

HANNAH HOFFMAN GALLERY

Darrel Ellis

January 28 - March 18, 2023

Opening Reception on January 28 from 6 to 8pm

Darrel Ellis's works often feel in-progress, so materially tactile and thick with meaning that they resist resolution into easy-to-digest pictures. His images weave together thematic threads tinged with the major debates of his time, some thick with history, some tense with contemporary struggles, and others made bright and pliable by Ellis's singular creative ambiguity. Racial injustice, the devastation of the AIDS crisis, the limitations of the art historical canon are all present in these works, but Ellis purposefully obscures the specificity of such concerns. His consistent objective is to locate a peculiar quietness, an affective visual tone achieved through subtle ingenuity and a material agility all his own.

Ellis's career was brief, cut short by his death at 33 years old from AIDS-related complications. Over the course of the 1980s, he worked to make sense of burdens both personal and societal, while also finding new possibilities for time-tested media: washes, ink, and graphite on paper, gelatin silver prints that he adopted and remade physically and conceptually. Ellis was a passionate student of art history, with a special interest in modernist pioneers like Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard. He began to draw as a child but started making art in earnest after receiving a box of negatives that had belonged to his deceased father, a photographer who was killed by a pair of plainclothes policemen a month before Ellis was born.

Ellis described his father's photography as an optimistic portrait of Harlem and the South Bronx in the post-WWII era. The tone of these images changed, however, as they were reconfigured and made anew over the course of the 1980s. At first, Ellis's remaking process involved translating photographic records into inky paint. In works like *Untitled (Audrey, Laure, and Mother)*, an image of Ellis's family members, the group's surroundings are wholly obscured, transformed into semi-translucent black strokes. In *Untitled (Mother)*, visual abbreviation renders the details of the subject's facial features and expression almost inscrutable. Focused on familial bonds and grounded in familiar settings, these works nod at the radically intimate portraits of domestic life by Matisse and Bonnard. Yet Ellis's images are so overtaken with visual gaps and expressive indeterminacy that they destabilize the sense of emotional and physical proximity that oozes from the older artists' works.

In the last years of his life, Ellis found new ways to disrupt the analogue of reality captured by his father's camera and in photographs Ellis made himself. A breakthrough came in the late 1970s, when he began to use an enlarger to project photographic negatives onto sculpted, three-dimensional surfaces. Curious about the visual distortions and shadows that emerged from this process, Ellis rephotographed the projected negatives and created new prints, revealing disruptions to the original image that opened new relationships and upended the past meaning assigned to so much documentary photography. *Untitled (Friends)* mobilizes the disorienting effects of this process and implies the wear and tear of time in its twisted perspective and seemingly abraded surface. In an untitled self-portrait from 1989-91, Ellis matched the curve of the work's contours to the arch of his reclined body. While physically flat, these works have a sculptural feel wholly alien to most lens-based artwork.

Swapping out and remixing the most readily identifiable features of painting, sculpture, and photography, Ellis altered the questions leveled at his images: rather than asking "who" or "what" has been captured by the camera, these works elicit "hows" and "whys," indeterminate questions that appeal to emotional memory and visceral experience as much as logical visual apprehension. His images vacate the expository capacity of photography, recreating the medium as a means of exploring the bounds of our ability to know the past and one another.

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Darrel Ellis was born in 1958, in the Bronx, New York. Ellis's life was cut short by AIDS in 1992 at age 33. Shortly after Ellis's death, a series of his photographs was featured in *New Photography 8* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and in 1996, Allen Frame organized a large-scale retrospective at Art in General, New York that traveled to numerous institutions nationally. Ellis's work is in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Harvard Art Museum, Boston; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York amongst others.

Darrel Ellis: Regeneration is currently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art through April 23, 2023, it is co-organized by the Bronx Museum of the Arts, where it will travel to in May. *Please Stay Home: Darrel Ellis in Dialogue with Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan*, will open February 2, 2023 at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard University.