



# Everything But the Boy: Chris Ironside's *Mr. Long Weekend*

by Kerry Manders

"Even in the off hours, men know marks."<sup>1</sup>

—Anne Carson

"[I]f we are visible and invisible to each other, the gap is enough to sustain our attraction."<sup>2</sup>

—Luce Irigaray

*Mr. Long Weekend #18* features Toronto artist Chris Ironside wielding a canoe paddle as sword and sporting a Canadian flag as cape, proudly riding an enormous stag—or, rather, riding an ostentatious stag-sculpture-cum-lawn-ornament. Here, Ironside strikes a humorously self-conscious (super) heroic pose, one arm raised in triumph and purpose as knight-errant on his long weekend quest (T-shirt, ball cap and flip-flops = ubiquitous long weekend armour). Ironside's quest is neither singular nor teleological; this image, though labelled #18, introduces *Mr. Long Weekend* (2005–10) on Ironside's website and was featured in the advertising material for the exhibition that I attended at Toronto's O'Connor Gallery in the summer of 2010.<sup>3</sup> While Ironside's valiant pose mimics the robust stag's, the irony of this virile affinity lies in its impossibility. This male deer is decidedly *not* wild: he is a cast-iron sculpture erected, contained and displayed on private property. Ironside appears to be riding the stag, but he is going nowhere on this immobile beast. Rather, he is remobilizing his engagement with masculinity as nature, as identity, as desire.

*Mr. Long Weekend* features multiple representations of a masculine body that simultaneously is, and is not, Ironside's own. In what he calls a series of "documented performances," Ironside embodies variations of a masculine type: suburban dad, (Molson) Canadian outdoorsman, enthusiastic frat boy, Harley Davidson rider. The singular "Mr." is photographically dispersed into sundry images of boys or men who might claim the series' title, with all that the moniker playfully connotes of masculine competition and dominion. Similarly, "Long Weekend" names not one specific time but any and all "alcohol-fuelled and testosterone-laced" summer holidays, conjuring and recalling

potent scenes and symbols in the collective Canadian consciousness.<sup>4</sup> It is on such familiar imagery that Ironside perpetually riffs—from beer-funnelling teenagers at Provincial Park campgrounds to cocktail-sipping suburbanites manicuring their fenced-in lawns. Ironside's images evoke any number of domestic beer commercials that imagine and idealize the supposedly normal Canadian man, one who not only consumes said beer but who necessarily loves various sports (playing and spectating), exudes patriotism, ogles women, goes camping, wears plaid, and thinks about hockey (even in the off-season). Developed via his queer lens, Ironside's iterations of normative masculinity suggest

that it is only in and through reiteration that gender is produced in the first place—indeed in any place.

There is something positively funny—and delightfully queer—about a gay male artist playing a stereotypically straight dude straddling a male deer. Ironside literally tops the art object, his legs embracing the stag beneath him. This corporeal gesture mirrors Ironside's embrace of his anti-type, embodying him as subject and object and allowing him, as he describes it, "to transition from wanting the object of desire to becoming the object of desire." Ironside characterizes his photographs as "indirect self-portraits of men I want or have wanted to be." As a result, they document his effort to identify with such men by inhabiting their difference—his attempts to see, to feel, to record what "he" is like, and what "I" is like as "he." Looking to understand the otherness within his own gender rather than between genders, Ironside stages hyper-real types not to mock the ostensibly typical, but to engage compellingly diverse desires that simultaneously converge and conflict for him: desires to be, to (be) like, to know, and to have. Ironside has been chasing and tracing these desires throughout his career. His undergraduate thesis exhibition, *Pretty Ugly Boys* (Guelph University, 1996), his MFA thesis show, *Hard Candy* (York University, 2002), and his current projects turn and return to terrains of masculine identity. In *Mr. Long Weekend*, Ironside performs roles that have been normalized into invisibility and indelibly marks the putatively universal gender that so often remains unmarked and unremarked.

In his photograph of a deer-crossing sign bolted to a roadside hydro pole (*Mr. Long Weekend #10*), Ironside echoes his own photographic imagery of wildlife tamed and symbolized. Invariably, the iconic mid-leap deer pictured on these signs are male (the antlers mark their sex). Although *Mr. Long Weekend* is shot exclusively in black and white, the familiar sign implies the cautionary yellow: one should slow down, beware, take care. The sign asks us to be extra vigilant in our perception as we might cross paths with another species. Who has the right of way? Humans have invaded deer territory and yet deer risk their lives crossing our roads. The deer-crossing sign signals not only caution, then, but also potential danger: either or both species may be injured or killed in a collision. As a gay man in a straight world, Ironside is exiled from the Law of the Social that supports and sustains heterosexuality; because abject, his is the more vulnerable masculinity. However, the power Ironside wields as an artist

opposite  
Chris Ironside, *Mr. Long Weekend #18*, 2007, archival pigment  
print, 51 cm x 61 cm  
PHOTO: CHRIS IRONSIDE; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





leaves his subject exposed to a scrutinizing—and often lusting—gaze that strips “the man” of his protective armour and thus strategically, lovingly, unmans him. Gay artist and straight subject intersect in Ironside’s body. The tension between normativity and alterity (stag and drag) coalesce in the physical and representational space of the artist’s body and its documentation. Without clearly demarcated boundaries, these images ask, what do we make of men? What do men make of themselves? How, and why, do men make themselves? While *Mr. Long Weekend* often showcases the potential humour of such questions and crossings, its scenes always retain their gravity so as not to undermine the significance of Ironside’s inquiry.

In photographing the sign, Ironside offers what is arguably his most self-reflexive piece in the series. Compellingly, the deer-crossing sign that Ironside photographs is disfigured, altered by some invisible other who has fled the scene. An anonymous graffiti artist and/or long weekend prankster has spray-painted genitals (penis and scrotum) onto the deer. The sign’s status as found art is thus redoubled as Ironside witnesses the sign play of another, and his photograph becomes a serendipitous collaboration, an encounter with another that is creative rather than combative. Here is a *mise-en-abyme* of representation wherein Ironside and the other refract the tyranny of official, “original” signs. The paint dripping from the genitals can be read as semen, though it is the sign that is reproduced here and not the species. While the leaping stag with its exposed member might appear the picture of masculine strength and purpose, Ironside questions its veneer of virility—the stag, in its fixed and vulnerable pose, appears rather impotent. If the deer-crossing sign implies the cautionary yellow, so might the leaking liquid (potentially urine); I say leaking because the substance appears to fall straight down to the ground—there is no velocity to the excretion. This stag would not win any pissing contests. The image at once evokes masculine territorial marking (see also *Mr. Long Weekend #25*, in which Ironside urinates on a cherry tree) and its opposite. The stag’s genitals are exposed to the elements and to the audience, its excretion a sign of a body not fully self-possessed, contained or controlled.

While the entire series invites its audience to consider the nature of normative masculinity, the deer-crossing sign in particular contends that masculinity is not natural or innate; it is a sign circulating among others, a sign erected and protected by various institutions that hold it dear. Ironside loosens the grip by tampering

with the product and betraying masculinity as eminently malleable: illusive, allusive, elusive. Ironside highlights signs as (re)presentations and repetitions that are dynamic—possibly like the “real” deer that necessarily evades the frame. Just as the stag in *Mr. Long Weekend #18* is an art object, so is the stag in the deer-crossing sign, and so are the men that Ironside fleetingly inhabits. Ironside renders wild life as still life, which is not to say that he omits dynamism. The prosthetic aesthetic (drawing a big dick on a stag is like giving a penis a penis) is also the mischievous matter of male hijinks or “late-night dares” (Ironside) that accentuates its potency and humour: the mark might well have been made by drunk teenage boys, homosocial young bucks out to impress each other.

The occasionally campy sensibility of *Mr. Long Weekend* is fittingly ramped up in the various camping shots. Camp is, in part, characterized by the kind of heightened artificiality and exaggerated performance that Ironside undertakes. Initially these shots struck me as amusing, since Ironside categorically loathes camping. As he tells it, “I set up and took down a tent more times for this project than I ever have in ‘real’ life.” In real life, Ironside embarked on a single camping trip, lasting only one night, and he was done by daybreak: “there is nothing civilized about camping.” He wears this distaste melodramatically in his facial expressions for *Mr. Long Weekend #11* and *#13*: is that extreme discomfort I detect? Or perhaps distress? These photos are more than comical: his face might register fear, and there is an ominous quality, especially to the night shots, a hint of horror film aesthetic. The shots of trees and chairs are eerily and artificially lit as flashlights and car headlights penetrate an enveloping, portentous darkness. Like the deer crossing a highway, a camper pitching a tent outdoors is subject to danger. These dangers are intensified via the prohibition against exhibiting such an “unmanly” emotion as fear. In turn, this prohibition necessitates other signs, other markers to metonymize that which men must not express.

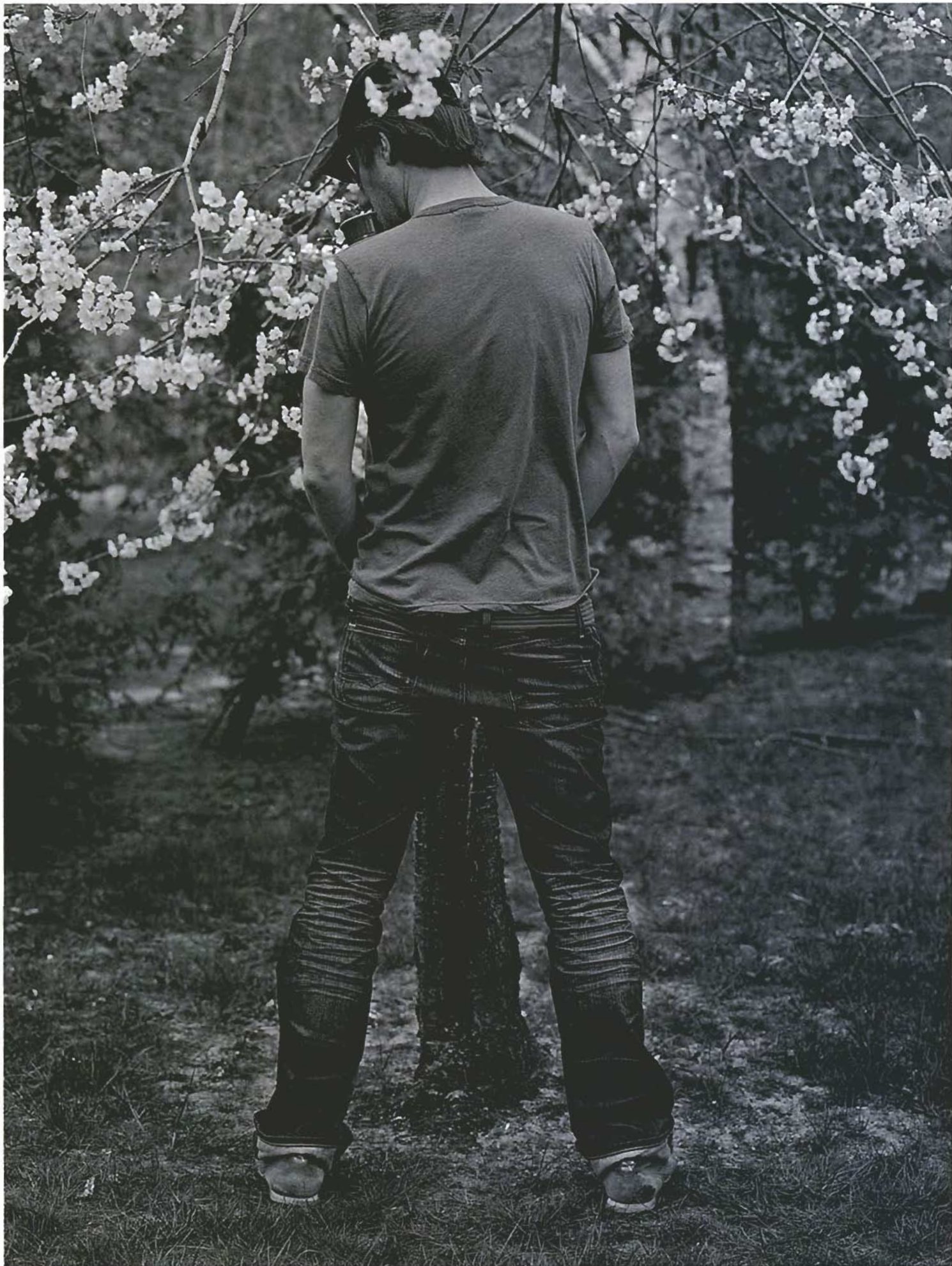
The empty chairs in *Mr. Long Weekend #12* and *#15* (a lawn chair and a chaise lounge, respectively) register Ironside’s temporal play. The chairs are the remnants, perhaps, of a different kind of wildlife; one imagines the absent sitter passed out in a nearby tent. The photographs picture the after(math) of a before pictured elsewhere in the series (they logically follow *Mr. Long Weekend #11* and *#14* but are not exhibited in this order). Defying our expectations of causal-chronological order, there are spaces between these companion

photos, spaces occupied by photos that belong (speaking chronologically) before the before and after the after. Ironside’s strategic (dis)placement puts his photos into a self-referential dialogue and invites his viewer to construct his or her own spectral narrative. Ironside also documents the time of the shoot; here, the performance inheres in the body outside, rather than inside, the frame; the photographs necessarily invoke the photographer, the body behind the camera who is staging and lighting the scene. This intensifies the self-reflexive play: the lighting literally spotlights the time and the mechanics of the photographic shoot.

In shooting the absent man—and absence per se—Ironside acknowledges the impossibility of apprehension and denaturalizes the processes of imaging, imagining and viewing any body. We cannot finally locate a body outside of the mediating discourses and narratives that construct it. Moreover, the absent body is irrecoverable through its representation—the photograph is not the body but, rather, a reminder of its absence. In photographing the chairs as material, quotidian objects without bodies, Ironside interrogates categories through which we understand embodied experience and highlights the epistemology of vision, upon which photography—and masculinity—rely. An empty chair connotes the beautiful failure of representation: Ironside pictures the space left behind by bodies that neither the photographer nor his photographs can fully access or render.

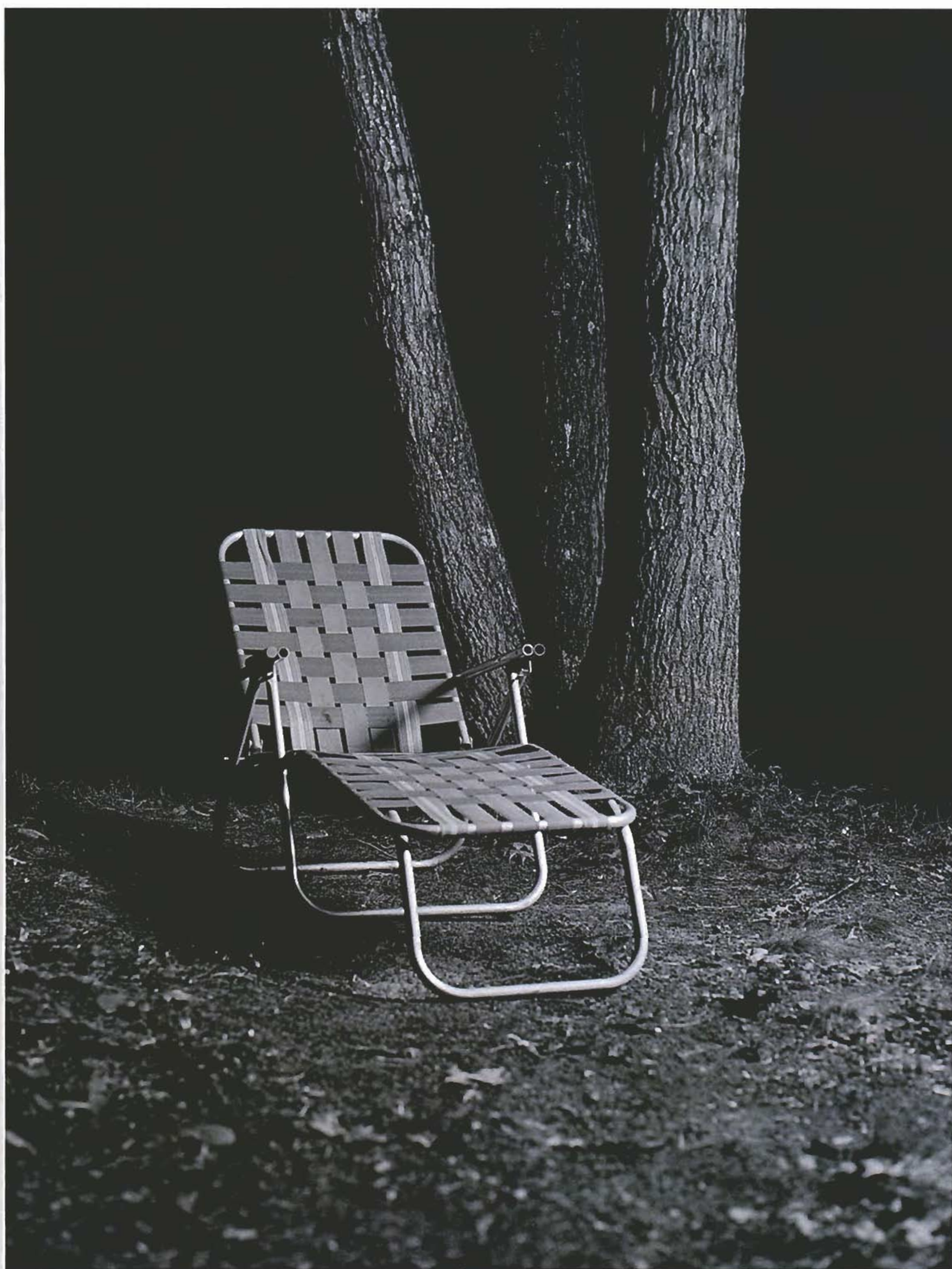
Despite the “natural” locales, the *mise-en-scènes* are meticulously contrived; context is as constructed as any identity within it. In alluding to the body no longer in the chair, the photographs suggest the immediate history of the particular scene. More broadly, however, they recall a whole history of summer long weekends by featuring the decidedly old-school chairs that I remember from childhood, with their criss-cross nylon webbing and aluminum frames. These chairs are lightweight and transportable, but famously fragile (and flammable): the webbing frays and the aluminum bends (do these chairs ever survive more than one summer season?). The criss-crossed material woven taut across the frames of the chairs, pictured without the materiality of bodies, reiterates the persistent theme of intersectionality in *Mr. Long Weekend*: crossing deer, crossing orientations, crossing genres, crossing times. The webbing inevitably frays, just as the masculine nostalgia that these photographs ostensibly offer turns into something else: hangover, exhaustion, failure. Saturnalia meets Tuesday mourning, and





Chris Ironside, *Mr. Long Weekend #25*, 2010, archival pigment print, 40.6 cm x 51 cm  
PHOTO: CHRIS IRONSIDE; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





Chris Ironside, *Mr. Long Weekend #15*, 2006, archival pigment print, 40.6 cm x 51 cm  
PHOTO: CHRIS IRONSIDE; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Mr. Long Weekend must go home.

Ironside's work is intriguingly intertextual as it intersects camp with horror, paying homage to one of Ironside's artistic influences, David Lynch, who is famous for his depictions of the mystery and multiplicity of identity and for his pervasive intertextual embeddings. Look closely and you can see that Ironside sports a *Twin Peaks* T-shirt in *Mr. Long Weekend* #11. In this shot, Ironside shines a flashlight towards—and looks searchingly at—his own camera, and thus at his audience. He stages an encounter between artist (as art subject) and viewer. It is as though he scrutinizes our perception of his interrogation of his gender. The effects of the flashlight are as blinding as they are revealing: we might be the deer in his headlights. The artist as his own model looks at us reading the signs; it is a reciprocal gaze. Looking at each other across the (time) frame, we are interconnected and embedded in Ironside's intersubjective scenes.

"I wanted to know what he was like."<sup>5</sup> I end by citing *Mr. Long Weekend*'s beginning, a deceptively simple epigraphical assertion that articulates Ironside's career-long interrogation of, and play with, performances of masculine identities. Ironside began exploring what "he" is, was, and will be like as a Fine Arts student in the early 90s. As an established photographer and instructor today, he remains curious: "I wanted to know what he was like." "He" logically refers to the "man," the other, that Ironside was not, is not, and will not be, despite the accoutrements of normative masculinity that he dons for this series. The crossings apparent in each photograph iterate the allure of the week-ending man, and it is to him that Ironside is irresistibly drawn. The singular subject, "he," belies the mobility that Ironside's practice activates with every take. On stags and campsites, in chairs and weight rooms, in front of the camera or behind it, I/he/Mr. is always and necessarily equivocal—even at the most intimate junctures. Separately and together, the photos in *Mr. Long Weekend* repeat a familiar tale of idealized—adorned and adored—masculinity. Yet Ironside wears such narratives to unwear and ironize them. Playing against his own type (queer, urban, artistic), Ironside does not fit comfortably or fully into the "other" he puts on, throwing into relief the gaps, the disjunctions, between any "I" and its accompanying idealization(s). Ironside's masquerade suggests that roles and landscapes are not fixed and that closed systems are but opportunities for manifold and furtive crossings; the real man is an empty animal track—as fleeting and provisional as our

trespasses into his territory.

"I wanted to know what he was like." Past tense, future tensions. A palpable nostalgia for the boy he never was and a lament for the man he'll never be inform Ironside's present play. He is also mourning the impossibility of knowing: he *wants* (desires and lacks) libidinal and epistemological knowledge. "I wanted to know...": Ironside's wanting is an ongoing curiosity that can never be sated, just as any "I," any incarnation of masculinity, can never be authentic. Crucially, Ironside questions not what he *is* but what he is *like*. I/he can never "be," can only perform resemblances and dissemblances of desire in a series of photographs of self as indelibly other.

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*For galvanizing exchanges about pitching tents, crossing signs and riding stags, the author thanks Tom Cull, Chris Ironside, and Brandy Ryan.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*. (New York: Vintage, 2000), 7.
- 2 Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 16.
- 3 See Ironside's website at <http://www.chrisironside.com>
- 4 When I quote Ironside, I am citing either his artist statement or conversations we had while I was writing this piece.
- 5 Ironside uses this line by Everything But the Girl, from their song "Wrong" (released in 1996 on their album *Walking Wounded*), as the epigraph for his artist statement for *Mr. Long Weekend*.