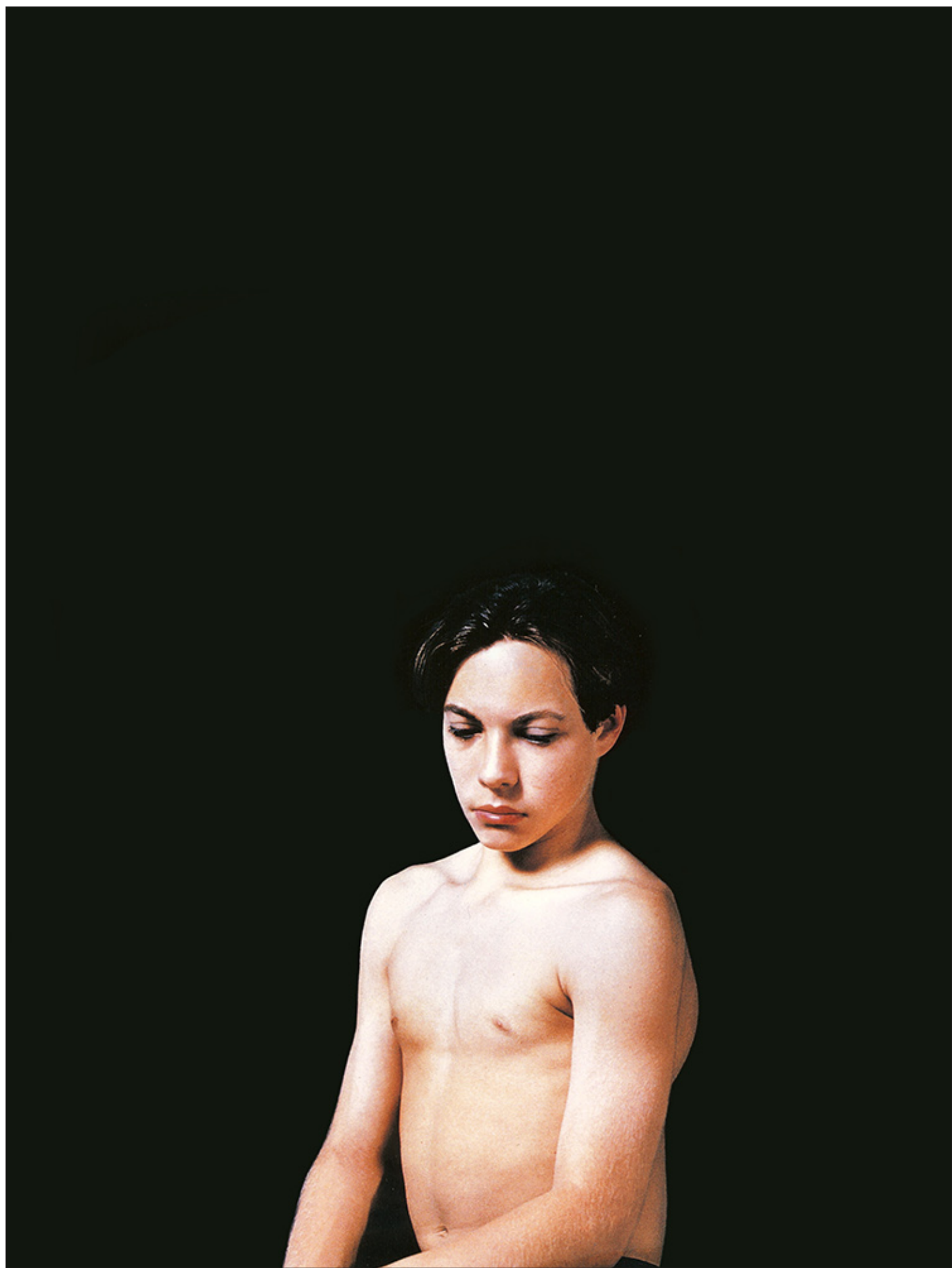


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Relativism is inimical to the kind of judgments on which traditional notions of art depend, yet in the current anxiety over the veracity of lens-based images, in an age of transition from silver salts to electrons, lies a more fundamental issue: when do we begin to doubt all absolutist positions? The world has many flavors, some of them more natural and some more artificial; tasting them is part of what makes life pleasurable. On the other hand, one man's herb garden may be another's compost heap.

In the lengthening shadow of the twentieth century, dichotomies seem less useful than ever. Ditto digital thinking. As information goes in the direction of on/off, yes/no, right/wrong, human beings begin to see the usefulness of thinking in analog terms. We fill in the spectrum between means and ends, and between beginnings and ends. Movies, like fiction before them (pulpy or not), now start in the middle, fast forward to the end and then go back to the start. Chronological uncertainty is a sign of moral uncertainty. Who shot the sheriff? Was it really in self-defense?

As critic Brenda Laurel has pointed out, "virtual reality" is on its face an oxymoron. The same could be said of virtual nature, whether rooted in human nature or in the Otherworld of flora and fauna. But what is natural to us already is recognized as second nature. Second nature lies in the domain of art and artifice. Second nature is the representation of nature by the cerebral cortex. Second nature is located at the intersection of human understanding and ecological necessity.

Peter Campus' images make this explicit. Foreground and background, inside and outside, map and territory interpenetrate and merge. Keith Cottingham's portraits go beyond ego, having been fashioned from skin samples and hair patches in a frightening ritual of replication capable of producing more than one of nobody. Aziz + Cucher seal off respiration and ingestion, making insensate beings of subjects who lack the most basic receptors of their species. Stephen Johnson retreads the quintessential landscape of modern photography, paying homage to the sublime while reconstituting its circuitry with electronic receptors.

What do these pictures—photographs, so to speak—have to do with second nature? Their nature is convincing but arguable, a construct of the imagination (but no more so than Albert Bierstadt's or Thomas Cole's) that is right because it looks so wrong. The digital mind cannot process its essential ambivalence. Only analog net-surfers and mouse-rappers have the insights necessary to decode its complex infrastructure, but all residents of the end of the block of the twentieth century should get the picture by instinct.

What you see isn't computer art. Much of what has masqueraded to date as computer art might better be called digital pictorialism. The tools of that trade are known as photo-manipulation software, but they really are illustrators' shortcuts. Think about this: computers can draw but they cannot photograph. The camera remains essential but not final. It's this lack of finality about the image in the lens that makes us queasy. It's not natural. No, it's second nature.

—Andy Grundberg



Keith Cottingham, *Fictitious Portraits*, 1994.

SEE

Second Nature
Andy Grundberg
1995

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