



In her most recent body of work, Sam Contis uses photography and archival research to explore the relationship of bodies to landscape and the shifting nature of gender identity and expression.

The photographs in this exhibition were made at Deep Springs College, one of the country's last all-male institutions of higher learning, which is located in a remote desert valley on the California-Nevada border. Contis's images capture the strange beauty of the high desert in macro- and microscopic views. The resonance of earth and body and the sensual echoes of human and animal give her works an Ovidian sense of imminent metamorphoses. Contributing to this sensation of superabundant possibility is the mythic potency of the American West.

America's fascination with the desert West was sparked by the landscape images that photographers such as Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan brought back from their survey expeditions. O'Sullivan's explorations of the American West were done as part of US government-funded expeditions between 1867 and 1874, and his images capture both the beauty of the land and the changes being wrought to the area by miners and settlers, railroads and new cities. Contis references the grand vistas of these photographic pioneers while offering a more intimate view of this fragile and multi-faceted landscape.

Deep Springs College was founded in 1917 by the engineer, industrialist, and educational visionary Lucien Lucius Nunn. Inspired in part by the pedagogical theories of John Dewey, Nunn sought to create a school combining Socratic learning, self-governance, and manual labor, as well as isolation from society. Although practical education was to some degree the underlying premise of the curriculum, Deep Springs is profoundly idiosyncratic, placing its inhabitants in a world very different from the reality they will likely enter upon graduation.

For generations, the West has symbolized an ideal of freedom and self-determination even as it has defined a rough, often violent ideal of masculine identity. Deep Springs can seem, in many ways, to be an embodiment of these ideals. For example, in addition to their academic studies, the twenty or so students operate a ranch of about two hundred head of cattle, and raise animals to be slaughtered for food. The American cowboy of bygone days spent weeks in the saddle, sleeping rough under the stars, and sharing camaraderie and companionship with an all-male team in relative isolation from the larger society. Even now, this ritual is replicated annually at Deep Springs when two of the students are selected to drive the herd on horseback to the summit of the White Mountains, where they spend the summer together watching the cattle graze.

While the "cowboy" is essential to the Western myth, and a central figure in American masculine ideals, Contis's photographs allude to another side of both the historical and present reality; that is, an experience of gender that is more nuanced and open to ambiguity. In the early days of the American West, when women were few and far between, it was not uncommon for men to take on traditionally female roles. Similarly, at Deep Springs, gender identity has always been open to fluid expression. And coursing through Contis's photographs is a powerful countercurrent of softness, gentleness, and fertility.

In addition to creating singular images, Contis is concerned with the syntactic relationships among works in a series. She arranges her works in the gallery in ways that draw out formal echoes and poetic resonances, especially those that undermine a predominantly masculine gender narrative. She suggests analogies between male bodies and the landscape, inverting the conventional trope of earth as female form. Images of young men nurturing plants or reclining in the nude balance pictures of dusty struggles in the corral or a blood-spattered cloth. Against the backdrop of ageless mountain ranges, the historically constructed categories of gender seem to melt away like a desert mirage.

Lawrence Rinder
DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR, BAMPFA

In this presentation Contis has also included a number of photographs borrowed from the Deep Springs archive, including images made by some of the first students at the college a hundred years ago.

Biography

Sam Contis (b.1982) lives and works in California. Her work is represented in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Yale University Art Gallery, and has recently been exhibited at the Fotomuseum Antwerp, Gallery Luisotti in Los Angeles, and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery in New York. She is the recipient of a 2016 Aaron Siskind Foundation Fellowship and a Tierney Fellowship. She holds an MFA from Yale University and a BFA from New York University. Her first book, *Deep Springs*, which includes some of the work in this exhibition, was published by MACK this year. This is Contis's first solo museum exhibition.

THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

Sam Contis MATRIX 266 MAY 3–AUGUST 27, 2017

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE



Checklist

All works courtesy of the artist

Horseback

2013
Gelatin silver print
24 x 30 in.

Abandoned Copper Mine

2013
Gelatin silver print
4 x 5 in.

Caterpillar

2013
Gelatin silver print
5 1/2 x 7 in.

View from Gilbert Pass

2014
Archival pigment print
5 1/2 x 7 in.

Lean Back

2015
Gelatin silver print
7 x 8 3/4 in.

Embrace

2015
Gelatin silver print
8 3/4 x 7 in.

Echo

2015
Gelatin silver print
8 3/4 x 7 in.

Branding

2014
Gelatin silver print
20 x 25 in.

High Noon

2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 30 in.

Cowboy

2014
Gelatin silver print
24 x 30 in.

Blue Thumb

2015
Archival pigment print
20 x 16 in.

Hothouse

2015
Archival pigment print
16 x 20 in.

Milk Pail

2013
Archival pigment print
20 x 25 in.

Shoeing

2013
Gelatin silver print
9 1/2 x 12 in.

Chest

2015
Archival Pigment Print
6 1/4 x 5 in.

Rock Face

2014
Gelatin silver print
38 x 30 in.

Three Horses

2015
Gelatin silver print
34 x 44 1/2 in.

Nude (Jack, Reading)

2015
Gelatin silver print
7 x 8 3/4 in.

In the Garden

2015
Archival pigment print
4 x 5 in.

Cover

2015
Gelatin silver print
12 x 9 1/2 in.

Arbor

2014
Archival pigment print
34 x 44 in.

Eggs

2015
Gelatin silver print
37 1/2 x 30 in.



FRONT *Hothouse*

ABOVE *Arbor*

OPPOSITE *Cowboy*

BACK *Three Horses*
Nude (Jack, Reading)
Embrace