

Best in Show

Recommendations by
R.C. Baker

**Mark Morrisroe:
'From This Moment On'**

Artists Space
38 Greene Street
212-226-3970, artistspace.org
Through May 1

The Misfit

Let's get the bleak backstory out of the way. The photographer Mark Morrisroe was born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1959, to an unidentified man he sometimes claimed was Albert DeSalvo, the Boston Strangler, who was once his alcoholic mother's landlord. Morrisroe worked as a teen prostitute, and in 1976 was shot by one of his johns, leaving him with a permanent limp. He died of AIDS in 1989.

Morrisroe's upbringing perhaps explains his ethereally lit silver print of a dead rat lying on its back, hind legs splayed, front paws curled in a stiff embrace of the void (*City Life*, c. 1981). Like Jack Smith before him, he mined beauty from the abject. But while the theatrical Smith envisioned his flaming dragsters swept up in a flowery rapture, Morrisroe had a hustler's instinct for street-level detail. A 1980 self-portrait of the artist spot-lit in a dentist's chair captures the drool staining the napkin around his neck and a metal suction tube hooked into his slack mouth. A gray blur in the foreground (perhaps the edge of the dentist's steel tool tray) conjures an air of limbo, of semiconscious agony and/or ecstasy. Across the dark background wall arcs a mounted swordfish, a surreal moment echoing the hook dangling from Morrisroe's lower lip.

Morrisroe's friends and lovers form a sort of family album, misfits drawn together by shared ostracism. "It kills me to look at my old photographs of myself and my friends," he once wrote. "We were such beautiful, sexy kids but we always felt bad because we thought we were ugly at the time. It was because we were such outcasts in high school and so unpopular." When clothed, his subjects might wear East Village club gear, adorned with chains and spiky hair. In Morrisroe's 1979 evocation of disco morphing into new wave, a stud in white short-shorts and a wifebeater kisses a woman with cropped hair and knife-edge cheekbones, the two of them joined by a strand of pearls. Naked, his models are indeed beautiful and sexy, vibrant with youth and daring.

Beyond their subject matter, his photos have a potent physicality, the borders sometimes bristling with scrawled title, date, and multicolored strokes of retouching fluid. Dust spots ravage the dark, shaman-like figure who faces down a long-necked mannequin in *The She-Thing From Hell/Purple Love Part II* (1985). Worthy of its lurid title, the enigmatic narrative hovers at a tantalizing distance behind the visceral static of the emulsion flaws.

As his disease advanced, Morrisroe sometimes worked in a makeshift darkroom in his hospital bathroom, creating photographs from his own X-rays or from X-rated "special-interest" magazines. Garish colors, overlapping nudes, truncated typography, and jagged abstractions converge with the messy vitality of a life spent much too quickly.

Art



Courtesy Artists Space

Morrisroe visits his ant: *Untitled*, 1986