

David Armstrong

08.06.-15.09.2024

EN

This is the first extensive exhibition of work by American photographer David Armstrong (1954-2014). Just under 100 portraits are on show, a selection of landscape images and around 300 contact prints from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

Why this work now?

Firstly, it is a document of its time that exudes beauty. We see a New York that no longer exists. It is New York as an attitude to life, beyond the Empire State Building, the urban canyons and yellow taxis that occur countless times in films, stories, ambitions and advertising. This New York is a promise, and New York as a home for outsiders and the stranded, for artists, poets, musicians and bohemians. Cookie Mueller, writer and actress in John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, among other films, immortalised these people in her texts, and Armstrong portrayed many of them, including Mueller herself. They, like him, lived in downtown Manhattan, partied at the legendary Mudd Club and hung out at the beach in Provincetown, Massachusetts. In this exhibition we encounter the actress and gallery owner Patti Astor; artists John Waters, Greer Lankton, Jack Pierson, Tabboo! and Christopher Wool; actor and filmmaker Vincent Gallo; photographer Nan Goldin; curator Klaus Biesenbach; writer Gary Indiana; lawyer and civil rights activist William Kunstler; musicians Philippe Marcade, John and Evan Lurie; model and later Vogue editor Lisa Love; tattoo artist Mark Mahoney; artist and fashion designer Maripol; poet and art critic Rene Ricard; transgender model Teri Toye; or indeed Cookie Mueller.

Armstrong photographed his generation. First in Boston in the 1970s, where he studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and formed a scene with photographers and artists such as Nan Goldin, Mark Morrisroe, Tabboo! and Jack Pierson. The earliest black-and-white photographs show young people caught between precocious thoughtfulness and cigarette-smoking rebellion:

Like it could be anywhere. It's like they are rebelling against their education. They're in art school, but they don't want to be like these distant observers they want to observe themselves, and their lives, and their friends, and their drugs, and their bars. [...] You know, it was about queerness, it was about punk and rebellion, it was about drug dealers, drag bars, HIV, like none of those things were inseparable. (Oral history interview with Lia Gangitano, 2017 February 5-6. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.)

The exhibition manifests how, from the very beginning, Armstrong did not simply depict people, but an attitude to life - and how he gave it form at the same time. This attitude to life had many different facets: it was intoxicated and exuberant, it was full of melancholy and boredom, it was proud and filled to the brim with coolness and emotion. Being on the fringes was celebrated as a success; for many there was no alternative. They met in clubs, first in Boston at The Other Side, later in downtown Manhattan at the Mudd Club, a punk club and the antithesis of the glamorous Studio 54. Style was central, not as an aesthetic, but as an attitude, as staging and a springboard to self-destruction or to a career. But what is particularly striking today, forty years later, is the beauty and dedication with which Armstrong photographed his people - and the directness with which they looked into the camera, with an unabashed pleasure in posing and seduction. Everyone is sexy. But what is most striking is the almost

shocking intimacy. The shock comes from the fact that this form of intimacy has disappeared from our portraits, and we had not realised it.

It could all have easily gone wrong, because there was too much of everything: too much energy, too much intensity, too much time and too little money: Yeah, life is tough in the real world. Actors wait on tables, ballet dancers work as topless go-go girls, artists wash dishes, and that's not even the worst part. Someday you might bring your garbage on the subway, someday you might even shit in your own bank

wrote Cookie Mueller in the 1980s in 'Another Boring Day', first published in 2022. But therein lies Armstrong's art and its significance: he did not allow the excess and scarcity that characterised the period to run its course; he did not want to exaggerate and exoticize it, but indeed reined it in. For Armstrong's art, as others have noted before, is classically conservative. It had to be. It was modelled on the painting he had first studied and from which he borrowed portraiture, landscape painting and the genre scene. These types of images, each with historically anchored pictorial conventions, allowed Armstrong to capture and frame the subject in order to focus on commonality (within a generation, an attitude to life or a moment) without taking away the individual's brilliance and shortcomings. And they allowed him to unabashedly celebrate beauty:

I remember first seeing Peter Hujar's photos. That was earth shattering.

Their power – all about authenticity and restraint, proportion and the contemplative, subdued grandeur as they used to define 'classic art'. (David Armstrong in conversation with Jack Pierson in *Night and Day*, 2012).

Roughly speaking, Armstrong's oeuvre consists of three groups of works: portraits of people, most of whom were in his circle of friends; blurred landscapes from the late 1980s onwards; and, thirdly, commercial photographs for the fashion industry created from the mid-1990s onwards. The exhibition centres on the first group of works, the portraits of his friends, lovers and acquaintances, artists, poets and dealers. These are complemented by a selection of around 300 contact prints, shown here for the first time. These provide an insight into Armstrong's approach and how he photographed, and broaden the perspective on his work. We are not showing an established, museum-style Armstrong in this exhibition, but an artist at work, whose oeuvre we still need to fully assess.

We have also included a series of landscape photographs. They form a counterpoint to the portraits. In contrast to the portraits, they appear detached from time and place. A building or a landscape does not care whether it is photographed or not. They never pose and do not want to be seen, understood or displayed. They are simply there and will long outlive us; that is the melancholy that Armstrong stages. Thus landscape images are always mirrors of the maker's soul, they are ciphers for states of mind and indirect self-portraits. This is what makes them so dangerous and open to nostalgia. Armstrong made these landscape photographs contemporaneously with a major, profound crisis at the end of the 1980s: the AIDS epidemic. They are to be understood against the backdrop of this immense tragedy, as still lifes and memento mori. In them, time is suspended as a perpetual future past. 'The AIDS virus, wearing only its most insidious smile, had crashed the gates of our party' writes the critic Linka Yablonsky, herself an Armstrong subject, in 1989 in the exhibition catalogue for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Nan Goldin, photographer and close friend of Armstrong, had curated *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* for New York's Artists Space; it was the first major exhibition on the subject of AIDS and sparked heated debates. In 'A Last Letter' shortly before her AIDS-related death in 1989 Cookie Mueller wrote:

Each friend I've lost was an extraordinary person, not just to me, but to hundreds of people who knew their work and their fight. These were the kind of people who lifted the quality of all our lives, their war was against

ignorance, the bankruptcy of beauty, and the truancy of culture. They were people who hated and scorned pettiness, intolerance, bigotry, mediocrity, ugliness, and spiritual myopia; the blindness that makes life hollow and insipid was unacceptable. They tried to make us see. All of these friends were connected to the arts. Time and history have proven that the sensitive souls among us have always been more vulnerable.

Another aspect of Armstrong's work is shown in the 1979 cycle *Night and Day*. A selection of the pictures, originally intended for a publication, is shown here on two screens. These are colour slides taken between New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts. Over the course of 10 months, Armstrong photographed his friends in bars, clubs, cars, in bed, in the bathtub and on the beach: 'They're snapshots from a period when I was rarely awake during the day.' (David Armstrong, Interview Magazine, June 20, 2012) All the pictures were taken with a 35mm hand-held camera, some using a flash that Armstrong otherwise never employed. *Night and Day* is a portrait of a subculture and bohemia. Spiritually closest to punk, its protagonists present themselves fully conscious of their style. They cultivate a post-romantic, pseudo-conservative rockabilly style, as immortalised on stage by the indie band Lounge Lizards. John Lurie, one of the founders of this conceptual band who was portrayed several times by Armstrong, played in Jim Jarmusch's style-defining film *Stranger Than Paradise* in 1984. This cult film of the urban 1980s intelligentsia brought the style celebrated in *Night and Day* into the alternative mainstream.

But in what tradition does Armstrong's work stand? Broadly it can be said that Armstrong's photography, like that of many American photographers, is indirectly or directly centred around the figure of the outsider, the anti-hero and the loner. This figure has shaped American art and culture like no other; it is the basis of American myth, the western and the asphalt cowboy. It is inconceivable without its foil: the self-made man, the oil baron from the gutter, the computer billionaire from the garage and the immigrant as Hollywood star. Great American poets such as Walt Whitman have waxed lyrical on the figure of the outsider, it appears in countless films and books and is equally a major theme in photography. A significant portion of the history of American photography can be traced along the lines of this theme. Susan Sontag did so in her seminal essay 'America in the Dark Mirror of Photography', published in 1973. Time and again and in ever new forms, American photography has staged the individual as outsider, and the outsider as heroic individual: as documentary in the work of Walker Evans, socially critical in the work of Louis Hine, criminalistic in the work of Weegee, romantically idealistic in the work of Robert Frank, as early street photography by Lisette Model, in the tense ambiguity of Diane Arbus, in a hyperquotidian way by Stephen Shore or in complete laconicism in the work of Andy Warhol. Armstrong is probably one of the last to immortalise the figure before it was finally exhausted and became commercialised. His work would therefore mark the end of a subject (and an era); indeed his portraits are underpinned by quiet irony. As if his pictures were communicating that this marginalised quotidian, this proud boredom and hedonistic melancholy could soon be over. For all the good humour and elegance, there is consciousness of a great fragility. And the people portrayed know this too; in their neo-post-self-staging they celebrate this figure and their lives once again, as if there were no tomorrow. And in fact AIDS put an end to the whole thing. The approaching unstoppable commercialisation of all areas of life did the rest. So we look at this, Armstrong's, world and realise, as if caught on the wrong foot, what we have lost. But one thing will remain, and Armstrong knew it: beauty. It is both the strength of and the problem with photography, and Armstrong knew that too. - DB

Curated by Daniel Baumann and Wade Guyton in collaboration with Colleen Doyle, Elizabeth Whitcomb and the Estate of David Armstrong.

With many thanks to J. Luca Ackerman, Tom Alexander, Stefano Bartoli, Christopher Bollen, Tess Çetin, Ric Colon, Lia Gangitano, Nan Goldin und Studio, Ben Grieme, James Haslam, Martin Jaeggi, Yuko Kosaka, Andrei Koschmieder, Sadie Laska, Julia Lee, Dimitri Levas, Jessica Lin Cox, Lisa Love, Win McCarthy, David Mramor, Jeanette Mundt, Attila Panczel, Jack Pierson, Michael and Ellen Ringier, Andy Robertson, Andrina Roth, Nicole Skibola, Zach Steinman, Linnea Vedder, Florian Wagner.

Short biography

David Armstrong (1954 Arlington, Massachusetts – 2014 Los Angeles) attends, in 1974, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University (Boston) intending to paint. He turns to photography, resulting in what later would be coined 'The Boston School' of photography alongside Nan Goldin, Phillip-Lorca diCorcia, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Taboo!, Gail Thacker and others. In 1977, Armstrong moves to New York City and has his first exhibition at Hudson Gallery, together with Nan Goldin. He shoots the production stills for Eric Mitchell's film *Underground U.S.A* (1980), starring Patti Astor, Rene Ricard, Jackie Curtis and Jedd Garet. In 1981, he is part of *New York/New Wave* at P.S.1, an extensive group exhibition featuring artists, poets, graffiti artists, photographers, and No Wave musicians (curated by Eric Mitchell). In 1983 his ex-partner Kevin McPhee dies of AIDS. In 1989 Armstrong is part of the influential exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at Artists Space in New York, curated by Nan Goldin. In 1992, he moves to Berlin, where Nan Goldin is guest of the DAAD Residency. In the 1990s, Armstrong's work is shown in several exhibitions, at, among others, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York City, Galerie Bruno Brunnet, Berlin, Museum für Gestaltung, Zürich, Whitney Biennial, New York, Galerie Scalo, Zürich and New York, Yvon Lambert, Paris, ICA Boston, Boston and Judy Goldman Fine Art, Boston. He finds in Walter Keller of Scalo Verlag Zürich an important supporter who publishes three of his books: *A Double Life. David Armstrong / Nan Goldin* (1994), *The Silver Cord* (1997) and *All Day Every Day* (2002), edited by the Zürich film historian Martin Jaeggi. After his death in 2014, the Estate of David Armstrong is established and his work is inventoried by Colleen Doyle and Elizabeth Whitcomb together with Tess Çetin, Nicole Skibola and Linnea Vedder.

Workshops and tours

Our exhibitions are accompanied by an extensive mediation programme, including workshops for school classes and free tours every Thursday evening at 6.30 pm, except during Zürich school holidays. 'Afternoon for all' creative workshops take place on Sundays 23 June, 14 July, 18 August and 15 September. See our website for details of workshops and other events.

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed

Kunsthalle Zürich receives funding from



Stadt Zürich
Kultur



Kanton Zürich
Fachstelle Kultur

L U M A
F O U N D A T I O N