By Murray Whyte

“Even the pin still in the making” read the quote on the back of Darrel Ellis’s funeral program in 1992. It reflected the poignant 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 scapes of the past. At the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard, more than two dozen of Ellis’s pieces, whether moun-

ful, evocative drawings or uniquely visceral photographs, capture the artist’s quest to make himself whole.

Ellis, who died of AIDS-related illness, was a habitue 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 2002, began a recon-

amination of his career, and a touring exhibition co-organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Bronx Museum, finishes its first stop in Brooklyn next month. It opens in the Bronx in May.

The installation, behind the heavy closed door of the Carpen-

ter’s Upper Manhattan 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 sanctu-


ty of Ellis’s world.

Inside, Ellis’s pictures, most of them built from his father’s photos, bleed unrehearsed long-

ing. 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 joyful em-

brace, dancing.

Ellis’s re-creations are wrenching — as though by in-

vesting the time and care of painting and drawing, he could somehow internalize the pho-

tographs, 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 holiness. 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.

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 sky-

ward, as though directing his subjects to smile, embrace, pose. Some of Ellis’s most arresting work would render the un-

bridgeable gap between him and his father stark, formal terms. Ellis would build rough sculp-

tures from cardboard and plas-

ter, and project Thomas’s pho-

tographs onto them; then, he would photograph the distorted results.

Next to his delicately forlorn paintings and drawings, his pho-

tographs feel like a violation; one picture plays 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 irre-

onciable with how his life un-

folded.

Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan, two contemporary art-

ists, 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 de-

pictions of Black life, boldly forthright where Ellis’s were sonorous 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 include en-


tire 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 years 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 togeth-

er such things as a wedge of lemon, positioned in the foreground of a stack of objects that includ-

ed “The Fire Next Time,” James Baldwin’s towering 1963 book on the conflagrations of race in America. Here, a pair of her im-

ages contain similarly oblique insinuations: A black-and-white photo captures a delicate paint-

ings of an empty porch, lain flat on the hard 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 arch-


MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

A life in left-behind photos

Artist Darrel Ellis spent his all-too-short career reconstructing a lineage from his father’s old photographs

Top: Installation view. Above: “Untitled (Father with Camera).” “Untitled (Grandparents Dancing)”

PHOTOS (LEFT AND ABOVE) BY ADAM REICH


ART REVIEW

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

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

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