

AnOther

A Snapshot of New York's 1980s Art Scene on the Precipice of Aids

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / FEATURE



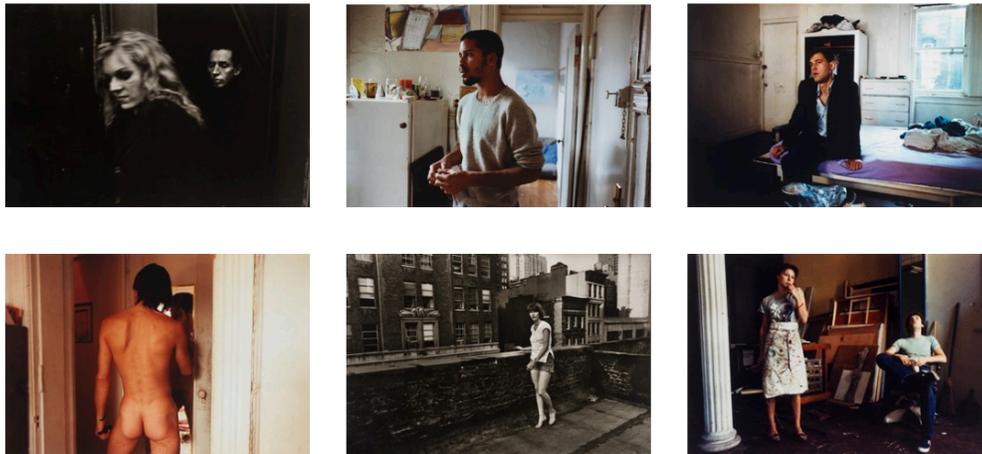
Darrel Ellis, my apartment, NYC 2/5, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery

A new photo show in New York features Allen Frame's unvarnished, gentle portraits of downtown figures like Nan Goldin, Cookie Mueller and Darrel Ellis

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TEXT Miss Rosen

Growing up in Greenville, Mississippi during the 1960s, photographer and filmmaker Allen Frame dreamed of finding a community to call his own, a world filled with artists of all stripes who came together to create a new world on their terms. Hailing from a family of competitive athletes, Frame says, "I was always escaping into the corners of my imagination and plotting my exit."



That moment came in the early 1970s, when Frame traveled to Boston to study at Harvard University and Imageworks, where he took a documentary approach to photography. But the academic way proved to be a poor fit as Frame felt a sense of disconnection and alienation entering into realms so far removed from his own experience. Seeking to establish himself as an insider among a circle of artists who shared values, principles and aims, Frame moved to New York in 1977. “Boston was repressed and Mississippi was provincial, so New York was a relief. It had this very sensual, gregarious flow,” says Frame.

Although the city had economically collapsed and become a burned-out shell of its former self, it was a young artist’s dream. The Gay Liberation movement was in full swing, transforming the West Village and the piers into a playground not unlike *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Rent was cheap and the cost of living was low. Frame fell in with a group of emerging artists just starting to make their name on the downtown art scene including Cookie Mueller, Kenny Scharf, David Armstrong and Alvin Baltrop.



Edward Brezinski, NYC, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery

In 1981, Frame moved to Perry Street – a lyrical thoroughfare nestled in the West Village – and became a fixture on the scene, hitting up local bars and galleries and photographing intimate moments of connection along the way. Few could have imagined a future as harrowing as the one that began to unfold on July 3 of that year, when *The New York Times* sounded the alarm with an article: [“Rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals.”](#)

“The cause of the outbreak is unknown, and there is as yet no evidence of contagion,” Lawrence K Altman wrote of the unnamed disease – now known as Aids – which had killed eight of the 41 men in less than 24 months. Marginalised as an LGBTQ+ issue, mainstream media coverage and public health initiatives fell by the wayside until the crisis reached epidemic proportions. But by then it was too late for tens of thousands, among those the friends Frame had photographed – selections of which will be on view beginning March 31 at the Gitterman Gallery booth during The Photography Show in New York.



Laurie, NYC, 1978© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery

Frame's photographs are a testament to the power of community, creation and preservation, offering a gentle reminder that doing the work is paramount. "When I moved to New York it was inconceivable to me that someone might make a living in fine art photography. There wasn't the same pressure there is today to make your name and build a career, so I gave myself the time to really explore," says Frame. "I did foray into theatre as an actor, director and writer for five or six years and I did as little work as I could possibly get away with to support myself. A lot of that time was about cultivating relationships to make photographs – but even that was very loose. I never did anything with the work until a couple of years ago."

Once again, Frame's timing is immaculate. Although the photographs were made four decades ago, they are once again aligned with the moment as a number of artists featured in the show are enjoying their own moment in the spotlight once again. Sir Elton John recently curated an exhibition of Peter Hujar's work, new documentaries on Nan Goldin and Edward Brezinski have just been released, and *Regeneration*, the first museum survey of Darrel Ellis, opens in New York this May.



Jody Guralnick and David Wilson, NYC, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery

Having worked in the theatre, Frame instinctively cast his friends in a stage of his own making that would later reveal itself in the print, each person caught in a moment that is at once intense, innocent, and intimate – the perfect recipe for romance. His images are potent moments of silence that hold everything together while still open to promise and possibility, much like the spaces between notes in a song.

Gravitating to these in-between times, Frame filled in the blank. “There was the reality in front of me, but there was also the creative projection that I unconsciously imposed, seeing them as characters in my imagination as much as in reality,” he says. “So even though the work is not staged, there’s definitely the feeling of a structure I’m framing them with. In my photographs what seems to be happening is a little different from what is actually happening. But maybe, as it’s been said, fiction is closer to reality than reality itself.”

Allen Frame’s photographs are on view 31 March – 2 April 2023 at the Gitterman Gallery booth during The Photography Show presented by AIPAD at Center415 in New York.