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Darrel Ellis, Bronx Museum review — a rebel genius revived

The artist manipulated family photographs and made dark drawings in his too-short career

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More than three decades after Darrel Ellis died at 33, a melancholy retrospective of his photographs and drawings at the Bronx Museum of the Arts is animated by lives he never experienced. “I want to capture the ethereal, ghostly image life,” he wrote in his notebook in 1988.

Now he’s returned as a hazy, haunting presence, draped in a past that predated his own birth. In his early work — and that’s mostly all he had time for — he lived through the memory of his father Thomas, who had also died at 33. The elder Ellis was an impassioned amateur photographer who ran his own studio for a time and hauled his camera all around the Bronx, training it relentlessly on family and friends. He was killed in a confrontation with the police in 1958, leaving a pregnant wife, a son and a young daughter. Darrel was born two months later, and 23 years after that inherited Thomas’s immense trove of negatives.

That meticulously documented absence proved to be a vital source of creative fuel. For years, he reprinted old snapshots, mussed them up, covered portions, projected them on lumpy surfaces and re-drew the distorted results. There’s something simultaneously nostalgic and violent about his



Darrel Ellis's 'Untitled (Laure on Easter Sunday)' (circa 1989-91) © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

efforts. Preservation merges with destruction, exorcism with obsession.

Ellis fell under the spell of his father’s archive in part because it recorded a prelapsarian Bronx, a proud, aspirational borough that was not yet the beaten-down zone of neglect and violence it later became. “The world he photographed was one I

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didn't know, because I wasn't born yet," he said in the lone interview he ever gave, just before his death. "I didn'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."

And yet those strangers inhabiting an unfamiliar world were his mother, sister and grandparents, and he used that raw material to rewrite his childhood. "I always tried through my art, because I could never do it in real life, to make the family to my liking," he said. He strove to reconstruct a world in which his family and the Bronx were still intact.

One of those heirloom photos shows his sister Laure as a toddler in Crotona Park. It's Easter Sunday, and she's dressed up in a fancy coat and Mary Janes, a stuffed rabbit under one arm. Ellis reprinted that image many times and, in many ways, hiding the girl's face behind patches of orange or blue, strips of white, opaque squares, and even a shiny space-traveller's helmet. In every iteration, a current of weirdness pervades the shot. We see her from below, monumentalized against the sky, with a great granite ledge at her shoulders and a distant apartment building hovering at the edge of the park. By the time Ellis is done revising, Laure could almost be a baby zombie or one of Hans Bellmer's eerie dolls.

Other family portraits are subject to similar treatment. Ellis copied studio shots of his parents and sister in ink, charcoal and paint, pasted pieces of paper over family members and edited his father out like a Stalin-era censor. The goal wasn't obfuscation, but discovery; the screens and filters allowed him to gaze directly at the past's eclipse. As we watch him engaged in a perpetual cycle of destruction and repair, wrecking prints and reassembling them askew, what emerges is the need to reconstruct an Eden that never really existed.



Ellis's 'Aunt Lena and Grandmother Lillian Ellis' (circa 1983-88) © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles



Left: Ellis's 'Untitled (Laure on Easter Sunday)' (circa 1989-91) © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

Right: A variation of the same © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

Ellis attended classes at Cooper Union, enrolled in the Whitney Independent Study Program and lurked in the Metropolitan Museum's galleries, scouring art history for role models. Édouard Vuillard, especially, struck an ecstatic chord in his psyche, functioning less as an aesthetic influence than as a kindred spirit. Like Ellis, Vuillard had trouble separating from his family and lived in claustrophobic proximity to his widowed mother after his father's early death. Vuillard had proclaimed, "My mother is my muse". Ellis jotted down a dream in which he expressed the sentiment: "My mother is God."

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With that precedent in mind, Ellis photographed, then painted, variations on his mother's bedroom, a dimly lit space with a curtained window, a television and one or two tenebrous figures hanging about. The skewed perspective and oppressive patterns that he learned from Vuillard flowed into a symbolic interior of intense intimacy and alienation. He also executed a faithful copy of Eugène Delacroix's "Hamlet and Horatio in the Graveyard", in which he perceived a reflection of his own circumstances. We see Shakespeare's hero in the wake of his father's death, contemplating mortality and bitterly resenting his mother's remarriage. Ellis's relationship with his stepfather wasn't murderous, but it was frosty.

Despite his congenital mournfulness, things were looking up for him in the mid-1980s. He shuttled between the South Bronx and the lower Manhattan art scene, where his reputation began to shine. He posed for portraits by the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar, which he then repainted, reclaiming his skinny body and dour expression. By then, Aids was tearing through his circle, claiming one after another of his new friends. Hujar died in 1987, Mapplethorpe in 1989. Nan Goldin assembled a group of artists to answer the disease in the show *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Ellis contributed his photo-inspired self-portraits. Then he, too, died in 1992.

The Bronx show makes clear that even as he staked out a distinctive corner of the art world, he was still honing his skills and hunting for his artistic identity. The technique of projecting photographs on curved and knobby surfaces seemed promising but had yielded little. He never quite squirmed out from under his father's photographic legacy. Though he was drawn to the past, he shared the fate of his own youthful cohort, rebel geniuses who started dying off almost as soon as he got to know them. All that doom makes this a bracingly sad show, trembling with what-ifs and might-have-beens.



Photograph of Ellis shot by Allen Frame in 1981 © Allen Frame



Ellis's 'Untitled (Mother's Bedroom)' © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

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A self-portrait Ellis produced based on a 1989 photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles



'Untitled (Katrina Styling Susan's Hair)' (circa 1985-88) © Darrel Ellis Estate, Candice Madey, New York and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

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