

# Hoffman Donahue

Darrel Ellis  
September 25 – November 1, 2025  
725 N Western Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90029

Hoffman Donahue is pleased to present an exhibition of works by Darrel Ellis, featuring a selection created between 1979 and 1987. Drawn from photographs, drawings, and paintings of close family members and the interiors of his Bronx home, the works on view reflect Ellis' exploration of translation across mediums and his ability to bind intimacy with formal innovation. Several selections from the Ellis estate are presented for the first time, offering new perspectives on this formative period in his practice.

Ellis' 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' life story runs quietly through these images. His father, Thomas Ellis, was a photographer who documented Black working-class life in Harlem and the South Bronx in the 1940s and 50s, before being killed by plainclothes policemen two months before Darrel's birth in 1958. The elder Ellis' archive would become a lifelong touchstone for his son, though the works presently on view demonstrate a distinct urgency: to claim and reimagine the texture of everyday life through his own images.

Ellis found new ways to disrupt the analogue of reality captured in his photographs. 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.

Focused on familial bonds and grounded in familiar settings, these works nod at the radically intimate portraits of domestic life found in nineteenth-century European painting. Figures are rendered in trembling lines, surfaces animated by texture, and distortions imbue the familiar with ambiguity. Through modest scale and delicate shifts of color, Ellis held an expansive range of feeling.

Ellis once remarked, "From one, you get many," a reflection on the regenerative nature of both life and art. The works gathered here embody that principle. At once deeply personal and formally rigorous, they expand beyond the particularities of biography to open onto enduring questions of memory and belonging.

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Darrel Ellis was born in 1958, in the Bronx, New York. Ellis' life was cut short by AIDS in 1992 at age 33. Shortly after his 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. He participated in The Whitney Independent Study Program and was a resident in the PS1 studio residency program.

Recent exhibitions include The Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA; Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY; Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY; CANDICE MADEY, New York, NY; Columbia Art Museum, Columbia, SC; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Galerie Bernhard, Zurich, Switzerland; and the Bronx Museum, New York, NY.

Ellis' work is included in the permanent collections of Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, NY; the Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Harvard Art Museum, Boston, MA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ; Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, München, DE; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.