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'O my shining stars and body!': Mitchell Squire's body photographs

Emma Cheatle & H  l  ne Frichot

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Essay

**'O my shining stars and body!':
Mitchell Squire's body photographs****Emma Cheatle** 

School of Architecture
University of Sheffield, UK
e.cheatle@sheffield.ac.uk

ORCID [0000-0003-0675-157X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0675-157X)

Hélène Frichot 

Melbourne School of Design, Faculty
of Architecture, Building and Planning
University of Melbourne, Australia
helene.frichot@unimelb.edu.au

ORCID [0000-0002-1755-5075](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1755-5075)

In the 1990s, Mitchell Squire was given by his then teacher Jennifer Bloomer at Iowa State University a copy of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.¹ His work as a developing architect then, and as an artist and teacher now, attempts to unmake and make a space from which he would wish to live in the world.² Nine of Squire's exquisite, discomfiting photographs from the series *OUT FROM* and *LOUT* (2020–2021) appear in this special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* dedicated to the legacy of Jennifer Bloomer. These images position Squire himself, or an image of his body, in the American rural landscape of central Iowa.

The images are a unique form of self-portraiture where, while revealing himself in multiple ways, Squire also refuses to be the subject. In a recent 2022 exhibition of his 'mirrored' portraits, he saw himself as neither subject nor object, but rather part of the camera itself, where, as he states, 'the camera [is] a tool or a weapon'. By seemingly positioning himself in front of it as a mirror, the camera is not so much focussed on him but on the surface of the mirror.³ In this way, Squire is both reflecting and mapping the body in space and time, implicating the picture plane as he did the rural landscape in its constitution. His is not just any body though, but specifically an older Black man's body (Squire began this portrait project at the age of 62) and the work specifically speaks of such to his status as well as the landscape as a signifier of the complexity of the construction of identity.

In the 1980s, British photographer Ingrid Pollard produced a series of photographs of Black people in rural landscapes, *Pastoral Interludes*, which brings together ideas of landscape, race and slavery, and national identity. The series, in the form of postcards accompanied by textual captions, critiques the construction of English nationalism, which in part occurs through an attachment to and realisation of the countryside by capturing Black subjects in typical romantic landscapes such as the Lake District, in positions such as sitting on a dry stone wall or gazing at the view. The series both magnifies the way that Black people were (and are still) seen as anachronistic or other

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to the creation of the pastoral, and challenges the way that they are portrayed as akin to urban space.⁴

Like Pollard's work, Squire's self-portraits, which place the Black man in the American landscape, speak of not just anachronism but of the legacy of slavery more directly, and even recall the historical abuses experienced by Black men and women in that same landscape. They entangle the politics and abuses of the Black body in the past and present in relation to the land Squire now tentatively, now boldly, occupies.

The images are joyful, painful, exquisitely beautiful, powerfully defiant and sometimes melancholic. Always naked, sometimes reclining in repose, at once passive, in pain, or otherwise defiantly resistant, Squire is seemingly in flux and still at the same time, both situating himself and continuing to create his space; he is at once woven into the landscape and seen in resistance to it. Shifting between our conceptualisations of landscape and shelter, he appears: camouflaged, wrapped in brown gauze at the base of a construction of dry sticks (Fig. 1) or behind a paper veil (Fig. 2); standing clutching a sheaf of dry grasses just gleaned (Figs. 3 and 4), and wrapped in a blanket in the snow (Fig. 5); wearing a wig of knotted textured material hastily pegged together, his fingertips gold dipped (Fig. 6); sitting in front of a green plastic sheet (Fig. 7); lying abject on his front on brilliant white snow (Fig. 8); then loosely but worryingly wrapped in translucent plastic (Fig. 9).

Simultaneously mapping abjection, pleasure, ease, and pain, the portraits are magical and disturbing, both of known histories and unknown futures.

Emma Cheatle and Hélène Frichot, August 2022

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes and references

1. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2. bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', in *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround Press, 1989).
3. 'Mitchell Squire at Cecille R. Hunt Gallery', n.d. <<https://hecmedia.org/posts/mitchell-squire-at-cecille-r-hunt-gallery>> [accessed 2 November 2023].
4. Phil Kinsman, 'Landscape, Race and National Identity: The Photography of Ingrid Pollard', in *Area*, 27.4 (December 1995), pp. 300–10.

Figure 1.
Untitled, 2021, self-published in
'WITHOUT LAW: Self Portraits April
30 – June 30, 2020', by Mitchell
Squire, 2022





Figure 2.
*Searching for Mendieta out in these
wood, 2021, self-published in 'OUT
FROM: Self Portraits 2020/21', by
Mitchell Squire, 2021*

Figure 3.
If forever was now, 2021, self-
published in 'OUT FROM: Self
Portraits 2020/21', by Mitchell
Squire, 2021





Figure 4.
Untitled, 2021, self-published in
'OUT FROM: Self Portraits 2020/
21', by Mitchell Squire, 2021

Figure 5.
Warmth of a Stranger, 2020, self-
published in 'OUT FROM: Self
Portraits 2020/21', by Mitchell
Squire, 2021





Figure 6.
Fixed up, 2020, self-published in
'OUT FROM: Self Portraits 2020/
21', by Mitchell Squire, 2021

Figure 7.
*The clarity of righteous rabblement
to me: or, a holy trinity of thugs,*
2020, self-published in 'OUT
FROM: Self Portraits 2020/21', by
Mitchell Squire, 2021





Figure 8.
The cold has never left me, 2020,
self-published in 'OUT FROM: Self
Portraits 2020/21', by Mitchell
Squire, 2021

Figure 9.
Untitled, 2020, self-published in
'OUT FROM: Self Portraits 2020/
21', by Mitchell Squire, 2021

