

---

# WHAT'S NEWS.

---



DOROTHEA LANGE/SAM CONTIS, FROM DAY SLEEPER (MACK, 2020). © THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA, GIFT OF PAUL S. TAYLOR, COURTESY OF MACK

## DEPTH OF FOCUS

Researching in Dorothea Lange's archives, artist Sam Contis uncovered a trove of unseen work by the photographer.

BY FANNY SINGER

---

**THE LANGE VIEW**  
A Dorothea Lange photograph, rediscovered and scanned by Sam Contis.

**A**RTIST SAM CONTIS, whose primary medium is photography, moved to Oakland, California, from New York in 2012, settling in a neighborhood not 10 minutes by car from the photographic archive of one of her heroes, Dorothea Lange, the great documentarian of the Depression-era American West. Contis discovered this fact only belatedly, in 2017, when she visited a Lange retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California, the official repository of Lange's work since her death in 1965. Having long harbored a sense of sorority with Lange, Contis began researching there, sifting through hundreds of negatives and contact sheets, few of which had ever been printed, seen or circulated. "I was genuinely surprised at the range of work," she recalls. "This was especially true of the more personal pictures—they seemed so close to pictures I might have made."

At the time, Contis was in discussion with Sarah Meister, a photography curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, regarding Contis's participation in the 2018 iteration of MoMA's *New Photography* show. Meister was working on a book dedicated to Lange's most famous photograph, *Migrant Mother*, from 1936, and starting to put together the Lange retrospective that's opening at MoMA in February. When Meister heard about Contis's exploration of the photographer's archive, she invited her to contribute to the Lange show.

With MoMA's support, Contis immersed herself further, recognizing for the first time the extent of her affinity with Lange. Contis, 37, is best known for a series of photographs made at Deep Springs, a small liberal arts college, at the time all-male, founded in 1917 in a remote desert valley east of the Sierra Nevada. During the five years in which she made regular trips to the school, traversing the Sierras by car, she became a keen observer of the Californian wilderness. Her photographs depict this landscape, but also how the bodies of her college-age subjects function within it: a parsing of geography, myth and identity. These images, together with archival pictures made by the school's first students, became a book called *Deep Springs*, published in 2017.

What Contis discovered of Lange's work rapidly became the ingredients for a project exceeding the scope of MoMA's invitation. So Contis enlisted MACK,



**NEW ANGLES** From top: Three more photographs from Lange's archives, at the Oakland Museum of California, including one of her son in 1930; Lange's 1936 image *Migrant Mother*.

the British publisher of *Deep Springs*, to help her realize a second artist's book. The result is *Day Sleeper*, a collection of pictures so contemporary in feel, it's difficult to reconcile them with

the Lange we know. The volume features more than 60 of Lange's photographs, scanned mostly from contact sheets and negatives licensed by the Oakland Museum, with a smaller number deriving from the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Contis believes 90 percent of the images have never been seen or published.

Through Contis's sequencing and, in a handful of cases, recropping, new visions emerge: a woman cutting the hair of a man beneath a leafy arbor; a pregnant woman in repose, her feet sunburned save for where the straps of her shoes crisscrossed the dorsa; Lange's 5-year-old son asleep, his face half-obscured by a cloth.

Contis was especially taken by Lange's observations of shapes made by the body. One photograph in particular, of hands clasping a draped form, snagged Contis's attention. Titled *Paul's Hands*, it had in fact been closely cropped, and on the contact sheet, the unedited version revealed that the form was Lange herself, while the hands were those of her second

husband, Paul Taylor. Contis took Lange's appropriation and edits as an invitation, an incitement even: for her to take Lange's work, very literally, into her own hands.

A wall of the MoMA exhibition will be dedicated to Contis's recontextualized selections, for this occasion rendered as photogravure prints. "I just have such confidence in [Contis's] ability to help people find a new way of seeing Lange," Meister says. Though Lange will perhaps remain most identified with her role as government-hired chronicler of the Great Depression's ravages, Contis shows us a far more complicated and

nuanced figure. Lange was appetitive, experimental, restless, her photographs shockingly contemporary and original. "There was such a strong kinship there," Contis says. "Lange's work felt familiar to me, almost like it was my work that I was just seeing again after a long period."



## SUMMIT STYLE

A flurry of new and renovated hotels make their debut in the French Alps this winter.

### Mademoiselle

This 41-room property just launched at the base of Val d'Isère's slopes as the resort's only ski-in, ski-out luxury hotel. The décor shows off a 4,000-piece collection of Louis XIII-style antiques and 17th-century art, and the 13,000-square-foot spa, by Guerlain, is the town's largest. [valdisere.airrelles.com](http://valdisere.airrelles.com)

### Refuge de la Traye

In Les Allues-Méribel, this once-rustic spot has reopened as a refined mountainside retreat. Reached exclusively by foot, horseback or Sno-Cat, the forested haven offers five rooms and suites, a pair of two-story cottages called *mazots* and a private chalet, all done in a palette of warm neutrals. [refugedelatraye.com](http://refugedelatraye.com)

### Écrin Blanc Resort

More easily accessed is this new Courchevel hotel (above), a strong option for families. Its 127 rooms and suites can accommodate up to eight people each; it features a private tunnel to Aquamotion, an indoor water park and spa; and it offers all-day supervised programming for kids ages 4 to 17. [ecrin-blanc.com](http://ecrin-blanc.com)

### Grand Hôtel du Soleil d'Or

This Megève property has welcomed guests since 1901, but never like this. Its 16 rooms and three new chalets are the results of a 15-month, \$11-plus-million renovation, which included the installation of a rooftop bar featuring a replica of a fountain in one of the town's squares. [lesoleildor-megeve.fr](http://lesoleildor-megeve.fr)

—Andrew Sessa