

Carpenter Center

PLEASE STAY HOME:

DARREL ELLIS IN DIALOGUE WITH
LESLIE HEWITT AND WARDELL MILAN

February 3–April 9, 2023

Level 3

PLEASE STAY HOME

BY MAKEDA BEST

Please Stay Home features the work of Darrel Ellis, Leslie Hewitt, and Wardell Milan, with a contextual installation that includes photographs by Ellis's father, Thomas Ellis, and close friend and artist Allen Frame.

Through a groundbreaking experimental practice that fluidly merges painting, printmaking, and photography, Bronx-born artist Darrel Ellis (1958–1992) engages with intergenerational memory, photographic practices, representation, and place. Ellis is known for his unusual technique that involved photographing images projected by an enlarger and introducing sculptural objects into the picture plane. The resulting works convey a sense of perpetual uncertainty and yet visceral tactility. *Please Stay Home* pairs Ellis with artists Leslie Hewitt (b. 1977) and Wardell Milan (b. 1977), who have created new work responding to his practice. The untimely death of Ellis at age thirty-three of AIDS-related causes cut short the career of a visionary artist, one who is finally being recognized as a forerunner to key contemporary interests in vernacular photography, appropriation, rephotography, and intersections between photography and sculpture.

DARREL ELLIS

The exhibition focuses specifically on Darrel Ellis's interiors—scenes that feature his mother, sister, and extended family members, as well as places the artist only knew through photographs. These intimate works invite us to consider the role of the family archive, self-expression, photography's social and cultural contexts, and its impact on the formation of Black identities. Taking its title from a text Ellis inscribed on one of his drawings, *Please Stay Home* foregrounds the artist's prescient vision.

ALLEN FRAME AND THOMAS ELLIS

Darrel Ellis's formal experiments engaged a multiplicity of mediums—while exploring themes of family history, identity, and loss—and proposed an expanded definition of photographic practice. He spent much of his short career creating works that reinterpreted the archive of images made by his father, Thomas Ellis, who ran a small photography studio. The elder Ellis was tragically killed in 1958, the year his son was born. An example of Thomas Ellis's works is included in one of the gallery vitrines.

For nearly thirty years, artist, curator, and writer Allen Frame (b. 1951) stored and preserved the Ellis archive in consultation with his family. A series of photographs by Frame of Darrel Ellis himself are also included in *Please Stay Home*. Self-described as an archivist of his era, Frame captured snapshots of queer subcultures throughout New York City in the 1980s. During this time, Frame and Ellis met and developed a close relationship. These documents of Ellis in his

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daily life, alongside Ellis's "Apartment" series of mixed-media works also featured in the exhibition, provide another intimate lens through which to understand an artist who grappled with how to represent his own identity and history.

PLEASE STAY HOME

The conceptual center of *Please Stay Home* is a group of monochrome paintings, drawings, and photographic works in which Ellis portrays a small, darkened interior. Reflecting an artist interested in seriality, the works' production dates span a number of years even though their content appears similar. Based on images made in his mother's apartment, the view is often directed towards a window. Recalling cinematic stills, one or more figures appear at the window, standing or sitting. The narrative of the scenes does not progress but remains fixed within one fragmented sequence. Ellis's childhood interest in drawing from comics and his desire to be a fashion illustrator seem to be evident in his later work as an artist, demonstrating his skill at exploiting the spatial and psychological dynamics of the image within the confines of a defined space, and his awareness of pose, gesture, and the gaze. Ellis carefully renders the effects of artificial and natural lighting. The viewer is exposed to a process akin to mark-making in Ellis's artistic vision and overall labor: the projected image becomes the primary "mark" from which other steps follow and flow. Ellis explained that the works "are all different; they're like regeneration, regenerated. From one you get many. And that works as a metaphor for the family."¹

Disrupting these pictorial spaces, variously shaped white voids are placed in different positions around the composition. For each work, the core of the pictorial

space is distinctly trapezoidal, created by Ellis's projection of the source image via an enlarger, which distorts the perspective and elongates the figures. The repetition of subject matter, mixed-media aesthetic, techniques of manipulation, and monochromatic palette would also become distinctive characteristics of Ellis's aesthetic.

Building on the "Apartment" series, *Please Stay Home* looks at interior scenes of home and place in Ellis's oeuvre. His journey as an artist led him to search out community, eventually becoming embedded in the downtown arts scene of 1980s New York and living in and sharing apartments/studios throughout the city; he also frequently circled back to live with his mother and sisters. Ellis once planned a photobook about his family in their Bronx apartment that one of his contemporaries described as "a kind of homage, really, to the relationship he had with his mother, at that home."²

As recounted by Frame, these bedroom pieces, which Ellis began making around 1985 and would return to over the years, were a breakthrough. Ellis would later perform similar experimentations with his father's archive of images, which he

1. Darrel Ellis, in David Hirsch, "A New Sensibility: Interview with Darrel Ellis," in *Darrel Ellis*, ed. Lara Mimosa Montes and Kyle Croft (New York: Visual AIDS, 2021), 33.
2. Allen Frame, "Uptown/ Downtown: Remembering Darrel," in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, ed. Leslie Cozzi and Antonio Sergio Bessa (Milan: Skira/D.A.P., in association with Baltimore Museum of Art and The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2023).

received from his mother in 1981.³ The elder Ellis, a postal clerk and aspiring photographer—who, in addition to participating in local camera clubs, briefly worked in commercial photography in Harlem and the South Bronx—died in 1958 when he was thirty-three years old. Darrel was born two months later. Viewing these works alongside an image by Thomas Ellis and *Untitled (Mother in Window)*, a 1983 drawing by Darrel Ellis made from the photograph, we can observe the transition the artist makes from mining his father's archive for content to the works that come a few years later in which he radically throws into question the nature of photographic representation.

Ellis produces these optical and phenomenological distortions through 2D effects. As he explains, "The geometric shape introduces the element of touch, feel—the basic element of photography. By rephotographing the photograph with an sculptural form [sic], I emphasize the materiality of physical reality."⁴ Ellis combines a critique of the internal meaning while constructing a space that fosters both a process of reflection and remembrance, through the senses. He joins other artists in experimenting with the bounds of the photographic image, a kind of questioning that gained momentum in the wake of the Museum of Modern Art's pioneering 1970 exhibition *Photography into Sculpture*, recognized as a turning point in the visibility of practices that hybridize the two mediums.

Ellis attends to a specific kind of remembrance and subject, a specific representational schema and material object: the family photograph. Photography historian Deborah Willis reminds us that turning to personal identity, family, and community, and creating new aesthetic and formal methodologies, is a commitment Ellis shares with other Black artists using photography at this time.⁵ Thomas Ellis's experience of his region of the world was far different from that of his son. Born in 1958, Darrel did not migrate to New York but was born there. He thus straddles two historical eras of hope and disillusionment. Ellis reached adolescence as the Great Migration of African Americans from places like Louisiana and Georgia (where Thomas Ellis's family had roots) was coming to an end. The elder Ellis witnessed Harlem as the spiritual capital of Black America, as it came to be known, whereas the younger Ellis's sense of uncertainty is profound. Marked first by the murder of his father and by his own experience as a gay man during the AIDS epidemic, his was an era that struggled with a vision of Black identity that had become politically, economically, and socially difficult to maintain.

On his own use of family photographs and his father's pictures, Ellis said, "It helps me to keep a certain amount of distance and detachment from the reality I know, growing up after my father's death. The world he photographed was one I didn't know, because I wasn't born yet. . . . I don't know any life from the forties and fifties with their picnics and their beautiful clothes

3. Frame, "Uptown/Downtown: Remembering Darrel."
4. Darrel Ellis, in Tiana Reid, "The Faces and Forms of Darrel Ellis," in *Darrel Ellis*, ed. Lara Mimosa Montes and Kyle Croft (New York: Visual AIDS, 2021), fn4.

5. Deborah Willis, "An Overview: African American Photographers 1839–1989," *International Review of African American Art* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 16.

and everything is so nice and perfect and wholesome.”⁶ Photographs, like performative works, may, as scholar Della Pollock observes, “mark a border space, a space of interaction and possibility.”⁷ The space Ellis constructs through his manipulations is both visceral and ephemeral. It interested Ellis to evoke both the physical and the otherworldly in his images: “Even though we live in a physical world—[in] a real world and we’re made of flesh and blood and everything—deeper down, the reality of human beings is that we are in fact spiritual beings. We’re connected to some source, some infinite, intangible source of life and creation.”⁸

LESLIE HEWITT AND WARDELL MILAN

Please Stay Home outlines the legacies of Ellis’s artistic propositions through the work of two contemporary artists, Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan. Their practices critically reevaluate notions of genre, the boundaries of mediums, and the function of spectatorship, while also reflecting on Black identities in the wake of and in relation to past and present civil rights struggles.

Through the integration of sculptural elements into the gallery space and onto the wall, Leslie Hewitt, who has described herself as “an artist who is interested in the narratives, the telling, the accounts, that circulate within historical narratives,”⁹

pushes the logic of analog photography beyond the camera to propose possibilities of the felt sense of time and space. Her practice is directly inspired by what she calls Ellis’s “exploration and expansion of the perceived normative approach to photography.”¹⁰ Drawn to Black popular culture, Hewitt’s practice is animated by a focus on historical and intergenerational memory. And with the additional reference to music, the works in the exhibition perpetuate a flow of relation between the past and present through haptic, auditory, and visual experiences. Hewitt writes, “By transforming the photograph into a place of experimentation, enunciation and arguably liberation, Ellis opened up space for another generation of artists trying to explore multiplicity.”¹¹

Wardell Milan’s layered images, drawn from personal and found photographs, explore through their process, materiality, and content Ellis’s questions of where the “self” lies within a matrix of inherited and embraced representations. Looking to what he describes as Ellis’s “uncanny” images, Milan has created experimental mixed-media works that “celebrate both constructed/imagined individuals and portraits of family members.” The viewer’s awareness of the materiality of the work is important to Milan. He wants the viewer to see “silver-leafed surfaces. The gray values and tones produced by charcoal and graphite. And the impressionistic washes of acrylic blues and whites.” Pointing to contemporary issues—namely, privacy, reproductive

6. Ellis, in Hirsch, “A New Sensibility,” 33.

7. Della Pollock, “Introduction: Making History Go,” in *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, ed. Della Pollock (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2018), 5.

8. Ellis, in Hirsch, “A New Sensibility,” 33.

9. “In Conversation: Leslie Hewitt with Megan N. Liberty,” *Brooklyn Rail* (November 2020).

10. Leslie Hewitt, artist’s statement, December 2022.

11. Hewitt, artist’s statement.

rights, and unprovoked violence on the Black body and LGBTQ communities—Milan describes the works as efforts to “re-image” moments of his own life.¹²

ALLEN FRAME, INTERVIEWED BY
JACKSON DAVIDOW

Darrel Ellis and Allen Frame were close friends and fellow artists whose photographic practices explored themes of family, intimacy, and the everyday. When Ellis died of AIDS-related causes at age thirty-three in 1992, his family gave Frame permission to house and store his work so that one day it might receive the critical, curatorial, and scholarly attention it deserved during his lifetime. Like other recent exhibitions and book projects that have brought greater visibility to Ellis's work, *Please Stay Home* is indebted to Frame's stewardship of the estate for nearly three decades. In the following conversation, Jackson Davidow, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Curatorial Fellow in Photography at the Harvard Art Museums, speaks to Frame about his friendship with Ellis, their artistic practices, their influences on each other, and the contemporary reception of Ellis's work.

This interview was conducted in New York City on October 17, 2022, and edited for length and clarity.

HOW DID YOU FIRST GET TO KNOW
DARREL AND HIS WORK?

We met in 1981 at a nondescript gay bar where a lot of artists went in the East

Village [Manhattan]. I was about thirty, he was about twenty-two. We were friends until his death in 1992. I introduced him immediately to my circle of friends, mostly artists, writers, and actors. I also met his close friends. This was right after he had started the Whitney Independent Study Program. Before that, from 1979 to 1981, he'd already had a studio at PS1 where he'd started making experimental abstracted photographs.

We met around the time that his mother had given him a box of his father's negatives and some prints. His father, Thomas Ellis, had been both a professional and a camera club amateur in the late 1940s and 1950s. There was a darkroom at the Whitney program, next to Darrel's studio, so he was going in there and making contact sheets, and working from there, making kind of faithful interpretations of those photographs in painting and drawing—not rephotographing.

During the years in which he was in awe of his father's work, making these paintings and drawings in a more straightforward way, he put this earlier idea of abstract experimentation in his pocket. Around 1987, he started rephotographing his own pictures taken in his mother's apartment, creating that trapezoidal, obstructive look that we know so well. He did that with his own images—and a lot of this material is included in *Please Stay Home*. Then, when he moved to his own apartment in Greenpoint in Brooklyn, he started rephotographing his father's work. Though he had known how to distort images since his residency at PS1, I think he was deferential to his father's vision initially, paying attention to it by recreating it faithfully. But experimenting with his own photographs gave him the confidence to take that process to his father's material.

12. Wardell Milan, artist's statement, December 2022.

WHEN YOU MET DARREL, WHERE WERE YOU IN YOUR CAREER? WERE YOU ALREADY MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS?

I started photographing when I was a student at Harvard in the early 1970s. I couldn't get into film or photography classes because I majored in art history and English. Frustrated with that, and fortunately, I found a beginning photography class taught by Henry Horenstein at a community center near Radcliffe, where I was housed. He was my first teacher as well as Nan Goldin's first teacher at another school. Then I took classes at Imageworks in Kendall Square and met Nan there before she went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. And I met her friends, such as David Armstrong, and the painters Tommy Chesley and Randy Stevens.

Then I left Boston and went back to Mississippi for three years and did a gritty documentary project that revolved around one queer friend of mine named David Kain. Eventually, I was bored there—David and another close friend had moved away—and I came to New York, just as a lot of people I knew in Boston were also moving there. The idea of New York was that it was a safer space to be than Mississippi, and that I would be stimulated and surrounded by all these artists for the first time. At Harvard, of course, I was not around artists—I was around academics mostly. And I realized that it was not the place that suited me as I was shifting into a different identity.

BOTH YOUR PRACTICE AND DARREL'S FOREGROUNDED EVERYDAY INTIMACIES, BUT YOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES WERE MARKEDLY DIFFERENT. CAN YOU REFLECT ON THESE DIFFERENCES AND CONTEXTUALIZE THEM WITHIN THE 1980S NEW YORK PHOTO WORLD?

While I was a photographer whose interests were film and theater, Darrel was a painter impacted by not only the photographers around him, who knew and photographed him, but also, of course, his father. My primary identity was photographer; his was painter. He did not really consider himself a photographer. He was not interested in the photographic process. He could have learned to be a good printer, but he didn't. For him, everything was about how to transform the photograph into the basis for a more abstract and conceptual image.

He knew photographers like me and Nan. He was photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar. Though these were just one-time experiences, the contact was important. He knew other photographers, too, like Andres Serrano and Dawoud Bey. Neither of us knew the "Pictures" people—artists working with photography, like Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman. And, of course, he knew many artists who were not photographers, like John Ahearn, Whitfield Lovell, Fred Wilson, Clarissa Sligh, and Susan Spencer Crowe.

DID DARREL LIKE BEING PHOTOGRAPHED?

I think he did. I photographed him a lot when I first met him, and he asked me to photograph him again after *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, the exhibition about AIDS that Nan curated for Artists Space in 1989. His self-portrait from a Mapplethorpe photograph was the main press image for the show and was reproduced widely. The attention showed him that he had an audience, that his work could be taken very seriously. He thought a lot about how he appeared through that self-portrait in the media—a Black man being shown in *Art in America* or the *New York Times*—and it made him want to explore persona and create other versions of a Black man. Not necessarily

himself, more in a way like Cindy Sherman exploring roles available to women. And he started staging self-portraits.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHERS WAS HE RESPONDING TO AND INSPIRED BY?

From high school on, Darrel was all over the place, seeing everything, devouring everything, thinking about everything. His father would have looked at James Van Der Zee and Roy DeCarava, so even if Darrel was not familiar with their work, he was influenced through his father's photographs.

But in terms of portraying scenes of the domestic and everyday, one of the passions both Darrel and I had was for late nineteenth-century French painting, particularly Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, who, of course, worked into the twentieth century. I would say they are the biggest influence on Darrel's sense of interiors—through painting. But for me, it was through film—Antonioni and the early 1960s in film. I don't remember having conversations with him about photography, but we both loved and talked about painters.

He was also influenced by John Baldessari, who did significant work with the vernacular as well as the idea of formal obstruction and abstraction. I think he was also influenced by Andy Warhol—doing two images next to each other, painting next to silkscreen—and Robert Rauschenberg. He was looking at all the collections and exhibitions in New York City museums.

I am really curious about what made him—especially someone in high school, drawing and painting from the masters, with a very classical orientation—have this urgent desire to distort the image at twenty. That was his application to the PS1 program. Who was he looking at that made him want to do that?

THERE ARE MANY ARTISTIC AND PERSONAL DIALOGUES THAT TAKE PLACE ACROSS *PLEASE STAY HOME*. FOR INSTANCE, BETWEEN DARREL AND HIS FATHER; BETWEEN DARREL AND A YOUNGER GENERATION OF BLACK QUEER ARTISTS SUCH AS WARDELL MILAN AND LESLIE HEWITT; AND BETWEEN DARREL AND YOURSELF. WHAT WERE SOME ONGOING CONVERSATIONS THAT YOU HAD WITH DARREL? HOW DO YOU THINK YOU INFLUENCED EACH OTHER IN ART AND LIFE?

One main thing that brought us together was material pertaining to the family and the archive of family images. He had his, and I had my grandmother's, which I was approaching through experimental theater: projecting her work with vernacular images from high school yearbooks, and my own pictures mixed in, with actors in front of the screen imparting material derived from interviews with people in my family.

My influence on him was to legitimize family and friend material in photography. It was very illegitimate until the late 1980s. Snapshots were not considered formal enough to be fine art. It wasn't until Sally Mann had commercial success in the late 1980s that family material was legitimized. What he synthesized was that postmodern, conceptual direction with the autobiographical and an approach to photography related to intimacy, family, friends, and daily life.

For *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, Nan invited us to be in it, to show work we'd made or to make work that responded to the AIDS pandemic. Darrel and I both created work. What he did was juxtapose the photograph and his version of it—with Mapplethorpe and Hujar—and what I did was similar: taking a vintage photograph and recreating it. I did that in two pieces,

and in another I created a juxtaposition that was tied to a narrative. My diptychs were influenced by his work.

TO WHAT DEGREE DID HE SEE HIMSELF CONTRIBUTING TO THEN-EMERGING DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES OF QUEER, BLACK, AND AIDS ACTIVIST ART?

In his head, I think, the dialogue was less with his contemporaries and more with things he'd see in museums. The thing that's missing is what was driving that fragmented formal treatment of things that was both conceptual and autobiographical. What was the inspiration and thrust? Something made him not want to stick to a safer, more traditional presentation of image.

FROM HIS DEATH IN 1992 UNTIL JUST A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, DARREL WAS LARGELY OFF THE ART WORLD'S RADAR. YET NOW, THANKS TO YOUR EFFORTS AND YOUR CARE FOR HIS ARCHIVE, THERE IS GREAT INTEREST IN HIS LIFE AND WORK. FOR EXAMPLE, VISUAL AIDS HAS PUBLISHED A MONOGRAPH, MAJOR MUSEUMS ARE ACQUIRING HIS WORK, AND A TRAVELING RETROSPECTIVE IS OPENING AT THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART IN A FEW WEEKS. HOW DID THIS QUIETER PERIOD PERMIT US TO MORE FULLY APPRECIATE DARREL TODAY?

Because I had a background in art history, I had a sense of reputations building and being created over time, a recognition that what was happening during the artist's time was not necessarily going to be the last word. As guilty as I felt for not being able to make things happen sooner, I also knew, with an art-historical perspective, that with an estate, time is on your side. It takes another generation to see and appreciate an artist's work in a way that is beyond the

limitations of the generation the artist was in. That idea was consoling to me—and in the end it was true.

Today, there is, of course, a greater political awareness of, and coming to terms with, race in this culture. It's a huge factor in the reception of his work, how it's embraced now in a way that it wasn't during his lifetime.

CHECKLIST

DARREL ELLIS

Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy of Candice Madey, New York

1

Untitled (The Kiss), 1990

Gelatin silver print

Collection of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg

Museum, Richard and Ronay

Menschel Fund for the Acquisition of

Photographs

2

Untitled (Laure and Mother in the Grass),

ca. 1988–91

Gelatin silver print

3

Untitled (Gwennie and Janice in the Hallway), ca. 1981–85

Graphite, ink, and wash on paper

4

Untitled (Group at Party), ca. 1981–85

Gouache, ink, and graphite on paper

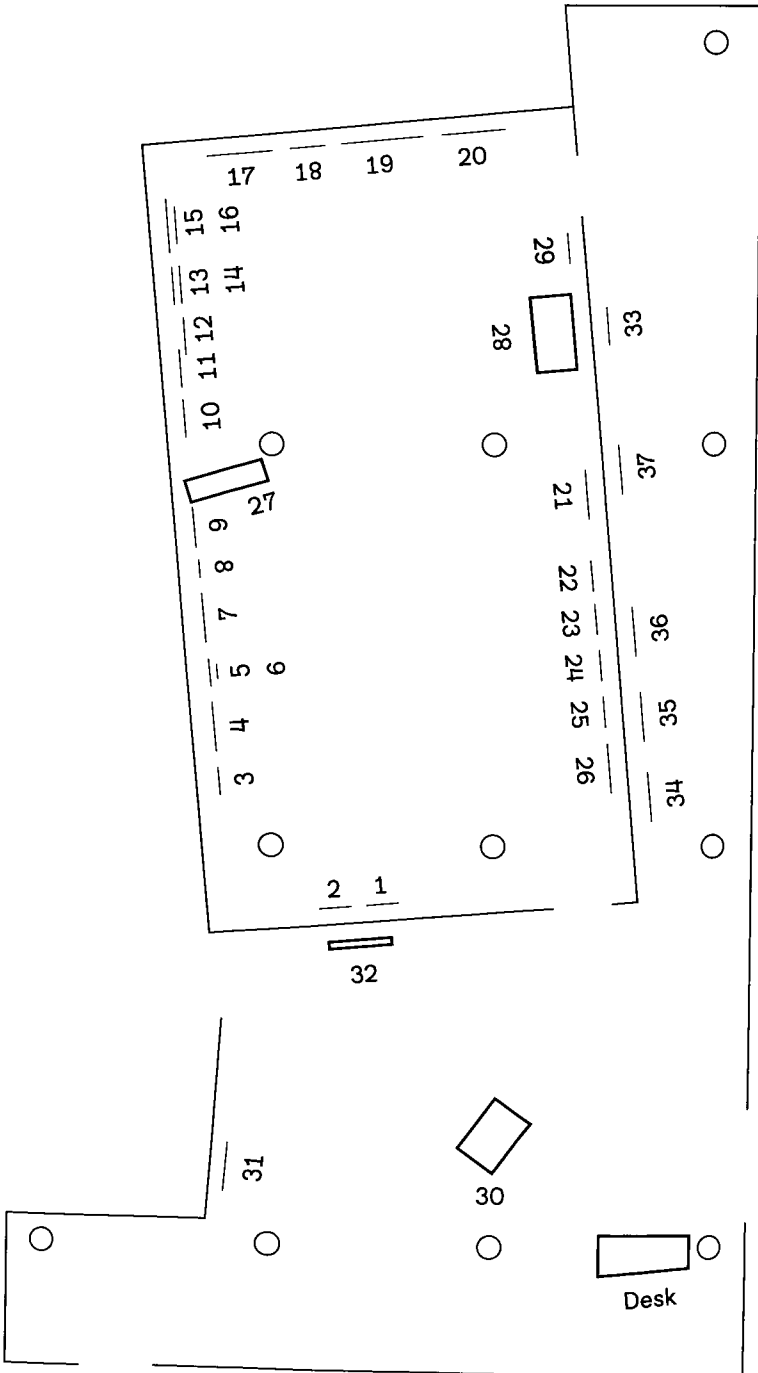
5

My Sister Sleeping, ca. 1981–82

Graphite and ink on paper

- 6
Untitled (Laure's Birthday), ca. 1981–85
Graphite on paper
- 7
Untitled (Mother), 1989–91
Ink and wash on paper
- 8
Untitled (Self-Portrait), ca. 1991
Ink and wash on paper
Collection of Green Family Art Foundation,
courtesy of Adam Green Art Advisory
- 9
Untitled (Mother in Window), 1983
Graphite, ink, and wash on paper
- 10
Untitled (Figures in Mother's Bedroom),
ca. 1987–91
Gelatin silver print
- 11
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1987–91
Gelatin silver print
- 12
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1987–91
Gelatin silver print
- 13
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1987–91
Gelatin silver print
- 14
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1987–91
Gelatin silver print
- 15
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1985–91
Acrylic on canvas
- 16
Untitled (Mother's Bedroom), ca. 1985–91
Acrylic on paper on canvas
Courtesy of Charlesfield Four LLC
- 17
Untitled (Two People on Sofa), ca. 1981–85
Graphite, ink, and wash on paper
- 18
Untitled (Miguel's Kitchen), 1984
Graphite, ink, and wash on paper
- 19
*Untitled (Please Stay Home Tonight.
Please Stay Home Today.)*, ca. 1982
Graphite, pen, ink, wash, and Letraset
letters on paper
- 20
Untitled (Miguel's Living Room), 1984
Graphite, pen, ink, and wash on paper
- 21
Untitled (Grandparents Dancing),
ca. 1981–85
Gouache and ink on paper
Collection of Aimé van Heddeghem
- 22
Untitled (Mother), ca. 1985–88
Ink, wash, graphite, charcoal, and acrylic
on paper
- 23
Untitled (Laure and Mother in the Grass),
ca. 1988–91
Gelatin silver print
- 24
Untitled (Katrina Lying Down), ca. 1985–87
Ink on paper

LEVEL 3 GALLERY



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Carpenter Center

35

Baltrop A., 2022

Acrylic, charcoal, graphite, ink,
china marker, silver leaf on paper,
mounted on canvas

36

Grace sitting in a garden, 2022

Acrylic, graphite, YUPO, silver leaf, cut-and-
paste paper on paper, mounted on canvas

37

Raul C., 2022

Acrylic, charcoal, graphite, ink,
china marker silver leaf, on paper,
mounted on canvas

Please Stay Home is curated by Makeda Best, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography at Harvard Art Museums, with Jackson Davidow, John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Curatorial Fellow in Photography at Harvard Art Museums, and organized by the Carpenter Center staff: Dan Byers, John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director; Maria Gonzalez, Gallery and Bookshop Attendant; Kate Kelley, Communications and Administrative Coordinator; Matthew Murphy, Exhibitions Production Assistant and Preparator; Sophie Pratt, Gallery and Bookshop Attendant; Danni Shen, Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant; and Francesca Williams, Director of Exhibitions and Registration.

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for the Visual Arts

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