

## **Alvin Baltrop**

“At the Hudson River Piers”  
selected by Douglas Crimp

29 June – 19 August 2017  
Opening on Thursday, 29 June, 6-8 pm

The photographs of Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) were virtually unknown during the artist's lifetime. A working-class African American many of whose photographs are sexually explicit, Baltrop encountered only rejection. In the past decade his work has belatedly begun to be exhibited, including at Third Streaming and MoMA/PS1 in New York City, the Reina Sofia in Madrid, and the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston. By far the largest cache of Baltrop's extant photographs depicts the scene at the dilapidated Hudson River piers adjacent to Greenwich Village and the Meat Packing District. During the 1970s and into the 1980s, when Baltrop photographed there, the piers were a site of pleasure and danger for men seeking sex, sunbathing, making a provisional home, or just hanging out and taking in the splendor of the industrial ruins. More nefarious deeds also took place: theft, gay-bashing, even murder.

Baltrop claimed to be terrified of the place initially, but also intrigued; he began taking photographs, he said, as a voyeur. Eventually he became a denizen of the piers, at times living nearby in his moving van, which also provided his source of income. His rapport with certain of the pier's users is clear enough in the straightforward portraits he made there, including one of Marsha P. Johnson, the beloved trans activist whose dead body would, in 1992, be discovered in the Hudson River near the very place where Baltrop likely took her picture. The rapport is even clearer in photographs of men removing their clothes to pose for Baltrop. And some photographs are so intimate as to suggest that the sex they depict is staged for his camera – or, indeed, that photographing was part of the action. Among these are routine sex acts, but there are pictures of kinky BDSM action, too.

Baltrop seems to have wanted above all to portray the environment in which these activities took place, the piers themselves. Sometimes you have to look closely even to locate people within the disintegrating remains of the pier sheds, much less see what they're up to; and in any case they might simply be sitting on a window ledge or standing on a mooring. Or, more disquieting, they might be prone bodies covered with blankets, presumably sleeping. In many cases, there are no figures at all; Baltrop's subject is simply the architecture in its vastness and melancholy.

Baltrop printed the majority of his photographs small, no more than 5×7 inches (approximately 13×18 centimeters), although he printed a few images considerably larger. There are variant sizes and crops of a few pictures. Because of the small size and density of information in many of the photographs, especially those of one pier taken from the distance of another, adjacent pier, you have to get very close to the picture to really see it. It has been noted that Baltrop's pier photographs constitute a significant record of a lost era of New York industrial landscape and gay culture's pre-AIDS history. There is truth in that view, but it suggests that Baltrop's project was essentially documentary in nature, whereas the intimacy of the pictures, their studied compositions, their attention to the play of light and shadow testify to a wider ambition.

Douglas Crimp