

Marginal Waters

Doug Ischar



GOLDEN

For Tom and Henry

Without whose support this project would not have been possible.

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*Holding at Bay:
Doug Ischar's Marginal Waters*

David J. Getsy

Formed by a narrow, man-made seawall of limestone, the Belmont Rocks served many functions since they were first built in the beginning of the twentieth century. They marked the border between the city of Chicago and the lake that gave it its identity and character. The Rocks served to shore up the infill and to create the parkland that buffered the city from Lake Michigan. In this sense, this craggy collection of stones did the work of both holding in and keeping out, creating a marginal zone that served as both beginning and end for the city. Framing the city's edge and lake alike, the Rocks stood in stark contrast to the more congenial and familiar beaches in other parts of the city.

This border function that the Rocks played for the geography of the city found an analogue in the way they were used during the days of summer. They were located east of the area that was, by the mid 1980s, rapidly gentrifying into the predominantly gay neighborhood now

commonly known as "Boystown." The Rocks served as the neighborhood "beach" both of a local working class community and of the emerging coalescence of a more visible gay identity and localization in this area (though there had been a less public yet substantial gay presence in the neighborhood since at least the 1950s). At the Rocks, the unorthodox outdoor leisure space provided by these stones became the site of a fragile consensus made possible by individuals holding together and keeping out — creating a new kind of visible community and a daytime social presence. The Rocks became known as a destination at which gay men would gather, but it also became a space where other marginal groups would join; classes and races could cohere (and sometimes collide), families were found and founded, and men from divergent backgrounds and home lives could come together, for a time, in this otherwise barren strip beyond the park at the edge of the city. In short, this boundary of the city became, itself, a place of possibility in which a different kind of public community could be experienced and visualized.

This sun-drenched, somewhat stark border zone, combined with its inhabitants' confident occupation of it,

led Doug Ischar to create the *Marginal Waters* series. Taken in the summer of 1985, when the community of the Belmont Rocks was at its height, these photographs celebrate the social formations made possible there. Ischar accomplished this not just through observing and capturing these scenes but, more importantly, by attending to the remarkable visual collisions and rhythms that erupted day after day. In so doing, he commemorated a transitional moment when the previously more diverse character of Lakeview was in the process of being overtaken by the new public social identity that Boystown was gaining.

There should be no doubt that these photographs offer an invaluable historical document of this queer culture from a quarter century ago. The vibrancy and diversity of the Rocks and the social norms and patterns of that community are charted across the series as a whole. The question of the historical significance of this community at this particular time, however, provided only the starting point for Ischar's engagement and transformation of that scene. To treat these photographs as just documentation would be to see only a small portion of the work they do. These images are structured

in such a way as to manifest — in their pictorial dynamics as well as in the subjects depicted — the fragile process of establishing and inhabiting communities, then and now.

Ischar took the source photographs with a 35mm Leica camera using color slide film. The choice to take them as color slides was significant. Rather than the more common process of exposing a negative which is then printed on photographic paper as a positive image, slide film creates a transparent positive image that is easier to edit and engage with, more immediate, and unique. Since the photographic image did not require the steps and translations necessary to arrive at a color print from a negative, this process also allowed Ischar to use color more directly and with greater surety. The sweeping blues of the lake, which are so important to the visual coherence and tone of the pictures, are a result of this careful attention to hue. Playing off this blue expanse, the Rocks and their inhabitants are washed in deep, sunlit colors — all of which create the saturated, almost unworldly intensity of the scenes.

These images existed only as slides until recently. Ischar created these new works from those source images taken in 1985, now transferring them to photographic paper for the first time. Ischar did show them in the late 1980s in the course of presentations and lectures, projecting them as slides but never realizing them as physical prints. The GOLDEN exhibition is just the second exhibition in which these works have been exhibited. (Two from the series were shown in the 2008 exhibition *Everyday People* at estudiotres gallery in Chicago.) The choice to re-engage with these images and create these new works now is a result, in part, of the advances in digital photographic technology that allow for the scanning and transfer of the slides and their intensity of color to the large prints seen in the exhibition. These images were always meant to be big — first as projections and now as large-format photographs. The sweep of the lake and the activated points-of-view in the images require the photographs to be both expansive and attentive to minute detail. As such, the scale of these photographic objects is highly significant. Many of the figures are almost life size, increasing the intimacy with which we can view the photographs. Unlike the projected slides, we can now approach and be close to these

photographs and their details, our proximity making us witnesses and participants of the scene.

This intimacy is in keeping with Ischar's practice of using a wide-angle lens to take the photographs. Rather than using other lenses that would allow Ischar to take the photographs from a distance and be unengaged, a wide-angle lens required him to be close. That is, his process required the permission, unselfconsciousness, and collaboration of the photographic subjects. This familiarity with Ischar is evidenced in the relaxation and closeness he was able to depict throughout the series. Only in this way could he capture those poignant moments of self-exposure, such as in *MW 16*, which depicts a close-up of a man removing his wedding ring. Importantly, Ischar never staged these compositions; he found them in the process of being part of these interactions and looking for these poignant moments and images. Ischar intended his participation in and depiction of these scenes to move beyond the ways in which art photographers had dealt with the everyday, seeking to shift the voyeurism common to that tradition to a more collaborative engagement with the community. At a time when visible displays of same-sex love and affection

were not just less common but possibly endangering, these unselfconscious moments of love, camaraderie, passion, and fraternity could only be captured by one who was trusted and known. The photographs still demonstrate the pleasure taken in these subjects and linger over bodies and interactions, but — as I discuss below — they also always contain evidence of the necessity of the supporting community that made these public displays possible — the community of which Ischar was a regular part. Among the thousands of humble interactions and affections that made up the day-to-day life of the Rocks, Ischar found and captured those moments and images that concentrated and exemplified the extraordinary possibility for public and open sociality that the Rocks offered at that time. He found these carefully structured compositions in this environment, framing and memorializing them in order to demonstrate the possibility and actuality of these moments and of this community. In this sense, these photographs are also acts of witnessing, attesting to the bonds formed at these moments.

Ischar's photographs differ from other modes of homoerotic photography that were beginning to be

seen more widely in the 1980s. Like the community he depicted, Ischar's photographs are both beautiful and common, banal and extraordinary. We might contrast these works to the emergence of Robert Mapplethorpe as the most visible example of homoerotic photographic practice in the 1980s. Whereas Mapplethorpe's highly constructed images are black and white, created indoors in the studio, and tend to focus on the aestheticized, posed and perfected body, Ischar's works intentionally retain the messy details. They testify to a public daytime gay culture and place their weight not on the beauty of individual bodies but, rather, on how people came together, creating visual harmonies and dissonances in their acts of love, friendship, and intimacy. Rather than relying on the more common mode of the photographer in the studio as the stand-in for the pure erotic gaze, Ischar was a participant in this community looking for, and finding, evidence of living and loving in public. This marginal space became welcoming and protective enough to foster such scenes of sunlit intimacy. That is, cramped into the narrow band of Rocks, these people found safety in numbers, occupying the margins as the place of possibility itself. It is this fragile process of

community formation and holding that Ischar's works manifest as well as document.

All of Ischar's photographs attest to the importance of this community as the necessary foundation for the scenes he depicts. An example of the photographs' pictorial dynamics will help illuminate these concerns, and I will focus on one of the exhibited works, *MW 22*, which depicts two men in an almost perfect geometric embrace. The photograph works slowly, giving its details up one by one. The first impression is one of structure. The man on top has placed his two arms to cradle and to stabilize, providing the viewer with strong horizontal and vertical structure within the image. The effect of this pose is to establish and to balance the tension between the upright and the recumbent, serving as a means to convey the sense both of security and of animated passion. This formal structure also frames the abandon and gratitude of the man, all but obscured, lying on the stone.

The resulting image seems classical, solid, and timeless while also being inescapably momentary, ephemeral, and caught as if by chance. These two men block the world out in their embrace and fold in on each other, oblivious

to everything that surrounds them. Caught between land, sea, and sky, they care nothing but for each other at this single point in time. Ischar did not stage this self-enclosing and perfect episode. It was captured precisely because it was momentary, fleeting, and likely forgotten. The formal structure — that which gives it its classical stability and timelessness — also exposes its infeasibility as a way for two men to hold and to be held (at least for very long). Nevertheless, it also seems like it could, and should, last forever. Ultimately, this work presents the moment of that self-interested embrace as a new emblem of the love that finds itself despite the world around it.

Next to this idyllic coupling, however, the creeping presence of a body on the right is visible — a man, sitting, recognizable from just a sliver of puffy flesh from his back. It interrupts the intimate pair's balance of sweeping passion and classical equipoise. This remainder of another body looks at first like it should have been cropped out (it easily could have been), but its inclusion is not at all accidental. It performs an essential function in the scene and in the image, and Ischar retained it for that reason. This man (though it is not necessarily a man) sits there, unaware but probably

not, of the scene behind him. The sitting man's presence at first seems to taint the image, making it apparent that this is not some far-off mystical and isolated place of love, but a cramped site where men gather. The beer can — is it theirs or his? — also rips us back to an awareness that this moment of intimacy, this blocking of the world, happened in a place and time despite itself, in the presence of others (like Ischar's lens) and as part of the everyday world where Miller High Life is a reality and not a prop.

Ischar kept this sitting man within the frame for all these reasons, for it is in the margins of this photograph that we see the fragile and mutually-reinforcing community that made this display of passion possible in the first place. The sitting man ultimately makes the image all the more sweet because of his intrusion into the otherwise postcard image that Ischar happened upon and photographed. One could imagine the sitting man turning away, looking out onto the blue lake, and smirking to himself at the attractive men to his left, confident in knowing that they shouldn't be caring about him or anyone else for this moment — if only for this moment. He protects them, and he surely would warn them of

the inevitable presence of authorities and onlookers. He is also a witness, caring — wittingly or not — for the chance community and the temporary intimacy that only sometimes looks this grand.

In this and all the works in the series, these little creeping details animate the *Marginal Waters* series and provide often simple, sometimes funny, and sometimes tragic reminders of these people's humble banding together on this band of rocks, making a space to let this community happen and flourish. The patterns of gazes and conversations in many of the works indicate a web of interactions, peppered by banal or profound objects ranging from a can of Cherry Coke (*MW 9*), to a pocket full of flowers (*MW 23*) to the cast-aside book by Paul Verlaine (*MW 19*). The works are filled with details of life, and in each there is evidence of the life of this community extending beyond the edges of the photograph.

Ischar captured the chance moments of accord and intimacy that flourished in the temporary spaces of this subculture. These places afforded the opportunity for men to be with each other, and Ischar's careful photographs indicate the tension that is apparent

between these utopic moments of being-together and the artificiality of the temporary social spaces they needed to establish for themselves. This concern follows through his work of the last two decades, and his recent films such as the important *brb* (2008), or *Forget Him* (2009), (included in this exhibition) continue to engage or critique this fundamental goal. For *Forget Him*, Ischar used found footage from the mid-1960s of men at the beach. The source film was a simple home movie that Ischar purchased from a junk store in Chicago. He appropriated and elevated this holiday scene by re-presenting it, adding an aphorism from Walter Benjamin's "One-Way Street" as well as overlaying music by seventeenth-century composer Heinrich Schütz. Schütz's duet for two tenors and two English horns, "*Adjuro Vos, Fillae Jerusalem*" from his *Symphoniae Sacrae I* (1629), was chosen in part because of a lyric from the *Song of Solomon* that Schütz used: "if you see my beloved, tell him that I am sick with love." Schütz's duet evokes both the longing and the togetherness that Ischar saw in the source film and that he associated with such idyllic scenes. (It should be remembered that, in his twenties, Ischar was a professional cellist and that the history of music remains a crucial source for his work in

film). Like the re-engagement with the *Marginal Waters* photographs, in *forget him*, Ischar again attests to the bonds established and the communities envisioned at the margins.

The *Marginal Waters* series is ultimately about people and the harmonies, rhythms, dissonances, and patterns they create — just for a time — as well as about the place that sanctioned and cultivated those relations. Ischar's attentive capturing and framing of images witness that community and elevate its episodes to manifest both the eternal and the mundane. Each image is structured carefully and almost architectonically, with forms being repeated and riposted across each photograph. At the same time, this intricate balance is strategically, and lovingly, interrupted or bracketed by the careful inclusion of seemingly accidental bodies or objects at the margins of each image itself. That is where the true meaning of the Ischar photographs comes clear — at the margins. For it is at the periphery where we can see the community at work. Ischar charted the ways in which the idyllic and loving pairs and parentheses of people are made possible — and are authorized — by the proximity of the others who watch, who testify, who protect,

who share. The works are misleadingly casual.

The banal scenes and ease of interactions that Ischar depicts are, he never fails to remind us, made possible by the other inhabitants of the edges who collaborate to let this new public community be realized by holding the world at bay.

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The following interview was recorded in late August of 2009 at Doug Ischar's lakeside home in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood – a Mid-Century Modern condominium perched eleven floors above Hollywood Beach, Chicago's present-day gay beach. The transcript has been edited and re-edited, but the drifts and repetitions of our conversation (influenced in equal parts, no doubt, by the rhythm of the waves below and the effects of the gin I sipped as we spoke) have been retained. Such circlings and returns seem appropriate to a discussion of Ischar's delicate, dense and occasionally oblique art. – JN

John Neff: To begin, could you provide a brief history of how you came to be a visual artist, and discuss what drew you to photography specifically?

Doug Ischar: My initial motivations were neither grand nor particular. I worked as a classical musician, a cellist, for many years before suffering career burnout in my early 30s. I decided to study photography because I'd always been curious about it. So I began my study of photography naively, with little knowledge of photographic or art histories and no experience with photographic tools or techniques – from scratch, as an enthusiast.



JN: This was in the early 1980s?

DI: 1983.

JN: I know that the pieces in the current show are archival inkjet prints made from film shot in 1985, but could you describe exactly what sorts of materials and techniques you used in shooting the images? What kind of cameras, films? Also, what language do you prefer in discussing these works: do you refer to them as photographs, pictures, prints, something else?

DI: I used 35-millimeter slide film, shooting with a small rangefinder camera – a Leica – and a single 35-millimeter wide-angle lens. This is relevant to the nature of the work, and to the social interactions that produced it, because that kind of camera and lens require you to be in very, very close proximity to your subjects.

My M.O. at The Rocks was to be omnipresent. I was there six or seven days a week all summer. I became a resident nuisance: people gave up on being bothered by me. Of course, I was a young gay man with my shirt off and



therefore fit right in with the crowd. This afforded a kind of access and “blending-in” that was crucial to making these images.

JN: What were The Rocks – could you provide a brief history?

DI: The Belmont Rocks were, perhaps, the original Chicago gay beach. They were already a storied site in the mid-eighties, and incredibly popular. That beach drew hundreds of people on weekends, dozens on weekdays – people from all over the city.

One of the most remarkable things about The Rocks was that, of any gay beach I’ve visited, it was the most centrally, overtly located. In the heart of a huge metropolis, a stone’s throw from a major traffic artery. There was no seclusion there like you’d find in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego or New York. It was right in the heart of the city in plain view.

JN: As resident nuisance – or at least a known quantity – on the beach during the period when you were taking these pictures, what was your relationship with other beachgoers?
In considering this question before our discussion, I imagined an analogy between “street” photography







and cruising – but perhaps that’s a too-obvious parallel. Is my characterization apt, or was the subject-photographer relationship somewhat different?

DI: It was an amalgam. Certainly I was a devoted photographer and the subject matter I was shooting was of extreme importance to me. And there was also an element of cruising, of...seduction involved. But despite my proximity to people there was a distance, because I was framing them and treating them as subjects.

In both the large photographic series I did around that time – Marginal Waters and the San Francisco Eagle pictures – I was very much a part of the scene, not an interloper. I was not a documentary photographer who, from the outside, had adopted a mission or project. I was part of those worlds, and while I maybe didn’t interact with the guys at the beach so much, I would run into them at bars, at the gym and so forth. I wouldn’t say I was an intimate buddy of many people at the beach. It wasn’t like Sid Grossman’s photographs of Coney Island – which are really of his close friends. But there was an element of affinity, of shared identity and, in some cases, attraction.



JN: Was there permission?

DI: The pictures were made along a spectrum with stealth at one end and tacit acceptance at the other. It varied a great deal from situation to situation. There are slide sheets filled with shots of a single scene where people are quite aware of me – perhaps they’re taken aback initially, but then, realizing that I’m harmless, they carry on about their business. My purpose was also – and of course this is a fundamental struggle within documentary – to disturb as little as possible. That might seem naïve, but as a young photographer that’s what I was hoping for with these pictures.

JN: You’ve answered one of my earlier questions. I suppose you call these pieces pictures?

DI: Well yes, they’re pictures. But they’re also indices, records. I’m fully aware of theoretical-historical debates about photographic veracity: that’s one of the reasons these photographs have lain dormant for so long. I have many – no doubt well founded – scruples about the prospects for photographic representation, its possibilities, its limitations. . .



JN: In the mid-1980s staged photography and conceptual image-text work were ascendant, with both approaches purporting to examine exactly those possibilities and limitations. At the same time, the documentary tradition was – allegedly – in crisis and decline. One of the few ways that documentary fine art photography was seen as theoretically valid was when it testified – from the inside, so to speak – to the experience of a minority community. . .

DI: And that was certainly one of my arguments for this and subsequent projects. One of my principal raps at the time was that subcultures should represent themselves. . . In working on *Marginal Waters*, I quickly outgrew my enthusiast's relationship to photography and became very zealous about my work, committed to picturing gay men – and particularly gay intimacy – in public.

JN: So were you motivated by what, for lack of a better term, I'll call a sense of community?

DI: Community is a word I love to avoid these days. I share Judith Butler's hope for "communities of people who have nothing in common." Community has become an



abused and petrified notion, but in 1985 there was still a sense of hopeful potential surrounding the idea...At The Rocks there was a fairly delimited set of gay men, most of them Chicago residents, who frequented the local gay scene. So, yes, community was a notion – call it an ideal - that was still meaningful for me at the time.

JN: So part of your interest was in the various ways that sexual identity was expressed in public spaces. I was thinking of your leather pictures and beach pictures as being in – not uncomplicated – opposition. The leather pictures depict a practice of discipline in daily life – maybe mirroring the practice of photography as a formal discipline. The beach pictures represent the flip side of sexual discipline: abundance, luxury and voluptuousness.

DI: That's an interesting point, to which I would add abandon. One of the paradoxes of the two projects is that the leather bar pictures, which were made in a sequestered space frequented almost entirely by gay men, show less intimacy than the beach pictures. But if one takes the steps, backwards as it were, from bar to sex club to bath house – all secluded gay sites – then the idea of discipline is left behind to a large degree. Note the



progressive removals of protection – architecture, privacy, clothing. What was remarkable to me about The Rocks was that – and there’s plenty of this in the pictures – there was a great deal of seemingly uninhibited and utterly relaxed public intimacy. In my photographs you frequently see guys on top of each other, really going at it. That was a very common sight.

JN: And those are the moments that you sought out?

DI: Not only, but they were moments that I found extremely important to depict because, although I had experienced them publicly as a gay man, I had never before seen them represented. That was another huge motivation for this work: I was deeply fed up with the kind of gay studio photography, typified at the time by Mapplethorpe, where things happen in an artificial, evacuated environment. I was bored to tears with neo-classical, glacial nudes, 90% of the time of a solo subject, the social

context being that of the photographer’s studio, period. This despite the fact that I was surrounded by guys living aggressively, courageously and publicly as gay men. And at the worst of times, I might add. It was a deeply frustrating lack and omission for me, one I felt compelled to fill.

JN: That brings to mind two points. The first is that in examining the pictures, one quickly becomes aware that, despite their having been shot on the fly, they are very strongly “composed.” Second, many of the figures in the photos have props or attributes which play almost over-determined allegorical or narrative roles in the depicted scenes. The books foregrounded in several of the pictures, for example. I’m again reminded of the kind of posing or play that takes place in cruising.

DI: Let’s start with the attributes. I was very consciously looking for the sorts of cultural props that gay men employed during leisure, public

leisure in particular. Pictures of men touching and so on would have seemed acutely lacking minus that sort of information. That's why, for example, book and magazine covers play a large role in these photographs, as do all manner of liquor containers. Think of it as image / text work – which was in vogue at the time – but “drawn from life.” Including found text within the frame was something that intrigued me a lot...

But, you know, I'd draw a distinction between posing for a studio photograph and the posing associated with cruising. There's no sort of social interaction – gay or otherwise – that wholly circumvents “pose.” And in cruising, pose is pivotal – thus the “Stand and Model” that's jokingly applied to SM. I'm a master poser myself. To put it very simply, I wanted to see the social – pose, performance and all. I wanted to see the social recorded in a way that it seemed never to have been recorded. Very seldom in gay history, and then only in vernacular photography, have such environments been committed to

record. For example, there's a terrific snapshot of a gay beach on the North Sea, in Germany, around 1920. A few such things exist. But I knew of no other queer photographer – and still know of very few – who had intently focused on a particular “queer” site over a long period of time, who had endeavored to create an expansive, detailed picture of public gay life.

As to the formality of the photographs, that's always been one of my misgivings about them. But living with them a second time, I'm less put off by that. I have more sympathy for that young photographer who was trying to arrest what he saw in the most beautiful way he knew. Arrest in the most profound sense of the word. To commit the amazing things he witnessed to a temporal, interactional or formal perfection. It's a hard question for me, and it's one that lingers. But I think there's something to be said for the obsessive care taken and time expended in making these pictures that are closer, perhaps, to Piero della Francesca than to Robert Frank.





JN: In retrospect, do you think the pictures function more effectively as formal objects than as sociological documents?

DI: I don't see why they can't do both. For example, I love Frank's *The Americans*. It's up there with Evans' and Lange's work. Even Frank's most radical, loose-limbed and spontaneous photographs are beautiful objects. But that doesn't negate the singular value of that work, its implicit critical and sociological project.

JN: It had to be spontaneous because he was trying to capture masks slipping.

DI: Exactly, and I had no such interest. *Marginal Waters* is utterly not about exposé or any sort of unmasking. It's about stilling the flow of gay public intimacy at its most compelling moments.

JN: Given your working conditions (which would seem to have favored image-making in the tradition of Frank, Klein, et al.), and given many

of the pictures somewhat "formal" compositions, did you go into your shoots thinking, "I'm going to try to capture this particular type of image, an image that's based on...?" Or did you perhaps find yourself observing a number of similar situations and then trying to find the exemplary instance?

DI: No, no, no to the former. I was looking for the most telling instance within a ceaseless temporal flow, not to mention the incredible density of activity of a busy day at The Rocks. One might dub this a sort of "decisive moment" photography after Cartier-Bresson. But the sought-after moment is not merely formal, but also social: the moment in which interactions between people, between people and objects, between people and a precariously occupied environment achieve their most resonant relationships...

But I must add that in 1985 I was quite un-schooled in art history, and particularly in contemporary art history. That was one of my

problems coming out of a relatively conservative photography program – Columbia College, Chicago – where I learned about Stieglitz, Frank, Garry Winogrand and little else. When I made this work, I didn't have the reserve of knowledge, the breadth of understanding, the conceptual strategies I have since acquired and explored. I was, for better or worse, working at a kind of brute level with what I as a novice could bring to this material. I didn't come with a formal agenda. I didn't come with a look I wished to impose... I stand by this work now more than I ever thought I would, but it's important to recall that it's early work by a young photographer 'in training.'

JN: So when you present the pictures now, do you think of them as old work? Or are they a species of new work that takes old images and filters them through the knowledge and experience of a long career?

DI: Definitely both. When I started a year or so ago to re-explore this work, to edit and print it,

I realized that I could not simply present these pictures as vintage mid-80s photos. They had to be re-imagined, reconfigured – new connections and juxtapositions had to be made. This is like dragging something past – against its will in some respects – into the light of the present. The work had to be brought, to the greatest degree possible, into alignment with my current thinking about art and photography.

JN: I know that you've recently done a lot of work about inter-generational gay relationships – I'm thinking of the video *brb* in particular. Do you think of yourself as being in a daddy / son relationship with your youthful artistic self?

DI: That is a boy I would never take home. Way too much trouble. Way too unyielding and pig-headed.

JN: Given the development of your work in the 1990s, and that work's investigations of how art can or cannot hold memory and express loss,





it makes sense to me that you'd revisit your past work. But what exactly brought you back to these images now? Was the interest archival, artistic, historical, sentimental?

DI: It's all those things.

JN: If you find yourself reluctant to engage with this young man, what prompts...?

DI: ...Well, in all honesty I have little choice. He's my past and I can't get rid of him . . . at least not neatly, surgically. I could burn my early work like Baldesarri, but I feel these photographs have too much historical value to make such a solipsistic move. And, all pride aside, there are a number of pictures in *Marginal Waters* that I'm quite pleased with, even from this distance. They're unlike almost anything I know. Their mixture of qualities is odd and uneasy and, finally, I've come to like that about them.

JN: Might they serve as a model for your future work?

DI: Let me digress. Since the 1960s, documentary has had a beleaguered, contested presence in the art world, or alongside







the art world. And all of the issues that were paramount at the time this work was made – the critiques of representation that went back to Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, and were being pushed forward by Alan Sekula and Martha Rosler – are still relevant today, no matter how much our image world may have changed. The problem is, that while edifying and still relevant, they remain – tellingly, I believe - irresolvable. That said, why shouldn't there be the possibility of an informed contemporary documentary? A few ethical stones in the road shouldn't negate an entire mode of representational practice. But I, personally, don't intend to pursue documentary in photographic form – except by reengaging with earlier work. Video is the medium that concerns me now.

JN: Much of your work since the beach pictures – I'm thinking specifically of your installations of the 90s – seems like an argument against figuration...

DI: I would not say 'argument.' Rather a gradual, painstaking removal of indexical representation...

JN: But there's not, properly, a removal of the index; there's a removal of the index as a trace of your presence.



DI: Maybe there's a compound removal: a removal of figuration along with the attendant specter of the photographer. That's the most honest way I can put it. But in place of the represented human figure – and the man lurking behind the camera – there's a growing focus on the body of the viewer and his or her relationship to the work at the exhibition site. This was a crucial consideration in my subsequent installation work.

Also, I wear multiple hats. At the same time that my installation work was shedding its representational features, I was teaching young photographers at UIC. And although I was concerned that they grasp the debates about documentary, I was entirely capable of encouraging them in such work. So the disavowal of documentary, of representation was never complete or dogmatic. I just followed a path of distillation, of narrowing, and of deepening, hopefully, that was crucial to my persistence as an artist. . .

JN: So how did you arrive at a renewed interest in figuration – in the newer linear videos, for example?



DI: Well, I reached a point where the installation work had become so utterly pared down that – although I was intimately aware of its references and what they meant to me personally – they were becoming increasingly irretrievable for viewers. . . . The work became overly reliant on critical retrieval, on “discourse” as an assist. That’s where I found myself – a point I locate in a piece that’s very close to my heart, a 24-channel sound piece that sonically represents the sweeping of a gallery floor [*ground*, 2001]. After spending two years producing that work, I felt the need to effect a fuller, less reduced engagement with my subjects. I had to reanimate or repopulate the work somehow. Not just with figures, but with observations from life that had become so deeply buried that they were no longer palpable. *ground* was as distilled a work as I wished to make, perhaps ever.

I also reached a turning point in my life as a man. I’m 60 years old. Life changes for everyone as they age, but it changes even more acutely or for gay men, perhaps. After a number of relationships in which I explored the complex, fascinating dynamic that exists between older and younger gay men, I wanted to talk about it. And I couldn’t talk about it in a Minimalist artwork. I couldn’t. There was no way of



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elucidating or elaborating those things.

That's why I've returned to kind of documentary – which is the new video work. I've actually been shooting again, something I haven't done for years. . .My colleague Julia Fish said to me after she saw some of my newer video work, “It's good to have your life back in your work, isn't it?” And I had to agree, it was...

JN: The credits for your video *brb* specifically note that the footage was “photographed.”

DI: Yes, but this is “documentary” within heavy quotation marks, where the indexical footage plays multiple roles within the tape. It's no longer simply an index to be seen and understood as a picture of the world; it's also to be seen and understood as a problematizing metaphoric agent within the work.

JN: Has this tendency to see the documentary and the poetic as cohabitating an image informed

your re-reading of *Marginal Waters*?

DI: It's helped me come to terms with the much commented upon “beauty” of the photographs – something that I had to make a difficult peace with. I'm finally able to see these pictures' beauty – or formality, if you will – as compatible with life in the deepest sense. Just because things are heightened formally doesn't mean that there's no life or mystery invested there. Consider Poussin or Watteau. Now, I can see around and through the lattice-like perfection of the pictures to a vividness that I was incapable of seeing before.

JN: When you returned to these pictures, did you return to a specific set of images picked circa 1985 from the hundreds of frames shot at The Rocks, or to a mass of unsorted slides?

DI: I was returning to a massive collection of slides. I spent a year reviewing them. Sitting here day after day with a loop, scrutinizing these pictures and reconsidering everything.

JN: So is it possible that rather than coming to terms with the pictures' formalism – their “lattice-like perfection” – you were actually finding it?

DI: Well, some of the pictures always attracted me and I'm still attracted to many of them. I also discovered things which I wouldn't have seen before, different kinds of pictures. For better or worse, I don't think the project is characterized by a signature stylistic consistency.

JN: It seems to me that each picture – and maybe this is a function of your retrospective scrutiny – is a type of picture.

DI: Explain.

JN: The pictures' consistency might come from the fact that each one seems to follow, however loosely, a genre or type – art-historical and maybe social. Pieta. Recumbent nude. Lovers' embrace. Figure by the seashore.

They appear to conform to certain models, and for me part of their interest arises from the way in which the documentary function plays against that formalism...

DI: That was certainly not on my mind at the time they were made. And even now I'm uncomfortable with the projection of art-historical – especially painterly - tropes onto this work. Such comparisons interest me only as distant parallels. I had – and have - no conscious intention of reproducing genre scenes from European painting.

Or to couch my point a bit differently: a historical example. We now know that Dorothea Lange saw exhibitions of French Romantic painting, Millet for instance, in San Francisco when she was working there as a portrait photographer. And one sees very clearly in her work for the FSA the influence of French Romantic tropes. This doesn't invalidate or lessen the power of her work. If anything, it ties the work to a





kind of history of Realist engagement in art, adding to and compounding its gravity.

So I'm not saying that I'm not interested in art-historical parallels, but simply that they are ancillary to more pressing concerns. I had enough on my hands balancing the representational / ethical demands of documentary against my predisposition to the poetic and lyrical. Documentary was a difficult proposition for me because, before coming to it, I had strong notions regarding beauty.

JN: While you were shooting *Marginal Waters*?

DI: Yes. These may have been conventional notions of beauty derived from a layman's awareness of people like della Francesca and Ucello, the most austere Renaissance masters. They were in my mind, surely. And such models may have, in my artistic innocence, suggested organizing principles for the pictures. Of course, the early Italian Renaissance is not what comes to mind when one thinks of street photography – or anything remotely candid, for that matter.

JN: But it might be what one thinks about when one thinks about gays.



DI: Well, at a certain point one has to talk – hopefully in non-essentialist fashion – about being queer. And about what that entire constellation of identifying elements means to an artist, and how one puts them to work or avoids them by turns.

JN: Well, could you talk about that for a second? Are you proposing a...gay aesthetic identity that has a consistency – albeit contingent – over time?

DI: No. I'm suggesting that gayness – even as a historically bounded category – is a vast bubbling cauldron of contingent attributes and attractions. I don't even believe in the notion of a stable self, so I certainly can't subscribe to the fantasy of a gay aesthetic. . .

Let me throw us off track a bit and note that there's a fair amount of kitsch in these photographs. And that's something that's been hard for me to live with because I'm a kind of tasteful fag. But some of the tackier beach pictures are among the most valuable to the project, indispensable even.

JN: Like?







DI: The boy with the flamingo. I've always had a love-hate relationship with that photograph because it goes over the edge in terms of my taste. But I know it's also perfectly germane to the project. So there's a tension in these pictures not only between della Francesca and Robert Frank, but also between Modernist high and vernacular low – although I was consciously seeking out pop artifacts while shooting. And while I cringe at times at my failures to exalt the “low,” I'm finally glad of it.

JN: That's always been the case within the kind of gay photography that you claim to disdain – Mapplethorpe, for example.

DI: Certainly. But allow me to interject another historical example: the problematic, crucial photos of Brassai. Without Brassai we would have no picture of the incredibly rich “deviant” subculture of Paris between the wars. And Brassai was an interloper to those scenes; some would reject the work as an instance of cultural colonizing. But a remarkable historical subculture persists because of his quirky attractions and brash trespassing. There's a photograph by Brassai of two butchers in baggy suits dancing at a ball. I would trade everything of Mapplethorpe's for that one photograph.

Well...except the X Portfolio. I would never want to lose that.

John Neff produces works of art, organizes gallery exhibitions and practices critical writing. He lives and works in Chicago.



On the Beach

Steve Reinke

What makes a beach gay? The individual grains of sand are aware of themselves as scopophilic objects, self-consciously and rigorously inserted into a semiotic regime they may claim as their own. The individual grains of sand arrange themselves into pleasing tableaux, always aware, for example, of the impact of a striking diagonal against the rigidly horizontal horizon of sky against lake.

What makes a beach queer? There is no possibility of a queer beach, though autonomous pockets of queerness may establish themselves in any terrain. Queers hate diagonals and try to remain at right angles: lumps arranged in irregular grids. A queer lump — never soft, never hard — will not agree to be a mute scopophilic object. Lumps that will always be at the ready to insist: What are you looking at?

Gay Time is Dilated

Like a gay sphincter is predisposed to be. In photojournalism and street photography (the documentary photographs of *Marginal Waters* are a kind of end-of-the-street photography) there is the “decisive moment” which captures a specific event at just the right time, at the apex of that event’s narrative arc. But there are no gay events: gay life is not a baseball game, or a war. It is episodic rather than narrative, but the episodes are static, without incident or development. There are no conflicts and no resolutions. Gay life does not reproduce, but merely continues. It is not a series of continuous actions but a sequence of discrete poses. (This is how Deleuze argues the same point in his Cinema books: movies are gay, Hitchcock goes both ways.) Gay life has no conflicts, but is full of attractions and repulsions: one moves toward or away from something based on one’s arbitrary, though highly refined, faculty of taste. Gay life, which occurs largely in gay time, is a day at the beach.

When one attempts to narrativize gay life, one corrupts gay time and nothing good — monsters and other grotesqueries, mostly — can arise from the distortion. Case in point: Oscar Wilde's most unfortunate mistake, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In reality — gay reality — neither human nor portrait (between which there is very little difference) age at all. Wilde's attempt to narrativize the exquisite equipoise of flesh to painting produces distasteful results. The tragedy of 'Picture', of course, is that a perfectly acceptable painting is subjected to the heterosexual regime of teleological time and is thrown into bestial chaos, the night of all seething things.

Time is uncivilized; events are unnecessary.

Stray Thoughts

It is not the waters that are marginal, but the little fishes in them, whether swimming or floating (belly up).

Not (only) signs, but props.



Forget Him

Against the muted affect of the photographs, we have the operatic intensity of the video *Forget Him*. The coolness of the photographs comes from their being situated within the muted, quasi-objective empathies of the documentary genre, as well as the serenity of the subjects (subjects in repose, auto-posed, self-positioned). *Forget Him* means to give us a different kind of experience, one might say an aesthetic experience, a beauty that, if it fails to achieve transcendence, at the very least produces a palpable longing. The video is constructed around a vintage 8mm amateur film that features a group of gay men at a secluded beach. Ischar supplements the found footage with a text from Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street* and music from Heinrich Schütz's *Symphoniae Sacrae I*.

The footage begins with two lyrical sequences (a rose bower and handsome young men), but resolves in a more complex, and complexly affecting, image: a homely middle-aged man, lately gone to flab, struggling to put on shorts that are far too tight for him. He struggles with the zipper; it bulges out, gaping. A cunt, absent or merely displaced — a kind of inverted (anal) castration. It is within (through) this aporia we may find a solace beyond nostalgia.

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for videos. He is the co-editor of several books, including *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (with Chris Gehman). A book of his video scripts, *Everybody Love Nothing*, is available from CoachHouse. He teaches Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern. Visit his website, www.myrectumisnotagrave.com.



Still from *Forget Him*, 2009

“Is there anyone who has not once been stunned, emerging from the Metro into the open air, to step into brilliant sunlight?
... So quickly has he forgotten the weather of the upper world. And as quickly will the world in its turn forget him. For who can say more
of his own existence than that it has passed through the lives of two or three others as gently and closely as the weather?”

Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street* (1928)



Still from *Forget Him*, 2009

Biography

Since the early 1990s, Ischar's work has focused on the potentials of video and sound in ever more distilled manifestations. Following large multi-media installations such as *Orderly* (1994) and *Wake* (1996), Ischar turned to more minimal forms. His 1997 work for InSite (San Diego/Tijuana) used a high school basketball court as locale for a multimedia meditation of adolescent homosexual desire. His 2001 work, *ground*, uses 24 channels of sound to replicate the sound of a gallery floor being swept. His 2005 public installation, *Water Music*, explores the relationship between personal and artistic histories of the Pacific rim cultures in which Ischar lived as a child. Since 2006, he has been producing single-channel videos around issues of cross-generational male intimacy and psychological/social loss. These include *Back the Way He Came* (2006), *Bask* (2007), *brb* (2007), and *Forget Him* (2009).



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Exhibitions

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Mercer Union, Toronto
Museo do Arte Moderna, Sao Paulo
Photographers Gallery, London
List Center for the Visual Arts, MIT
Blum Helman Gallery, New York
Wooster Gardens, New York
Göteborg's Kunst Museum, Gothenburg, Sweden

Bibliography

Art in America, Art and Text, Ten-8
The Logic of the Lure (John Paul Ricco)

Awards

National Endowment for the Arts
Illinois Arts Council

Collections

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago
Norton Family Collection, Santa Monica.

Screenings

Toronto Gay and Lesbian Film Festival
MIX Queer Experimental Film/Video Festival, New York

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Marginal Waters

Doug Ischar

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