



Gail Thacker's alchemical photographs contemplate the fragility of life

For the past 30 years, the New York photographer has documented her community of queer artists on meticulously distressed Polaroid film.

Lydia Figes

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In the 80s, around the peak of the AIDS crisis, the New York-based photographer Gail Thacker stumbled upon a novel way to experiment with Polaroids. “One day, after shooting with Polaroid 665 positive/negative film,” she tells us, “I was too tired and didn’t rinse the negatives.” Instead, she wrapped them in plastic and put them in the closet, forgetting about them soon after. A few months later, she returned to rinse them, but to her surprise, they had decayed and were stuck together. The accident led to interesting aesthetic results. In the artist’s own words: “they were reflective of life, ageing and chaos. Fractals had formed and painterly sweeps of blue”.

The accident marked a turning point in the artist’s career, one that would bring to fruition her trademark alchemical style. As the AIDS crisis continued to ravage the US, she realised that by manipulating the negatives, her photographs metaphorically spoke to real unfolding events — decay as an indexical sign of death. “The technique became not just interesting but more meaningful,” Gail says. “All living things go through this process.”



Gail Thacker: Midnight Call, the artist’s debut exhibition at New York’s CANDICE MADEY, presents a collection of black-and-white Polaroids adopting the same processes. Taken between 1994 and 2022, the shots reveal Gail’s queer, artistic community of friends, many of whom experienced great hardship and personal loss during the AIDS crisis. “Midnight Call is the title of the show because I created it in the late hours and called friends after midnight. Verbal storytelling carries an energy that is passed on. It’s rather magical. These images are a transformation of that energy.”

Gail and her cohort congregated around the Gene Frankel Theatre in Lower Manhattan — a venue still today known for giving a home to artists pushing

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for socio-political change, as well as LGBTQ and civil rights. Gail, who started out as Gene's assistant, describes the experience as life-altering. "He was incredibly intense, yet he understood and appreciated me," she says. "He was also a character, with flowing scarfs, hats and thick eyebrows with intense dark eyes. He taught me to work out of love, care and truth." Since his death in 2005, Gail has taken over as the theatre's artistic director and producer, continuing its 74-year history of championing progressive thinking.

Her involvement in the world of avant-garde theatre is inextricable from her photographic oeuvre, as well as her affiliation with artists of the Boston School, her creative peers who shared the ethos of "life as art": Nan Goldin, Pat Hearn, Jack Pierson and Mark Morrisroe. Writing about her photographic work in 2012, the poet Steve Cannon pointed out: "The intensity of Thacker's images also comes from her choice of theatrical and transgressive subjects and her ability to find her vision at the edge of coherent perception."

On her involvement in the world of theatre, Gail explains: "The power of 'yes' has a strong energy. I want artists to push their boundaries, entertain and create great sets so I can invite friends over to create portraits, which I call 'performance for the camera'."

Like her preference for allowing nature and chance to take hold of her artistic matter, Gail encourages her theatrical collaborators to operate in a similar vein. "I didn't study theatre. I'm an artist," she says. "I have the attitude that anything goes. I love to let people just be. I let them make mistakes or create great performances. I'm a firm believer that our voices are found in our errors." A self-described 'pataphysician', Gail regards her work as a counter-intuitive investigation of errors. "I'm influenced by



Walter Hurley Butching, 2012

absurdity and tragedy. We're all fighting against time and visibility — I'm saying 'no' to that. I choose what is thrown away as errors. That one time that $2 + 2 = 5$, yeah, that's me. I'm the five."

In honour of her close friend, Mark Morrisroe — the performance artist and photographer who died aged 30 after AIDS-related complications — Gail recalls his contributions to her practice: "I investigated other artists using a similar photographic technique and found there were many. When I called Mark about my discovery, his answer was 'yeah, I know. I put them in the freezer.'" On his deathbed, Mark gave Gail a large box of unexposed Polaroid 665 film so she could continue to develop her alchemical process — a

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departing gift that symbolically infused her medium with even more significance.

“During this time, I met Rafael [Sánchez] through Mark. That was around 1987, and we shared the horrors of watching Mark being defeated by this disease. It was horrible and frightening. The government wasn’t helping, AZT only made it worse, and hospitals were scared to touch Mark. It was a nightmare. I photographed Mark during this time... to capture his essence. He had this incredibly strong presence. Soon after, I started photographing Rafael. We worked together well; I call this our lifeboat. I felt our relationship was a safe place of creativity and care.”

The works in *Midnight Call* evoke not only the transgressive spirit of the New York theatre community and its lineage, but the very existence and preservation of memory — and the erosive qualities of time on memory. On what drives her today as a photographer, Gail says: “I come from a generation of people who were talked over, misunderstood, categorised... and often erased. So, I am thrilled for the day when I get the chance to share my Polaroids of this community to the rest of the world.”

‘Gail Thacker: *Midnight Call*’ is on view at New York’s CANDICE MADEY until 9 December 2023.



Love and Energy Claire Barnier, 1999

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1 Rivington Street / New York, New York / 10002 / +1 917 415 8655 / www.candicemadey.com