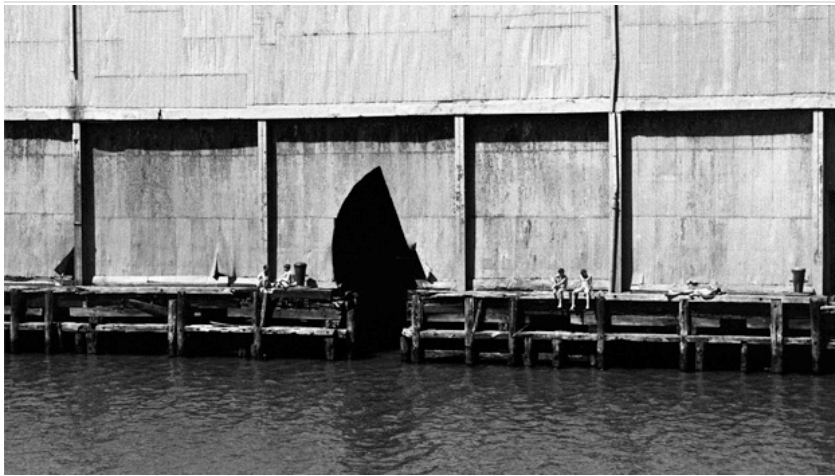


Life and Death on the Piers with Alvin Baltrop

by [Kathleen Massara](#)



[Alvin Baltrop](#) was born in 1948 in the Bronx and came out at the tender age of 14; he was forced to navigate sexual minefields without much help from his family or peers, though in spite or of this neglect, he later served as a mentor to wayward queer youth. He lived in the East Village for much of his life, a tall, dashiki-wearing, cane-wielding man about town, though his work was rarely shown before his death from cancer in 2004. In the past few years, however, his photographs have been getting more attention, bolstered by a 2008 *Artforum* cover story. An [exhibition](#) of his work from 1965 to the year before his death is on view at [Third Streaming](#) in Soho (through May 28). Yona Backer is a founding partner of the space and the exhibition's co-curator. "The work deserves to be seen," she said, "particularly because he photographed a Downtown New York that no longer exists."

Baltrop photographed the Hudson River piers in the 70s and 80s, at a time when they were abandoned by all but sunbathers and sexual outlaws. He documented Pier 52, where [Gordon Matta-Clark](#) sliced almond shapes into the walls and where [David Wojnarowicz](#) experimented with his drawings (along with the men who were looking for more than artwork). Lovers are captured between steel girders, standing naked near a window by a disintegrating wall, or relaxing in the sun. Some, like "Super Cream," are formal portraits of a subject bathed in light, half his chest exposed and a hand resting near the cheek. It's an update of Raphael's "[La fornarina](#)" through a queer lens.

Baltrop's rarely seen color and black-and-white photographs show men confronting the camera, while others are contemplative reconnaissance shots taken from afar. The images are remarkable: subjects glow, seductive apparitions of a patient photographer willing to wait hours for the right picture. The gallery's rough floorboards and mottled paint lend the show an air of authenticity mimicking the coarse Downtown-ness of the piers. There's a feeling of sexual liberty in these photos, coupled with a sense of dread and foreboding. Among the nudes is a photograph of a dredged-up corpse, partly shrouded, flanked by police officers armed with notepads. It's a voyeuristic look at the reality of pier life turned grotesque: prostitutes raped and murdered, young gay and lesbian runaways taken advantage of, graffiti artists thriving, all while nude sunbathers relaxed on the white-hot pavement. And yet, as Baltrop's former assistant and co-curator of the exhibition [Randal Wilcox](#) says in the trailer of the upcoming documentary on his mentor: "Once we were into the piers he wasn't afraid at all."

It's too bad that Baltrop's work is being recognized now, when he's no longer with us to enjoy a little

fame. He worked odd jobs for most of his life so he could devote himself to his art, and he watched his contemporaries achieve recognition while he was told his work was too "amateurish." If we take the following passage to heart, the memory of the photographer and his subjects live on: In a photograph of an airy pier warehouse, the graffiti on the walls reads: "Take a copy/tell your friends/the truth about this place."

(Images courtesy Third Streaming, copyright the Alvin Baltrap Trust)



Related Locations

Third Streaming

10 Greene Street, 2nd Floor, between Canal and Grand Street ([map](#))

Soho

646-370-3877

