

JONAH SAMSON

(JS)

In conversation with

MATT LOVSTED

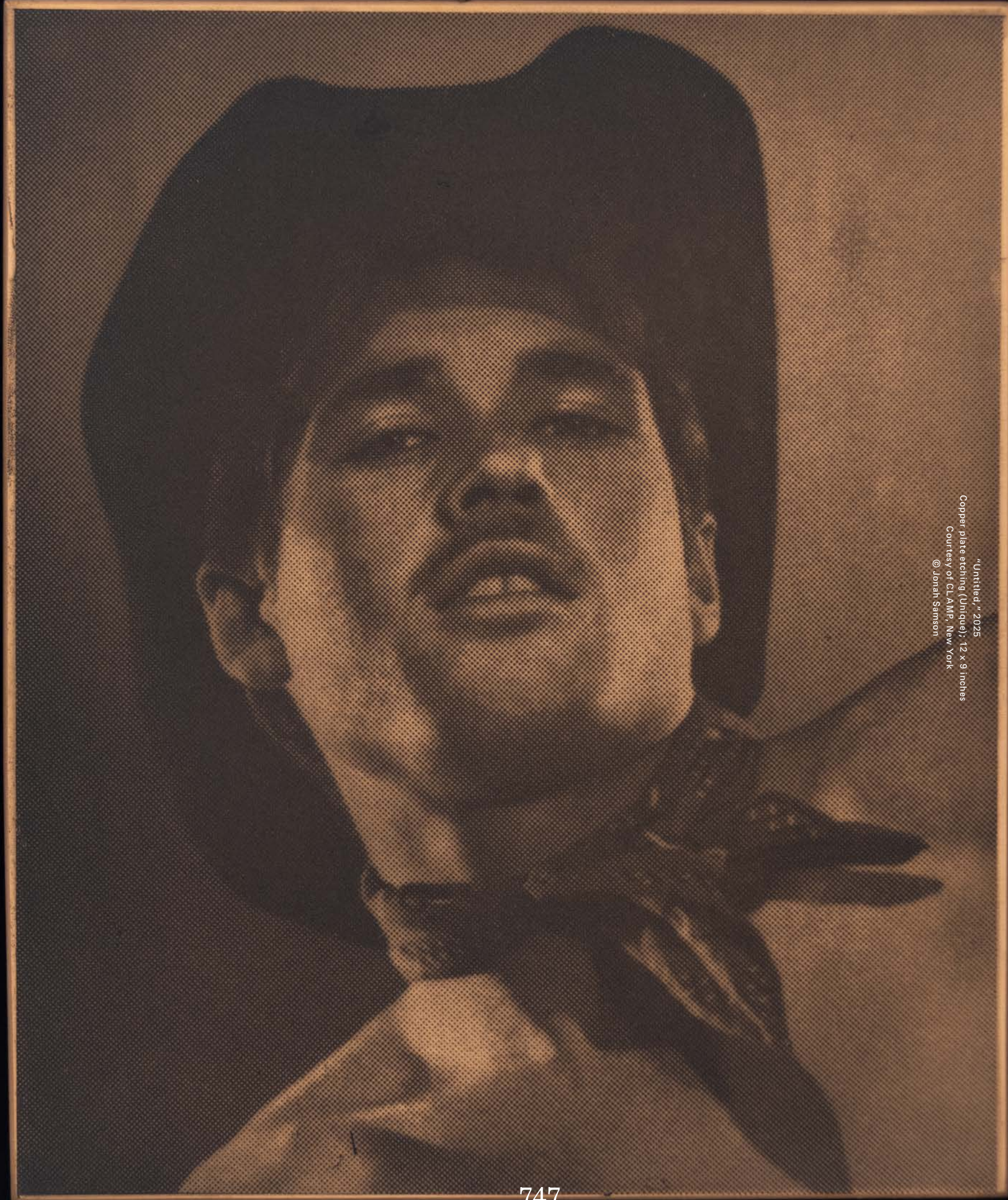
(ML)

Jonah Samson's work begins with images that have moved out of private life and into circulation: anonymous negatives and testimony. Rather than treating these materials as fixed records, he approaches them with sustained attention, tracing how meaning can persist, shift, and re-emerge through acts of looking and processing. Treating photography as a physical object—using analog processes like cyanotype, salt printing, and collage—to translate archival encounter into form. He questions the idea that time makes a photograph meaningful. Instead, returning the “decisive moment” to the present tense: the moment we consider a photograph, from the time and politics we inhabit, and the meaning we can't help but project. That admission—projection as inevitability—becomes an ethic. It allows ambiguity to remain intact while still insisting on visibility, especially for lives that once relied on being coded to be safe. Samson's practice is a form of co-belonging: disparate images carried into a world that feels truer than the one they came from. What emerges is a queer practice of custody.

746

Conversation curated by
EDUARDO GIÓN

(intro)



“Untitled,” 2025
Copper plate etching (Unique), 12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of CLAMF, New York
© Jonah Samson

747

“The main function of collage, now and throughout history, has been to take the existing world and reorganize it into a world you want to see, rather than the one you live in. This was one of the things I did in a collection called ‘Film Still Revisions.’”

MATT LOVSTED. Jonah, you spend hours scouring eBay for anonymous photos. What specifically do you look for in an image to decide it has the potential to become queer art?

JONAH SAMSON. I do spend a lot of time on eBay. I buy pictures that I’m drawn to, and there’s no specific reason for it. If it spoke to me in a certain way, I would purchase it and add it to my collection of images. It wasn’t until many years later, when I had boxes of these pictures, that I started to look at them more closely and try to draw relationships between pictures. Now, when I go on eBay to look at things, I’m very intentional about it. The pictures I’m looking for are pictures that I will use for a specific purpose. There’s a great book by Jacques Rancière called The History of the Image, and he talks a lot about what he calls the machine of mystery. “The machine of mystery is a way of taking otherwise disparate images and finding a co-belonging for them.” So, when I started looking at the collection, I would see these groupings that could be thought of as co-belongings.

One of the first projects that I did with the collection was an exhibition and a book called Another Happy Day, which is based on a quote from a Samuel Beckett play, Happy Days. And that book had a really lovely flow to it. It was just sequencing pictures from the collection without any text or explanation, under the influence of the Samuel Beckett play. And I really love that, and I think it was one of the first times when I really thought about these found photos in such a meaningful way. How do they read side by side? What kind of meaning do we give them when we pull them out of context and then put them in a new context? Or how do pictures read, one beside the other, as a meaning that they don’t have individually? And that was pretty groundbreaking for me. It sort of changed how I made work after that.

M.L. In your work, you often recontextualize mundane moments from the 20th century. How do you use “found history” to give visibility to desires or identities that were erased or coded during their time?

J.S. There’s a quote I always come back to from Susan Sontag’s On Photography: “Time elevates all photographs, no matter how amateurish, to the level of art.” I think about it all the time when I look at old photos, because they often feel nostalgic, and we’re drawn to them for that reason. I’m really interested in pictures that have value and meaning beyond that. So, if we assume all old pictures are art, it dilutes the meaning. When I look at them, I’m trying to figure out whether this is a good picture because it’s a good picture, or whether it just reads as a good picture because it’s old and tells us something about history. There’s another quote from Christopher Williams that talks about the decisive moment in photography. If you think about the quintessential idea of the decisive moment by Cartier Bresson, it’s the moment the photo is taken. It’s this perfect alignment of the universe in front of the camera at the exact moment it’s captured. But what Christopher Williams said is that the decisive moment in photography is actually when we look at it, and the time and space we look at it from, and what I’m interested in. So, when I see these pictures, I look at them through today’s lens, and how I read them, then I put them together and find meaning from that, because I think that’s just as important as when they were originally photographed.

M.L. In series such as Another Happy Day, you mix the domestic with the perverse. How does dark humor help you dismantle the idea of the “traditional family” and its gender norms?

J.S. I’ve always been drawn to dark humor, and I think that stems from my love of Samuel Beckett and the darkness and absurdity he gives to everything in life.

M.L. Your work has been described as a mixture of “magic, disturbance, and absurdity.” Do you think that “queerness” naturally inhabits that space of the strange and the misfit?

J.S. I think most queer people grow up feeling like they don’t fit into the world around them, and they probably spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to find their place in it. The darkness, the magic, and the strangeness of that experience are bound to influence us throughout the rest of our lives.

M.L. It is a process. You use old processes, such as cyanotype or sea-salt development. Is there a political intention behind using “slow” chemical techniques and organic materials to represent dissident bodies and stories?



“Self-portrait,” 1998
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson

J.S. I'm not sure if there's a political intention, but I'm very interested in slow living overall. These old processes that I use to create images. What I love about them is the time and space they take. Most of these old processes use UV light, but I actually use the sun. Most people who create photographs, particularly analog photography, work in the dark. I actually produce mine in my yard. They capture the time and the place so succinctly. It's the sun of that day in that location, and the slowness of that I find really attractive.

M.L. What other analog formats or media do you use besides photography?

J.S. I do a lot of very analog things, but they're probably all photography in one way or another. I work a lot with collage, but at its heart, collage is a photographic process. It's using existing photographs to create new work, for the most part. I'm really obsessed with photography. The history of photography, different processes in photography, and different ways we reproduce images are really exciting to me.

M.L. Artists such as Stan Brakhage and Sistiaga used film as a medium to appropriate it and use it as a pictorial framework. Who are your references?

J.S. My biggest reference is literature. I've been obsessed with Samuel Beckett for as long as I can remember, and I'm also influenced by other absurdist playwrights, including Tom Stoppard and Jean Genet. The last show I had at CLAMP Gallery in New York was inspired by a line from Walt Whitman's poem "To a Stranger." It's one of the poems in Leaves of Grass, and the first line says, You do not know how longingly I look upon you. I thought about that line for a long time before I found a place for it, and I realized it was something I was already doing with old gay publications. I built a gym in my studio and wallpapered it with giant cyanotype pictures of old fitness magazine models from Physique Pictorial. I realized that looking at these pictures and these gay porn magazines was exactly what Walt Whitman said, like you do not know how longingly I look upon you to these strangers. These old publications were so important to gay culture at the time. So, I keep finding meaning in different types of literature. The visual inspiration from different photographers and artists is infinite. I couldn't name all the people who inspire me, but literature is one thing I always come back to, and it seems to be the framework.

M.L. In your recent participation in Sharp Cuts: Queer Collage, you used physical collage. Is the act of cutting and pasting a metaphor for how queer people must construct their own identity from fragments of a culture that does not always include them?

J.S. Absolutely. The main function of collage, now and throughout history, has been to take the existing world and reorganize it into a world you want to see, rather than the one you live in. This was one of the things I did in a collection called "Film Still Revisions." In that body of work, I took existing film still photographs, cut two different pictures, and spliced them together to create two leading men. I

took pictures of intimacy between a man and a woman and then recreated pictures of two men together in these intimate moments. Growing up, most people of a certain age remember the first time they saw queerness on television or in a film, and how impactful that was. That is what I wanted to do with these pictures: create a queer moment out of what's been missing throughout photographic and film history.

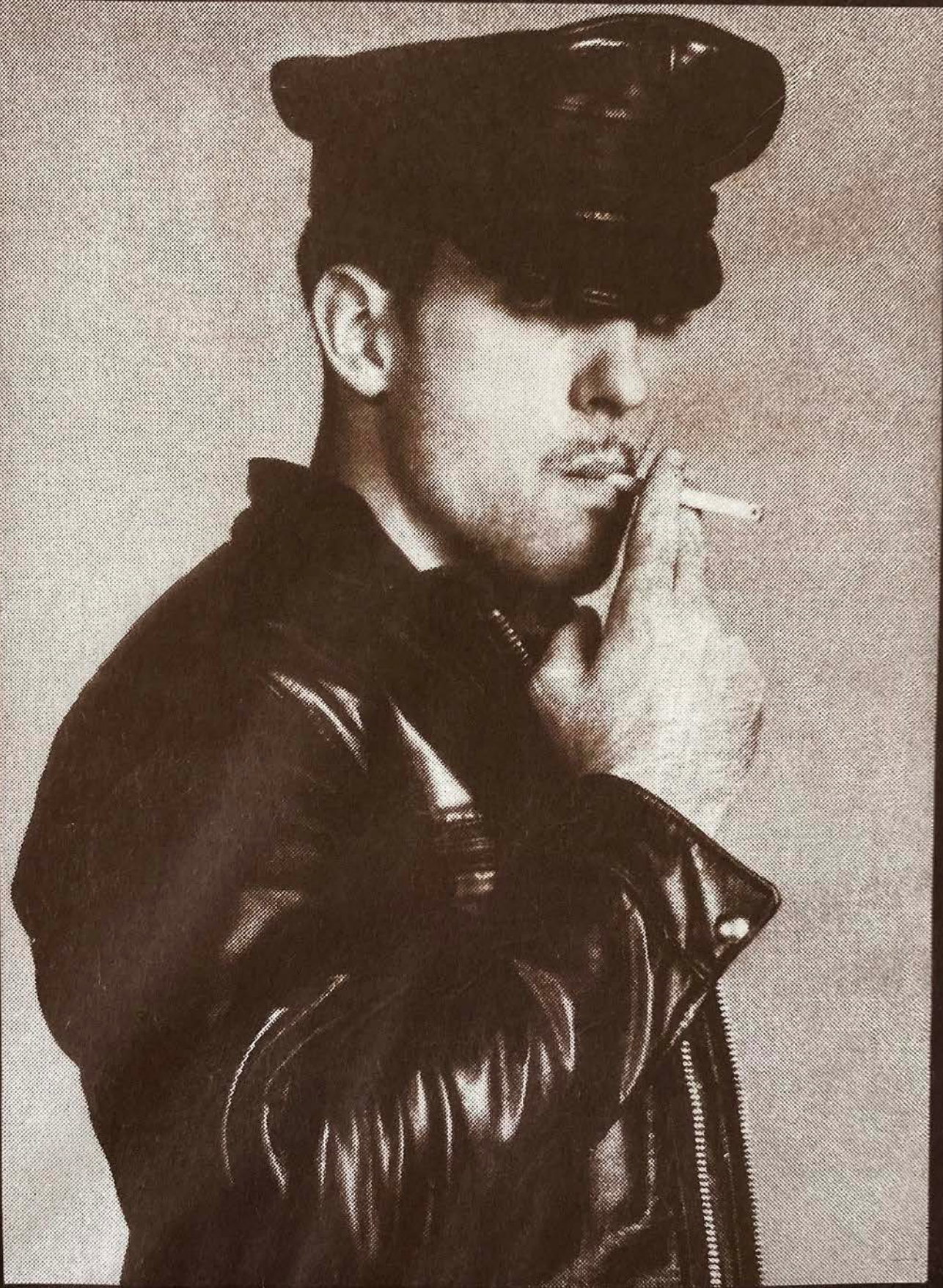
M.L. You mentioned that when you find old negatives on eBay, such as those from your series It Will Be Night, The Mist Will Clear, you feel a responsibility toward those images. How do you balance respect for the original privacy of those men with the desire to give them a place in queer visual history?

J.S. For some of the pictures I find, I definitely feel like a custodian. When I discovered the negatives for those pieces, I felt that way. The negatives were found on eBay, and they're of a group of men hanging out together in an intimate setting, with a lot of nudity. I obviously can't be sure what the original context of those pictures was, but they definitely felt like queer men on a getaway to Fire Island in the 1950s. They were very damaged when I received them, and I imagine they had been hidden away for decades and probably never expected to see the light of day, let alone be printed in the darkroom. I definitely felt a responsibility toward those pictures. In that piece in particular, I wanted to print these photographs, give them life, make them feel relevant, and prove that this happened in the past. It was beautiful to see them appear on paper and become physical objects. I wanted to reproduce that experience of printing them in the darkroom when I exhibited them, so I encased them in red plexiglass boxes. They really had this jewel-like quality on the wall, as they really did shine remarkably, but it felt like a nice way of honoring them.

M.L. Many of these images are from the pre-Stonewall era and have never been seen before, such as the portraits found at Casa Susanna. Do you think this is a way of bringing to light and giving visibility to a dark, hidden history of queer people?

J.S. Yes. As a matter of fact, the piece we were just discussing, the photographs encased in red boxes, was part of a show I did at Clint Rosenisch Gallery to mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. If you're like me and spend a lot of time looking at pictures and old queer publications, there's definitely a divide between the pictures you saw pre-Stonewall and the images we see post-Stonewall. The pre-Stonewall pictures were very coded. After Stonewall, things became far more explicit. I don't mean explicit in a sexual sense, but almost as a clear signal—this is explicitly gay imagery, intended for a gay audience. So, when I did the show, I wanted to shed light on this imagery, as that's what Stonewall did. It transformed the images we saw as queer people.

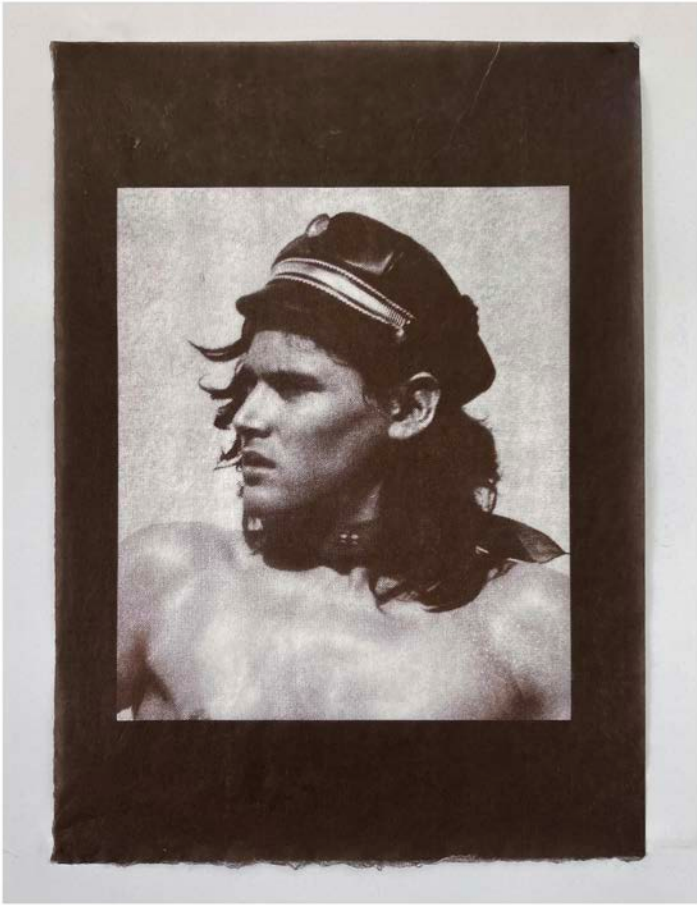
“I think most queer people grow up feeling like they don’t fit into the world around them, and they probably spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to find their place in it. The darkness, the magic, and the strangeness of that experience are bound to influence us throughout the rest of our lives.”



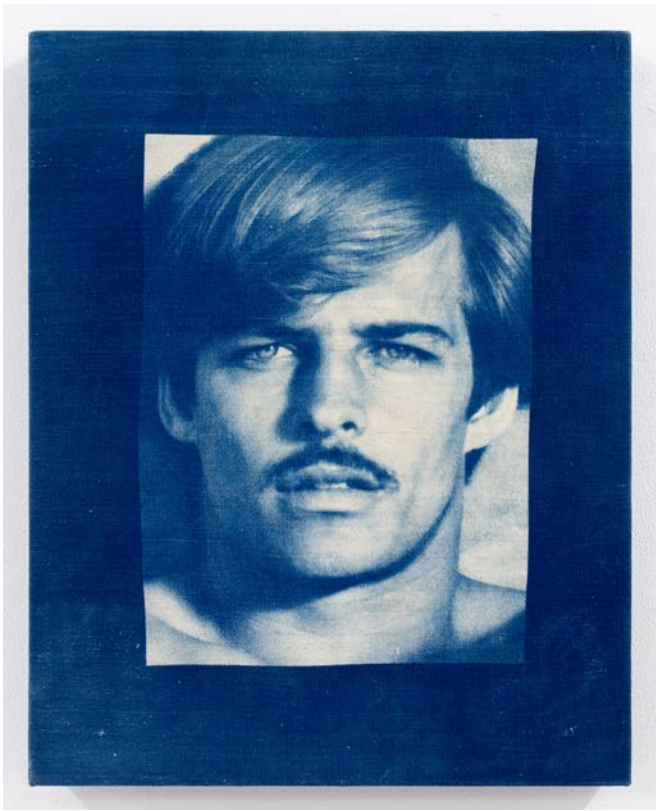
“Untitled,” 2025
Gold-toned Van Dyke print on handmade
Japanese Kozo paper (Unique); 19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonathan Samson



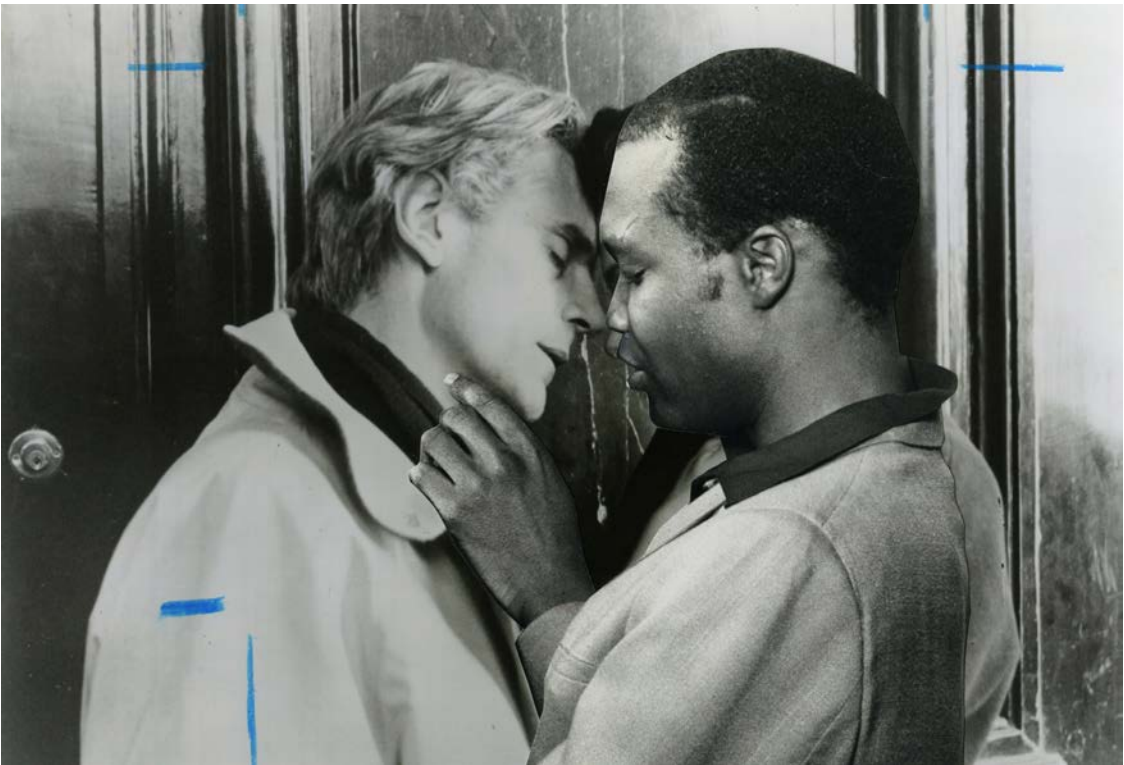
"Rewriting History 2," 2024
Gelatin silver collage (Unique); 7.125 x 9.375 inches, sheet
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson



"Untitled," 2025
Gold-toned Van Dyke print on handmade
Japanese Kozo paper (Unique); 19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson



"Untitled," 2025
Cyanotype on antique stretched hand-woven
French linen (Unique); 20 x 16 inches
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson



"Rewriting History 3," 2024
Gelatin silver collage (Unique); 6.75 x 10 inches, sheet
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson

M.L. Your book, *Yes Yes We're Magicians*, takes its title from Samuel Beckett. Why do Beckett's existentialism and tragic humor resonate so strongly with your vision of the human experience, particularly dissident identity?

J.S. Beckett taught me so much about life in general. He presented the absurdity of life as a way of being without explanation. So, this idea that we're born and we die, and all the pieces in between are strange and incomprehensible, not that they're meaningless, but they're just queer. And I think about Beckett's messages almost daily when I'm faced with different situations.

M.L. Amazing. When did you discover him?

J.S. I was studying liberal arts in Montreal around 1990. Speaking of analog things, I discovered a cassette tape of two critics discussing Beckett at the library—I checked it out, put it in my Walkman, and walked around Montreal, flipping the tape from side to side for weeks straight.

M.L. In your 2019 exhibition, you used red light boxes to present the images. Is this a way of reminding us that queer history is still in a never-ending process of “development”?

J.S. I believe so. Watching these images appear on paper in the darkroom was magical and deeply touching, especially when you consider that those pictures were never meant to be seen or shared.

M.L. I often think about the innumerable rolls of film that likely never made it to development for those very reasons. You often rescue photos of men in situations of physical camaraderie that we would now interpret as clearly homoerotic. How do you avoid projecting a modern perspective and maintain the ambiguity that made those images “safe” in their original era?

J.S. I don't think it's possible to avoid projections of a modern perspective.

M.L. In the age of visual excess, you choose images that are degraded, broken, or burned by time. Do you think the “damaged archive” aesthetic better represents the LGBTQ+ community's fragmented memory?

J.S. I'm not sure I'm attracted to the damaged archive, but I am attracted to the physical object that degrades over time. To me, a photograph is a physical thing.

M.L. Likewise, how do you feel about winning an eBay auction for a batch of private photos? Do you see yourself as an art collector or as the guardian of a family history no one else claimed?

J.S. I definitely feel like a guardian. I recently came across a seller on eBay who was selling Polaroid self-portraits of a cross-dresser, probably from the 60s or 70s, a collection taken over several years. The person appears in all of these various outfits and poses—they are really amazing. The seller had listed them individually, but I managed to convince him to sell me a lot of them. For me, they needed to stay together.

M.L. It's like a chronicle in its own right—almost a discovery unto itself.

J.S. When you think of the photograph as an object too, and of people being worried about processing film because of what might be on it, Polaroid photography changed that because you could take a picture and create the ima-

ge without anyone else being involved. It was just this sole person with a camera on a timer, making the pictures they felt were important to make themselves feel visible.

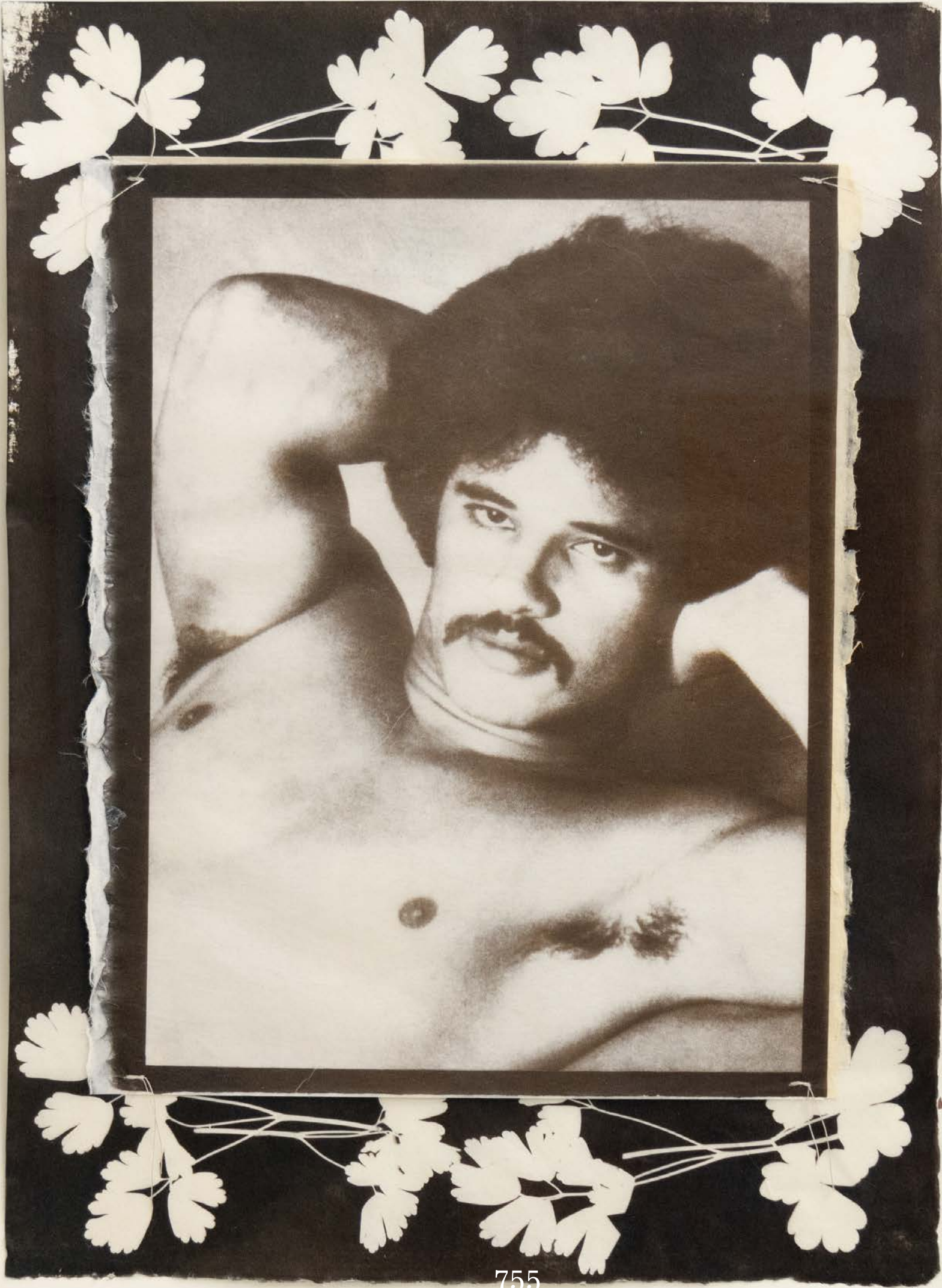
M.L. Polaroids are so passionate and can exist outside of surveillance in every way.

J.S. Exactly, it doesn't exist the way a negative does—it can't be reproduced. It's a very unique object.

M.L. What will we see from you next?

J.S. This week, I'm off to Mexico City because I work with a studio there to create copper-plate etchings. I began last year trying to figure out the gum bichromate process, which essentially uses pure, powdered pigments suspended in gelatin to create a picture. It's probably the original color photographic process. It's kind of amazing because they're made with pure pigments, so they'll never fade. So now I have to figure out where it's going to lead me.

“The decisive moment in photography is actually when we look at it, and the time and space we look at it from, and what I'm interested in. So, when I see these pictures, I look at them through today's lens, and how I read them, then I put them together and find meaning from that, because I think that's just as important as when they were originally photographed.”



“Untitled,” Double-layer gold-toned Van Dyke print on handmade Japanese Kozo paper and linen thread (Unique); 19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of CLAMP, New York
© Jonah Samson