

ARTFORUM

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David Hilliard

CARROLL AND SONS

With the two- to five-part photographic panoramas on display here, Boston photographer David Hilliard has once again presented open-ended narratives about desire, time, and mortality. These color works are often autobiographical, depicting fathers and sons or dreamy adolescent boys; others show shirtless models—posed on a bed or amid lush paradisiacal greenery—and betray the intense voyeuristic pleasure of the man behind the lens. The majority are shot in rural outdoor settings—ranging from a lake in western Maine to marshy shorelines an hour from Anchorage, Alaska—and all are staged with such sensitivity that they appear as if the photographer had encountered his subjects by chance. Notably, the individual photographs from each work employ slightly different depths of field and focal points; the resultant tableaux gently upend any unified perspective on the scene, and, in the photographs of fathers and sons—the show's strongest pieces—suggest the emotional distance between their subjects.

Hilliard's father, a divorced navy veteran and retired factory worker, appears as himself in two of the works, both from 2008. The triptych *Rock Bottom* features, in the left panel, a close-up sharp-focus portrait of the saggy- and craggy-faced patriarch standing in a lake. Appearing at once stern, reflective, and vulnerable, he places his hands on his chest between two sailors' swallow tattoos. In the right panel, Hilliard himself appears somewhat further from the camera. He bears similarly powerful, albeit gentler, facial features, and, on his hairy chest, a pair of trendier, more stylized swallows (he got the tattoos six years ago as both an homage to his father and an erotic adornment). The works in this show are from the series "Being Like," 2007–, and document Hilliard's efforts to "be the dutiful son but never quite hitting the mark." Although the father accepts his son's homosexuality, it has been a source of tension between them, perhaps emblemized in this piece by its middle panel—a view across the lake with clouds reflected in the water and distant mountains—which divides the two generations both visually and metaphorically. The triptych *Hope*, 2008, adopts a similar theme, showing a much younger father-and-son pair on a fishing expedition. The central panel features a boy clothed in a jacket and waders stained with blood and mud, glumly displaying his catch—several halibut. "This sweet boy," Hilliard has said, "reminded me of myself, so many years ago, just trying to get



David Hilliard, *Rock Bottom*, 2008, triptych, color photographs, overall 24 x 60".

through certain expected rituals so that I could go off and do the strange and wonderful things that I truly wanted to do." The father, suited in his fishing vest and accompanied by a dog, appears in the panel on the right facing away from his child. Such distance between father and son is not immediately evident in *Hug*, in which Hilliard holds his elderly father in a tight embrace. The picture was taken after his father's health had begun to fail, and Hilliard wanted at least one photograph that showed him holding the older man. Nonetheless, "although we're hugging," he says "the photo is really about my being alone."

In their depiction of growth and aging set within bucolic landscapes, several of the photographs in "Being Like" suggest Thomas Cole's iconic series "Voyage of Life," 1840, where images of the four stages of life—childhood, youth, manhood, and old age—are coupled with boats, water, the landscape, and horizons. Unlike Cole, whose scenes are suffused with Romantic allegory, the now forty-four-year-old Hilliard depicts life's passages from a conflicted perspective, where desire and generational difference have, over time, erected a wall between himself and the people he loves—a wall that can only be breached by his camera.

—Francine Koslow Miller