

TOMMY MALEKOFF

INTERVIEW:

JAMES WINES

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An artist who makes a point of working outdoors, Tommy Malekoff favors field trips over studio visits. Departing from divine landscapes and monumental objects, he shifts the focus on shopping malls and parking lots—a celebration of the mundane, as he discusses with legendary architect James Wines, exploring nature's revenge with a Gothic undertone.



JAMES WINES My profession has always involved an awful lot of information gathering and teams of people. I'm always dealing with documents and large models, things that are really cumbersome at this time in my life. Practically all of my ideas start inside and end up outside, whereas you start outside and end up inside.

TOMMY MALEKOFF I feel the most focused when I'm outdoors. I'm addicted to that feeling of stimulation you get when you physically confront something you've been researching online, or when you happen upon some sort of divine landscape or monumental object due to circumstance of wandering. Sometimes I envy artists that can be indoors all day and make objects in their studio, but ultimately everything I'm interested in already exists outside somewhere. When people ask to see my studio, I have to tell them I don't have one. We often go on a bike ride or some kind of field trip mission instead.

JW In your case, you're much more like a writer or an author. You can work in a single room with a couple books and make sense of your experience out in the world.

TM I've never thought about it like that, but a lot of my favorite artists are writers. I grew up reading mostly Southern Gothic literature, and I think that had a huge impact on what I'm attracted to visually.

JW You grew up in North or South Carolina?

TM I moved so many times as a kid, but primarily Greensboro, North Carolina. In a way, it was the perfect place to experience adolescence, because the demographic and landscape is very balanced. You're in a medium-sized city, so you have this relationship to large buildings and shopping malls, but you're also very much in tune with nature. And you're in the American South, which has its implications, but you're surrounded by universities and all these research centers for technology and agriculture.

JW North Carolina is the setting for *Perennial Shadows* (2017), your video about kudzu. This plant has a wonderful duality to it, which makes for nice discourse.

TM Yes, definitely. It's lush and beautiful and infinitely photographic, but also totally destructive. Kudzu thrives in the South, but it isn't even native to the United States. It was brought to America from



Japan at the World's Fair in 1876 as a porch decoration, and today it totally consumes the landscape. It covers buildings and parking lots, destroys power lines, and kills all other plant life around it.

JW I think of these instances as “nature’s revenge.”

TM Yes! It’s like the plant has overcome displacement and transformed into a villain. Going back to Southern Gothic literature, kudzu was often written about in fiction as this vine that would eventually cover the world, creeping into people’s windows at night and whatnot. I wanted to convey this in *Perennial Shadows* by using long, meditative shots of kudzu resting on top of manmade structures, simultaneously showing very little human presence.

JW It seems like your video *Desire Lines* (2019), which focuses on parking lots, is the opposite exploration. Instead of nature revolting, you’re examining man’s traces in nature.

TM Right, and that is what the title refers to—disruption of land created by human or animal foot traffic.

JW Like kudzu, the strip mall setting is ubiquitous in the landscape, but it’s certainly much less exotic. It’s a universally accepted part of everyone’s collective unconscious, but some people subliminally identify with these environments. Your video demonstrates a whole range of interpretations of that.

TM I was interested in how different social groups make use of this vast public space. Before I started

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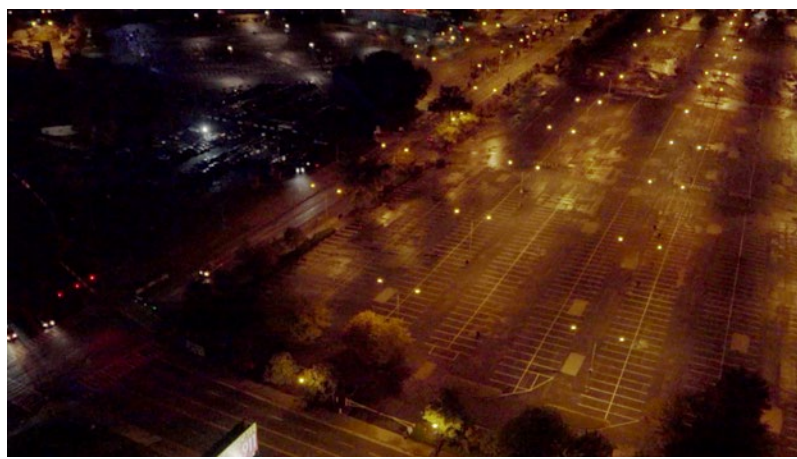
working on *Desire Lines*, I was collecting all this reference video material of people dancing, fighting, doing burnouts in cars, and so on. Most of what I was looking at took place outside, specifically in parking lots, so the idea came naturally from there. Initially, I thought the video would be a collection of vignettes, like five staged “acts” or performances. When I went to go document that stuff, I would always come back with way more material than I set out for, so the finished product ended up being less about one action over the other and more about an environment in general.

JW Is that how you ended up with the two screens?

TM Exactly. The two screens constantly in discourse with one another creates an atmosphere instead of a story. It draws parallels between things that are otherwise unrelated, and blurs the line of staged versus candid. The video exists on a seamless loop—there is actually no beginning, middle or end. There is this sense of an infinite landscape with constant movement.

JW There’s also the use of sound.

TM I worked closely with my friend Joe Williams on the sound, which is very important to the video. It’s composed entirely of field recordings and on-camera audio layered on top of each other, and some of that actually becomes musical. He took these samples of semi-trailer truck horns and



looped them really fast, so it sounds like an amplified pulse or heartbeat during the scene with the balloon rosary going into the sky.

JW Picasso said, “You don’t make art out of the Parthenon, you make art out of the debris at your feet,” and it’s so true—you have to look where other people don’t look. The highest compliment I’ve ever received is when a man saw one of the BEST big-box stores that I designed in Houston, Texas, and he told me, “You know, I’ve never really thought about buildings before.” I was successful in jogging him out of the complacency of just walking by buildings.

TM Right! Wow, that’s like the ultimate goal of making art. But yeah, it’s a celebration of the mundane. With *Desire Lines*, I wanted to bring life to what you’ve referred to as the “hostile slab.”

JW I’ve always been interested in this phenomenon of the shopping mall and its paved surroundings. I mean, asphalt is a petroleum product, so you end up with petroleum operations on top of petroleum. It goes to show our dependency on that resource.

TM With certain aspects of that video, I was communicating the idea of nature adapting to the presence of asphalt. That is why it was important for me to include animals like the iguanas and the wild horses. In some of the shots, you can even see grass growing back through cracks in the ground.

Maybe one day, all parking lots will be useless

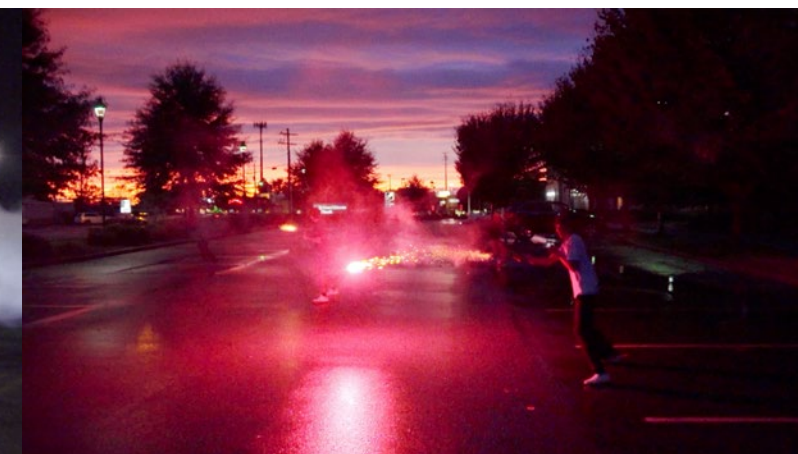
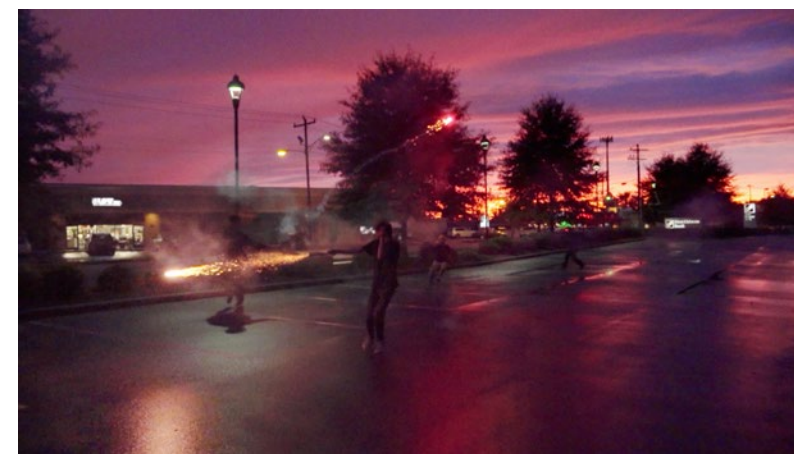
"Even if it's not that exotic, the strip mall setting is ubiquitous in the landscape. It's part of our collective unconscious. I wanted to bring life to the 'hostile slab.'"

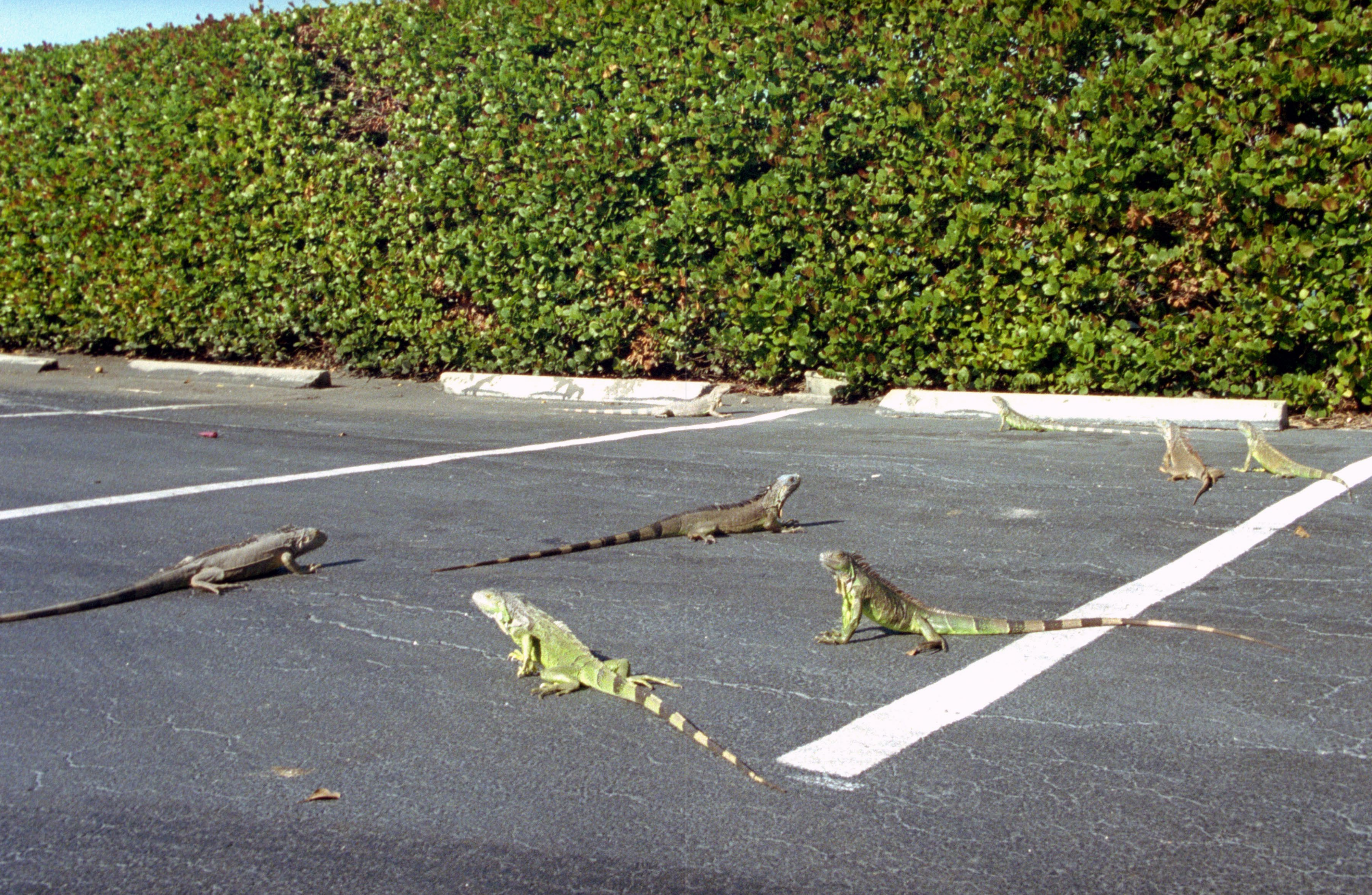
and abandoned as a result of self-driving cars and online shopping.

JW Your show in Los Angeles also had these silkscreen images of empty parking lots at night. Are those related to *Desire Lines*?

TM They are, but I think of them as the antidote to the video. *Desire Lines* is consumed with people and action, whereas these are more meditative studies of the same spaces. Sometimes I would revisit a location from the video and photograph it at night, void of humans or cars. Those golden orange street lights have such a theatrical effect—it reminds me of a stage before the curtains open. There is an overwhelming sense of spirituality you get from that glow, like a permanent “golden hour,” which is why I titled them “Night Suns.” Showing those images with the video illustrates the double life these places lead.

JW In addition to being an extension of what you’re thinking about, they also communicate a refined visual sensibility. You know, at this stage in my life, I realize that my practice is sort of condemned to illustration. I’m much more interested in seeing things that capture the mood and the attitude of an environment—a pure aesthetic experience. I’ve archived thousands of drawings relative to architecture, and nearly all of them are just exact renderings of the object.









TM That's the power of video as a medium, or at least editing. You have direct evidence of all this stuff that really exists out there, and you can show it to people in a way they've never seen it before. So many things are much more surreal than they appear.

Tommy Malekoff (American, b. 1992) is an artist and director who lives and works in New York. Malekoff will present an exhibition at ZERO ... , Milan, opening in November 2020.

James Wines (b. 1932) is an American artist and architect associated with environmental design. Since 1970, Wines is founder and president of SITE, a New York City-based architecture and environmental arts organization.

JW Like these storm videos you were showing me—what led you to that? There's not much of a duality to tornadoes: they're only destructive and everyone's afraid of them.

IMAGES IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: *DESIRE LINES* (FILM STILL), 2019. PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN DURING THE FILMING OF *DESIRE LINES*, 2019. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

TM (laughing) That was more of a project in collaboration with the music group SALEM. I was always curious about the life storm chasers choose, what draws them to constantly put their lives in the hands of extreme weather. Jack [Donoghue] from the band wanted to make a video with storms to accompany their music, but it was really important to him that we got original footage with them in it. It seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go film some of that stuff.

JW You're still young, and it's important to explore a wide range of subject matters early on in your career, before everything is put on a timeline and examined. What will you do next?

TM I'm working on a new video project in Florida that I'm still sort of figuring out. It has a lot to do with the elements, like fire, wind, and water. There are no humans in it so far. I want it to be really aggressive visually, but we'll see. Other than that, I am preparing for a show in the fall. I've started working on some sculptural things for that.

JW You're only at the beginning. Just make sure you aren't plagued with any labels. You don't want to be referred to as the "parking lot guy." Take it from someone who was the "ghost parking lot guy."