

Alvin Baltrop
Alvin Baltrop by Joseph Lovett

April 18 – May 9, 2026

Simo Bacar is delighted to announce the screening of 'Alvin Baltrop by Joseph Lovett', an exhibition centered on the only known video recorded in Alvin Baltrop's studio before his passing in 2004, which will open at the gallery on Saturday, April 18th, 7-9pm, and thereafter by appointment until May 9th.

Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) spent most of his life living and working in New York City. From 1969 to 1972, the artist served during the Vietnam War, where he began photographing fellow sailors. Following his service, he studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City until 1975. It was during that period that Baltrop started photographing in the West Village area and along the Hudson River piers, which he captured in a multitude of photographs between 1975 and 1986.

Joseph Lovett (1945-2025) was a documentary filmmaker and ABC News producer who pioneered the media coverage of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

The screening is accompanied by "Alvin Baltrop: Chronology" by Hugo Bausch Belbachir, published with Judy's Death as part of a year-long thesis work organized with the National Institute of Art History - Université La Sorbonne, Paris.

With special thanks to Allen Frame and James Cottrell.

Alvin Baltrop: Chronology
by Hugo Bausch Belbachir

1948: Alvin Jerome Baltrop is born in the Bronx, New York. The apartment where he grows up is located at 1058 Teller Avenue, where he lives with his brother James, who is thirteen years older than him, and their mother, Dorothy Mae Baltrop, a Jehovah's Witness.

1963: Alvin, James, and Dorothy Baltrop attend the speech given by Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, in which they participate. During his childhood, Alvin and his brother frequently encounter Malcolm X in the streets of their neighborhood in the Bronx and collect various political documents which they study together. When Dorothy discovers these documents in James and Alvin's room, she destroys them. The neighborhood where they grow up is deeply marked by the era's segregation cycle, imposed against African Americans.

1965: Alvin accompanies his brother to sell the 'Afrocentric' cards he produces in their room. Some of these are bought by a curator from the Studio Museum in Harlem. At the same time, Alvin begins experimenting with photography using a Yashica-C in the streets of the Bronx and Harlem, learning techniques from street photographers he meets during nocturnal adventures. He saves for months to buy a Leica M3, with which he daily visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art to admire the print collections. He builds a darkroom in the bathroom of the family apartment. Baltrop considers this sanctuary as the meditative context for his work, and locks himself in there for hours, experimenting with chemical techniques for image transformation and printing processes. He captures street scenes and indoor nudes. These early photographic works reveal an interest in the notion of the event and its crystallization in the image through a series of repetitive motifs that reflect both the coordination of subjects in space and architectural elements, as well as Baltrop's own subjectivity within the meta-narrative field of the image.

1969: Alvin frequents Black Queer activist circles of the Lower Manhattan milieus. He is a close friend of activist Marsha P. Johnson. A few months later, he is drafted into the Navy as a medical aide on a military ship. He regularly receives letters from his activist friends about the movements unfolding in New York that year, particularly around Stonewall, where he worked in the coatroom.

1969 – 1972: Alvin is 21 years old when he arrives aboard the USS William V. Pratt. He will perpetually contest having served against Vietnam, but "during the US war against Vietnam". During these three years on the ship, Baltrop continues his photographic production, focusing on the body's homoerotic systems and its tension within the military architecture of the boat – focusing on both scenes of solitary resting bodies and collective gatherings and actions. The image becomes a specific zone of unconscious reflection on the solitary and melancholic. His printing studio is autonomously set up in the bathroom of his cabin. He is nicknamed 'Big Al' or 'Witch Doctor' due to some books on black magic he keeps in his room under a poster of Yukio Mishima. A memo from January 1972 describes him as potentially suffering from a "possible psychiatric illness," having ingested dozens of pills to show another soldier, who wanted to commit suicide, "what it really looked like." After several medical inspections, he is discharged in 1972 and returns to his family's apartment in the Bronx. Upon his return, all the photographs from his adolescence have been destroyed by his mother.

1972: Alvin and his brother, James, visit Black dance conservatories in Harlem; one photographs, the other sketches. Baltrop becomes interested in the passersby, sex workers, and transgender individuals of the Bronx and Lower Manhattan neighborhoods. He continues documenting the social movements of activist groups in West Manhattan, primarily around Christopher Street. He does not discard any of his negatives and begins experimenting with framing, scale, and repetitive cropping within the image.

1973: Alvin joins the School of Visual Arts in New York

1975: After dropping out of school, Alvin becomes a taxi driver and installs a police radio receiver in his vehicle, listening to it to get to crime scenes when he is not driving clients. This experience influences his work, shifting toward a documentary approach to photography and a focus on social, cultural issues related to the experience of New York City at night. He meets Alice, also a taxi driver, who becomes

his partner and influences him to visit the warehouses along the Waterfront, stretching from 59th Street to Tribeca. These places are abandoned zones located across the West Side Highway after its collapse in 1973, where anonymous lives of gay men, criminals, homeless individuals, and artists manifest. Alice and Alvin move into an apartment at 89 East 2nd Street for \$110 per month, where Baltrop will live until his death. He attempts to sell his photographs and even drugs, taking on some shifts as a bouncer at The Bar, located at the corner of East 4th Street and 2nd Avenue. "I made money on the side selling coke, sometimes up to a thousand dollars a week. At least it was something, and that's how I saw it. It paid the rent, the phone bill, and I kept moving forward. I felt happy on some level. In my mind, to be where I wanted to be, I needed to invest my money in this camera and in this addiction. This camera, it's like blood, and the film that goes in it is like plasma in many ways." The previous year, Alvin bought a small van to work as an independent mover. He uses the vehicle to spend entire nights across from the piers, observing from a distance the life unfolding there. The hundreds of photographs taken by the artist document the architectural zones where anonymous gay sex encounters, sunbathers, sex workers, and kids left on the streets find refuge. Initially positioned from his van, Alvin gradually gets closer to each subject – originally seen as an index within the architecture – slowly focusing on the identity and history of those who, for the most part, will become his friends. Alvin talks with them, bringing supplies, condoms, and preventive documents. "Though initially terrified of the piers, I began taking these photos as a voyeur [and] quickly became determined to preserve the scary, crazy, incredible, violent, and beautiful things that were happening at the time. To take some of the shots, I hung from the ceiling of several warehouses using a makeshift harness, watching and waiting for hours to record the lives of these people (friends, acquaintances, and strangers) and the unfortunate end some of them met. Casual sex and the nonchalant consumption of drugs, the creation of art and music, sunbathing, dancing, partying, etc., often gave way to assault, detached but insensitive violence, rape, suicide, and, in some cases, murder." The rapid appearance and expansion of AIDS in the 1980s further reduces the number of people frequenting the piers and the sporadic pleasures that could still be found there. That same year, Gordon Matta-Clark takes over Pier 52 and performs cuts in the building's structure to let beams of light in. The work, *Day's End*, is documented by Baltrop, although he never truly meets Matta-Clark, who finds the place "a state of anarchic tolerance by the city (...) requiring cleaning and reorganization for a more positive and possible use." Gordon Matta-Clark deeply despises the gay groups living in the shed ("a real playground for thieves, both for people who went there just to wander and for a recently popularized group of sadomasochists", according to his words) and installed locks on every entrance of the industrial complex. For Alvin, this place is one of life; his, and that of those who share his fears. In a notebook, he writes down questions he aims to ask the people living in and passing through the warehouse, to understand their stories: Do you know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it?; Do you know the answer or have you already guessed it?; Why did you call?; What led you to go upstairs? Black-and-white issues: notes on race, general physical description. What brought you to the piers?; What was the usual routine when you were on the piers? Details: what, when, where, etc.; Have you developed long-term friendships, lovers, bonds, or regulars on the piers?; How old were you the first time you had sex; homosexual sex? Did you think it was homosexual sex? (history); Describe your life outside the piers, while you were at the piers, the only place to socialize and have sex.; Describe your family now, back then, and during the coming-out process.; Are you currently in a long-term relationship? Describe it: length, sexuality.; Are you HIV positive? How has that affected your life and sex life?; Do you have one or two special memories from the piers? Describe them in detail.; How do you dress to go to the piers? What type of men, activities, scenes attracted you?; Describe the people you see on the piers.; Others have talked about the smell or the feel of the piers.; Did you talk to your friends about the piers? What did you say, and what did they say?; Please look at this photograph. What is your reaction? Does it belong to your environment?

1977: The artist holds his first solo exhibition at The Glines: A Gay Arts Center, in Tribeca.

1980: Alvin meets Mark, whom he falls in love with. They will spend the next 16 years together. Alvin secures a stable job in Manhattan as a press operator, where he gains access to negatives and a darkroom. Although formally and conceptually close to the work of his contemporaries, Baltrop does not associate with any particular scene and struggles to present his work in group exhibitions. Robert Mapplethorpe offers Baltrop \$50 and a gram of cocaine in exchange for him to pose for a photo. Alvin refuses.

1980 – 1990: Throughout the decade, the warehouses along the Waterfront are destroyed, and the ruins of the West Side Highway are cleared to make way for a new highway. Alvin documents the destruction of these places in hundreds of photographs. Young homeless gay men and sex workers flee, and many friends lose contact. The beginning of the AIDS epidemic claims many of Alvin's friends, including Alice. A significant number of queer bars, clubs, and independent spaces close down. In 1988, James and Alvin Baltrop found Baltrop & Baltrop, a commercial business selling reproductions of their works in the form of greeting cards and pins at various festivals in New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Washington, and Detroit.

1992: The artist holds a solo exhibition at The Bar.

1992 – 2000: Alvin meets a new generation of young gay men, lesbians, and transgender individuals who have been rejected by their families and are living on the streets. With the piers destroyed and no longer able to serve as a refuge, Alvin, using his skills as a medic and military personnel, approaches them to offer help: he recommends over-the-counter medications, distributes condoms, and offers life advice in a compassionate manner. He expresses his desire to buy land and create a community space where he could spend his last years teaching photography to marginalized people he meets. Complications from diabetes and cancer begin to slow his productivity and limit his mobility. He expresses a desire to create new series, particularly revisiting his photographs of street sex workers in Lower Manhattan at night, using highly sensitive film and staying hidden in a van. At this time, he considers experimenting with inkjet printing on handmade papers coated with clay or other unconventional materials. He also talks about relaunching Baltrop & Baltrop, aiming to expand the range of products inspired by his and his brother's works, who has passed away.

2003: Inadequate medical care at a veterans' hospital leads to the partial amputation of his foot. His concurrent health conditions worsen following this procedure. Alvin continues to take photographs in the hospitals and hospices where he stays. "All I want is to keep a record of what I've seen as a Black and gay photographer. Things I've desired, things I've loved. And when people ask me: 'But what could this possibly mean to someone?' I answer: 'It means a lot to many people.' I can tell a whole story, and I try to express all of my feelings — the touch, the smells, the emotions. What scares me today is ending up like some of the guys I know, who took photos their whole lives. And then, when they die, the family shows up, finds all this work, and doesn't know what to do with it, so they end up throwing it all away. I want people to look at these photographs and say: 'This is something from my time.'"

2004: Alvin dies at the age of 56.