

Under a Dismal Boston Skyline

**Faye G., Jo, and James Stone Gallery, Boston University Art Galleries, Boston, MA
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Upon entrance to the exhibition “Under a Dismal Boston Skyline,” on view September 14 - October 28, 2018 at the Stone Gallery, Boston University Art Galleries, visitors are immediately struck with the eerie melody of Nina Simone as part of the projected work by Suara Welitoff, “Be the Boy,” (2001) facing the gallery doors (Fig. 1). In the looping black and white video, we see a young man winking and shaking his hair at the camera in a direct flirtation, which recalls Andy Warhol’s “Screen Tests” of the mid 1960s. But instead of a neutral backdrop, as in Warhol’s performative videos, behind this man attempting to “Be the Boy,” we see an out-of- focus skyline. While no defining landmarks appear, the exhibition title on the wall nearby (along with the thoughtfully written wall label) announces that the cityscape behind the film’s subject is of course, Boston.

This brief film sets the tone for an exhibition which is at once nostalgic and energizing, intimate, elusive and illusive. Although the city of Boston, with its history and its cultural conservatism, is always present in the background, the major protagonists of the show are the figures that have contributed to its rich alternative culture from the late 1970s until today. The exhibition is divided between artists who emerged from Boston and left (such as Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Maura Jasper); those that had only fleeting relationships with the city (including Art School Cheerleaders, Creighton Baxter, Óscar Díaz); some who came, and remained as educators (Marilyn Arsem, Dana Clancy, Bonnie Donohue, Steve Locke); and a couple of persistent locals (Luther Price, Candice Camille Jackson). With work spanning the last four decades, the 25 artists in the exhibition offer representations of themselves, each other, and the artistic counterculture in and around Boston (Fig. 2).

The exhibition provides a hazy portrait of a moment in time in the late 1970s- mid ‘80s when the city was home to an energetic group of students who inspired each other, relying heavily on their communities (often tied to the punk scene, and gay/transgender culture) to fuel their emerging, experimental practices. The unofficial leader of this group was photographer Mark Morrisroe, a Boston-area native, who went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts where he met several of the other artists connected to The Boston School.¹ Several portraits of Morrisroe are on view: a monumental, eerie, patchwork silhouette by twins Doug and Mike Starn (1985-6); a film featuring the strikingly calm artist describing his survival of a shooting, part of Bonnie Donohue’s Survivors series (1982-3); and two photographs that Morrisroe took himself, one a mischievous self-portrait (1981), and the other, a selfie before its time, made with Morrisroe’s signature “sandwich” print method, which depicts Morrisroe with close friend Gail Thacker

¹ Many of these figures were historicized in a 1995 exhibition at the Boston ICA entitled “The Boston School,” which identified common threads in the work of several photographers working in Boston in the late 1970s and ‘80s. Artists from the Boston School included in this exhibition are: Nan Goldin, Shellburne Thurber, Mark Morrisroe, Gail Thacker, and David Armstrong.

(1978/86).² These works reveal a playful, yet enigmatic young photographer, lost too early to AIDS, who was worried about being perceived of as “weird,” but was clearly embraced by his creative community. Morrisroe’s significant presence in the exhibition illustrates how the artist’s personal mythology was an important point of connection for those he interacted with directly, as well as those he influenced through his work (Fig. 3).

Morrisroe was part of the impetus for the exhibition – independent curator Leah Triplett Harrington, one of the curators for this show, had been researching the artist when she joined forces with the exhibitions other curators: Evan Fiveash Smith, an M.A. candidate in the History of Art and Architecture at Boston University, and Lynne Cooney, Artistic Director at the Boston University Art Galleries.³ The team of curators used the Boston School as a starting point from which to look forward from the late 1980s until now, selecting artists who had integrated themselves into Boston’s fabric and whose practices embody similar kinds of experimentation in photography, film, and performance that were initiated in earlier decades.

The result is a network of students and teachers, collaborators and strangers, who continue to push the boundaries of filmic media and conformist culture (Fig. 4). While there are certain pieces that connect less obviously with the themes of the show, overall the more recent work provides visitors with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with lesser-known figures. Some of these works share formal similarities, evidenced in the abstracted remnants seen in the slide projections of Luther Price and Genesis Báez’s buried photographs. In other examples, such as the drawings of Cobi Moules and Steve Locke or Esther Solodnz’s painted panels, there is a clear tendency to push away from photographic portraits as representations of identity or selfhood. But in all, the exhibition’s diversity of characters and artwork leaves the viewer with a snapshot of Boston’s cultural underground as it has developed in recent years, urging us to remain aware that under our shared, dismal skyline, captivating experimentation is ongoing.

Sasha Goldman is a Ph.D. Candidate at Boston University. Her research focuses on Italian art and exhibition histories in the 20th and 21st centuries, with particular interests in artist-driven publications and exhibition catalogues, and temporary exhibitions and fairs. Her dissertation situates the artwork of Italian contemporary artist Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960) in relation to the work of three seminal figures who are representative of major phases in recent Italian art, revealing how the shared strategies of Cattelan and his precursors demonstrate the fundamental role that history and national identity play in the work of Italian artists across the twentieth century.

² Morrisroe developed a method of using a Polaroid Land camera, which he used to create the technique of mounting enlarged double negatives on top of each other

³ Conversation between Lynne Cooney and the author, October 11, 2018.



Installation of Under the Dismal Boston Skyline Exhibition, courtesy of Boston University Art Galleries. Photo by Evan Fiveash Smith.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Under a Dismal Boston Skyline*, featuring Suara Welitoff, *Be the Boy*, 2001. Courtesy of Boston University Art Galleries. Photo by Evan Fiveash Smith.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Under a Dismal Boston Skyline*, courtesy of Boston University Art Galleries. Photo by Evan Fiveash Smith.



Figure 3. Installation view of *Under a Dismal Boston Skyline*, courtesy of Boston University Art Galleries. Photo by Evan Fiveash Smith.



Figure 4: Installation view of *Under a Dismal Boston Skyline*, featuring the work of Steve Lock and Mark Morrisroe, courtesy of Boston University Art Galleries. Photo by Evan Fiveash Smith.