

A photograph of a man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a white crew-neck sweater. He is standing in profile, looking out of a window. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window. On a white cabinet to the left, there are several glasses and a colorful object. On the wall above the cabinet, there are some papers or artwork. In the background, a doorway leads to another room with a blue object on a bed.

DARREL ELLIS Allen Frame remembers an artist

AS TOLD TO FABIO CHERSTICH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLEN FRAME



Previous spread: Darrel in the kitchen at Butch Walker's and my apartment on Perry Street, with a Jody Guralnick painting over the refrigerator, 1981.

Above: Darrel making slides of his work at his apartment in Greenpoint, circa 1988.

I first met Darrel Ellis in 1981. I was 30 and he was almost 23. He had just broken up with the actor José Rafael Arango and we were at an East Village neighbourhood gay bar called The Bar, at 2nd Avenue and East 4th Street, half a block from José's apartment. The Bar had been in existence just a few years and had become a popular, low-key hangout with a pool table and jukebox, notable for the actors, artists, and writers who frequented it, including Peter Hujar, John Heys, Bill Rice, Jim Neu, Frank Franca, Bob Gober, Dieter Hall, Ken Tisa, Alvin Baltrop, Stephen Barker, and many others. That night at The Bar I brought Darrel home to my fifth-floor walk-up apartment in the West Village, which I shared with my roommate, an actress from Mississippi named Butch Walker. The bathtub was still in the kitchen. Our relationship started romantically but was very short-lived and quickly changed into a friendship.

When we first met, Darrel had already completed a residency at PS1 and was just starting the one-year Whitney Independent Study Program, and he invited me to his studio there to see his work. He had recently discovered the photography archive left behind by his father, Thomas Ellis, who had been tragically murdered by the police two months before Darrel was born in 1958. Darrel had just begun to draw and paint from his father's negatives of family gatherings in Harlem and the Bronx through the '50s—portraits, picnics, and festive social occasions. A photographer myself, with an archive of my grandmother's family photos from the '30s, I was fascinated by what Darrel was starting to work on and curious to see where it would go. He was a compelling personality and a deeply talented artist. I loved his work. The whole connection to photography of course interested me, but also as a figurative photographer I was really enamoured of his figurative paintings, drawings, and sketches. Before he even got the studio at PS1, when he was just 21, he was trying to find a way to conceptualise his approach to photography. At that time he figured out how to project over a sculptural form and rephotograph the projection to distort the image. But when he found his father's archive, he stopped doing that so much for a few years and turned to just faithfully interpreting his father's work, without distortion, in ink washes, drawings, and paintings. The discovery of his father's archive had a huge impact, not just for the work he produced, but also in connecting him to the father he had never known. The stepfather he grew up with drank heavily and was abusive. Discovering his father's work and finding out more about him created a different narrative about his identity. In fact, the biggest upset we ever had in the years we knew each other was when I found a bunch of photos in a box on the street and offered them to Darrel, thinking he might want to work from them in some way. They were pictures of Black soldiers during the '40s, casual portraits and group pictures, centring around one particular guy. Darrel was so offended I didn't realise that he wouldn't want to use them—that the only reason he was working from vintage photos was because they were by his father about their family.

My own context

Throughout this time, I was carrying on with my own photography. My photos were always about friends and family, and so naturally included Darrel. I would photograph people repeatedly in different contexts. Sometimes I went outside this parameter when exploring the social context of certain friends, making pictures of people that

I didn't know. Originally, I wanted to be a filmmaker and was more influenced by film than still photography, from Antonioni to Cassavetes. When I started taking still photography seriously, Diane Arbus was the photographer I was paying the most attention to. I was also studying art history, and Caravaggio had a big impact on me, and then many other painters. Besides film, Southern literature—I grew up in Mississippi—was important to me: William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and Walker Percy. I started doing colour photographs right away, but until 1981 I was mainly doing black and white. My book *Fever* came out last year, with colour photos from 1981 of Charlie Boone, Jody Guralnick, Butch Walker, Bill Jacobson, John Heys, Dan Mahoney, as well as Darrel. That same year, 1981, I had become part of a circle of gay male artists; the leader of this group was the artist Ken Tisa, who was a few years older. He lent me



the big soft sculpture that I put above my bed. I was also working for *Bomb* magazine in those years. I met the founder, publisher, and editor, Betsy Sussler, when we were performing in a Gary Indiana play called *Phantoms of Louisiana* at the Performing Garage in New York. It starred Cookie Mueller and Taylor Mead. I became a contributing editor for about 15 years and mainly interviewed playwrights and wrote about experimental theatre. I suggested Darrel's work to Betsy and she published it twice.

The social scene

Occasionally, for short periods of time between 1981 and 1984, Darrel would stay with his best friend, the painter Miguel Ferrando, and Miguel's boyfriend Todd in Miguel's family's apartment in a housing project on the Lower East Side. Darrel took some pictures there of

apartamento - Darrel Ellis



Opposite page: John West, Dan Mahoney, and Darrel at the apartment on Perry Street, 1981.
Above: Butch looking in the mirror at the apartment on Perry Street, 1981.

apartamento - Darrel Ellis



Above: Butch playing backgammon at the apartment on Perry Street, 1981.
 Opposite page: Dan at the apartment on Perry Street, with a Ken Tisa sculpture on the wall, 1981.
 Next spread: Darrel at José Rafael Arango's apartment in the East Village, 1981.

Miguel in drag and based an interesting series on them, with Miguel holding Todd in a Pietà pose. As I said, when I met Darrel, he was living with his former boyfriend José, but eventually he went back to his mother's apartment in the Bronx, where his two younger siblings also were living in a big four-bedroom apartment in a housing project. Later, he moved to an apartment in Greenpoint in 1987, where I photographed him several times. This was the last place he lived. Life between all these homes and apartments was varied. José had people over often, I think, and parties. I went to a New Year's Eve party there once and a dinner party where I met the Colombian novelist Jaime Manrique. Darrel's mother's apartment seemed pretty busy, too, with family and friends. It seemed that everyone liked to hang out in his mother's bedroom where there was a TV, but also in the kitchen. I don't think he had many people over to his Greenpoint



apartment and I don't remember him ever having any big parties. He was incredibly dedicated, hard-working, and prolific. He didn't spend much time in bars after around 1982. He liked to be at home working. It was also a question of where you would spend what little money you had—on drinking and going out, or art materials. The latter were a priority always.

Witnesses

I'm not sure how Darrel first met Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar, but they both photographed him on the same weekend in 1981, just before we met, and each one gave him a print from the session. I think Darrel knew Nan Goldin both through me and her friend Robert Vitale. Nan later invited Darrel, as someone in her circle of friends, to be part of her show *Witnesses: Against Our Van-*



ishing, held at Artists Space in 1989. It was the first big art show about AIDS in New York. The reason it got so much attention was not the subject of AIDS but rather the controversy surrounding the catalogue essay written by David Wojnarowicz, which was a stream-of-consciousness rant against the politicians and religious figures whose attitude towards AIDS was lethal and heinous. Because he named names in such a righteous way, the government arts agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, rescinded money they had promised for the catalogue, and that misguided decision became the basis for a further battle in the culture wars that had already erupted over government funding of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition and various individual artist grants. In that show Darrel presented his paintings from the photographs taken of him by Mapplethorpe and Hujar, which he hung beside his self-portrait interpretations of their



photos. His painting from the Mapplethorpe photo was used as a press image and was widely reproduced. Both Mapplethorpe and Hujar had already died of AIDS-related causes by that time, though Hujar's work was also included. Darrel got a lot of attention from the show; it's surprising to look back and realise there wasn't then a rush from galleries, curators, museums, or collectors at the time. But that didn't happen. One of his high school teachers got in touch with him to buy a piece.

Influences

It's interesting how exposed personally he was to photography in New York in that period; he had a strong and intimate connection to it, even though he considered himself primarily a painter. Through his father's work of course he was exposed to photographic



Opposite page: José and Darrel at José's apartment, 1981.

Above: John Heys, Bill Jacobson, and Charlie Boone leaving Charlie's apartment, 1981.



Above and opposite page: Darrel at José's apartment, 1981.
Next spread: Charlie and Butch at the apartment on Perry Street, 1981.

influences of the '40s and '50s; Thomas would have known all the important studio photographers then, as well as important Black photographers like Roy DeCarava and James Van Der Zee. Then in the '80s Darrel created profound conceptual photographs of his own and crossed paths significantly with major photographers of that decade, like Hujar, Mapplethorpe, and Goldin. And, of course, he had close friends like me and, earlier, James Wentzy, and he knew, more casually, photographers like Dawoud Bey and Andres Serrano. On the painting side, his best friends Miguel Ferrando and Richard Brintzenhofe were painters, and they talked about painting constantly. In fact, I think his most significant influences came from this field. We were both huge fans of the Nabis—Vuillard, Bonnard, and Vallotton. Also, Degas, Seurat, and many others, and later painters like Balthus, Freud, and Alice Neel.



I never really knew what Darrel thought of my own work. I suppose he respected it or we would not have remained close friends, but we didn't talk about it critically. Then, one time in 1990, he asked me specifically to photograph him. After the exposure his work got in the *Witnesses* show of 1989, he wanted to work again from another photographer's images of him. That was the only time we really 'collaborated' or worked together. From that photograph, he made two gouaches that adhered literally to my composition, then two more that kept his whole figure in them but left out the surrounding context, then his largest painting—the most abstract version—which is a simpler outline of himself against a white background. It's a brilliant, late painting that suggests how his work might have developed had he lived longer. They're all in private hands now except for the large painting.





Above: Darrel making slides of his work at his apartment in Greenpoint, circa 1988.

Opposite page: Darrel at his studio in the Whitney, 1981.

Next page: John West, Charlie Boone, Frank Moore's boyfriend Doug, Jim Self, and Tom Reeder at a party in Frank's loft, 1981.

An ending and a legacy

The important friends in Darrel's life were Black, Latinx, white, gay, straight, male, female. He was very open. But I definitely saw racism and discrimination against him by white curators in the '80s with whom I talked about his work. It registered as a kind of dismissive attitude. On the other hand, he found support from Black and white curators and artists, from Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis at Fashion Moda, to John Ahearn, Susan Crowe, Bill Rice, Nan Goldin, Peter Galassi, and Not Vital. I also think the fact that he was Black, gay, and died of AIDS factored heavily into why his work was not sought after more following his death. And we have to remember how many artists died in the AIDS pandemic; there were a lot of sudden losses and precarious bodies of work to attend to. People were devastated and exhausted.



Darrel was first hospitalised in 1991 and went into a coma but then recovered. At that point he quit his job as a security guard at MoMA, where he'd worked since 1987. After that scare, he spent most of his time in his studio at home making a prolific amount of work. But then he went into another coma in 1992, from which he didn't recover, and Darrel died in a Brooklyn hospital at the age of 33. Not long afterwards, his surviving siblings met with some of his close friends and we asked them to let us keep the work together in one place in order to show it to people to try to bring more exposure to it. I offered to house it in my studio, and then stored it until 2020, when the gallerist Candice Madey started working with it. I act simply as a pro bono adviser to the family. Shortly before Darrel died, he did have a show of his conceptual photos in 1991 in a gallery on 57th Street called Baron/Boisanté. Then

there was his posthumous inclusion in the MoMA show in 1992, *New Photography 8*, in which again one of his images was used as publicity and appeared in the *New York Times*. That might have brought more interest but didn't. The retrospective I curated in 1996 at Art in General got a glowing review in the *New York Times*, but once again it did not generate much later interest. I definitely attribute this lack of follow-up attention to racism—maybe less of an overt racism than neglect, omission, disregard, and homophobia, and an aversion to the subject of AIDS. Fortunately, time is on the side of estates, and the time that elapsed between his inclusion in a group show in 2004 and his solo show at Osmos in 2019 was beneficial, in the end, in that his work appeared fresh and riveting at a time in which people had come to recognise the extent to which they had neglected to pay attention to worthy BIPOC artists. The scope of that



omission is shameful. More recently his work has received a solo show at Candice Madey Gallery in New York in 2021 and another solo show at the Not Vital Foundation. A show of both our work together has just closed at Galerie Crone in Vienna. In the fall of 2022 a show will open at the Baltimore Museum of Art that will come to the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2023, and there will be a show of Darrel's work at Harvard's Carpenter Center for Visual Arts in 2023. It is not until now, over 40 years after we met, that his posthumous recognition is ensured.