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SPECIAL GALLERY ISSUE

SoHo, Steadfast Bastion for Alternative Works

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

SoHo was once the hub of the New York art world; now it's a satellite, but a vital one: some of the city's oldest alternative spaces are there, along with new ones, like Third Streaming. Several of these spaces, within blocks of one another on either side of Canal Street (those to the south are technically in TriBeCa), have impressive spring shows that keep a spirit of experimentation alive, and that are, by coincidence, thematically connected.

Artists Space opened in 1972 and is still going strong. Under the directorship of Stefan Kalmar it has recently presented a string of solos by artists who, if not discoveries, are low on the New York radar. The latest is the American photographer Mark Morrisroe, seen in a superb retrospective that originated in a different form at the Fotomuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland.

Mr. Morrisroe, who died at 30 in 1989, was a linchpin figure in the Boston punk scene of the '70s and counted artists like Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson and the future dealer Pat Hearn among his friends. He had impeccable *maudit* credentials: child of a drug addict, with a habit of his own, he started hustling men for sex when he was 15 and spent much of his short life surviving on handouts.

Still, he went to art school and did well, specializing in performance and learning photography. And the two forms blended seamlessly in the thousands of pictures he took, most of them portraits of himself and friends. Many of the small Polaroids in "Mark Morrisroe: From This Moment On," aren't much on their own: girls and boys — and the art-

ESTATE OF MARK MORRISROE (RINGIER COLLECTION) AT FOTOMUSEUM WINTERTHUR

ist himself, thin as a whippet — strip, pose, mug. Click. That's it. Yet these funky little things, hand tinted, written-on, served as sketches for the large, labor-intensive color pictures that are Morrisroe at his best.

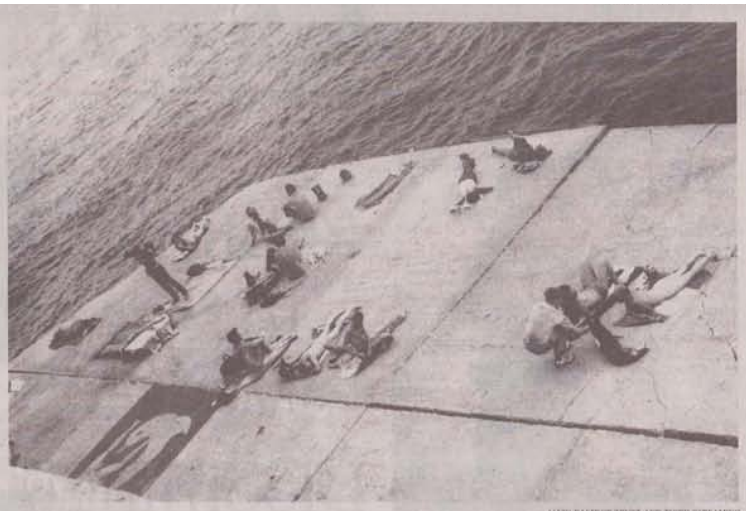
These pictures entailed rephotographing photographs and layering negatives to produce painterly images of languid lovers, wilting flowers, and bleak city skylines bathed in gold and amber light. At once scrungy and plush, they have a freakish nobility, Diane Arbus dancing with F. Holland Day.

In the mid-1980s Mr. Morrisroe moved to New York but never fully landed. With no money he had to live in Jersey City, and after he received an HIV-positive diagnosis in 1986, physical decline set in. His last pictures, some developed in hospital bathrooms, were made from medical X-Rays of his own body — lungs in bruisy Warhol colors — and figures that he clipped from pornographic magazines. Surrounded with aureoles of spiky light, they seem to burn right into the film.

Nothing I know about Mr. Morrisroe personally makes him sound lovable; his art has none of the moral thrust that fueled the work of a contemporary like David Wojnarowicz. So, we don't have to feel romantic or righteous about Mr. Morrisroe's art; we can just be wowed by its inventive, queer, polymorphous gorgeousness.

During the years Mr. Morrisroe was hustling, vamping and studying in Boston, a self-taught New York photographer named Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) was documenting elicit erotic and aesthetic performances taking place in cavernous shipping piers along the Hudson River in Manhattan.

The piers, abandoned and decaying, were used by gay men as social gathering spots, and by artists as raw spaces to transform. In the 1980s, Mr. Wojnarowicz and other young painters covered pier walls with graffiti-inspired murals. In the 1970s Gordon Matta-Clark, a cohesive force in SoHo's early history as an art community, turned one pier into a giant sculpture by cutting out a wedge-



ALVIN BALTROP TRUST AND THIRD STREAMING

Above, Mark Morrisroe's "'Nymph-O-Maniac' Promo Still Spectacular Studios [Pia, Richard, Nathan]" at Artists Space. At left, "Untitled," around 1977, a photograph by Alvin Baltrop at Third Streaming.

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shaped piece of wall and letting light flood in.

Indoor and outdoor shots of Mr. Matta-Clark's piece are among the 60 images in "Alvin Baltrop: Photographs 1965-2003" at Third Streaming, the first local survey of his work. Born in the Bronx, he started taking pictures when he was in the Navy and never stopped, tailoring his existence to his vocation. His range of pictorial interests was fairly broad: urban street life, children, lovers, prostitutes. But the subject he kept returning to was life on the piers, and there really was life there in an ever-shifting population of homeless people, teenage runaways, sun worshippers, and sexual adventurers. Because he was a familiar presence, Mr. Baltrop could shoot pretty much what he wanted, including amorous couplings in voyeuristic close-up. And his tableaus of nude, sun-splashed bodies have a pastoral look, like Thomas Eakins's all-male swimming scenes. At the same time there's a constant undercurrent of danger; a passing face looks murderous; police fish a corpse from the river; a pier explodes in billows of dark smoke.

The pictures went all but unseen during Mr. Baltrop's lifetime. The art world didn't know what to do with work on an unorthodox subject by a black, bisexual photographer, so did nothing; and in the wake of AIDS a historical veil was drawn over the "sex piers" phenomenon. Fortunately a friend of his, Randal Wilcox, took Mr. Baltrop's material in hand after his death, organized the prints and rescued countless rolls of unprocessed film. Mr. Wilcox, with Yona Backer, founding director of Third Streaming, put the exhibition together. Image by image it's uneven, but there are wonderful things, and the cumulative impact is potent, not only as art produced by an exceptional eye, but as a document of a turning-point moment, just before the city would tear the piers down, and AIDS would sweep away many of the lives that had passed through them.

Some art historians would say that pulling down and sweeping away constitute the essential dynamic of 20th- and 21st-century art. And that's the thesis behind a sequence of three group exhibitions at the Swiss Institute collectively titled "Under Destruction." The theme was inspired by the work of the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925-91), remembered for his "Homage to New York," a kinetic sculpture that was designed to simultaneously create and destroy paintings, and that prematurely self-destructed at its 1960 Museum of Modern Art debut.

Nothing at the Swiss Institute makes so spectacular an impression. There are hints of controlled damage (a bullet-riddled glass box by Monica Bonvicini) and apparently spontaneous obliteration (a light bulb explodes in a Michael Sailstorfer video). And painting, as a medium, takes a beating. Pavel Buchler runs flea-market pictures through a washing machine before cutting them to pieces. And, on film, Alex Hubbard creates a tarred-and-feathered version of Abstract Expressionism, as if to affirm once and for all that if painting isn't dead, it should be.

Death as stand-up comedy shtick? Mr. Hubbard's piece might be so described. So might everything in "Let It End Like This," a cunningly morbid group show at ApexArt conceived by Todd Zuniga, a founding editor of Opium magazine and a host for the "Survivor"-style reading series called Literary Death Match.

For the Apex show Mr. Zuniga asked dozens of artists, writers, and musicians to compose their own obituaries in whatever form they wished. Several responded with written death notices that both follow and depart from conventional models. Sean Landers takes the opportunity to eulogize the person he wishes he were rather than the one he is. Aaron Garretson scrawls a string of hoped-for encomiums — "author of countless," "survived by adoring" — beneath a doleful self-portrait.

You'll also find video obits, podcast obits and funerary monuments. C M Evans supplies a grave marker in the form of a doormat, Quenton Miller a headstone carved with the words "Shut Up." In a brochure essay Mr. Zuniga writes of the sobering impression his own mother's death has made on his view of mortality, though he manages to make the self-revelation sound like a smart one-liner.

Finally, impressions, lasting and elusive, are the focus of "Drawing and Its Double: Selections From the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica" at the Drawing Center, another venerable SoHo nonprofit. The drawings take an unusual form: they are the original designs etched by artists, using burins and acid, on metal plates from which prints (the "double" of the title) were made.

The selection begins on a grandiose note with a set of 10 oddly shaped copper plates on which, around 1549, the Mantuan artist Giorgio Ghisi engraved a print version of Michelangelo's "Last Judgment." Several years later the Vatican ordered that all exposed genitalia in the fresco should be covered up, and Ghisi's plates were similarly altered. No wonder Michelangelo has a look of puzzled pique in the frontispiece portrait Ghisi did of him.

It should be said that images incised on metal surfaces can be hard to see, and you have to move around in front of the plates at the Drawing Center to catch the right fall of light on what is, in essence, a form of drawing as low relief.

The effort is worth making just to get a sense of the range of ingenious draftsmanly techniques the medium encouraged. The animals in Antonio Tempesta's bestiary plates have the solid, no-nonsense outlines of newsprint cartoons, while Federico Barocci's 16th-century "Annunciation" seems to emerge from a mist of minutely hatched strokes. And the show's most familiar image turns out to be its most surprising: A prison interior by Giovanni Battista Piranesi looks imposing when printed but has a shockingly scratchy and scribbly copper plate source.

The Istituto Nazionale, in Rome, has a long history of preserving such objects. Its collection comes up to the present, as does the show, which moves on through super-subtle Giorgio Morandi still-life etchings to a recent series of politicized images of the Ten Commandments by [illegible] in Italy in 1965 and now lives in New York.

After Mr. Canevari finished his designs and pulled some prints, he physically bent the plates so that further printing would be impossible, and the plates would stand as art objects on their own. In doing so he, like the show itself, proposes new and alternative histories for printing and drawing alike.

And alternative is what SoHo is into, what sets it apart.

ONLINE: INTERACTIVE MAP

An online map of the galleries around Manhattan, with photos and details about the the artists' work on display:

nytimes.com/arts