

PHOTO BOOTH

# A TOUR THROUGH CENTRAL PARK'S CRUISING GROUNDS

*Arthur Tress's new book, "The Ramble, NYC 1969," provides a view into a world otherwise all but invisible to passersby.*

**By Vince Aletti**

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Photographs by Arthur Tress

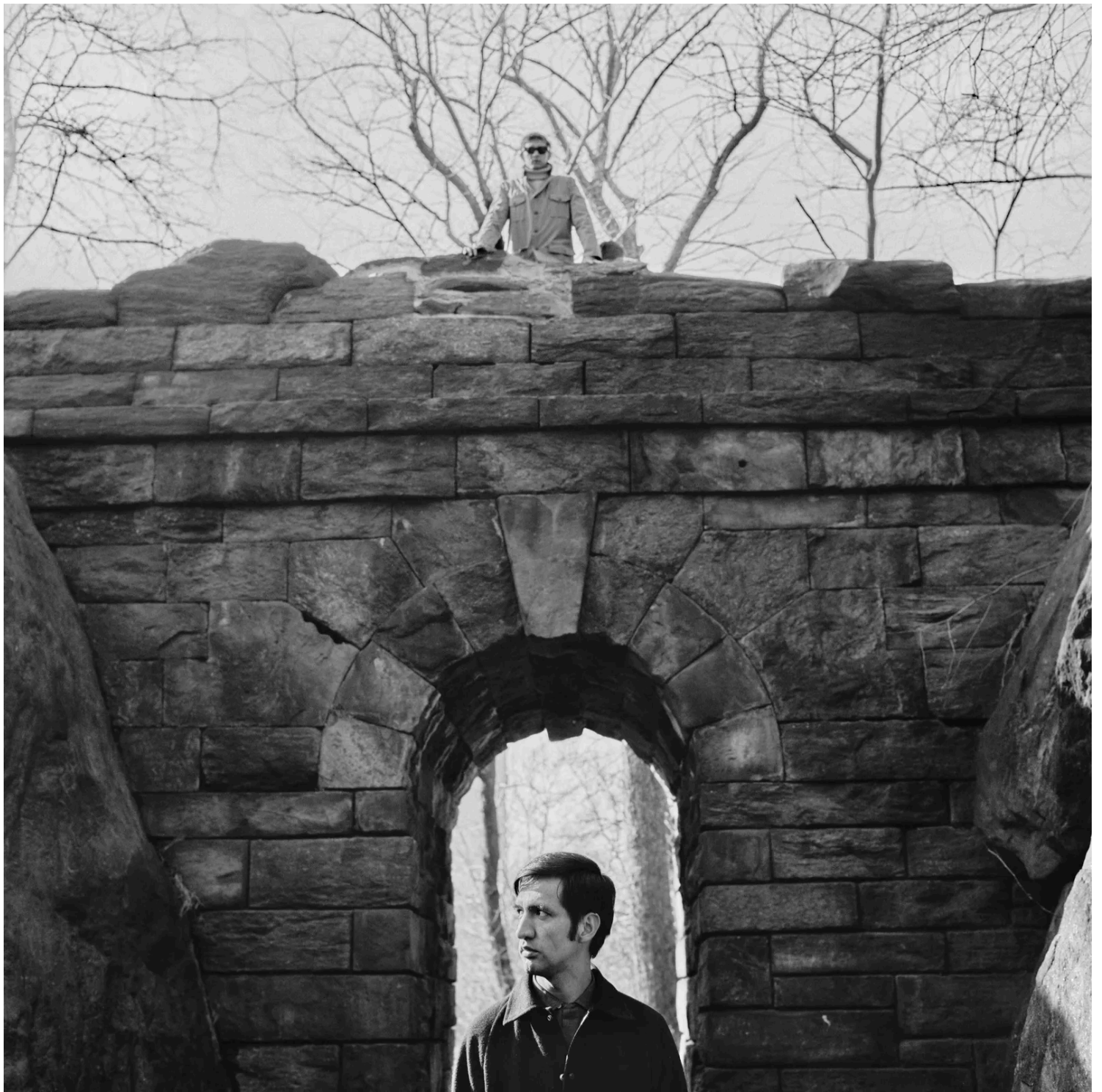


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**T**he eighty-five-year-old photographer Arthur Tress has had a long and busy career, but the photographs that continue to define him are from the



nineteen-seventies. Most of them are oddly charged, dramatically staged images meant to evoke dreams, nightmares, or fantasies. Many of the best-known photos from a series with children, published in 1972 as “The Dream Collector,” could be frames from a David Lynch film. Much of the subsequent work Tress made was similarly theatrical but tended to involve homoerotic scenes. In one picture, a slim teen-ager reaches over tentatively, tenderly, to peel a bandage off another boy’s bare thigh, a moment both touching and wonderfully matter-of-fact. Tress’s approach during this period recalls that of his friend and mentor Duane Michals, another maverick. Both photographers are storytellers, impatient with the limitations of the photograph as a document, and looking for ways to open it up to the imagination. Although their work with the male body anticipated more radical and more widely seen images from Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar, Bruce Weber, and others, its detour into narrative tended to place it outside of any larger conversations. I remember thinking that Tress’s photography was intriguing but melodramatic and a bit overwrought. I never spent much time with it.



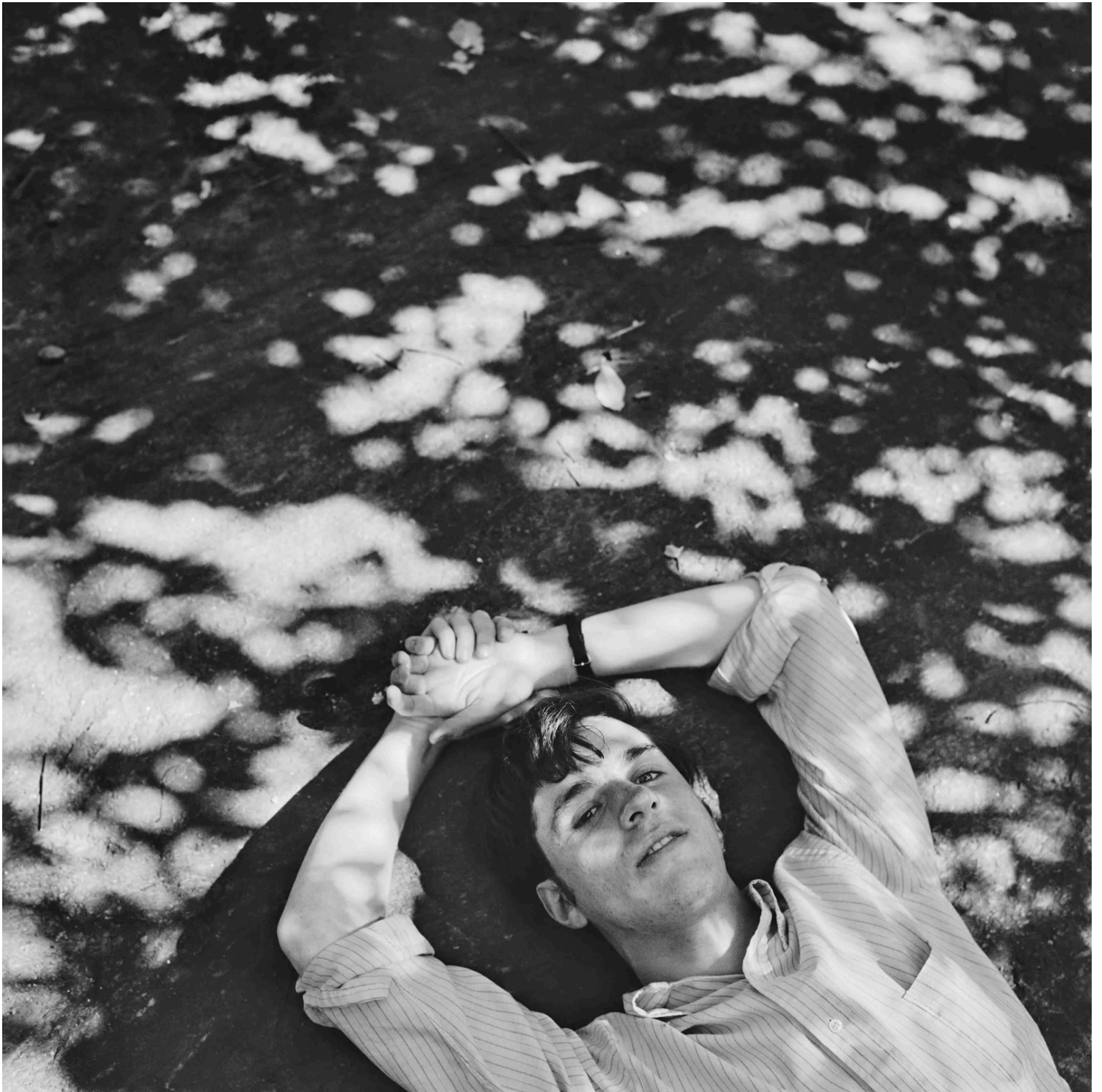


Tress's new book, "The Ramble, NYC 1969" (Stanley/Barker), and a related exhibition currently at the Clamp gallery, in Chelsea, makes me rethink all this. The work was made concurrently with another series, "Open Space in the Inner City: Ecology and the Urban Environment." The Ramble, a wooded area on the

center-west side of Central Park, was its own “urban environment.” But Tress’s prime interest was in the people he found there: mostly good-looking but otherwise unremarkable young men who were passing through, standing around, and waiting. Long before Tress arrived, the Ramble was known as a place where gay men hooked up and had sex in the bushes. In 1968, when he was in his late twenties, the photographer lived at Riverside Drive and Seventy-second Street, a short walk from the Park, and, as he told the playwright Jordan Tannahill in *Interview*, the rocky, overgrown Ramble was “my own private cruising grounds.”







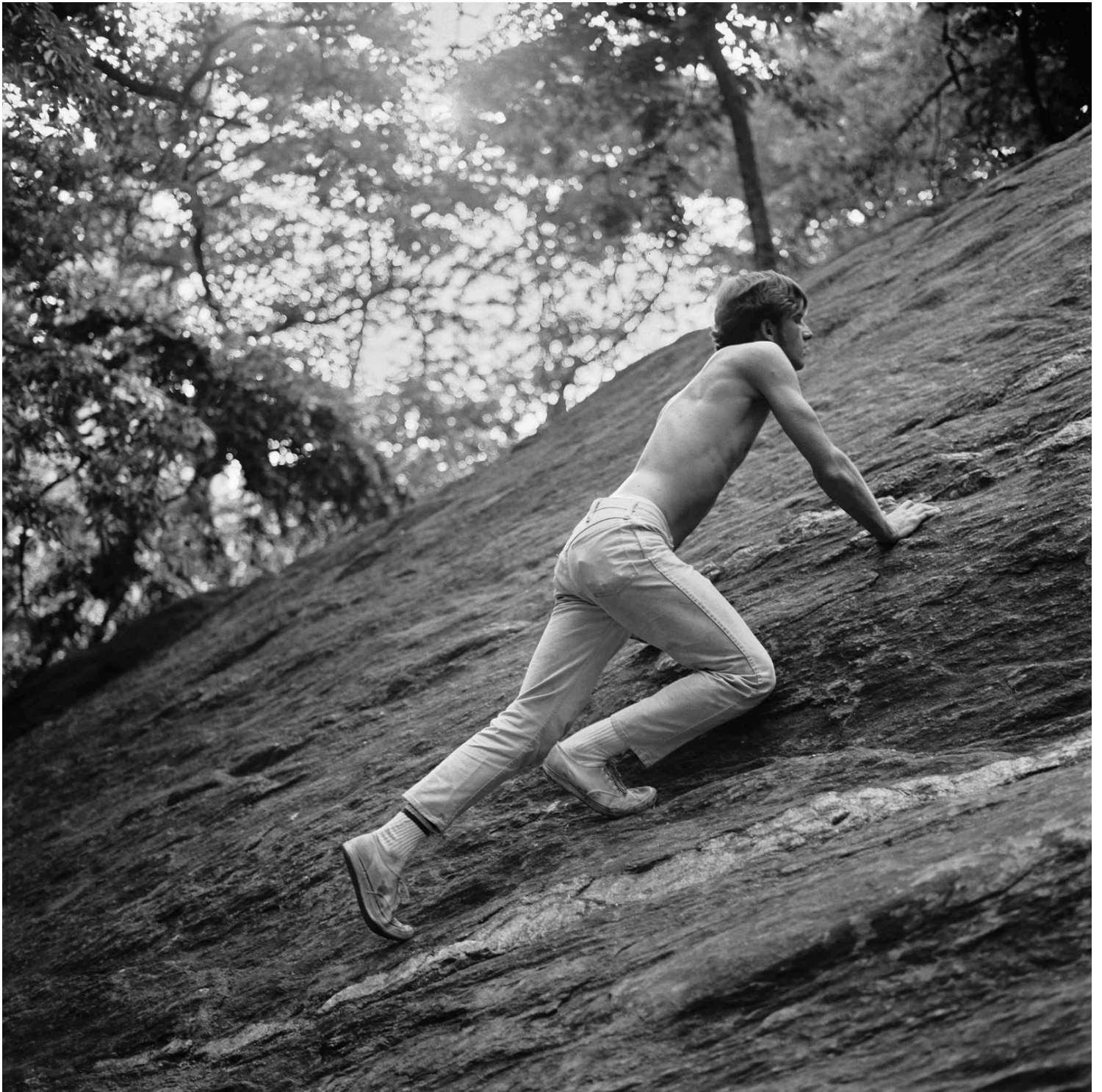


The Ramble's ever-shifting population was more various than any gay bar's. When Tress started taking his camera to the Park, he photographed some men "surreptitiously" but often asked first if it was O.K. For many, it wasn't. Even if gay sex was beginning to be decriminalized at the time, a lot of the men who cruised

for sex were married or closeted or otherwise on the down-low. We can't know much about the men who did agree to be seen in Tress's pictures, only that they comprise a small part of the population that used these paths as meeting places and hunting grounds before the sun went down. But are these photographs performances or documents? How much does Tress's subjects' consent compromise the "truth" of these pictures? "My work has always been a little bit of improvised, stage-directed imagery," Tress told Tannahill. He calls it "poetic documentary."







Even when these handsome young men are obviously posing for Tress's camera, the work is rich and fascinating, providing a view into a world otherwise all but invisible to passersby. Tress told the writer and curator Jackson Davidow, who wrote an essay for "The Ramble," that he'd been cruising since he was fifteen.

Recalling “layers of guilt and fear” that he and others had to work through, he suggests that many of his pictures could be seen as self-portraits. So he’s especially alert to expressions of anticipation, yearning, disappointment, and the kind of loneliness that even a flash of attention can’t dispel. Some of Tress’s images are jolting, including one of a bare-chested man who appears through some thorny branches, his wide-eyed stare so intense that he looks possessed—at once sightless and a seer. Other photographs suggest sympathy or concern. In one, Tress’s subject is perched on a rock, hands clasped over his folded legs, as compact as he can be but still anxious, apprehensive. Another guy, lying on the ground in dappled sunlight, is viewed from above at a moment of unself-conscious surrender—he’s one of several subjects who looks ready to fall in love.









Such pictures provide “The Ramble” with an emotional element, but what Tress does best here is reportorial—giving us a sense of place and of ritual. Some men stop and wait to see what comes along; others keep going, always on the lookout. In many of the images, the man whom Tress has focussed on is unaware of

another man nearly hidden in the foliage or on a rocky outcropping, just a few feet away—a missed connection that can seem at once poignant and comic. Tress surely recognized himself in all these men, from the saddest shrinking violet to the happy flasher with nothing under his trenchcoat but pants cut off just above the knees. But if “The Ramble” forms an extended self-portrait it also provides a mirror for its readers, queer and otherwise, navigating a world full of possibility that we don’t dare reach out and touch.







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