

**Lost in New York**

by Lee Ann Norman

**Alvin Baltrop: Photographs 1965 – 2003**

Alvin Baltrop

Third Streaming

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The Hudson River Piers beneath the old West Side Elevated Highway had a reputation for being a place where cutting-edge art making occurred.

While Gordon Matta-Clark, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, and the graffiti artist Tava among others used the Piers to create site-specific interventions and performances, Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) chose to focus his attention on what many people feared and reviled about the location. From the mid 1970s until their complete demolition in 1989, Baltrop's photography captured the lives of the city's poor, queer, and homeless residents who called the Hudson River Piers home.

In "Alvin Baltrop: Photographs 1965 – 2003," curators Yona Backer and Randal Wilcox (Baltrop's former assistant) present a comprehensive view of an often overlooked, queer, African-American artist who only began to receive critical recognition posthumously from the art world. On view are many of the gelatin silver prints that comprise the "Pier Photographs" for which Baltrop is most known along with images taken during his years of naval service in Vietnam from the mid to late 1960s. Previously unseen work including rare archival materials and color prints, and work made near the end of his life in Manhattan hospitals also show Baltrop's refined aesthetic that used classicism to temper the harshness of a reality many wished to ignore or forget.

Baltrop often shot his Pier photos from a distance. He waited patiently in warehouse doorways or rigged makeshift harnesses from above to capture these shockingly intimate and extraordinary scenes of casual sex, blasé drug use, sun bathing, love and laughter as well as rape, mugging, and murder. Despite this vantage point, the images are not voyeuristic or leering. Within the rubble of a New York that no longer exists, Baltrop framed the lives of the cast-offs who lived at the Piers and the cruisers and passerby that visited them to convey the "joyous situation" Gordon Matta-Clark hoped to emulate with his 1975 Hudson River Piers work *Day's End (Pier 52)*.

Baltrop never made a living as an artist in his lifetime. He often struggled to print his images or care for his vast stores of material properly. Rarely seen color ink-jet prints of street scenes recall the quotidian by relaying mundane activities like bike riding and pick-up games on the corner, to New York storefronts and yards. Close-ups of elaborately adorned male and female genitalia have been printed from heavily damaged negatives and echo the private and personal in Baltrop's life. As an artist marginalized by the art world, Baltrop likely felt a deep kinship with those he photographed. His images carry a dignity and elegance that transcend the detached dissociation of documentary photography and quietly underscore the humanity inherent in his subjects. His images possess a raw beauty that expose a vibrant world where high art and low culture often collided. Although Baltrop's vision was never fully realized in his lifetime, the thousands of prints and negatives that comprise his artistic legacy allow us to take a second look at an important photographer who wasn't afraid to capture a side of the city that most of us never knew.

~Lee Ann Norman





Images: *Untitled (The Cloisters, Fort Tryon, New York)*, 1965, © The Alvin Baltrop Trust; *Untitled, 1975-1986*, © The Alvin Baltrop Trust.

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