

WILL MCBRIDE'S BOARDING SCHOOL BOYS

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S PEAK INSIDE THE ELITE SALEM SCHOOL.



TEXT BY JEFFREY FROM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL MCBRIDE

All images © Will McBride, 1963, courtesy of ClampArt, New York City.
This page: "Mike beim Sport." Opposite page: "Einer greift nach Seife und berührt."





"Mike und die anderen schmeissen sich mit Wasser"



"Mike und andere Schüler Giessen Wasser über sich"

Salem Suite, Will McBride's ephemeral collection of photographs, is a snapshot of boyhood in motion. Taken in 1963, the photos follow the life of Mike, a boarding student at the Salem Castle School in Germany, as he's swept up in the mercurial nature of adolescence—eating, exercising and showering in a world on the cusp of manhood. In black-and-white photos, innocence and curiosity collide, torsos tenderly touching.

Though originally trained as a painter by Norman Rockwell, McBride leaned on his photography skills during World War II, joining the U.S. Army in Germany, where he specialized in infantry yearbooks. As he transitioned to permanent residence in Berlin, painting gave way to photography full time, marked by his controversial work in *Twen* magazine as well as his children's sex education book, *Show Me! (Zen Mal!)*. Kiddy porn, some people called it; McBride rebutted with a second installation, *Show Me More! (Zen Mal Mehr!)*.

Until his death in January 2015, he continued to unabashedly explore issues of youth, sexuality and coming of age. Critics be damned, he remained keen on body-positivity, anti-war sentiments and naked boys—quite the trifecta.

Salem Suite, published in 2014, fits snugly within his larger body of work, mapping the topography of adolescence and the climb toward fully formed masculinity. The images reside on a plateau, just before the boys' ascent, each body a landmark of transition. Young Mike—boasting a full bush, pubes from groin to navel—radiates quiet confidence. A pendant hangs from his neck; his armpits are full. A smaller, sheepish boy stands next to him, though they're not yet divided by competition. Self-consciousness is seemingly absent.

As water cascades down their faces and soars across the bathroom, bodies dance, arms flail, laughter rises. These flickering moments are what interested McBride most.

In a rare on-camera interview with the website *Flasher*, McBride said, "I watch what they're doing and what they have to do. What they have to learn to do. How the boy loses. How his identity becomes caught in society."

There are, of course, flashes of peeping-tom allure, but it's not as simple as creepy voyeurism. McBride's camera is quiet, more mirror than lens. Even as the bodies touch—one boy gliding his hand over Mike's tummy as he reaches for a bar of soap—the action says nothing of sex. McBride captures the atmosphere as it was: boys touching and being touched without taboo.

Other photographs tell a similar story. Mike toasts four wine-filled goblets with his glass of milk. He fidgets in a windowsill, unaware of the girl watching him from across the courtyard. Each frame sees fragile innocence teetering on the edge of what, for many boys in a war-defined generation, would prove to be a sharp descent

into state-sanctioned aggressive masculinity. McBride's anti-war agenda focused on this calm before the storm: the final moments before the boys were sharpened into violent, militaristic manhood.

"Whatever state—U.S.A., Germany, France—without aggressive men, they can't run their states," he told *Flasher*. "Above all, they can't make war. In the early '70s, we thought it would be a good thing for young men to live out their sexuality. We thought they would become peaceful. But this opinion hasn't survived in the public so long because the state doesn't need peaceful young men."

While the group-shower/water-fight fantasy rests comfortably in my mind, these photographs are about something more. They are moments in which McBride has stalled an unstoppable force, the final frames of boyish purity. ■



Opposite page clockwise from top left: "Mike wäscht sich mit anderen," "Schüler waschen sich," "Mike und andere schmeissen Wasser beim Waschen," "Mike schmeisst Wasser auf sich." This page from top: "Mike und Freundin," "Mike belauscht die Musik eines Mitschülers."