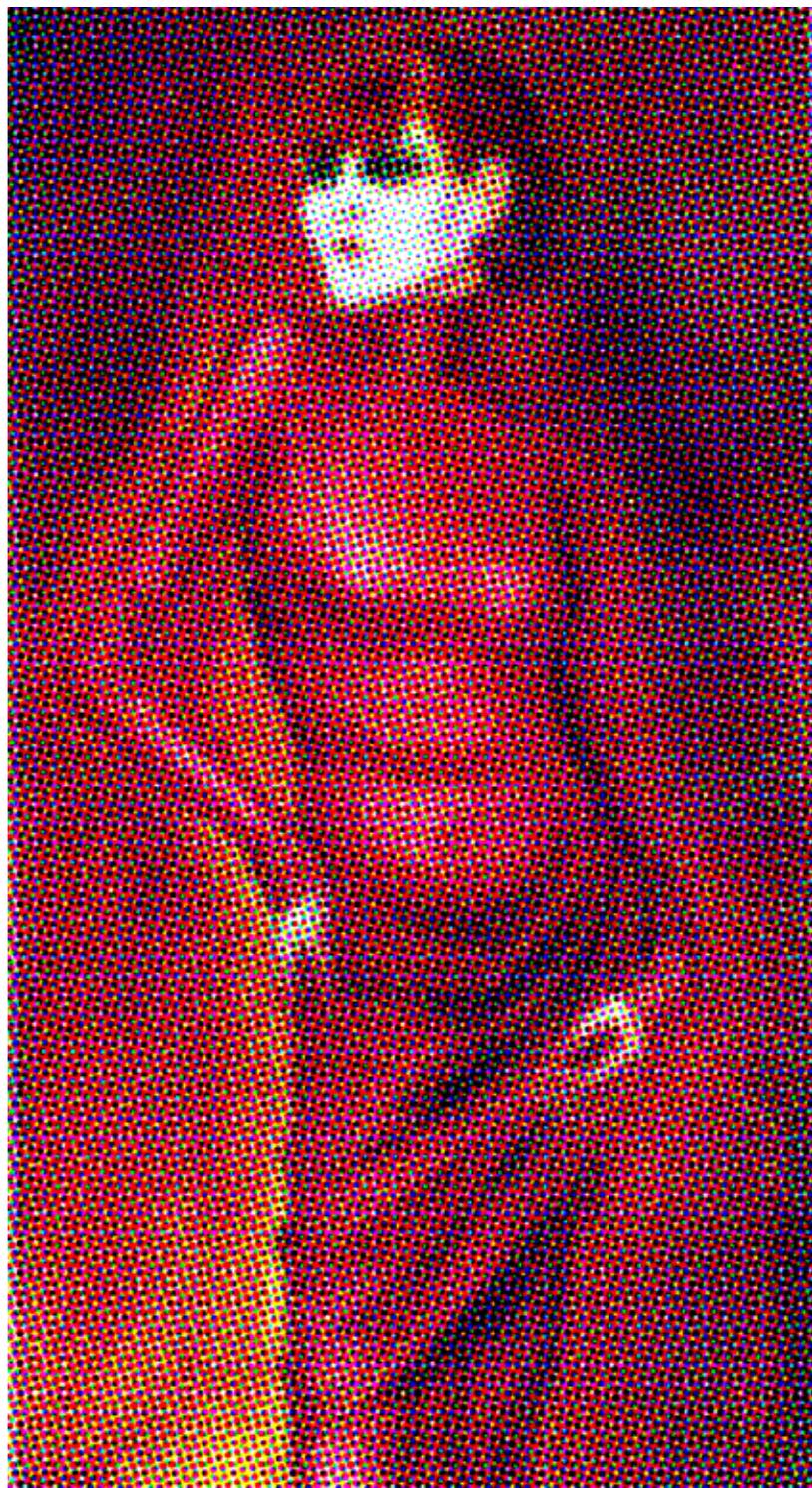






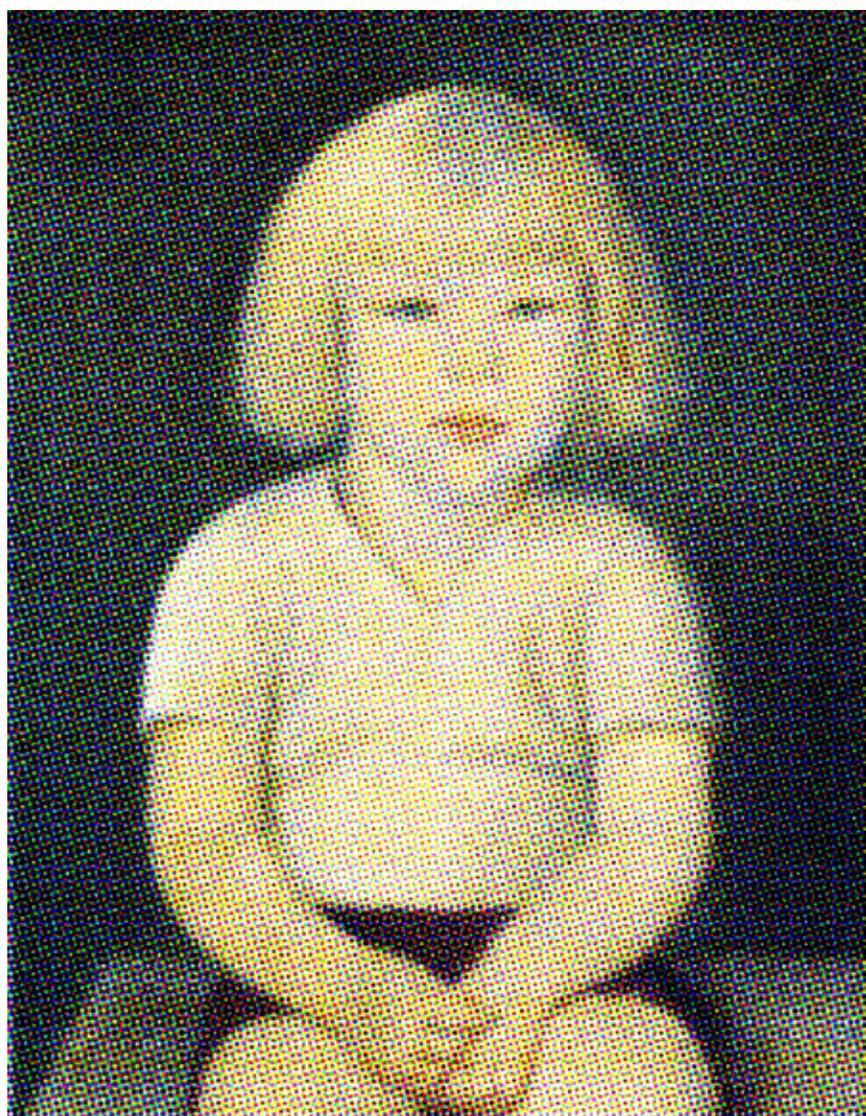


It's like getting cruised. Feeling hunted. Being chased. Fuck, my stomach is in my throat. I won't give you everything, either. If you are lucky you'll have me for a minute, or maybe forever when I save you to my hard drive. But my attention is fickle, always on to the next kick. The next one and the next one... only to remind me of the rot inside me.

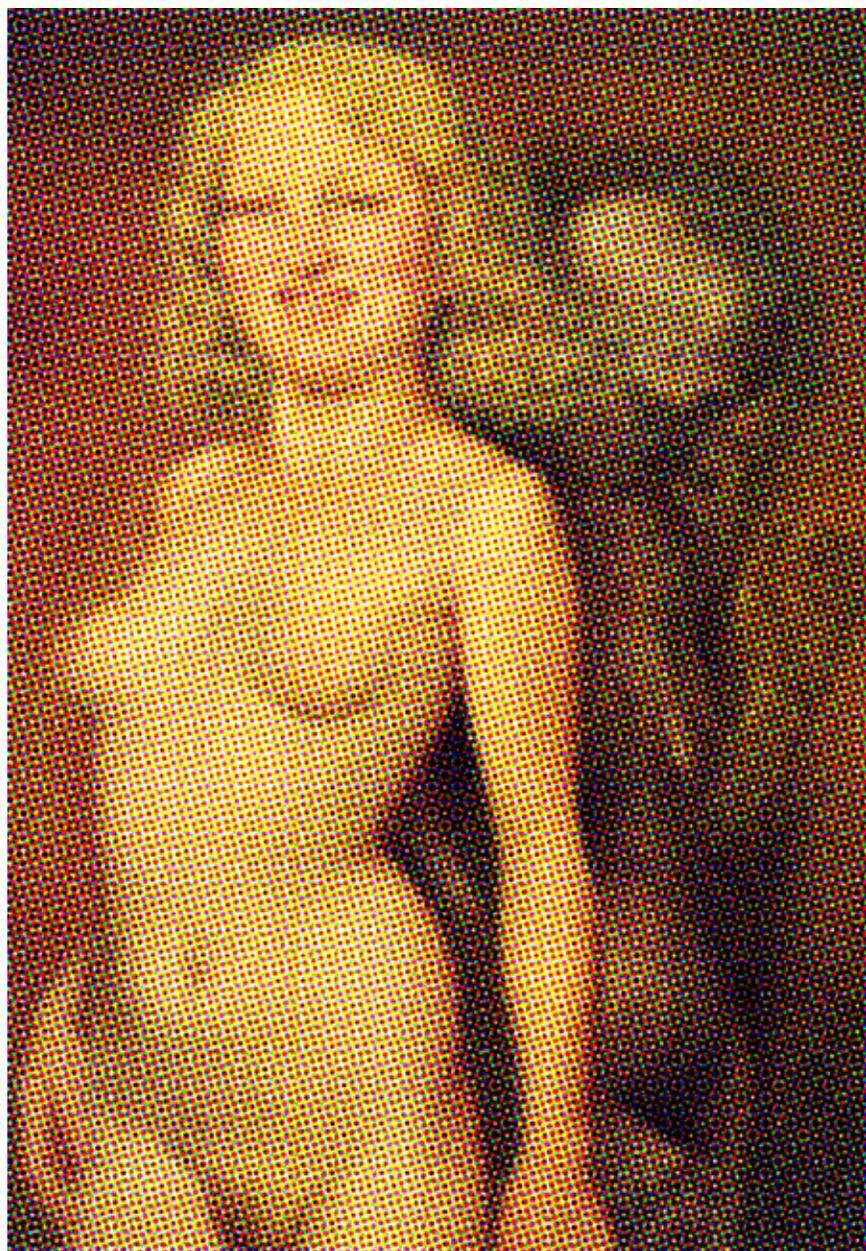


**I want skin like a beautifully draped Prada overcoat.
Supple, willowy, pliant but always a little unwieldy.**

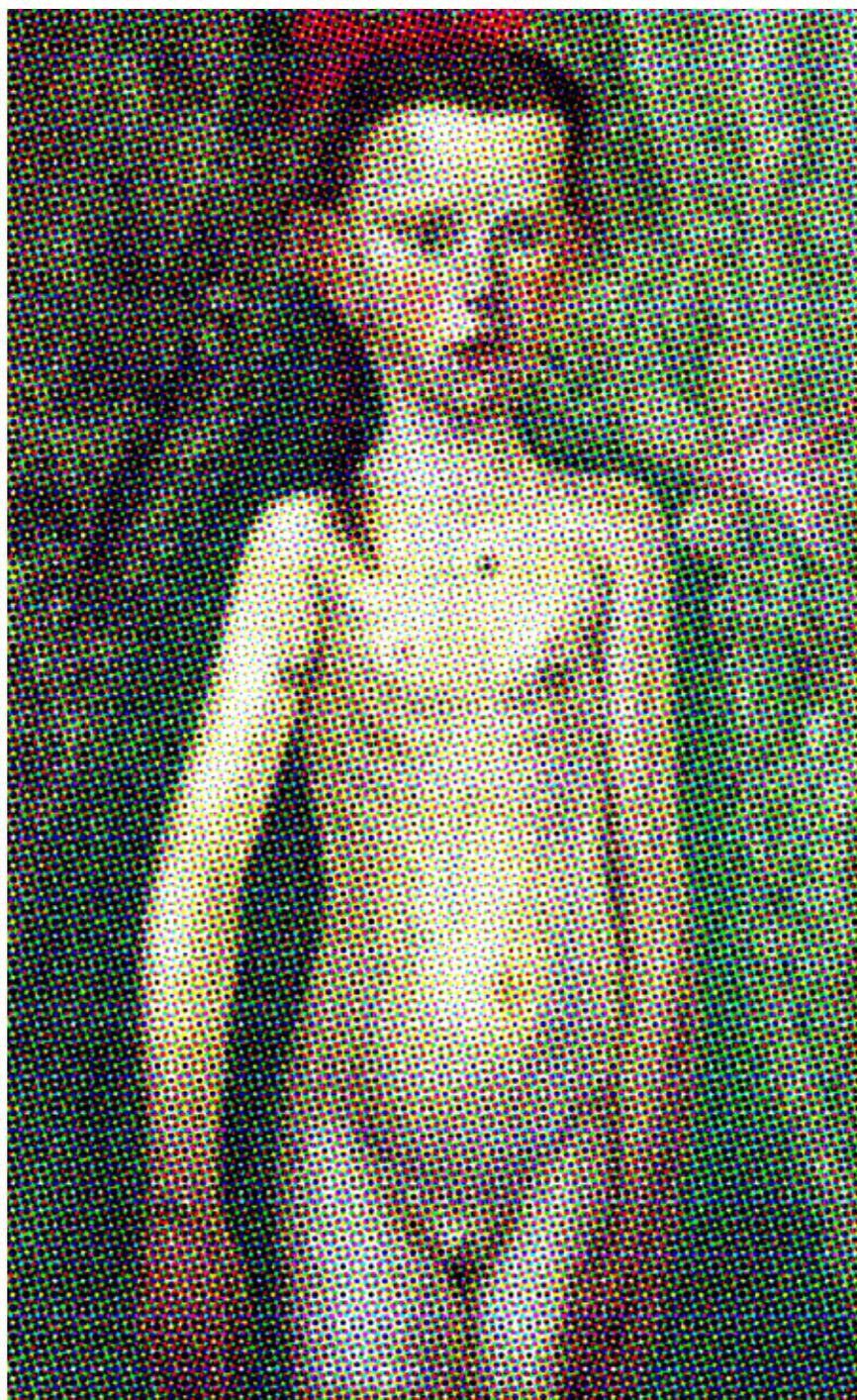


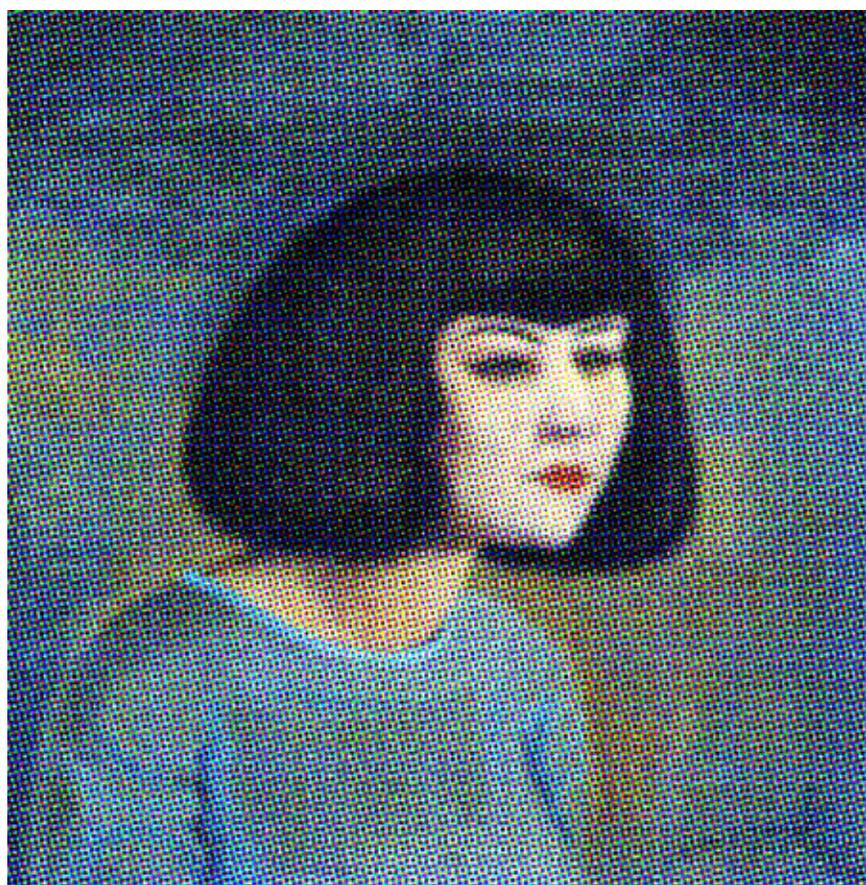


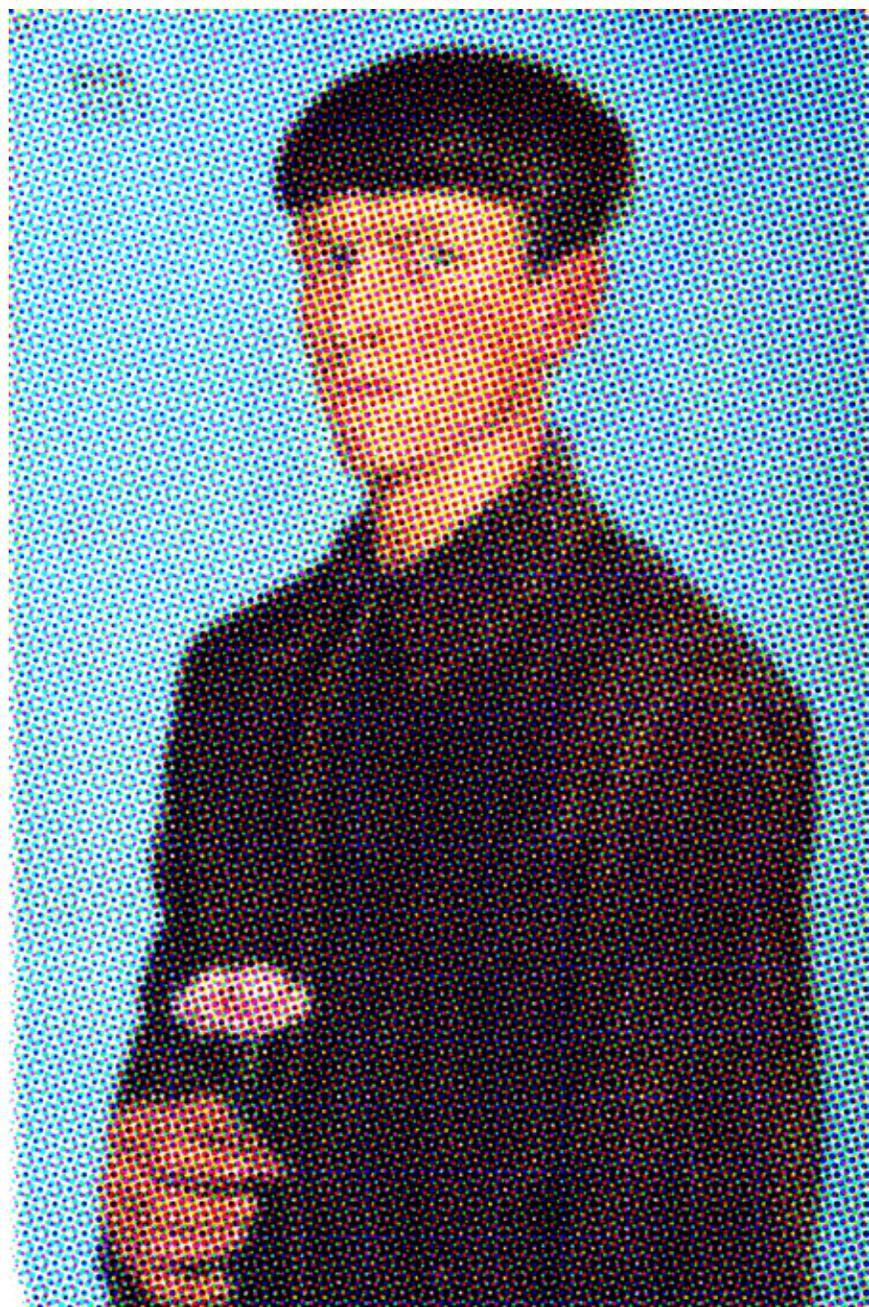
They tell me the magic is in the mystery, but what if I don't like mysteries? What if I want to be hit in the head, like an axe cleaving through my cranium.











Fuck me in my eye holes. Good and deep. Take me back to the beginning. To the first time I was beheld. Your eyes licking me. Pre-pubescent confusion like sticky jizz in my brain. I need to gag on a cum rag, draw it out so I can swallow it again. I won't believe them when they tell me this wasn't something real. I had all of you to myself, even if just for a second.



APHRODITE IN THE GROVE, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 30 inches

As soon as the fall semester ended, my attention turned to my thesis solo show. I was sitting on my studio floor organizing the contents of a busted old box of photographs and moving them to a new container. Looking at all the old pictures of me and my friends with our bad 1980s hair made me nostalgic for the sense of possibility that time held for us. I felt inspired and made a playlist of music from then; on it was Song to the Siren by This Mortal Coil. As Elisabeth Fraser's haunting voice came on, I was transported to the family room of our house where I would lay for hours listening to music.

On the floating, shipless oceans
I did all my best to smile
Til your singing eyes and fingers
Drew me loving to your isle
And you sang, "Sail to me
Sail to me, let me enfold you
Here I am, here I am
Waiting to hold you"

The song seemed to encapsulate much of what I had been thinking about as I made the new work that would be in my show. It's essentially about the hazards of desire and the threat of death. The loss of my father heightened a fear of my own demise. I was looking back at old photos I had taken in my youth and using them as springboards for new work so I liked how the song would reference my youth. That night it became my provisional title, but it stuck. I recently found out that the song was originally written in 1967, the year of my birth, so maybe it was preordained.



JOHN, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches

The pleasures of flesh

For as long as I remember, I've been mesmerized by the body. My favorite book as a kid was an illustrated human anatomy guide for children that my oldest sister, Marise, gave me. It was called *The Question and Answer Book About the Human Body*. It is broken down by the various systems (skeletal, nervous, digestive, etc...) although true to '70s era America the reproductive system is not covered. I don't know where this curiosity came from, but I remember poring over this book trying to understand how all the systems worked in concert with one another.

Growing up Catholic, the body often held contradictory connotations. In almost every room of my house, there was a crucifix which depicted a near naked Jesus in the rapture of his demise. His sinewy body draped from the cross had a distinctly erotic character. When we went to church each Sunday, the same image of a lithe young Jesus hung in grand scale behind the altar and we were there to revere him. At the same time, we were taught to be skeptical of the body because it was the source of temptation and sin. All of your actions are supposed to be directed towards the life you have in eternity after you are freed from the burden of body. Perhaps the mixed messages around the body drew my interest to it.

The human body has been a preoccupation of art for millennia. The prehistoric *Venus of Willendorf* (c. 24,000–22,000 B.C.) is perhaps the earliest known example of figurative sculpture. Curvy and round with pendulous breasts, the navel and genitals are distinctly rendered. This points to the likely function of this portable, tiny sculpture as a talisman of fertility. In her introduction to *Body of Art*, Jennifer Blessing notes that many of the surviving images of the human body from ancient times through the Renaissance:

“were intended for ritual and devotional use, expressing religious beliefs that developed as a means to understand the natural world and perhaps to manage social behavior.”⁴

The crucifix functions in a similar way. As the story goes, Jesus came to earth to die for mankind’s sins. His dying body is meant to remind you of your inherent corporeal sinfulness. Dangling there on the cross, all hot, he’s supposed to help keep you in line.

I think there are various impulses that lead me towards nudity in my photographs. I don’t shoot people naked for shock value. To me there is nothing more natural than the human body. The variability in forms is infinitely interesting to me; every body is different... And everybody inhabits their body differently, which is something I like discovering. This usually requires an investment of time but it is ultimately worth it.

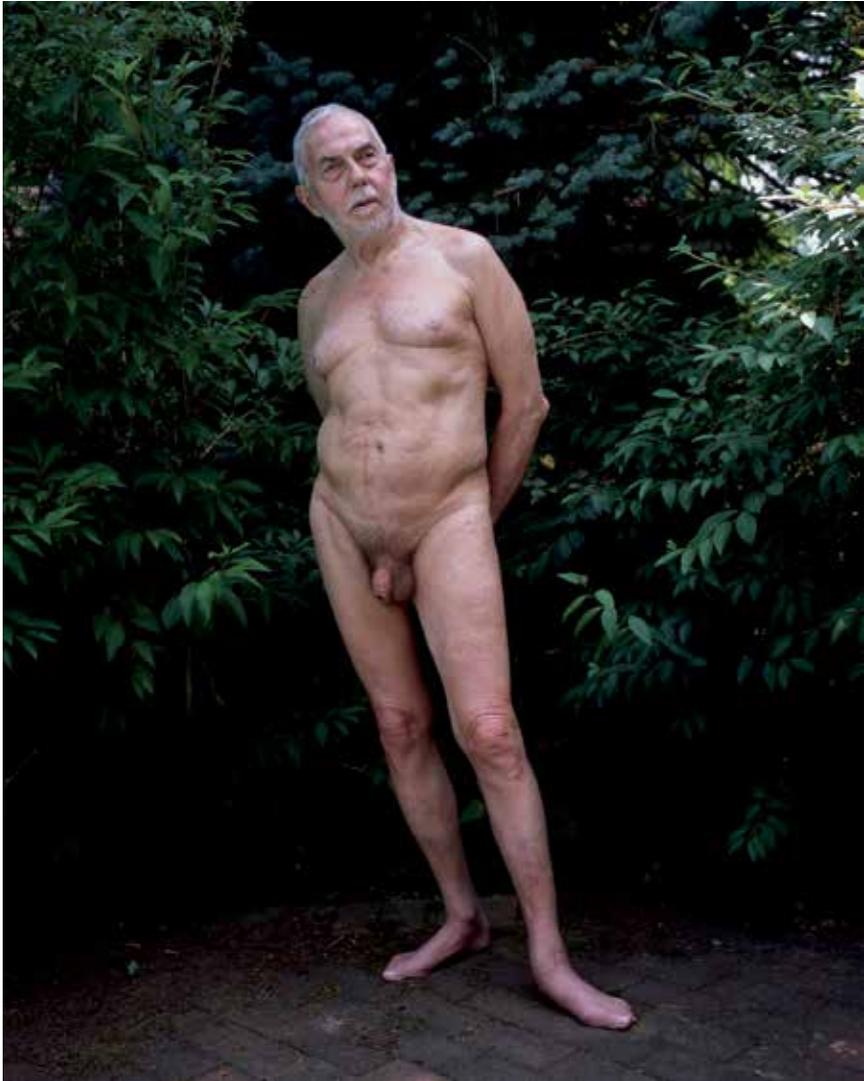
The other thing that nudity does is strip away the particularity of style. Clothing has so much power to convey meaning and image. I am more interested in seeing someone revealed through their gestures, how they land in their body and how they gaze back at me. There is an inherent power in being the photographer but I go out of my way to subvert it. I never put on airs of being in control of the situation. If I am nervous, I usually reveal it either in my chitchat or in the sweat stains billowing out from the armpits of my t-shirts. I often ask my subjects what things feel comfortable to them, or ask them to tell me if something feels unnatural. We are all so critical of our own image, so I am always shocked by insecurities of people I think are truly great looking. Essentially I try to put them at ease.

Sometimes if I met the guy via the Internet, through a hook-up site for instance, I may actually shoot nude as well. It feels like it levels the playing field and allows me to experience my own nakedness. There has usually been flirting and banter leading up to the encounter, but it can still be awkward to find the right moment to undress. I’ve learned that it’s never predictable but that’s also part of the excitement. I never know how the exchange is going to play out; sometimes it’s sexual and sometimes it’s not. Not everyone is comfortable being naked in front of a stranger so this intimate prerequisite attracts subjects that are on a similar wavelength to me.

I have discovered that through photographing people I expand my notions around desire. Slowing down and taking the time to really apprehend someone allows for a greater appreciation of our human quirks. It feels very exciting and gratifying to me.



STEPHEN, 2016
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches



JOHN, 2015
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches

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Looking at the body gives me a tremendous visceral, visual pleasure. This is wrapped up deeply in my own sexuality and the experience of having to stifle it for many years during my adolescence. I remember watching my classmate, Vince Rasmussen, leave the classroom in seventh grade and being transfixed by his ass in his Jordache jeans. As my bulge swelled, I lived in fear of being caught and beaten to a pulp.

As a teenager, I used to keep a collection of underwear ads torn out of Sunday circulars in my pants drawer of my dresser. In hindsight it was an apt place for them, although at the time I chose it because it was the deepest drawer making the pictures less likely to be found. Jim Palmer was the model for Jockey at the time. I loved his hairy body so he featured prominently in the collection. These pictures provided a lifeline to something that was true inside me but I wasn't ready to accept. And I could consume them without the fear of being beaten up.

Looking at bodies makes me feel alive and aware of my own. I spend so much time in my mind that I relish the moments when I can inhabit my physicality and be aware of having a body. I think we all feel our bodies as remote since thought and language can often get in the way of feeling. I create experiences that give me access. In the process, I bring images into the world where nakedness is an important state of being.

My birth is the stuff of legend in my family. I am the ninth of ten so there are plenty of stories—but mine was special. My mother began having labor pains in the early evening. Hours passed and the contractions grew closer. She was putting off going to the hospital until her water broke. Strangely it never did. Eventually the contractions were so frequent she finally let my dad take her to the hospital. She was already well-dilated and the nurses were incredulous when she said her water had not broken. When she would tell the story, she would say with much flourish “this is my ninth child, don’t you think I would know if my water broke?”

I had what my mother has always called a dry birth. For some unknown reason, the placental fluid had dried up—and not a day too soon. I was the only one of us born on my due date (the foretelling of a future of pathological promptness!). I weighed less than five pounds so was treated as a preemie and spent my first days in an incubator. My dad would tell the story of how tiny I was and would hold out his hand, and say “you could fit right in there.” What I remember most about the story, though, is how he further described me: tiny and shriveled, like a baby bird.



KAMAL, 2015
Archival pigment print
20 x 30 inches

Picking at the wound

I was often the subject in my early photographs but struggled to understand to what end. For years I had been trying to take a self-portraiture class at ICP. Twice I had signed up for classes—I don't recall who was teaching them—but both times they were canceled for low enrollment the week before (I thought I was perhaps one of three people in all of New York interested in self portraits...). So when I discovered Jen Davis' class, *The Investigation of Self and the Human Condition*, I was excited but didn't really have high hopes that the class would actually take place. I hadn't heard of Jen or encountered her work at this point but I discovered her website. I remember being completely blown away by her beautiful and sensitive self-portraits. Her vulnerability was palpable as she revealed images of a body type that we rarely see.

To my surprise and delight, the class did not get canceled. It was in fact very popular; there were eighteen of us in the first class. As is typical of continuing education classes at ICP, the group was a collection of very different people with very different experiences. The majority of the class was women; I think there were only three guys that first time we met. Jen had us fill out a questionnaire. I was horribly nervous because we were all told to bring ten or so images to share with the class. I had never really shared my images of myself in a class like this before. The whole time I was filling out the sheet, I kept thinking about putting the work up.

I had brought a selection of images that I put up on the board, as well as a book of self portraits I had made at Parsons when I did my design degree. One by one we went around the table, introducing ourselves and talking about what brought us there. Some students had never taken a single photo of themselves, while others had been doing it for years. The work was very uneven and varied, but from that first day I recognized something different

about how Jen treated her students. I had just experienced a class in the previous semester where the teacher was very dismissive of the students who were just starting out and struggling to find their interests. Jen was the exact opposite. She treated everyone as an image-maker deserving of respect no matter where they were in the process of becoming an artist. This was exactly the tone needed for a class that challenged you to expose yourself week after week.

The first assignment was meant to be an ice-breaker of sorts. We could choose to either do a narrative or alter ego self-portrait. I dismissed offhand the idea of an alter ego, believing myself to be fully realized without sides of myself yearning for expression. As the days went by, some awareness of resistance to the alter ego route welled up inside me and I knew this was fertile ground for me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that if I had an alter ego he would be a go-go boy: confident of his sexual attractiveness and willing to flaunt it.

When it came time to shoot, my approach was a fundamental challenge to the persona I usually have in front of the camera, and also the one I have in the world. Normally I have a measured and controlled bearing, often revealing little of my fears, vulnerabilities and desires. I know what angle of my face offers the most concealment. I take little risk for fear of shattering that façade. Now here I was cupping my naked ass cheeks or sucking on my index finger while tugging on the waistband of my jockstrap.

In thinking about the alter ego, I knew I had real discomfort in any display of seductiveness. I searched through my collection of images to root out postures and poses that felt impossible or distant for me to inhabit. I know I have a real desire for harnessing that power in me, for making myself an object, but up until then I'd been too afraid to own it and confront it. The process of taking the pictures was both terrifying and electrifying. I was definitely holding back a lot and second guessing myself. It helped to be drinking wine but honestly I still never let myself really cross over into a territory where I felt I was really inhabiting the go-go boy persona. I knew I had limited time (god, did I not want Andy to witness me doing this!) and worried that they would feel too "studio", which in the end was a false fear. I think the studio quality really isolated what I was trying to do and BE in front of the camera. There was nothing more to look at than my carefully worked and sculpted physicality.

The next day I still had this really unsettling feeling, as though I had done something really shameful. I questioned my ideas and motivations and really made myself feel small and silly. I don't think I realized what I had confronted and I started to become worried about what others would think. Would Jen think they were lame? Would the other classmates feel



UNTITLED, 2014
Archival pigment print
21 x 14 inches

embarrassed for me? I edited and played around with the images in a semi-detached and disinterested way... like looking out of the corner of one's eye. It wasn't until I started to print them the night before our next class that I allowed myself to feel the electricity of what I had done and that it was really a shift in the story I was trying to tell.

I felt anxious about putting up my pictures; since taking them I had been feeling really raw and unsettled. Totally vulnerable. My work felt so different than everyone else's—in style and in content. And it felt more unabashed. I'm not sure people knew what to think. For many of the other students in the class, this was their first time taking self-portraits. They were trying to conceal themselves (one guy did a whole series with a stocking over his face) or were completely timid about their work. I had a lot of those same feelings too, but since I had been doing this longer and was particularly invested in this mode of representation, I felt like the only way forward was through. You have to make the kind of work that you can make in a particular moment, and not apologize for it. And even though I was reluctant about mine, I never felt apologetic for them. On the contrary, I was proud of my bravery in hanging it all out.



It seemed to have paid off because Jen really loved the work. When we came to my photographs towards the end of the critique, there was this hilariously awkward burst of laughter from everyone. Not at the work, because I would have been crushed, but at the contrast and the way it confronted everyone, including me. Jen loved the aggression and the engagement with the viewer. She felt like it was a breakthrough for me and something that was lacking in the other work. I think on some subconscious level, I knew that was true but in this instance, I did need the reassurance from outside.

As the classes progressed, the critiques got increasingly personal. We started to feel more comfortable with each other and Jen facilitated a warm and supportive environment. We knew about each other's mommy or daddy

issues, traumatic childhoods and troubled relationships. Roughly a third of the students stopped coming. They tended to be the ones who were having the hardest time opening up. Perhaps it just got to be too much for them. We were all sharing our hang-ups and fears as we stood in front of images of ourselves, baring it all figuratively, and sometimes literally. It was an incredibly bonding experience; I still have two good friends from that class.

The class was a turning point for me. I started to think about my work differently and began to clarify what I was trying to say. Jen helped me hone my voice as an artist, and also taught me how to talk about other people's work. The critiques were always generative, helping the students gain greater insight into how their images functioned and what their concerns were. I started to feel comfortable revealing how someone's work made me feel. I was tremendously insecure about my own work so I tried to be empathetic and constructive when I gave feedback, but also very honest. These critiques turned into a dialogue which is how I believe a critique functions best. Something is learned that wasn't clear before.

It is something that I think is missing from our critique class in the MFA. The format is very structured; the artist is not able to speak but everyone else must speak for three minutes regardless of whether they have something to say. In the beginning, it felt awkward but I wanted to give it a chance because I understood the point of it: in groups, there are generally those comfortable expressing themselves and those who are not. This theoretically levels the playing field, but in practice I think it generates a stifled critique. If people don't have anything to say, they generally echo comments made by someone previously. The feedback can sometimes feel random and not leading anywhere.

It was in this class that I realized I needed to start trusting my own experience as a wellspring for making work. It was a huge shift. Suddenly my fears of fading from notice at middle age were apparent and something I wanted to engage with in my work. I started questioning who gets represented. I'm sensitive to those that are often overlooked because I often have felt that I am. The power of representation remains important to me and I doubt it will ever change.



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 30 inches



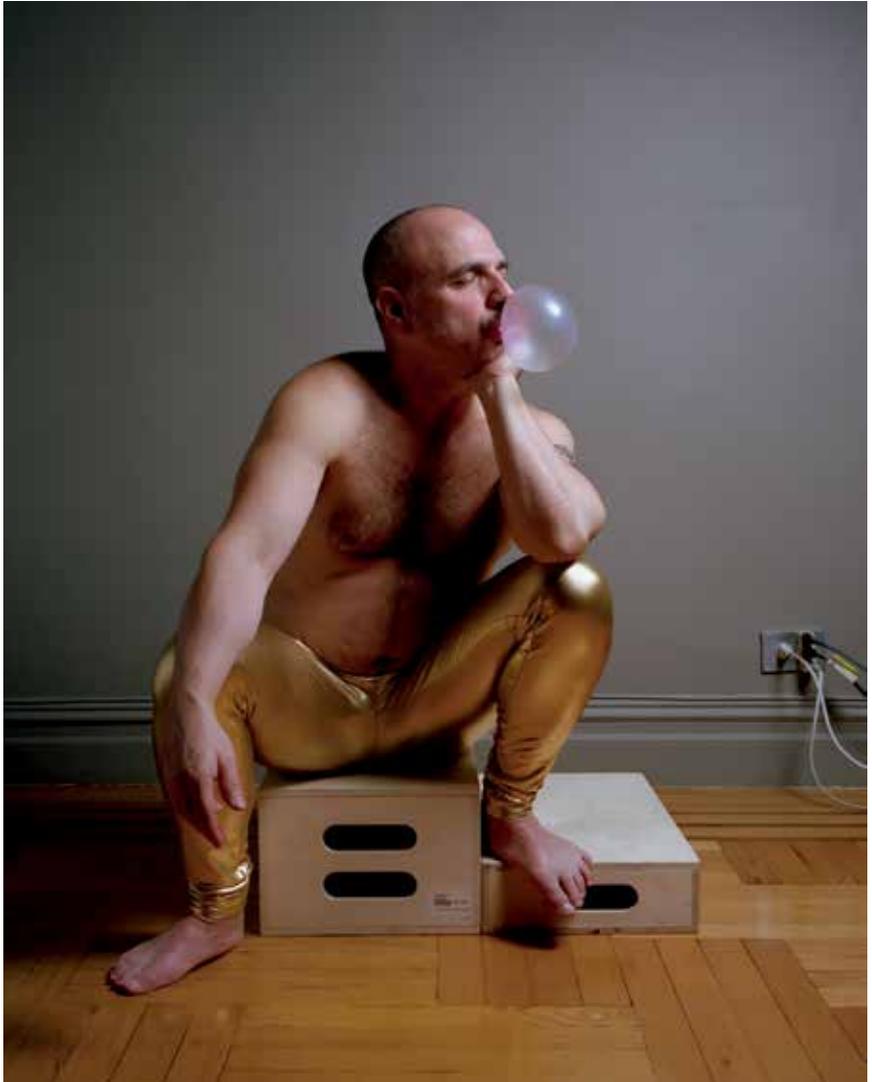
UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 36 inches

It was the summer of 2011 when my siblings asked me to come home for a week to help my mom. My father was having knee replacement surgery at 84 years-old and they anticipated a difficult recovery. His two weeks at a rehab center was cut short when my family realized after the second day that the place was a negligent nightmare. In addition to this difficulty, the anesthesia had triggered dementia and delusions. I moved my flight up a week. I had expected that I would be doing some cooking and cleaning, as well as nagging him to do his rehab exercises.

Shortly after arriving, my mother told me that later in the week I would need to help my father in the shower. I was totally flipped out at the prospect—it's not something one ever really expects to do—but I knew I needed to be the dutiful son. When the time came, I dreaded seeing his aged, naked body. My mom helped him get undressed and seated in the shower on one of those plastic chairs. I decided I would wear my gym shorts because being naked with him would be even weirder. My mother called me in so I took my place behind him and helped him wash the areas he couldn't reach. We spoke very little; I'm sure it was as awkward for him as it was for me. I tried to avert my gaze from him as much as possible, but it was unavoidable when I needed to help him out. My mother had set out a blow dryer next to the toilet and my father instructed me that I needed to dry his crotch! Looking at him was unavoidable and suddenly I was confronted by his shriveled penis. It seemed to be inverted like his body was pulling it back inside him from disuse, fossilizing the terror of my own aging.



**NO MATTER WHAT YA CALLS ME-
I AM WHAT I AM AN' THA'S ALL I YAM!, 2015**
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches



THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE, 2015
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches



KAMAL, 2015
Archival pigment print
32 x 48 inches



STEVEN & JIM #1, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 36 inches





SELF-PORTRAIT WITH JEROME, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches



JARED, 2016
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches



STEPHEN, 2016
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches



KARTIK, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches



NICO, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 45 inches



STEVEN & JIM #2, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 36 inches



In a box I'd labeled Memories, I discovered a beautifully weathered issue of the C.E.P Perspective, my high school newspaper. It's dated May 9, 1985, shortly before I graduated. Inside was a special feature on homosexuality that included my anonymous piece about my first experience at a gay bar. I had completely forgotten I had written this and was suddenly overcome by curiosity and fear about what I'd written. Some of it was sweet, some of it was cringeworthy but my opening remarks sent a chill down my spine. I was brought back in time as if through a wormhole, and all the tortures of my youth felt palpable again.

"Imagine yourself in an iron shell—a shell that is totally sealed and locked around you. You're inside because society says everything you feel is wrong and unnatural. This is how I felt before I finally accepted and admitted I was a homosexual. I had known that I felt different since the sixth grade. It wasn't an instant decision I made, it was a gradual awareness of myself. I'm a senior now and I admitted it for the first time only a short while ago. That means for six years I kept this to myself. It was so hard to get through those years. Many nights I cried wishing I could be different, always knowing it was hopeless."

Reading this three decades later as a grown man, I understand myself and the forcefulness with which I won't allow my sexuality to be silenced.



MIKEY, 2015
Archival pigment print
30 x 37.5 inches

Can I have your attention

In the late 1990s, Catherine Opie gained critical recognition with her *Portraits* series that placed individuals from a fringe community visibly front and center. At the time she made this work, she was living in Los Angeles but commuting regularly to San Francisco. She had found her tribe there in the S/M community with which she was intimately involved. The original impetus for making the work was as a corrective; she didn't like the way the leather community was portrayed in mainstream culture. She had been looking at the portraits of Hans Holbein the Younger who depicted his subjects with dignity and authority. She deliberately chose to use his work as a point of departure because she wanted to portray her sitters nobly. In an interview with Russell Ferguson, she said:

"The photographs stare back, or they stare through you. They're very royal. I say that my friends are like my royal family."⁵

The portraits range from three-quarters to full body views and are all on bold colored seamless backdrops. There is red, orange, green, blue, turquoise, and purple. They have a classic formality that echoes Northern Renaissance paintings. About this deliberate choice, she says:

"Formally it can bring out all these different shapes within the body, to make it pop. It is a way to take the people out of their environments, and isolate them, because the art is really what they are doing with their bodies. It's also to make the focus really on the person."⁶

Many of the subjects are seated and gaze intently back at the camera. This directness gives a challenging air of confidence to each and every one of them. Using a 4 x 5 camera which has a tremendous capacity to

describe detail, the images are evenly sharp allowing the viewer to see the intricacies of her subjects' tattoos and the pores of their skin. Many of the prints are near life-size at 30 x 60 inches.

As a whole, they represent a very eclectic group of individuals. There is the drag performer Justin Bond seated facing the camera, her blond hair contrasting beautifully with the rich purple tone behind her. She wears a sleeveless dress that feels reminiscent of the 1950s but is radically revising history with a grey, laced corset at her tiny waist. Bearing a coy half-smile, her gender ambiguity creates tension in the picture. The performance artist Ron Athey is photographed against a vivid green backdrop, standing tall with both hands tugging at the crotch of his striped trunks. His body is covered with tattoos and piercings and he wears dramatic thigh-high, lace-up boots that seem the epitome of fetish. He stares defiantly back at the viewer.

Each individual shines in his or her uniqueness. Bodies bear the marks of ink and metal. Identity is fluid and often indeterminate. Opie is successful at both challenging and beguiling the viewer.

"I try to present people with an extreme amount of dignity. I mean they're always going to be stared at, but I try to make the portraits stare back. That's what the relationship is all about. I mean it's not like Diane Arbus or anything like that. Some of the portraits look very sad, I think, they have this distant gaze, but they are never pathetic. They are never without dignity. And so I think that when people see them they have to question their own relationship to what they are seeing. I think I have changed a lot of people's minds about this group of people."

The lighting is even with the subject universally in the center of the frame, akin to typical head shots but their ordinariness evokes some sort of discomfort. There is something pleasantly cheesy about them that fine art photos are supposed to eschew. Their artfulness, however, comes from the juxtaposition of an unfamiliar subject made visible in a manner demanding empathy and respect. In this way, they reveal Opie's masterfulness. She found a strategy to transmit her own inner convictions about the dignity of these people into the photographic.

Touko Laaksonen, aka Tom of Finland, did for gay male sexual desire what Opie did for the S/M community. In a career spanning more than five decades, he made work that became increasingly explicit. Early gouaches from the 1940s, recently exhibited at Artists Space in New York, seem almost quaint compared to later work from the 1970s and 1980s where puckering assholes and engorged, outsize, dripping penises clamor for the viewer's attention. They also moved towards a hyper-masculine aesthetic



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
14 x 17.5 inches

signaling a departure from the more common depictions of homosexuals as limp-wristed, prancing pansies. This trajectory of revealing more while reclaiming masculinity seems to mimic the increasing acceptance of gay sexuality and points to the influence of representation.

Tom got his first break in the 1950s when he submitted erotic drawings to the American magazine, *Physique Pictorial*. Produced by Bob Mizer in Los Angeles, the magazine was like many other beefcake magazines of the time which featured muscular men in athletic poses. Sold under the guise of fitness and health magazines, they were essentially aimed at gay men before gay porn was legally available.

In an untitled gouache from 1947, two men facing each other flank a third who stands in the center of the painting. The two men on the left are wearing suits and fedoras and look somewhat dandified. Both seem to be black. The man on the right is wearing blue jeans and a cap. He seems to be white and one senses that he is more rough and tumble or working class. He is standing with his knees bent and has pulled his dick out of his jeans. His left hand is stroking it and he has a proud grin on his face as he glances down. The other two look on smiling and are starting to have their own fun. The man in the center has one hand in his pocket, presumably playing with his own dick, while he reaches for the crotch of the other.

While this must have been quite titillating in that particularly repressive era, Tom's later work was more overt and insistent about the shameless joys of gay sex. Beginning in the 1960s when laws around pornography began to loosen up, the drawings became more explicit, as well as fetishistic. Not only are the cocks bigger, but asses are often rendered as two perfectly round, bulging orbs and pecks look like engorged fruit meant to be devoured.

In a late drawing from 1987, the setting is a prison. Metal bars separate two beefy cops from two equally beefy prisoners. Both cops have skintight uniforms, knee-high leather riding boots and leather caps. Their muscularity is exaggerated and bulging—their jawlines square and strong. One cop is pressed against the bars with his shirt ripped open and his pants partially pulled down. The three other men are on him in various ways. The skinhead convict sucks on his succulent tits while the second convict, on his knees with his own exposed boner, laps at the cop's enormous dick. He firmly grips the shaft with one hand and is tugging on the balls with the other, ignoring his own member. The second cop stands behind the first. His uniform is intact but his fly is open with his hand shoved down his pants. The outline of his huge cock and balls are apparent through the uniform and we see him playing with himself. He's pulled the back of the other cop's pants down, shoved his free hand in there and appears to be

fingering his buddy's hole. The cop getting all the attention looks back at the other cop in apparent surprise, but his gaze indicates he wants more. It's an incredible picture.

The hyper-masculinity of his images has been criticized but it had a specific function. Tom started making these pictures when gay men were commonly represented as effeminate and weak. His desire told him something else. His business partner Durk Dehner explains:

"Tom's work favored the 'manly man.' His motivation? This type definitely turned Tom on, yet he consistently chose 'butch' because manliness had always been denied the homosexual—as if it was solely owned by the heterosexual world! Tom felt this unjust and wanted to equalize the playing field. He sought to broaden the vocabulary of what gay men could be."⁸

Tom's images transformed how gay men thought of themselves and it's hard to understate his effect on the development of gay culture.

I don't recall precisely when I was exposed to Opie or Tom of Finland. It was likely towards the end of college. I do remember, however, a distinct shift in my mind about my sexuality after studying German in Berlin during the summer of 1992. The fall of the Berlin Wall was relatively fresh and the city had this exciting energy. I had never lived in a major metropolis before so this was my first exposure to a type of gay life that was alien to an innocent, suburban Michigan boy. I went to my first back room at Tom's Bar in Schöneberg and had my first street hook up somewhere in Berlin. The men there were so open and edgy about their sexuality. Even the safe sex awareness ephemera was overt and highly erotic. The experience of a more honest and open culture started to dislodge my repressed ideas around sex from my Catholic upbringing. It no longer needed to be circumscribed by love and I was able to acknowledge my desire as a potent force deserving of its realization.

When I came back to Ann Arbor to finish my last year at Michigan, I was transformed and emboldened. I got a new apartment and was determined to continue exploring my sexuality. I must have brought home a Tom of Finland calendar from Berlin because I framed six drawings and prominently displayed them on the wall in my bedroom. It was the only room of my apartment I didn't sanitize for my parent's visit at graduation. When they asked to change, the bedroom was the only option. I didn't know what to do so I just let them go in. When they came out they were blank yet visibly rattled. I don't think they ever forgot Tom's images. I saw the power of representation on them and on me. What we don't see, doesn't exist or is perhaps easier to ignore. What we do see, can change us.

As children, we all create stories to explain away the insults and injuries, perceived or real, from our parents. We internalize them and internalize them, and our own inadequacy is often at the core of the story. My mother was emotionally remote and not particularly tender—like god knows how many other duty-bound women. I concluded at some point that I must not have been lovable or cute enough to break through her steely bearing. And to confirm this belief, there was the dearth of photos of me as a baby, the unsightly broken blood vessels on my left side making one arm warmer and longer than the other, oh and that story about how I came out looking like a bird.



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 30 inches

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS

I remember waiting for him to come home from work. We were always so excited for him to play with us. The first thing he would do is go to the basement sink and wash his greasy hands with an oil based creamy soap. I've asked all of my siblings the name of this soap but no one seems to remember. It came in a tin can like shoe polish and it had a very particular, cloying smell. Leslie and I would go down there with him. He'd remove his shirt; underneath he always wore a v-neck white undershirt. I remember marveling at him and can still remember his musky, sweaty smell. Recently, I realized that I smell just like him. I think I am the same age that he was then.

...

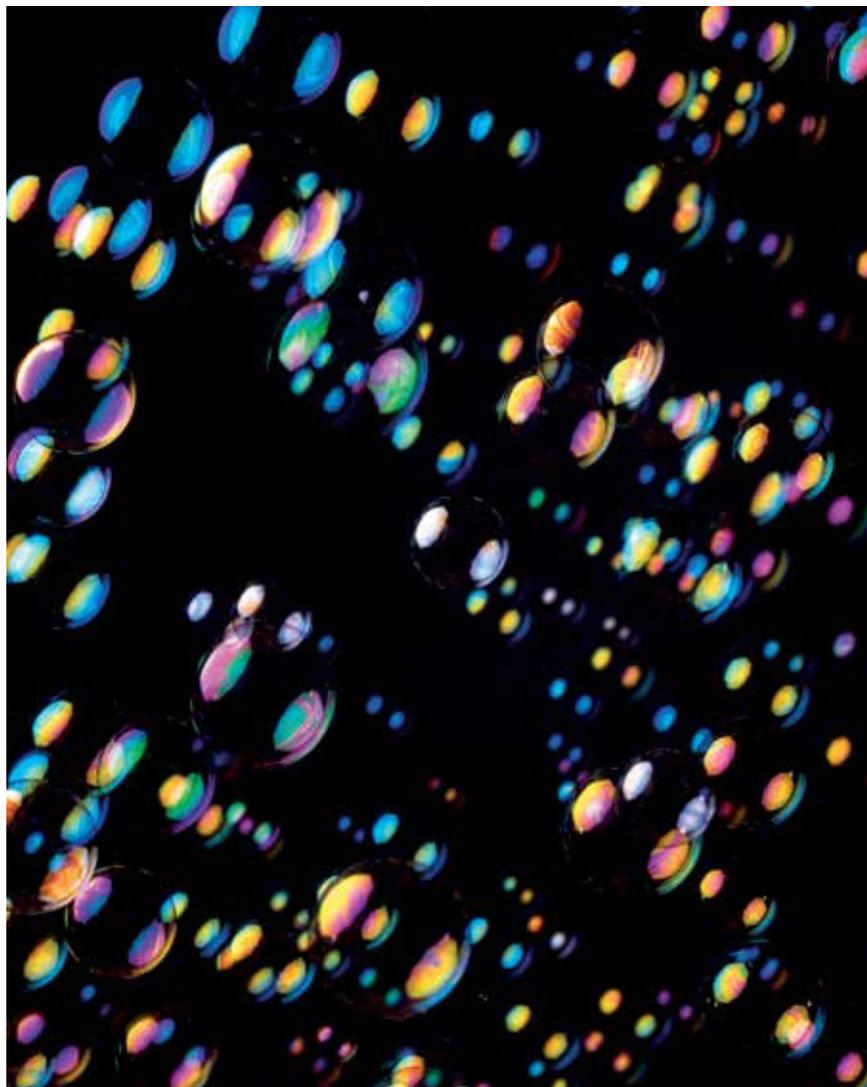
I'll never forget the expression on his face when he came to wake me up for beauty school and found me in bed with Jeff. I avoided the house the entire day because I knew the shit had hit the fan. It took him two weeks to talk to me about it. I remember him being nervous and pretty wasted. His words were rambling and confusing but I was shocked when he indicated he had been intimate with men. Ultimately he told me I would always be his son and he would love me. I was only eighteen then and never had the courage to ask him about it again. I'll never really know what he meant.

...

When I saw him last, he would sit in his chair most of the day staring out aimlessly, or sleeping, rarely saying anything. Occasionally he would talk to the empty lounge chair next to him. When I visited, I would help him in the shower. He came to hate showering; a fact I attribute to its savage reminder of his loss of dignity. I would look away as he undressed himself. His manly, earthy smell was gone.



OLD FLAMES ARE DEAD MATCHES #1, 2015
Archival pigment print
36 x 24 inches



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
20 x 25 inches



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
14 x 21 inches

His fading memory enriches my own

During the winter break of my first year of graduate school, I decided to visit my parents in Michigan. It was long overdue and there wasn't going to be a better opportunity during my studies. At 87, my father had been battling dementia for the previous five years and every visit brought new and unexpected changes in him. The last time I was there, he had narrowly escaped a bout with sepsis and I had come to help my mother. The stay in the hospital had provoked more severe delusions but as he settled back into being home, the moments of lucidity outweighed those of confusion. When I got home this time, it was clear that equation had flipped. In particular, he seemed to have lost a lot of ground with his capacity for language. He spoke almost in a whisper and had a hard time connecting sentences or staying with you in a conversation. It also was not clear at times whether he knew who I was.

My father had always been a great storyteller. His descriptions were so vivid and they were colored with his wonderful sense of humor. I had brought a Zoom audio recorder with me because I wanted to preserve some of these stories. I'm from a huge family, so when I am in town there is a constant stream of visitors. I was only there for a short time and grew concerned I would never have time alone with him. Fortunately there was a baptism the day before I left and I was asked to stay with him since he needed constant supervision. I was the obvious choice because I hadn't stepped foot in a Catholic church in years.

My father had always been a heavy drinker of beer and whiskey, but after he was diagnosed with dementia my mother had to limit his consumption because it would interact with his medications and make matters worse. When I visited, I'd always have wine around and he would furtively ask me for a glass. I loved to share these moments with him and my mother was



MEMORY/PROJECTION #3, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 30 inches



UNTITLED, 2015
Archival pigment print
25 x 20 inches

fine with it as long as it didn't get to be too much. After everyone left for the baptism, I opened a bottle of wine. I thought this would perhaps make conversation more forthcoming since he had become much less talkative. I got out my Zoom and told him what it was. I'm not sure he really understood. We spoke for a couple hours and had a couple glasses of wine. I continually tried to spark his old ways of storytelling but he needed to be led. As time went on, it was apparent that it was getting tiring for him so I let him rest. I had no idea what I was going to do with these recordings but it felt important to have them, even if they weren't completely coherent.

Three weeks later on a Sunday afternoon, I got a call from my sister in Colorado. She had been tasked with passing on the news that my father had collapsed in the shower. Fortunately my brother had been there helping him. My brother tried CPR but my father was unresponsive so an ambulance was called to rush him to the emergency room. There was a terrible blizzard in Michigan that day and two of my sisters took my mother to the hospital. It sounded like a harrowing journey and the treacherous weather must have amplified the stress of the situation. Less than forty-five minutes later, my sister called me back and told me my father had died. We were all completely shocked; his health had been otherwise stable. I couldn't fly home for two days because the blizzard was moving towards New York and the airports were closing. I was anxious to be with my family so those two days were quite difficult.

When I got to my mom's on Tuesday, my sister gave me the job of scanning photos for the funeral. With my mother's help, they had pulled out a few hundred photographs ranging from my father's youth to his old age. For two days I pored over these images as I scanned them. There were images of me I had never seen before, including one of me being held by my father on a family beach vacation that purportedly took place before my birth. This profoundly affected me because certain assumptions about my upbringing were being challenged. I started to wonder in what ways I had limited the adult relationship I had with my parents based on these assumptions.

After the funeral I returned to New York and my studies at ICP. Something had shifted in how I wanted to make work. I had brought back a stack of photographs with me because I had the urge to do something with them. Memories were flooding back to me and on my flight to New York, I started writing these recollections in my journal.

First, I made a small book about my relationship with my father combining homoerotic images of him with his army buddies and ones of him holding me that I found to be tender. Later, the texts I wrote on the plane became the basis for a video about my father, called *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, that I worked on for the entire semester. It was composed of still

photographs with audio from the recordings I had made with my father weeks before he died. I had been trying to make work about my own anxieties around aging, but it wasn't until my father's death that I really opened up to the possibilities of what that could mean.

My father's death threw my own mortality into profound new light. Spending time with all the old family photographs inspired me to look into two old boxes of photos and ephemera that I hadn't looked at in decades. I had been an avid chronicler of my friends from high school through to college. I discovered a treasure trove of slides, prints and an assortment of other random things like letters from friends and copies of my school newspaper. I started to mine this collection for inspiration for my own image-making. Instead of looking downcast at the prospect of aging, I was suddenly very thankful for the life I had lived and made for myself.

Both of these boxes remain open in my studio, their contents in various piles all over the floor. Traces of the particularities of my experience that I had wanted to explore—growing up gay in the Midwest, coming out in the 80s with the specter of AIDS perpetually haunting the experience of my sexuality, and the struggles for acceptance during my adulthood—were contained in these boxes. I feel like I've only just begun to tap this potential and am craving spending time in the studio experimenting with this detritus of my life.



“I am proud of my heart alone, it is the sole source of everything, all our strength, happiness and misery. All the knowledge I possess everyone else can acquire, but my heart is all my own.”









“What a torment it is to see so much loveliness passing and
repassing before us, and yet not dare to lay hold of it!”





“If only these treasures were not so fragile as they are
precious and beautiful.”









“No one is willing to believe that adults too, like children, wander about this earth in a daze and, like children, do not know where they come from or where they are going, act as rarely as they do according to genuine motives, and are as thoroughly governed as they are by biscuits and cake and the rod.”



TEXT EXCERPTS:

The Sorrows of Young Werther

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

end notes

1. W.M. Hunt, *The Unseen Eye*, 22.
2. Nathan Kernan, "What They Are." *Art on Paper*. New York, May-June 2001, 67.
3. Peggy Roalf, "Flesh and Bone: Unique Photographs by Richard Learoyd" *Aperture*, Summer 2010.
4. Deborah Aaronson, *Body of Art*, 7.
5. Catherine Opie, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 105.
6. Catherine Opie, 104.
7. Catherine Opie, 105.
8. Hooven III, F. Valentine, "Afterword," *Tom of Finland: Life and Work of a Gay Hero*, 233.

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