

David Armstrong's Probing Gaze by Vince Aletti

The photographer David Armstrong, who was based in Brooklyn and died in 2014, at sixty, has never looked as good as he does right now, in a big, smartly installed retrospective at Artists Space (through May 23). That's partly because this is the first time we've been able to grasp his career as a whole. The exhibition, although it includes landscapes, still-lives, and nudes, is titled "David Armstrong: Portraits," because that's where the emphasis lies. With more than ninety works, the galleries are thronged with beauties, many of whom refuse to be pinned down to a gender. Still, men tend to snag the most attention, if only because they return Armstrong's tender, probing gaze with affection and plenty of heat. Desire defines the work and is impossible to divorce from our response to it.



"Moritz, Jefferson Avenue, Brooklyn," from 2009. Photograph by David Armstrong / Courtesy the Estate of David Armstrong

Without overplaying Armstrong's key role in the Family of Nan (Goldin; they were lifelong friends and collaborators), the curators Kelly Taxter and Jay Sanders are careful to ground the show in his history of books and exhibitions. The soft-focus color landscapes and interiors from his 2002 book, "All Day Every Day," had looked minor and imitative at the time. Here, ringing the main galleries like establishing shots in old movies, they suggest a world fading into memory—a misty past with little meaning for the present. On the other side of the scale, in a vitrine at one end of the space, are a group of five small scrapbooks. Only a few open pages are visible (more are included in the show's catalogue), but they're as tantalizing as a peek into a friend's diary—and proof that pictures in separate bodies of work were being made simultaneously.

That everything-at-once approach explodes across a whole wall at the opposite end of the gallery. Here, a collagelike installation of photographs, framed and unframed, color and black-and-white, abut and overlap across twenty-seven feet. The undertow of nostalgia—a tribute to the way we were—is overwhelmed by the celebration of a spirit that has never seemed more alive.