

MARK MORRISROE

by brooks adams 3/1/11



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Self Portrait (to Brent), 1982, C-print, negative sandwich, retouched with ink and marker, 20 by 16 inches. Collection Brent Sikkema; Untitled, ca. 1981, toned gelatin silver print, 13 by 19 3/8 inches.;

NEW YORK

I NEVER MET THE NOTORIOUS Mark Morrisroe (1959–1989), but I must have seen every one of his shows, beginning in the mid-'80s, at Pat Hearn's now mythic galleries in New York's East Village. In '85, it was a works-on-paper group show at her slick Avenue B storefront, featuring Morrisroe, Donald Baechler, George Condo, Philip Taaffe and others. In '86, it was a solo at her imposing 9th Street space (between avenues C and D), where she presented a full range of Morrisroe's photography: "sandwich" prints (as he called them) in big dark frames, small prints from Polaroid negatives, and "early darkroom experiments" using found materials—from gay porn magazines and such—printed in negative.

In all its incarnations, Pat Hearn Gallery was the epicenter of cool, but in 1985-86 it was at its most cutting-edge. There's a surprisingly conservative snapshot of Morrisroe and Hearn from this period, probably from one of his openings, which is heartbreaking in its propriety. The artist—so much more often shot in the buff—is wearing a coat and tie, while Hearn, of late a punk princess (and, in Paris in '81, photographed in the nude by Morrisroe as Kiki de Montparnasse and La Mome Piaf), has morphed into a grande dame in a fur-collared coat.

Morrisroe's work became better known after his death, as Hearn, his devoted old friend from Boston, staged a series of memorial shows, in 1994, '96 and '99. Hearn, who inherited his estate and more than anyone else shaped, curated and pushed his work, also died young, at 45, in 2000; and, like that of so many artists whose lives and careers were cut tragically short by AIDS, Morrisroe's work was put in considerable risk. When Pat's husband, the maverick dealer Colin de Land—who had been trying to place the estate—died at 47 in 2003, it seemed like the two dealers' engaged and unorthodox way of working was going to disappear.

The sale of the estate in 2004 to the Ringier collection of contemporary art, belonging to the Swiss newspaper magnate and art book publisher Michael Ringier, could not have been more fortunate. Ringier's curator, Beatrix Ruf, had originally proposed to de Land that the estate, once it was owned by Ringier, would be housed at Fotomuseum Winterthur. The museum's curator, Thomas Seelig, put archivists to work—most recently Teresa Gruber—sorting through the chaos, and this thorough inventorying has given Morrisroe a second life. There was a vigorous, Rimbaudian bloom to his work this winter at an exhibition curated by Ruf and Seelig in the serenely neutral spaces of the Swiss museum. [The version opening this month at Artists Space, "Mark Morrisroe: From This Moment On," has a different selection of work.]

Morrisroe died at just 30, but by then he had accomplished a considerable life's work. According to Gruber's catalogue essay, his oeuvre comprises about 2,000 photographs, including 800 Polaroids, 600 gelatin silver prints, and 200 C-prints and "sandwich prints" (Morrisroe's invention, made by reshooting a photograph, producing an intermediate negative, and exposing the photographic paper through the two sandwiched negatives). There are also 60 cyanotypes and gum prints (19th-century techniques), boxes and boxes of fascinating ephemera (a selection of which was presented at Winterthur) and three Super-8 films.

ROLE-PLAYING AND GENDER-BENDING youths—artists and others—populate Morrisroe's photographs: 20-somethings getting naked, donning high heels and wigs, trying on identities. This is the culturally specific world of Boston in the late '70s and early '80s, when high punk ruled and Morrisroe and his friends from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (where he got a scholarship) were cutting up, living on the edge and documenting each other's every move. Among them were Hearn, Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and Doug and Mike Starn, who with Morrisroe and others were dubbed the "Boston School" of photography in a show at the city's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1995.

Morrisroe, by all reports, was the most out-there and diabolically ambitious of them all. "If Mark didn't have art he would have been a serial killer," remarked his friend Pia Howard, one of many choice quotes printed large on the wall at the entrance to the Winterthur show. Indeed, as we read in Gruber's biographical essay, Morrisroe's mother was a severely depressed alcoholic, and his father was absent. The artist often claimed that his father was Albert De Salvo, the Boston Strangler (who was in fact his mother's landlord and lived nearby). As a precocious teenager who changed high schools and left home early, Morrisroe styled himself "Mark Dirt" and worked as a hustler in order to raise enough money to get his own apartment; he also found time to graduate from high school. At the age of 17, he was shot in the spine by one of his clients; after several weeks in the hospital, he willed himself to walk again, though with a noticeable limp.

Morrisroe's enterprising adolescence comes to life in the typed originals of the fanzine *Dirt* that he and a friend, Lynelle White, produced in 1975-76. They distributed the 'zine in Xeroxed and hand-colored editions of between 20 and 30 in Boston nightclubs. The hilarious faux-celebrity reports in *Dirt* show Morrisroe reveling in self-invented stardom, emulating the prevailing American masters of the genre—Andy Warhol, as well as the filmmakers Jack Smith and John Waters—all of whom were heroes for the young artist. Issues of *Dirt* were exhibited in vitrines at Winterthur, along with ephemera from Morrisroe's later drag performances with Stephen Tashjian, aka Tabboo!, the most charismatic of Morrisroe's early cohorts. Together, they appeared as the Clam Twins at clubs like the Pyramid in the East Village.

Remarkably, the Winterthur exhibition re-created Morrisroe's first solo exhibition in 1981 at the 11th Hour in Boston, a gallery founded by Mike Carroll and Penelope Place. Here he showed relatively straightforward black-and-white prints in which the dominant influences seem to be Diane Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe. The most shocking of them is a shot of someone in bondage, his head and body tightly wrapped in plastic and packing tape, and a single breathing tube allowed. Next to this hung a portrait of a wholesome blond boy and cute dog, like something out of "Lassie." Notable, too, are a shot-from-below portrait of the young Nan Goldin wearing a black bra and a string of pearls, and a close-up of a dead rat, feet in the air.

Morrisroe's adolescence is memorialized in Polaroids taken at that time and then resurrected by the still-young photo-alchemist in his sandwich prints. There's a definite time lag, not visible at first, in these works. *Sweet 16: Little Me as a Child Prostitute*, June 6 1984 uses an early Polaroid self-portrait from ca. 1975 of Morrisroe sprawled nude on a bed. The title's words are scrawled as marginalia on the Polaroid, which is in turn framed by numerous graffitied lines and shadows in the sandwich print. *Blow Both of Us, Gail Thacker and Me, Summer 1978* (1986) is a later enlargement of an early, double head shot of Morrisroe, with his sardonic grimace, and Thacker, with her asymmetrical wedge hairdo. In the distance looms what he called in another context the "dismal Boston skyline."

It's all in the marginalia, I came to think, when looking at the startling silver prints, cyanotypes and sandwich prints that constitute Morrisroe's best work. The combinations of hand additions—dots, dashes, stars and written titles—give the prints a notational aspect that is fully in keeping with the contemporaneous use of words and dates as imagery by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Tashjian and others. Occasionally, the texts are epistolary: the best-known example is in *Self Portrait (to Brent)*, 1982, a steamy frontal nude with the tag, "Taken to answer sex add [sic], a little something for all those words of wisdom that youve been offering me all these years." Morrisroe's inscriptions establish a poetics of time and place: "Paul Ardmore, Nosferatu, Summer '84, The Unspoken" reads the title accompanying a portrait of a literary-looking fellow.

These inscriptions adumbrate a cult of feeling in Morrisroe's milieu, even suggesting sincerity (some might say sentimentality). It is an intimist sensibility that would have considerable repercussions in the later assemblage reliefs and drawings of Morrisroe's youthful lover Jonathan Pierson, who would change his name to Jack. Among the many images of Pierson in the show, none is more beautiful than *Fascination (Jonathan)*, ca. 1983, which depicts him in bed, with a parakeet perched on an upstretched hand. Obscured in what looks to be a gown on the bed are two cats, who watch the dumb show from either side.

WORDS AND LINE READINGS drive Morrisroe's experiments in filmmaking. "Again!" the director's taped voice shouts repeatedly in *The Laziest Girl in Town* (1981), in which Pierson plays a hayseed ("Are you one of them transsexuals?" he asks) to Morrisroe's glamorous Pucci-and-chinos-clad gal at the sink. In *Hello from Bertha (1983)*, the rantings and ravings of Morrisroe as a Joan Crawford type confined to a bedsit, and visited by the hilarious Tashjian and Pierson (themselves both in drag), turn out to be entirely scripted: the text is a little-known playlet by Tennessee Williams.

The films are one of the real discoveries of the show (I wish, at Winterthur, they hadn't been screened in the noisy museum entrance) and help explain the iconography of the photos. For instance, the artist's drag alter ego in *The Laziest Girl*, "Sweet Raspberry," becomes a tragic older actress looking over her shoulder wistfully in the famous sandwich print *Sweet Raspberry, Spanish Madonna (Self-Portrait)* of 1986. The films are given their due in the show's catalogue, in a probing essay by Stuart Comer, film curator at Tate Modern. Comer describes a lost, and fearsome-sounding, snuff movie from the mid-'70s involving a cat, a collaboration between Morrisroe and Steve Stain, a Boston punk performance artist. Hearn showed the unsigned video on a cable TV program she ran at the time in Boston. Its airing prompted a huge outcry, a court case and the cancellation of Hearn's show. Morrisroe wasn't directly implicated, and Stain chose to leave town fast.

Much of Morrisroe's best work was accomplished in Boston. He moved to the New York area only in 1985, to Jersey City, N.J., in fact, where he occupied a cheap apartment passed on to him by Philip Taaffe. In her excellent catalogue essay about the East Village in the '80s, Linda Yablonsky reminisces, "When Morrisroe hit town, it was the beginning of the end. As a latecomer to the party, he melted into a scene that hardly noticed him." By '86, the year of that first one-man show with Hearn, he tested positive for the AIDS virus.

The works from the last three years are different in character. For the most part, they are collage-based photograms of found materials. They include fringed cutups of pages from porn magazines printed as overlapping negatives in hot colors on black paper. One untitled C-print and rayogram (ca. 1987) is a lyrical still life of what look to be floating perfume bottles, but are more probably AIDS medications. (What a send-up of the cosmetics industry!) Other works appropriate the artist's own medical charts. The image of Morrisroe's formerly ephelic chest is presented in diminished profile in a 1988 series of three gelatin silver prints, photograms of X-rays, in three different color combinations, which look at first like biomorphic abstractions.

The artist's big, beautiful smile is revisited in another untitled gelatin silver print from 1988 that shows an oversize image of Morrisroe's own dental X-ray (with one front tooth missing); the artist's hand is visible only in the hints of marker line around the negative.

What's most amazing about this work is that much of it was executed in impromptu darkrooms the artist rigged up in his hospital bathrooms. Morrisroe's courageous, unrelenting drive to keep making art is inspiring. The catalogue essayists clarify a body of work done in considerable isolation; there were no longer cute friends around to get naked with (except, perhaps, the artist's last partner, Ramsey McPhillips). Very often Morrisroe was by himself. The black-and-white Polaroids of the artist nude, lying in the sunlight, his body wasted to a bony apparition of his former saturnine self, are among the most moving in the show.

Morrisroe died, but his spirit lives on—not only in the additional prints that will no doubt now come on the market in increasing numbers, but as the avatar of young video and performance artists, like Kalup Linzy and Ryan Trecartin, who wreak havoc with gender and identity. There's also a renewed fervor over '80s homoerotic work and its role in the American culture wars. The recent censorship of David Wojnarowicz's video *A Fire in My Belly* (1986), removed from the exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. (then screened at a dozen museums and acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art), provoked memories of the first fracas over Wojnarowicz's work and NEA funding [see A.i.A., Feb. '11]. Back then, in 1989, the controversial show was "Against Our Vanishing," curated by Nan Goldin for Artists Space, and it included, posthumously, photographs by Morrisroe. There's a certain poetic justice, therefore, in the fact that Morrisroe's work will

now be seen at Artists Space.

The artist's late photograms, as I discovered in Switzerland, feature a couple of gay-inflected images of stars and stripes. These are the two variants (1986 and '87) of an untitled C-print (a photogram of printed material) reproducing a star pattern over a hard-to-read magazine cover with the headline "The ABC's of S&M." These jazzy graphics, at once hermetic and in your face, struck a weirdly patriotic chord in a winter that saw the abolition of the U.S. military's policy of "don't ask, don't tell."

"Mark Morrisroe" opened at the Fotomuseum Winterthur [Nov. 27, 2010-Feb. 13, 2011]. The catalogue features essays by Beatrix Ruf, Thomas Seelig, Fionn Meade, Elizabeth Lebovici, Linda Yablonsky and Teresa Gruber, and a conversation between Ruf, Seelig, Lia Gangitano and Frank Wagner. The version of the exhibition appearing at Artists Space [Mar. 9-May 1], "Mark Morrisroe: From This Moment On," is curated by Richard Birkett and Stefan Kalmár.

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