

SUMMER PREVIEW

50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

Mark Morrisroe

ARTISTS SPACE

His life cut short by AIDS, Mark Morrisroe worked tirelessly to the end. Yet his art was in no way stunted. From his early photos of the 1980s Boston punk rock scene to his last images of his own bedridden body, his work consistently evinces a yearning for insider's fame and success (fueled by his idol worship of Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and John Waters), as well as a queer and outsider sensibility—see Morrisroe's risqué self-portraits or the campy drag performances and Super 8 films he made with friend and collaborator Tabboo! (aka Stephen Tashjian). Morrisroe was the most experimental, moreover the best artist of the Boston School, a loosely knit group of artists from the 1980s known for making diaristic works, and he remains a key self-mythologizer in contemporary art. Still, he's been mostly unrecognized, though several esteemed curators have championed his oeuvre: Lia Gangitano devoted a room to his work in her 1995 survey, "Boston School," at that city's Institute of Contemporary Art, and last November, Beatrix Ruf and Thomas Seelig organized a retrospective at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Zurich—selections from which Ruf, Richard Birkett, and Stefan Kalmár have brought to Artists Space in New York.

It seemed only fitting that a retrospective of Morrisroe's work make its US debut at that institution. For it was there in 1989, just months after his death at the age of thirty, that his friend Nan Goldin organized the landmark group show "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," a meditation on the disease and its impact on her New York milieu. The exhibition was met with rage by right-wing politicians who demanded that the NEA cancel its \$10,000 funding of the show; the foci of their ire were Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987, and an incensed entry in the catalogue by David Wojnarowicz. Most reports from the episode don't cite the equally scandalous selection of Morrisroe's work, such as the photographs *Sweet 16: Little Me as a Child Prostitute*, 1984; *After the Laone (In the Home of a London Rubber Fetishist)*, 1982; and a later image of the artist ill at home.

Similar works were on view in this show, which presented intimate records of Morrisroe's life over a span of ten years. There was the vivid documentation of the punk clubs; the black-and-white portraits of his friends; the pictures from vacations in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the gorgeous prints of everyday life; the colorized photographs of X-rays (one Technicolor rendition of his ailing rib cage in 1988); and, finally, the ephemera, such as cut-and-paste layouts from his short-lived zine, *Dirt*. These pieces revealed the many sides and selves of Morrisroe, and also of his close friends. Much of his work focuses on his relationships, especially with Tashjian, the artist Jack Pierson (one of Morrisroe's former lovers), and Pat Hearn (Morrisroe's art dealer in the later 1980s). The small cast who became the subjects of his work also supported it, helping to circulate his larger-than-life biography.

Morrisroe knew (and learned from Warhol) that creating myths is a way of building one's cultural capital in the art world, and he outlandishly maximized (or optimized) anecdotes about his life. One could point to his stories of his serial-killer father and drug-addicted mother, or those about his being shot in the back at sixteen. (The result, however, as Pierson said in *Artforum* in 1994, was that "the stories didn't move him up or down the social ladder, they just intensified where he was already to the nth degree.") Morrisroe's eccentric vigor clashed against the thorough, nearly clinical feel of this show—his ephemera carefully preserved in vitrines, many works installed in a drab grid. Would Morrisroe have wanted all of this work to be shown? It's impossible to know. But the sight of it all at once was revealing, since he was an artist who had an incredible knack for always doing everything *more*—even during his last days, when he could hardly do anything at all.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Mark Morrisroe, *Ramsey, Lake Oswego*, 1988, color photograph from black-and-white and color negatives, 20 x 16".