

## **R+R [Rest + Relaxation]**

Ryan Arthurs

As an artist and photographer, my work focuses on themes related to masculine identity. It explores the physical, mental, and bodily spaces where men go to assert their strength and prove themselves. Previous photographic series have focused on military men, outdoorsmen, white water kayaking and other adventure sports. Traversing harsh environments, my subjects, test the limits of their courage, flirt with danger, experience adrenaline, and rely on the bonds of friendship for survival.

Whereas earlier work used the natural world to explore themes of strength and toughness, my current work uses vintage military snapshots to investigate the bonds of friendship, playfulness and vulnerability of men in the military. This series, titled *R+R (Rest + Relaxation)*, captures servicemen in moments of ease, play and vulnerability. Hanging out, swimming, smoking, drinking, and playing cards, these soldiers have let down their guard, both physically and emotionally. Freed from their duties, my subjects develop openly affectionate friendships and seek comfort in the simple pleasures of recreational activities in order to pass the time and distract themselves from the anxieties of war.

I began collecting images of military men roughly five years ago while browsing photo bins at antique shops and flea markets across New England. At the time, I was making photographs of cadets at West Point and was thinking about using historic imagery as reference for new photographs. As time passed, I continued collecting, refining my search to more casual snapshots that implied some secret, even flirtatious interaction between image-maker and subject. I loved the idea that these men would playfully pose then swap places; allowing each an opportunity to be photographed and photographer—the camera an extension of a shared, but private gaze, exchanged between men. In this way, I began to imagine the personal space around each subject as charged, activated a by playful glance, an affectionate stare, or a flirtatious wink.

I scanned the original photographs, printed larger digital images and silkscreened over the portraits, colorfully obscuring and highlighting the figures. While these designs serve to mask the figure, a transparent base extender allows the viewer to see through the shape, calling attention to the relationships between the men. Tension and desire circulates between both subjects and viewer. The polygonal shapes playfully outline the body language and gestures of the men, while also referencing American abstract expressionism, as well as the pixel, the building block of modern color expression. I see the work departing into fantasy, one that isn't exclusively eroticized, but one where recreation becomes escape from conflict.

At a time when our own military was questioning "*Don't Ask, Don't Tell*" and the ability of gay Americans to serve openly, *R+R* presents images of men who fought bravely and loved fiercely, regardless of sexual orientation.