



BOYS OF SUMMER

IN 1979, DAVID ARMSTRONG WENT WITH HIS FRIENDS AND HIS CAMERA UP TO PROVINCETOWN. THE REST HAPPENS IN OUR HEADS

David Armstrong remembers that summer as the zenith of a downtown party scene orbiting around the Mudd Club. He and his friends were living in an apartment on Elizabeth Street, and sometimes they would get tired of New York and sometimes they would come home tired at dawn and pile into his friend Bruce's car and head north to Provincetown. They would stay at the beach for a few days or a week, usually at the house of an older friend whom Armstrong had met at a Boston commune when he lived there as a teenager. 1979 was the summer where there were "oodles of drugs" around, where the goal was "not to work," where so many of Armstrong's stories of this particular season involve convoluted

love relationships between men and men and women, the thread of each one tangling into another. The stories involve high highs ("he was heaven on earth," the photographer says about his boyfriend of the time, "French Chris," who showed up at the Elizabeth Street apartment one day "either for a haircut or to cop drugs") and low lows ("she swallowed razor blades," or "he killed himself at 19," he says of other friends who appear in the ensemble cast of his 20s). Armstrong has a way of uttering the most banal names of his circle—Mary, Eric, Mark, Chris—that loads them with impenetrable textures. In other words, 1979 was a year for the photographer that seems very specific in its cultural moment in Manhattan and generally characteristic of what it means to be young in a difficult landscape. The color photographs the 25-year-old took of his friends that summer in Provincetown tell that story.

Armstrong had taken more structured black-and-white portraits on the beach in Provincetown a few years before, when he attended the Boston Museum School with his friend Nan Goldin. While his later portraiture has continued to explore formal elements of light and pose more methodically than Goldin's, Armstrong still shot the scene around him with his 35-millimeter camera. "I usually always used a flash, because I was mostly shooting the New York scene at night," he says. "I was barely up during the day." But the 35 millimeter accompanied him up to Provincetown in the car. "Bruce was the only one with a license," he says. "We all took turns. We were usually drunk or stoned. It's surprising we never got pulled over. Although sometimes we would go up there to dry out." Armstrong considers the "Summer of '79" series, which was exhibited at the Provincetown gallery Albert Merola last summer, to be selections from his private archive, not necessarily intended to be shown in a gallery setting. Accordingly, many of the photographs hang on French Chris,

naked in the water, asleep in bed on his side, or sitting on the back of a blue convertible with his friend Mark while a beach parking lot lays chopped in tire tracks under open sky. "I remember those times as very unencumbered," he says. "I think that's a feeling that can only happen in your 20s, when there are so many changes and so much mobility." What strikingly separates Armstrong's studies from mere vacation snapshots is the sensitivity he gives to the subjects—it is easy to see him in love with Chris, posed behind the wheel in the shifting sunlight—but they possess a tough tone that pulls away from nostalgia. In their cool precision, they are uneasy reads, floating somewhere between what has just happened and what will happen next. That may have something to do with Armstrong's intention behind taking them. He didn't look at shooting his friends as a way of preserving them in albums. "I didn't think of it at the time that way. It was just something I did. I took pictures of these people. That was the art I was making. You can think, Let's go to the Cape and take pictures. But another part of it happens later, when you are in the darkroom, focusing on an image." Armstrong may very well be the one contemporary photographer who is able to record a sense of time, slowed but not still, meaningful but not flattened into a final meaning. He no longer spends his summers in Provincetown and, on last hearing, French Chris lives in the South of France. But for this particular series, 1979 could really be any year—not for the men in the pictures—but for those of us who get the moods it makes. **Christopher Bollen**

Clockwise from top left: *Haircut*, *Chris asleep with pink blanket*, *Chris and René*, *Mark and Chris in parking lot*, *Chris in car*; Provincetown, 1979

Photography David Armstrong