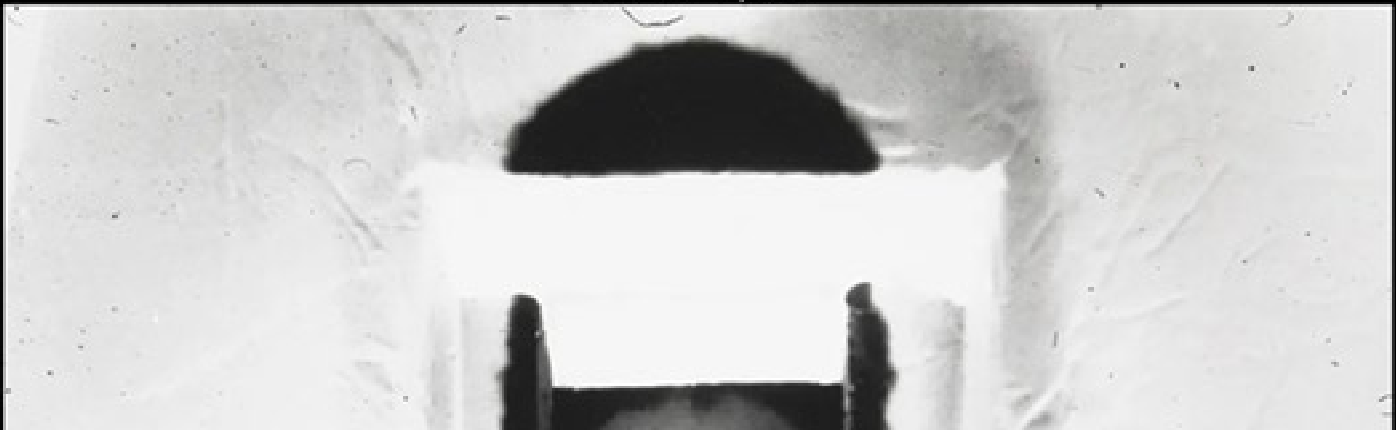
PHOTO BOOTH

AN ARTIST LOST TO AIDS FINALLY GETS HIS DUE

Darrel Ellis made a wrenchingly heartfelt body of work based on his late father's photographs. They've remained obscure until now.

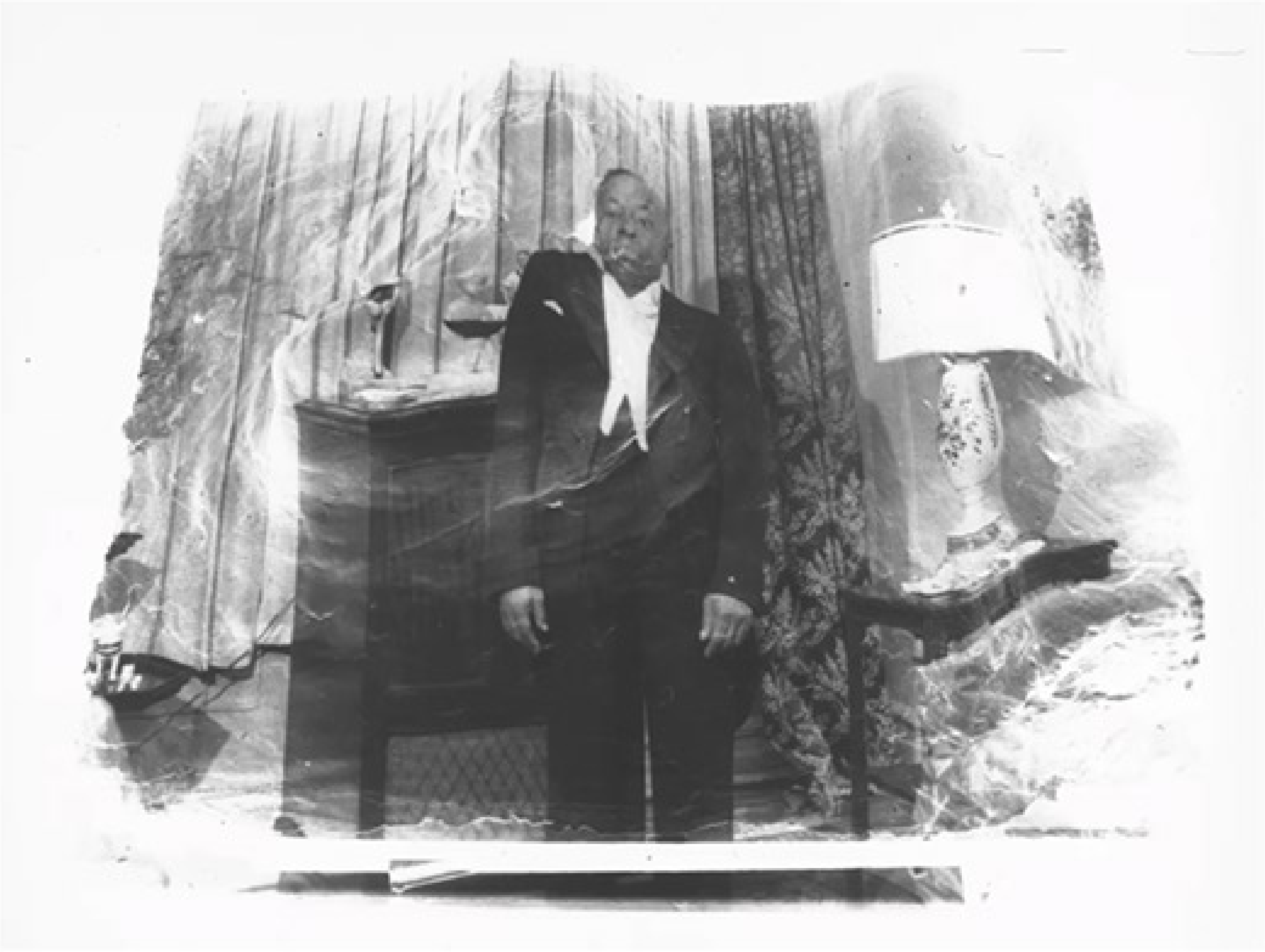
By Chris Wiley

December 14, 2021



"Untitled (Self-Portrait after Museum Guard Photograph)," circa 1990. Gelatin-silver print. Photograph by Darrel Ellis Courtesy of Visual AIDS and Candice Madey, New York. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody.

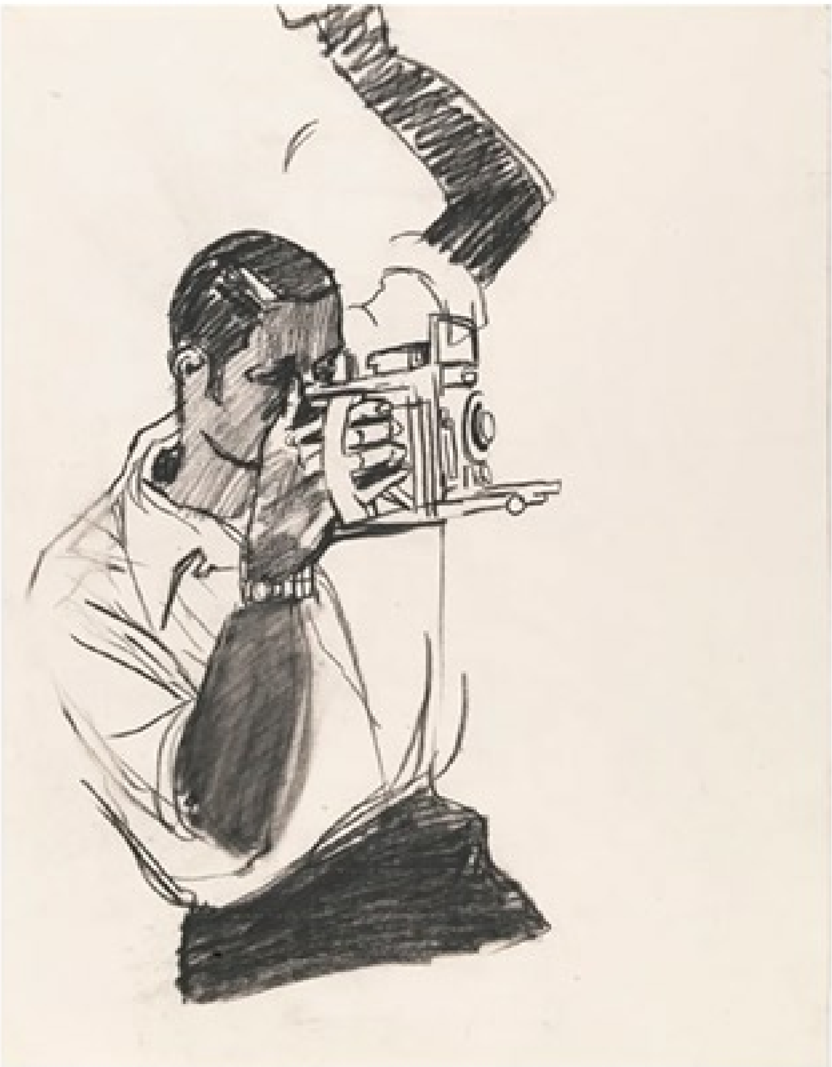
Darrel Ellis was possessed by the past. This was true when he strolled the halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a budding artist, visiting paintings by the European masters that stung his heart. It was true, later, when he immersed himself in the teachings of traditional Eastern religions. But the past gripped him hardest when he made his own drawings and photographs, which reinterpreted pictures that had been taken by his father.



"Untitled (Grandfather James A. Harrison)," 1990. Gelatin-silver print. Photograph by Darrel Ellis, Courtesy Visual AIDS. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

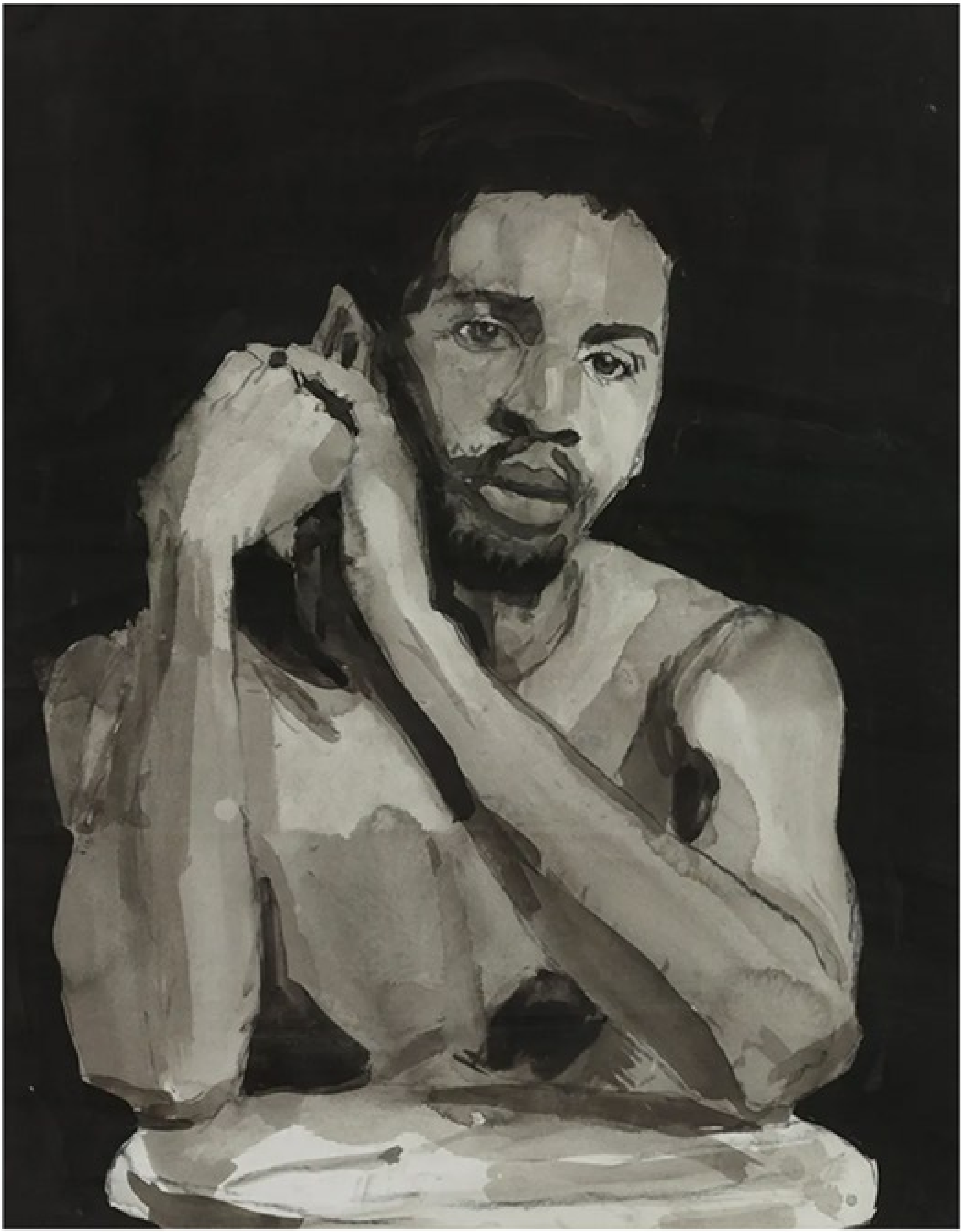
His father, Thomas, was an amateur shutterbug who'd briefly run a professional portrait studio. But before Ellis was born Thomas was beaten to death by drunken plainclothes policemen on the streets of the family's South Bronx neighborhood;

according to Ellis's sister, an argument had ensued after Thomas asked that the cops move their double-parked car. (In a bitter irony, Thomas had been training to join the police force. A few weeks after his death, the academy called to inform him that he had fulfilled the requirements.) Born in 1958, Ellis made it his life's work to explore the world in which his father had lived. Working from prints of Thomas's pictures, and later from a cache of negatives that his mother gave him, he used that recovered history both as a catchment for his nostalgic fantasies and as a sounding board for his present-day existence. L. P. Hartley's famous adage casts the past as a foreign country; Ellis was less a tourist than an expat. He died, of AIDS, in 1992, at just thirty-three years old, the same age his father had been when he was killed.



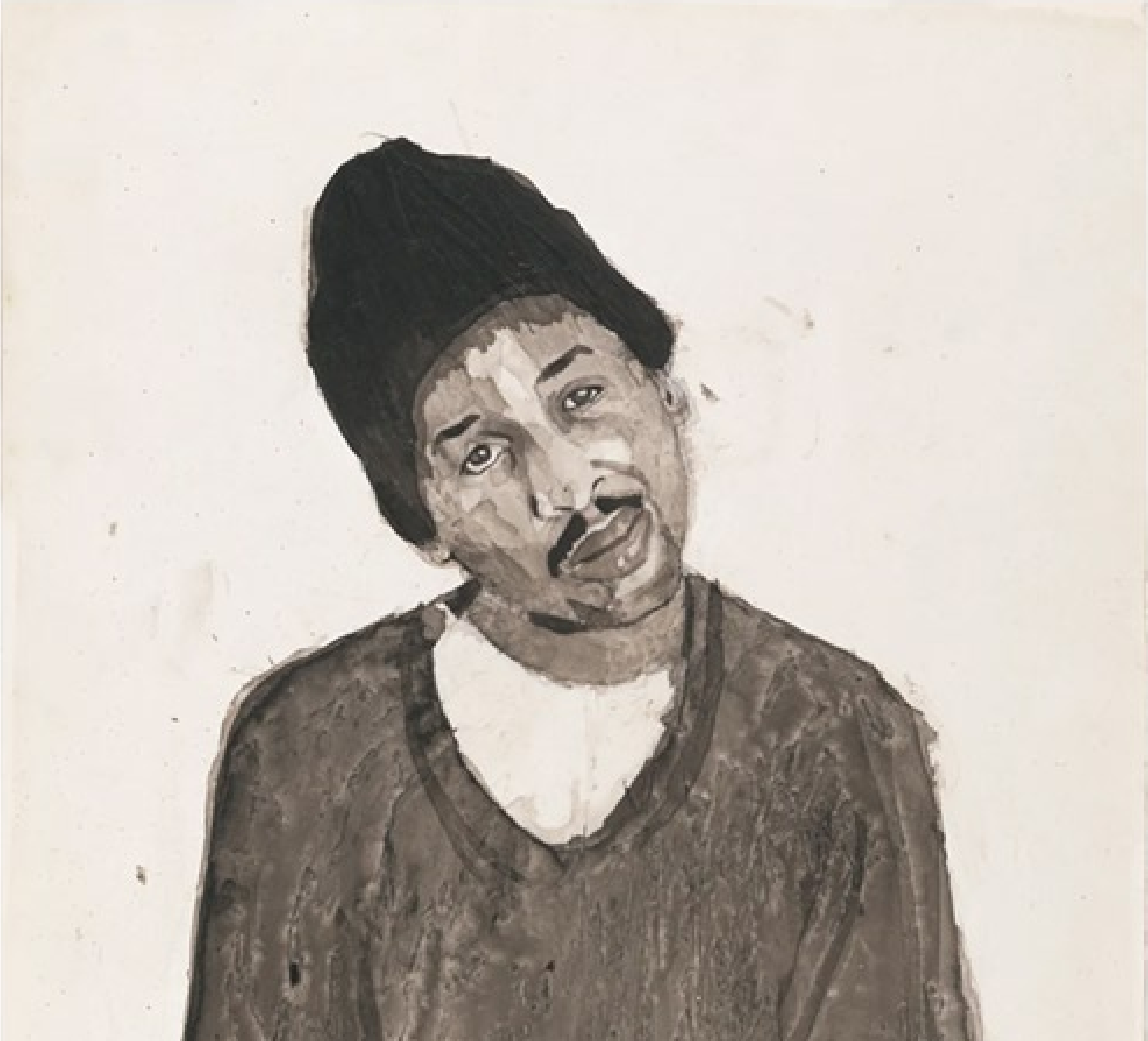
"Untitled (Father with Camera)," circa 1981–85. Charcoal on paper. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

It is only with the publication of a new monograph of Ellis's work, by the arts organization Visual AIDS, that Ellis is beginning to earn the recognition that he deserves. (A travelling exhibition will have its first stop at the Baltimore Museum of Art, next fall.) As a young artist, Ellis took classes at Cooper Union and attended the prestigious Whitney Independent Study Program. He circulated in the vibrant downtown scene among fellow-artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar, both of whom took his photograph. But unlike some of his peers, who found recognition during their lifetimes or after their deaths, Ellis's work remained relatively obscure. Money was always tight, and to make ends meet he held down a job as a security guard at MOMA, which he resented having to do. During his brief career he mounted just a handful of exhibitions, and he gained his only glimpse of wider notoriety as a participant in Nan Goldin's scandal-causing group exhibition about the AIDS crisis, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," in 1989. Tellingly, however, he chose to reimagine both Hujar's and Mapplethorpe's photographs of him—neither of which he liked—as powerful self-portraits, thereby staking a creative claim to his own image.



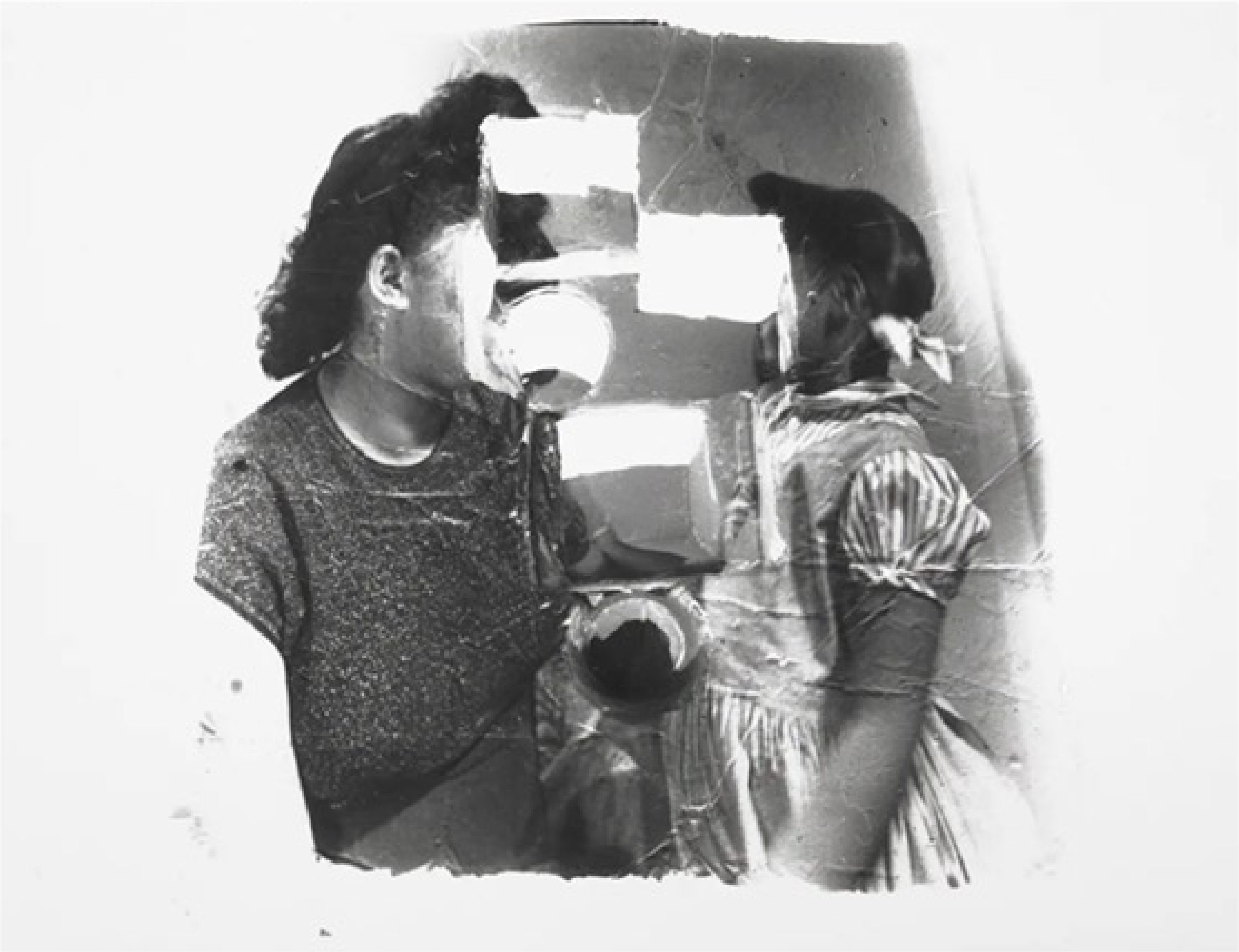
"Self-Portrait after Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe," 1989. Ink and wash on paper. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The only known recording of Ellis is an interview, conducted for the gay biweekly newspaper *New York Native*, less than a year before he died. He told the interviewer, David Hirsh, that he was never one to harp on the subject of his Blackness. "There's so much racism naturally in the art world," he said. "And people don't know how to react to you a lot of times, as a Black artist, they don't know how to react to your work. It's a big issue, and it's one that I guess I don't really think about often—Black, the race thing—even though I know it's there. But it's very naïve of me to be that way because it's affected my whole life." Still, the subject inevitably made its way into his work. In one series of photographic self-portraits he depicted stereotypes of Black men—security guard, beggar, Black Panther. He never exhibited those images, but he used them as the basis for several later works, including an uncharacteristically goofy distorted photograph, "Untitled (Self-Portrait after Museum Guard Photograph)," and a drawing, "Untitled (Self Portrait)," in which a rumpled Ellis appears with his hands outstretched, entreating the viewer for assistance, or perhaps mercy.

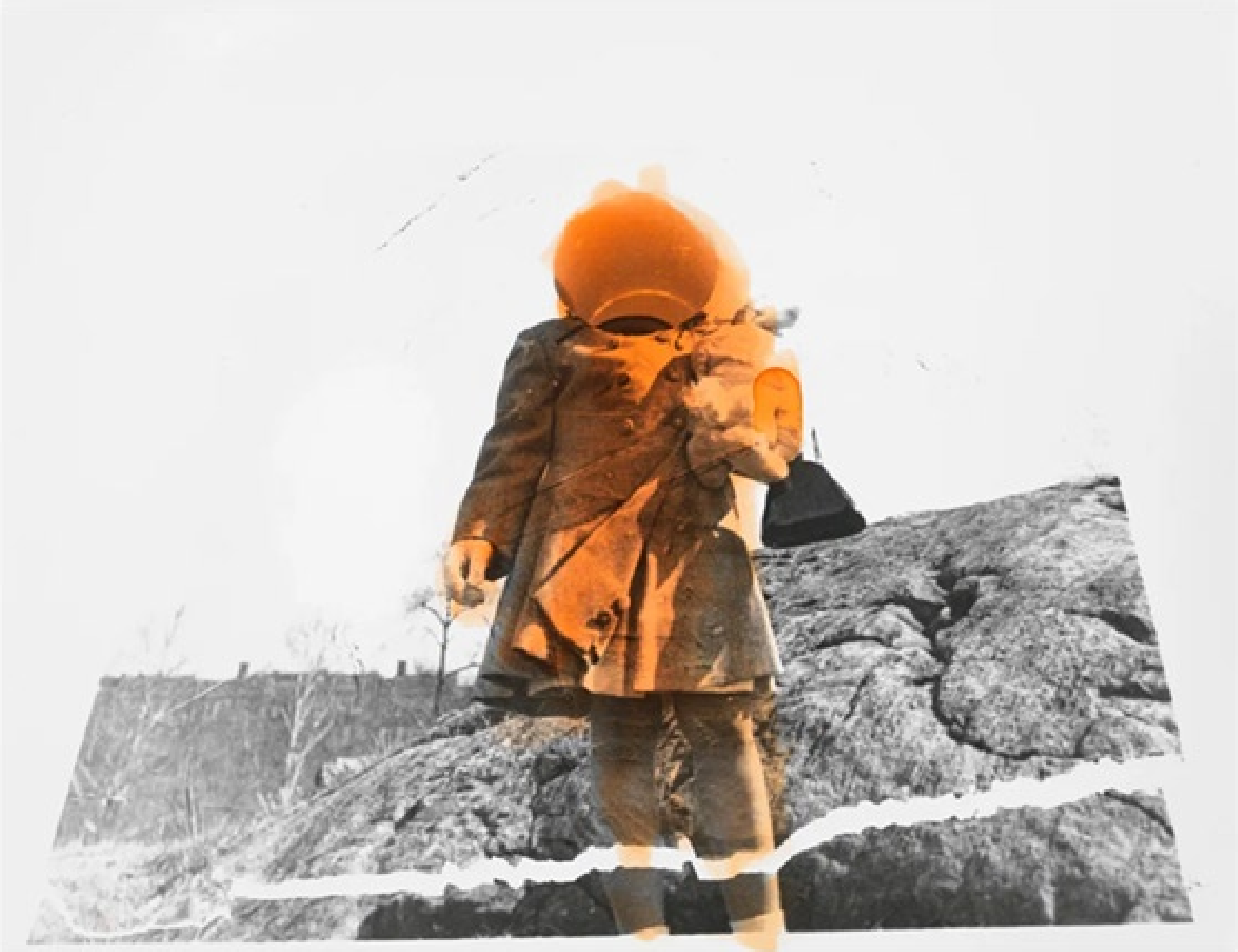


"Untitled (Self-Portrait)," circa 1990–91. Ink and wash on paper with textured ground. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

In a somewhat superficial sense, Ellis could have fit in well among the artists of the so-called Pictures Generation. This cohort, which included figures such as Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman, was besotted with voguish postmodern theory and cheeky acts of appropriation. But while Ellis was certainly swimming in the same intellectual pond—in his notebooks, you can find dashed-off self-admonishments to "read Hegel" and "read Derrida"—his appropriative work had little in common with their hipster remove and pointy-headed philosophical posturing. His work instead was wrenchingly heartfelt and personally revealing.

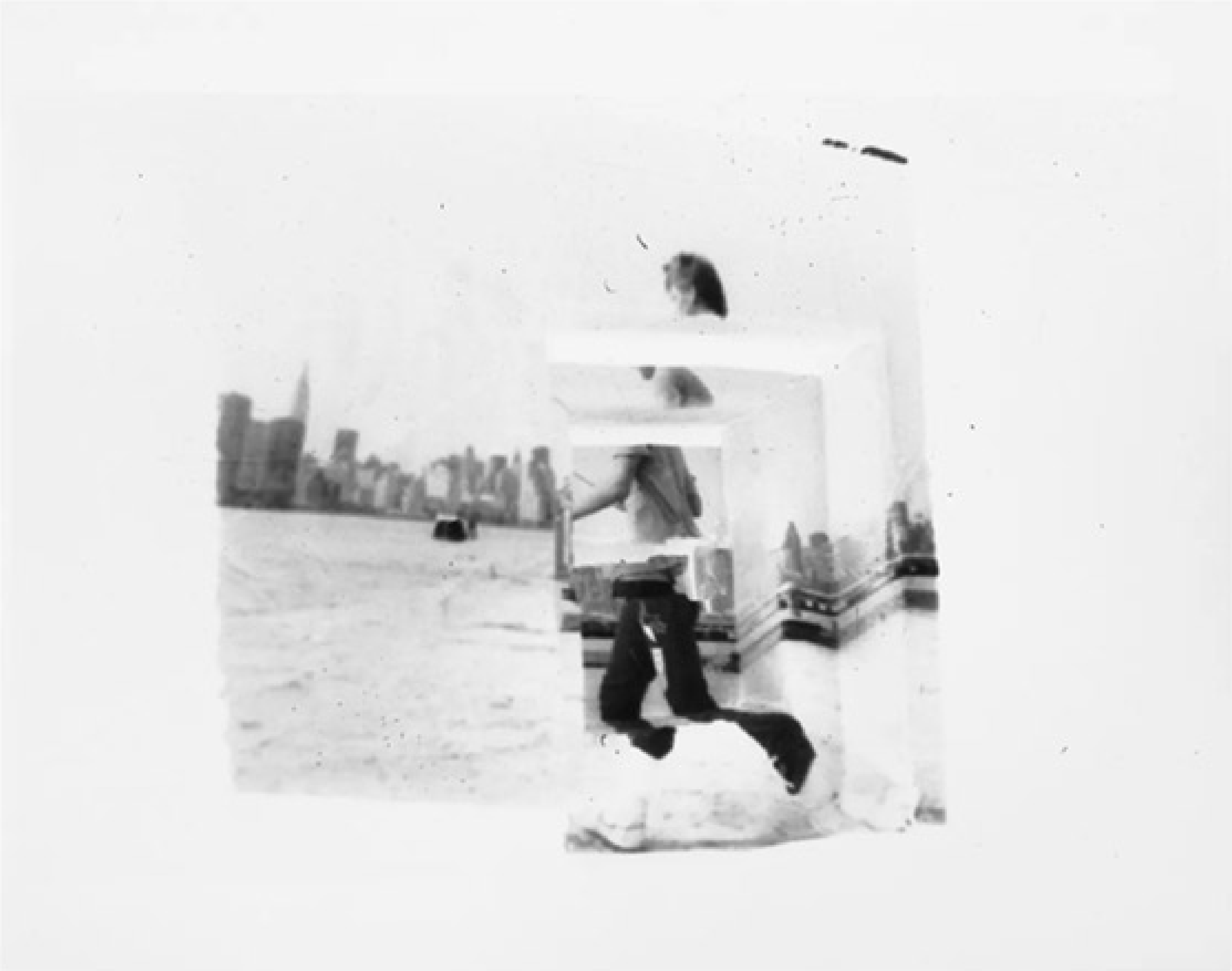


"Untitled (Laure and Mother)," circa 1989–91. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

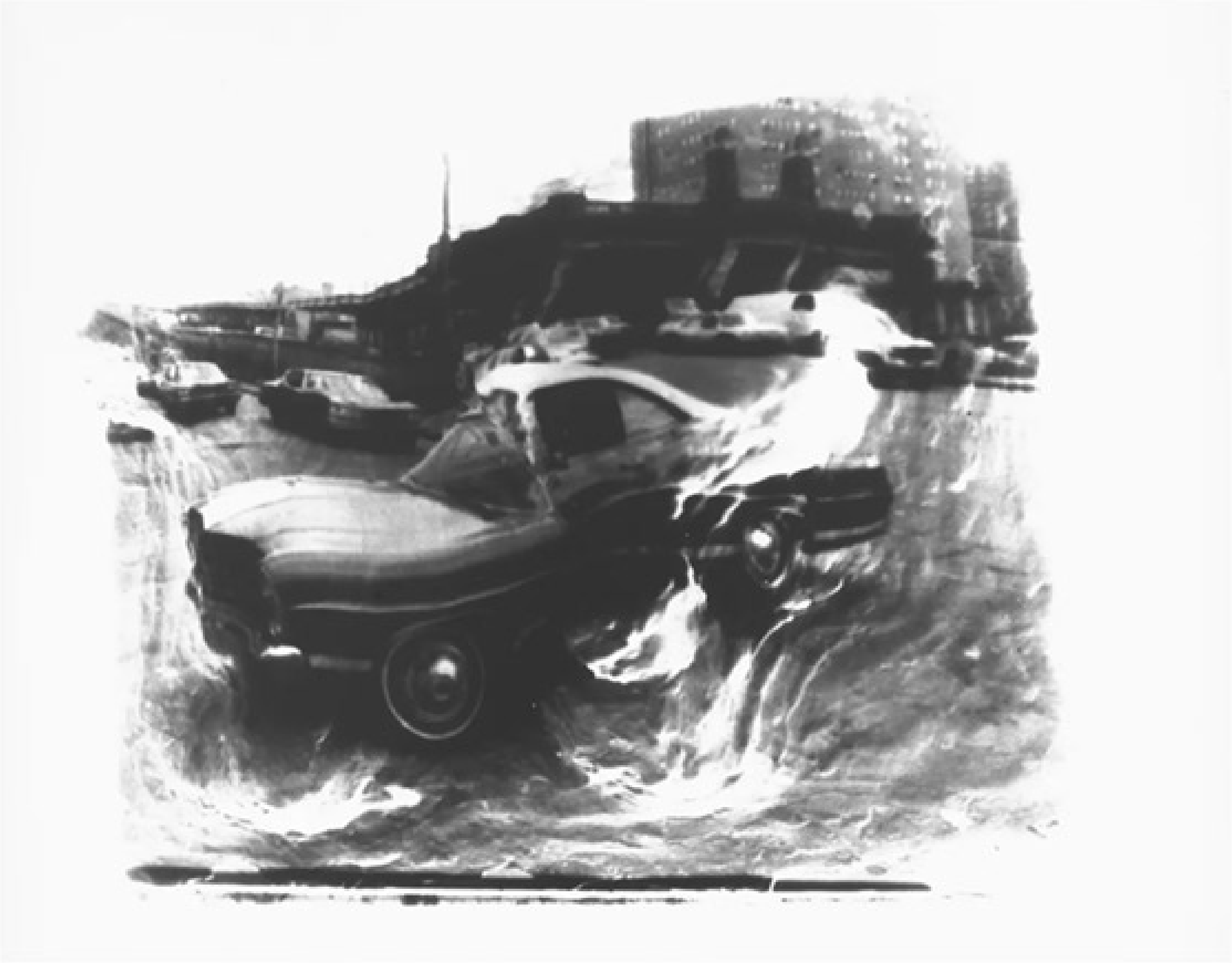


"Untitled (Laure on Easter Sunday)," circa 1989–91. Gelatin-silver print with colored ink. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

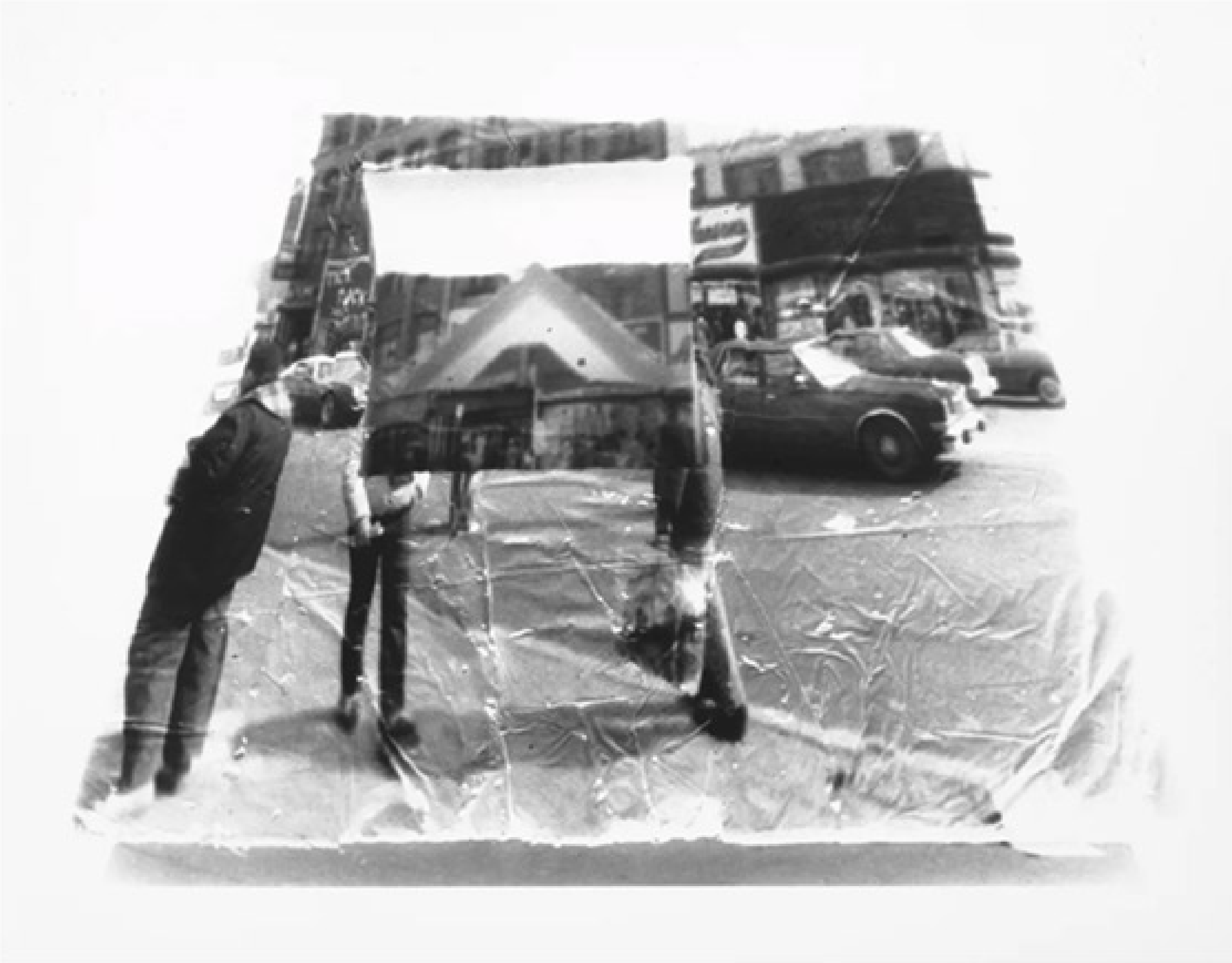
In his interview with Hirsh, Ellis recalled being a solitary, unhappy kid. He was always scratching away at his sketchbook, which didn't exactly ingratiate him with his family or his peers. His mother remarried after his father's death, and his stepfather made his home life less than welcoming. The outside world was not much better. Owing to a combination of racist housing policies, city mismanagement, economic upheaval, and the lingering damage wrought by the construction of Robert Moses's Cross Bronx Expressway, Ellis's South Bronx neighborhood was spiralling out of control by the time he reached his early teens.



"Untitled (Manhattan Skyline from Greenpoint Pier)," circa 1989–91. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

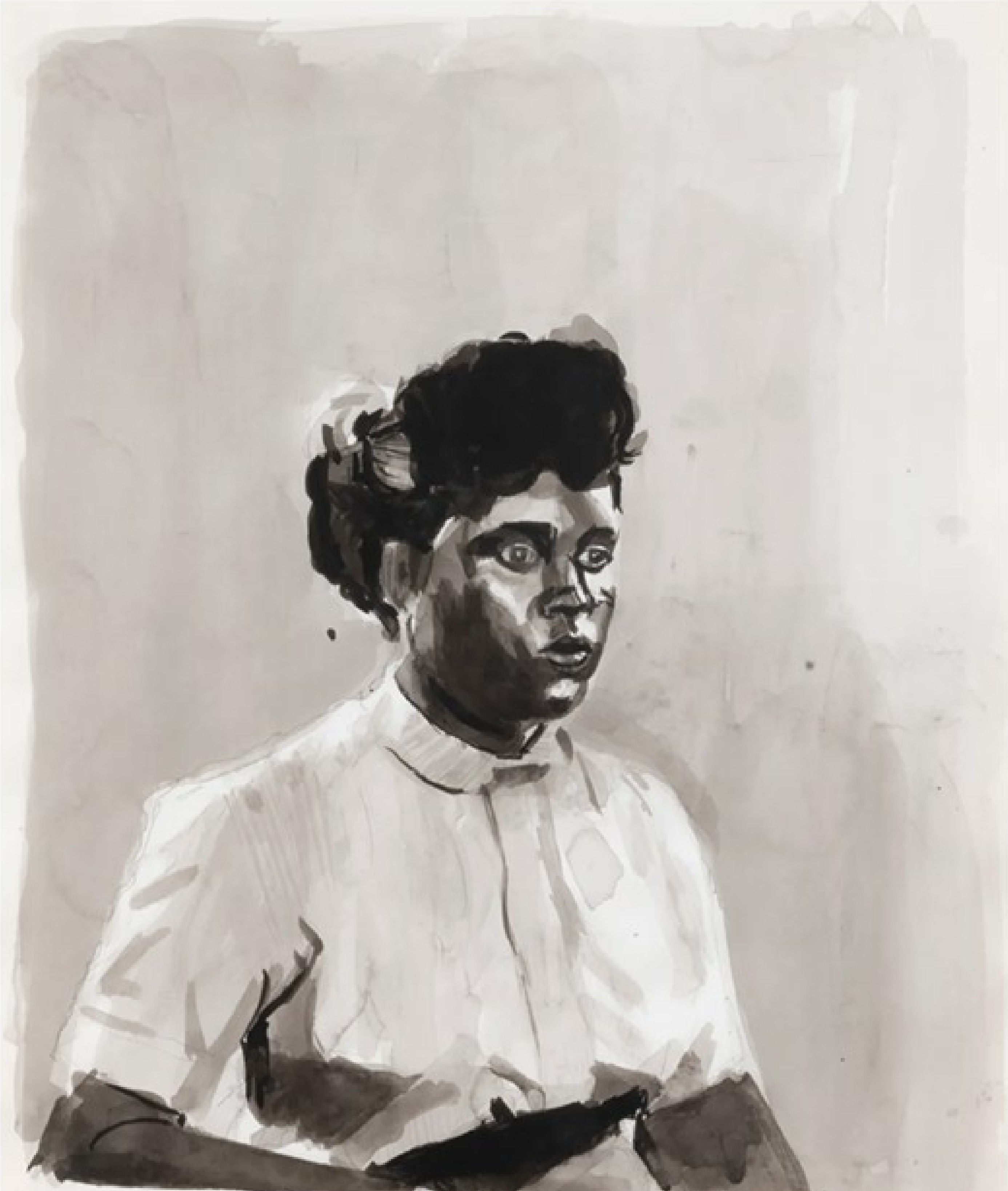


"Untitled (Car on the Street)," circa 1988–92. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.



"Untitled (Street Scene)," 1987. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

Little wonder, then, that he became enthralled with his father's old pictures, which were taken in the Bronx but seemed beamed in from another world entirely. "I don't know any life from the forties and fifties, with their picnics and their beautiful clothes and everything is so nice and perfect and wholesome," he told Hirsh. "The subjects in my father's photos are my mother and sister, and my grandparents, who I knew very well. When I look at pictures of them I see that life changed them so much, I can't help but have some reaction."



"Untitled (Mother)," circa 1989–91. Ink and wash on paper. Darrel Ellis Estate. Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

Ellis's first works based on his father's photos, from the early eighties, are drawings that have the feeling of transcriptions. It's as if Ellis believed that faithfully re-creating the originals would somehow summon the lost scenes back into existence. Quickly, though, he developed a distinct style that combined impressionistic washes of ink with sharp, tremulous lines, evoking both Édouard Vuillard's hazy romanticism and Alberto Giacometti's jagged angst. His works also bear an unmistakable relation to those of the contemporary masters Marlene Dumas and Luc Tuymans, whose paintings are similarly engaged with photography and memory. Ellis's images are aptly ambivalent, by turns haunting and deeply sentimental, evoking his struggle to reconcile himself with the archive his father left behind. He told Hirsh, "I always tried through my art, because I could never do it in real life, to make the family to my liking."

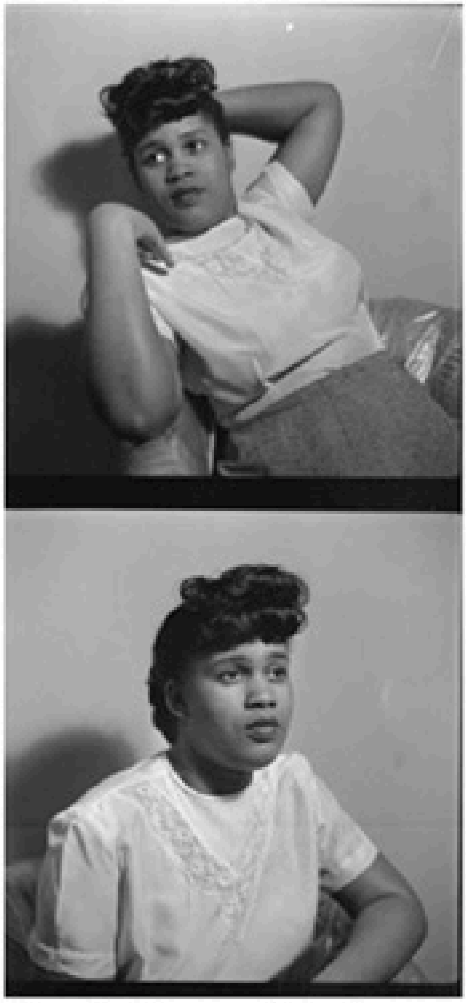
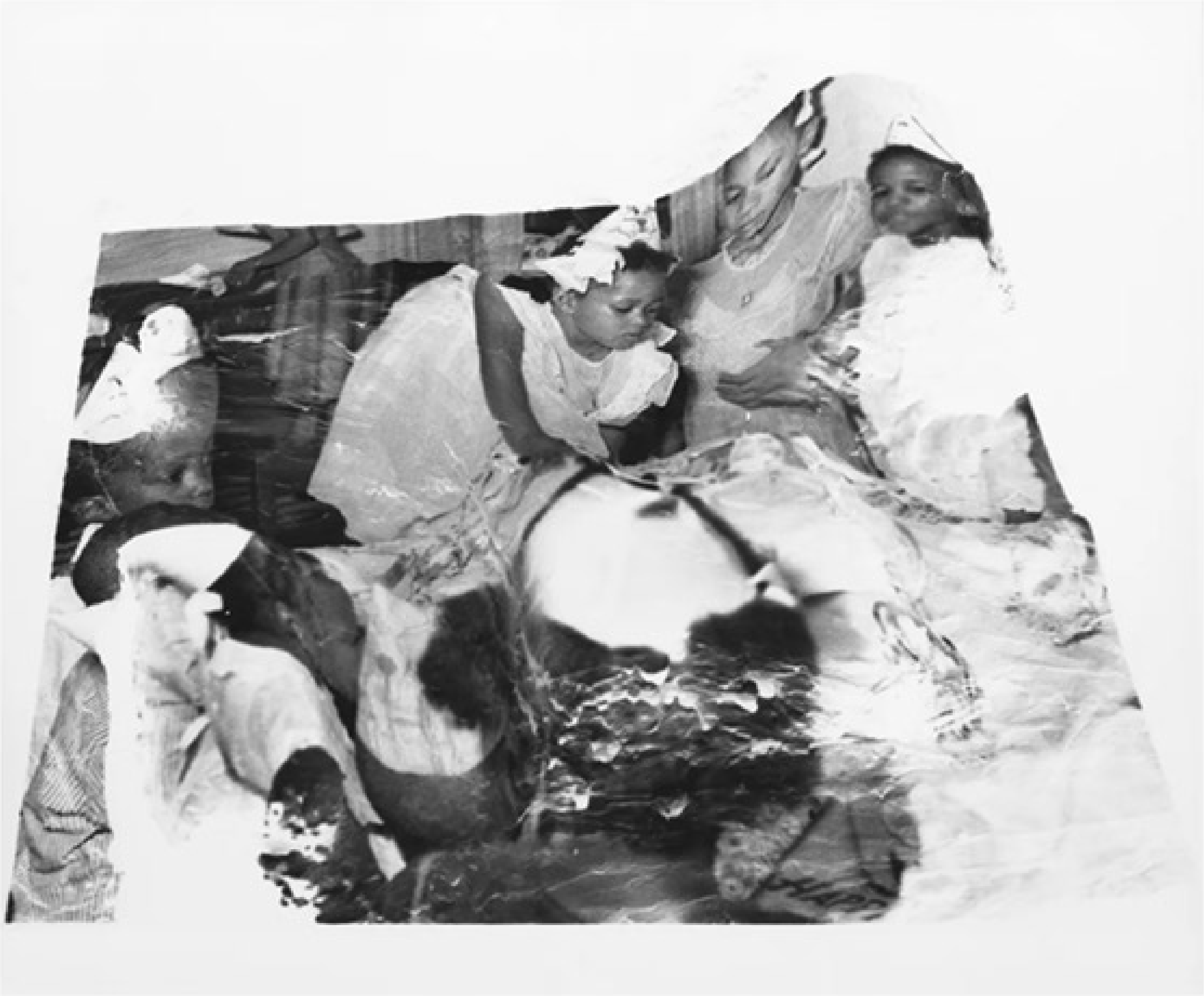


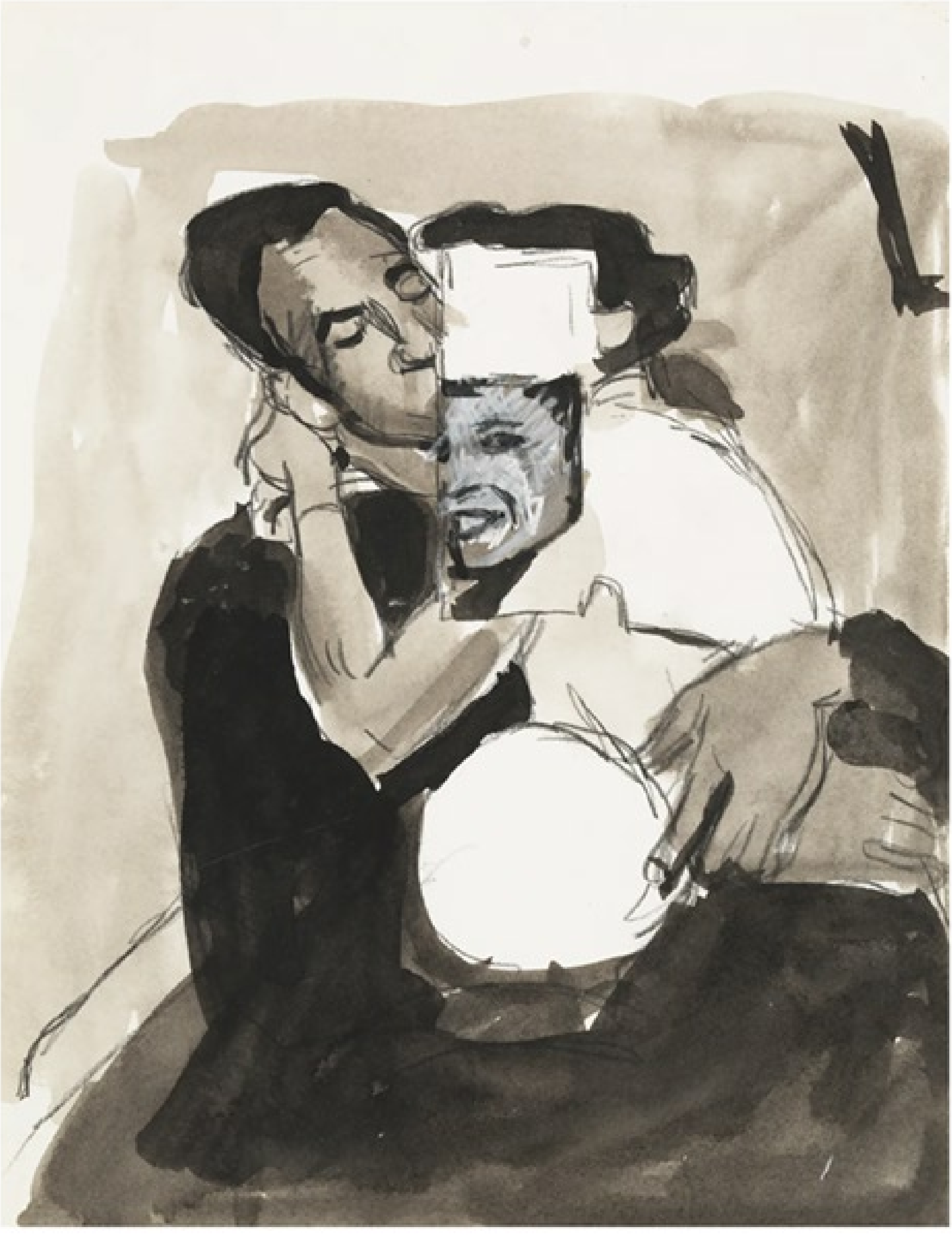
Photo by Thomas Ellis, circa 1953. Darrel Ellis Estate. Courtesy of Visual AIDS.



"Untitled (Birthday Party)," 1990. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

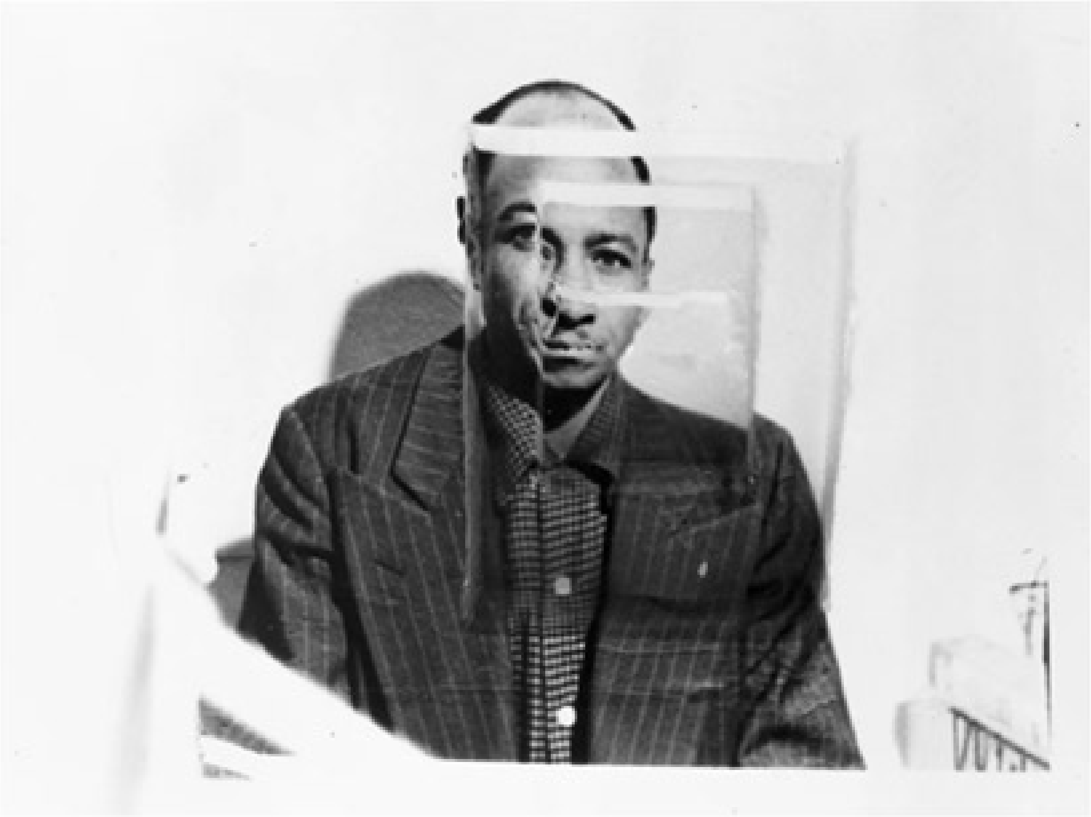
Ellis said that he didn't consider himself a serious photographer, but he devised an ingenious method to create altered versions of his father's images without tampering with the original prints or negatives. First, he would construct three-dimensional cardboard, foam, and plaster sculptures roughly resembling topographic relief maps. Then he would project his dad's images on the plaster landscapes and photograph the transformation. The results were disconcerting, even to Ellis. They show placid family scenes ruptured and effaced as if by a vandal, treasured memories warped incomprehensibly. "When I look at those photographs sometimes all I see are holes," he told Hirsh. "It bothers me. I say

'God, there are so many holes in these pictures'—that's what I told the gallery —'God, I can't take this.' I guess because it reflects a truth or reality, that search for wholeness and completeness, but it doesn't exist."



"Untitled (Aunt Connie and Uncle Richard)," circa 1989–91. Crayon and ink on paper. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York and Visual AIDS.

Perhaps it was this feeling of incompleteness, as well as a looming sense of his own mortality, that led Ellis to immerse himself in Eastern religion. In one undated entry from his journal, the hexagrams from an I Ching reading are jotted beneath the question "Do I have AIDS?" "Even though we live in a physical world and are made of flesh and blood and everything, deeper down the reality of human beings is that we are spiritual beings," Ellis told Hirsh. "We're embodied souls. We are connected to some infinite intangible source of life, of creation." This understanding of existence as both concrete and numinous jibed with Ellis's photographic practice. Like all photos, his father's were freighted with a paradox: though they were indelible records of moments in time, the memories associated with those moments could all too easily be lost, swallowed up in the slipstream of a life's passage. There is something about the Buddhist valorization of the present that Ellis understood, perhaps before he ever cracked open a sutra. At his memorial service, in June of 1992, there was a quote from him printed on the back of the program. Echoing Faulkner, it stated, "Even the past is still in the making."



"Untitled (Uncle Joseph Tansle)," circa 1989–91. Gelatin-silver print. Darrel Ellis Estate, Courtesy Candice Madey, New York. Collection Marcos Chaves.