

Holding at Bay 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 photo-graphic 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 presented. (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 photo-graphs. 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 cooperation 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 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. This 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 of both 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 moment 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 film work.) Like the reengagement 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 reposted 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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MW1



MW 4



MW 9



MW 16



MW19



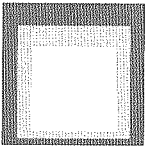
MW22



MW 23

Marginal Waters

Doug Ischar



GOLDEN

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Marginal Waters

Doug Ischar

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