

ART REVIEW

Darrel Ellis: A fracture life in pictures at the Carpenter Center

The artist spent his all-too-short career constructing a lineage from his family photos his father left behind.

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 16, 2023, 6:01 p.m.



Installation view of “Please Stay Home: Darrel Ellis in Dialogue with Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan” at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2023. Courtesy of Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

“Even the past is still in the making” read the quote on the back of Darrel Ellis’s funeral program in 1992. It reflected a deep truth of how the young artist, just 33 when he died, had lived. Ellis grew up in New York’s South Bronx, where his father, Thomas, was beaten to death by police in 1958, [just months before Darrel was born](#); he had allegedly dared to complain that the officers had double-parked. Thomas had been an amateur photographer, and when Ellis was in his early 20s, he found a trove of his father’s pictures of his family’s life before Thomas’s killing tore it apart.

Those images — family portraits and candid scenes, holidays, home — would haunt him, and filter through to his work as an artist as he struggled to piece together his own life from the scraps of the past. At the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard, more than two dozen of Ellis’s pieces, whether mournful, evocative drawings or uniquely visceral photographs, capture the artist’s quest to make himself whole.

Ellis, who died of AIDS-related illness, was a habitué of the downtown New York scene; he was photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar, and was included in [“Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,”](#) a 1989 exhibition about the AIDS crisis organized by the photographer Nan Goldin. But he enjoyed little notoriety — he worked primarily as a security guard at New York’s Museum of Modern Art — and his work all but vanished after his death. [A first monograph](#), published in 2022, began a reclamation of his career, and a touring exhibition co-organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Bronx Museum, finishes its first stop in Baltimore [next month](#). It opens in the Bronx [in May](#).



Installation view of "Please Stay Home: Darrel Ellis in Dialogue with Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan" at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2023. Courtesy of Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. JULIA FEATHERINGILL

The installation, behind the heavy closed door of the Carpenter's Center's main gallery, feels like a time capsule, a parallel universe sealed off from our own. In the expansive foyer just outside it, the present impinges, but it doesn't penetrate the sanctity of Ellis's world.



Darrel Ellis's "Untitled (Grandparents Dancing)," circa 1981-85. Courtesy of Candice Madey, New York. ADAM REICH

Inside, Ellis's pictures, most of them built from his father's photos, bleed unrequited longing: A portrait of his mother, her dark hair tied up in a bow, is a re-creation of a photo taken in 1953, five years before he was born; another picture captures his grandparents in a joyous embrace, dancing.

Ellis's re-creations are wrenching — as though by investing the time and care of painting and drawing, he could somehow internalize the photographs, own them, make them part of his own experience. They capture the simple pleasures of a life that predeceased him, and his versions ring with a plaintive hollowness. His portrait of his mother is stark and eerie, a world apart from the bored amusement she displays in the photo. They're from a world he can see, in pieces, but never know.



Darrel Ellis's "Untitled (Father with Camera)," circa 1981-85. Collection of Michael Sobel. ADAM REICH

The photographs also allowed Ellis to imagine the man who made them. Among the most poignant pictures here is a drawing of Thomas from the early '80s, camera pressed to his face with his arm raised skyward, as though directing his subjects to smile, embrace, pose. Some of Ellis's most arresting work would render the unbridgeable gap between him and his father in stark, formal terms. Ellis would build rough sculptures from cardboard and plaster, and project Thomas's photographs onto them; then, he would photograph the twisted, distorted results.

Next to his delicately forlorn paintings and drawings, his photographs feel like a violation; one picture splays a photo of his mother and older sister in idyllic repose into violent contortions. The pictures embody the knot of the artist's anxieties — memories not his own, fractured and irreconcilable with how his life unfolded.



Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan, two contemporary artists, bookend Ellis's work in the space. It's a subtle but affecting choice by curator Makeda Best. Milan's silvery collage-portraits draw parallels to Ellis's own depictions of Black life, boldly forthright where Ellis's were somber and subdued. Hewitt's evoke a deeper kinship, around the language of memory and the wrenching futility of piecing it together from fragments. Best known for her photographs of obliquely suggestive clusters of objects, Hewitt has in recent years expanded her work to minimal sculpture. Here, lengths of parallel copper bars interlock and form a grid with slim spans of wood; a slab of white wall leans against the main gallery's exterior. They're spare gestures that yearn for communion all the same.

Hewitt's work has often made me think of the frustrations so clear in Ellis's photos, though seen from a calculated remove. The first pictures of hers that I saw, years ago, gathered together such things as a wedge of lemon, positioned in the foreground of a stack of objects that included "The Fire Next Time," James Baldwin's towering 1963 book on the conflagrations of race in America. Here, a pair of her images contain similarly oblique insinuations: A black-and-white photo captures a delicate painting of an empty porch, lain flat on the hardwood floor; another, a photo of a dog-eared textbook open to a passage about colonialism in India, is layered primly with oblique photos of tropical scenes and austere Modern architecture.

You have to stretch, though not too much, to see in Hewitt's work the simmering discontents of colonial displacements, and how she, as a Black artist working today, struggles to construct a lineage, aesthetic or otherwise (the lemon is a reference to Renaissance painting; the sculptures tie to [minimalism](#), the spleenless, esoteric art movement that flourished in the 1960s as the violent convulsions of the [civil rights movement](#) reached their apex — a retreat from brutal reality, a refusal to engage).



Darrel Ellis's "Untitled (Please Stay Home Tonight, Please Stay Home Today)," circa 1981-1985. Courtesy of Candice Madey, New York. ADAM REICH

Where her work speaks in whispers, Ellis is notably out loud. The piece chosen for the show's title is a plea: "Untitled (Please Stay Home Tonight. Please Stay Home Today.)," circa 1981-85. The picture, of a standoff between two men captured in a soft wash of gray ink, feels to me like an exhortation against all manner of threat: Police violence, the ravages of AIDS, whatever danger may lie outside the door. Ellis, born into fracture, never had the luxury of safe retreat. The one he built in his work is powerful and moving, and couldn't save him.

PLEASE STAY HOME: Darrel Ellis in Dialogue with Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan

At Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge.
Through April 9. 617-496-5387, carpenter.center.

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