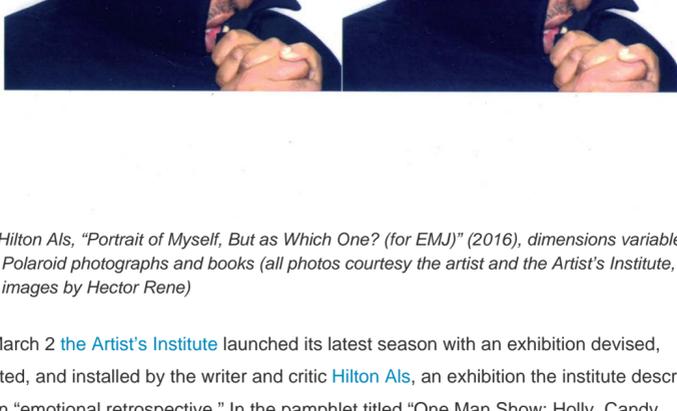


An Emotional Retrospective for Hilton Als

by Seph Rodney on April 12, 2016



Hilton Als, "Portrait of Myself, But as Which One? (for EMJ)" (2016), dimensions variable, Polaroid photographs and books (all photos courtesy the artist and the Artist's Institute, images by Hector Rene)

On March 2 the [Artist's Institute](#) launched its latest season with an exhibition devised, curated, and installed by the writer and critic [Hilton Als](#), an exhibition the institute describes as an "emotional retrospective." In the pamphlet titled "One Man Show: Holly, Candy, Bobbie, and the rest," which accompanies the show, Als hints at what this means when he writes that he loves Lou Reed's song "Walk on the Wild Side," "because of all the people he [Reed] remembers in it." So this retrospective is about remembrance and commemoration. Certainly the portraits that visually anchor the show, placed here and there around the institute's townhouse space are mostly of Als's friends, loved ones, and heroes who are no longer alive. Indeed, according to the institute's director and curator, Jenny Jaskey, the seed for the exhibition was the death of [Holly Woodlawn](#), a transgender Puerto Rican actress associated with [Andy Warhol's Factory](#) and a luminary figure for Als. Her passing prompted Als to consider with whom he had made formative relationships in the 1970s and '80s, living on the Lower East Side, clubbing in spaces frequented by transgendered partiers, and learning the treacherous and ecstatic contours of romantic desire.

But this exhibition is *not* rooted in nostalgia. Als states in his pamphlet that it's generated by love for his friends, and as it often is, love is complicated. He writes, "I loved them all the more; their fluidity around naming — that is, out of being a self free of presuppositions." This then is a compound love: for who these personalities were, for what they represented, and for how they allowed him to conceive of himself as ever changing. This fluid conception has propelled Als to become his own protean person: photo editor, graphic designer, music and theater critic, essayist, curator, and visual artist.



Hilton Als, "Stormé, Bobbie, and the Rest" (2016), overhead projector with transparency of Bobbie Derecktor; Diane Arbus, "Stormé standing in the park with a cigarette, NYC" (1961), gelatin silver print, 14 ½ x 17 ½ inches (framed); 57 x 61 inches

The retrospective consists mainly of portraits, photographs found, taken, owned or, commissioned by Als. He's added colored light bulbs, placed next to the images to give the space a nightclub feel, with certain corners red and sultry, others yellow or blue, and some lime green. The institute's townhouse with its hardwood floors, fireplace, and separate rooms is an apt place for this exhibition; the setting conveys a sense of intimacy with what are essentially Als's ghosts. Walking the rooms you want to treat these unfamiliar memories — many of the characters depicted are only known to Als — with tenderness. There is also playfulness in the short videos and slide images projected through old-time carousels, with all the whirring and pops of that archaic technology, and in the disco music streaming from a small stereo placed on the floor, which always sounds a bit like a Baptist church to me, with its jubilant choruses and energetic harmonies. There's even a velvet rope displayed before some stairs splashed with soil. Ashes to ashes. The retrospective offers, more than anything else, a sense of *place*, a quality of mood that is the 80s, gender play, homoerotic energy, and wistfulness.



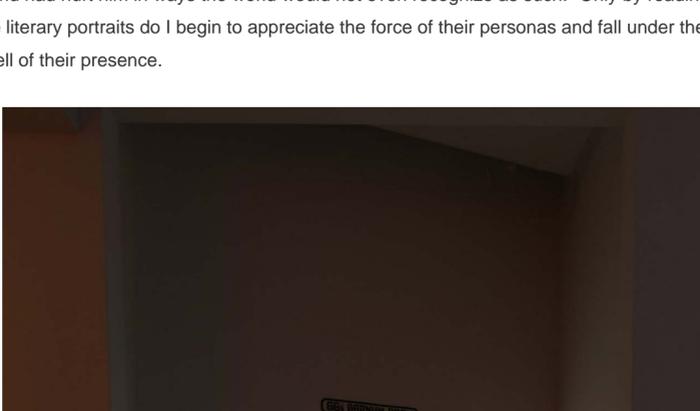
Hilton Als, "One Man Show: Holly, Candy, Bobbie, and the Rest," installation view

Still, I have trouble seeing Als here. He's hiding — a little. Though there is a small portrait of him (with his face partially obscured behind a coat collar) on the mantle in the first room a visitor enters, mostly the show is populated by these ghosts who stand in for him. While writing this review, I unexpectedly run into him at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and I suggest that in this exhibition he is standing somewhat off screen. He confirms this. He says he sees himself as [Candy Darling](#), whose ghostly image appears in Saran Wrap silk screens in the back of the gallery, down the stairs and to the right. When I return to the gallery to look at Darling's portrait a few days later, I realize he's had some fun with me: the silk screens only reveal gray, barely-there, textured patterns that are only fragmentary impressions of what might be Darling's body.



Hilton Als, "Candy" (2016), screenprint on cellophane, 194 x 96 inches

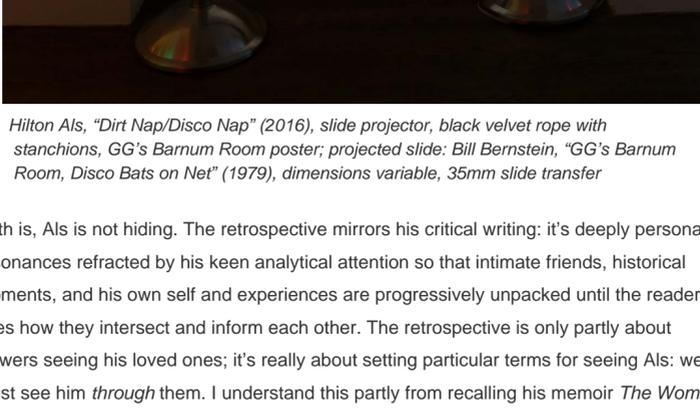
These characters seem even more like apparitions in comparison to their vivid presence in the pamphlet's prose (which also contains excerpts of Bobbie Derecktor's journals). Here's a sample: "In my friend's room there was a record player where he sometimes spun old childhood 45s, and a small boy's bed that could not contain his grown body: he did not wish to grow — he did not wish his voice to grow. But one thing he could control, though, was his voice: he sounded like a peevis nasal-sounding child just returned from fresh hurt. The world had hurt him in ways the world would not even recognize as such." Only by reading the literary portraits do I begin to appreciate the force of their personas and fall under the spell of their presence.



Hilton Als, "Dirt Nap/Disco Nap" (2016), slide projector, black velvet rope with stanchions, GG's Barnum poster; projected slide: Bill Bernstein, "GG's Barnum Room, Disco Bats on Net" (1979), dimensions variable, 35mm slide transfer

Truth is, Als is not hiding. The retrospective mirrors his critical writing: it's deeply personal resonances refracted by his keen analytical attention so that intimate friends, historical moments, and his own self and experiences are progressively unpacked until the reader sees how they intersect and inform each other. The retrospective is only partly about viewers seeing his loved ones; it's really about setting particular terms for seeing Als: we must see him *through* them. I understand this partly from recalling his memoir *The Women* which I read as an undergraduate student. I was astonished that prose so personal could at the same time be so relentlessly analytical and insightful, making his own complicated psychic development a matter of public consideration.

This is the first season for the Artist's Institute after moving into their current home at 132 East 65th street on the Upper East Side from their previous home on Eldridge Street. They have been in New York since 2010 and over the past five years have worked with 10 artists who include Fia Backström, Carolee Schneeman, and Pierre Huyghe, though this is their first time working with one who is primarily a writer. The institute is a unique arts organization that stages lengthy, considered collaborations with artists over the course of a six-month "season" that also features programs for the public. For their collaboration with Als there are three discrete sections planned. The next ones, not yet titled, will focus on James Baldwin and on his sister Yvonne and Sheryl Sutton. Jaskey says that at some point soon Als will hold a talk around his written work thus letting his audience a little further into his intimacies. This is indeed something to look forward to.



Hilton Als, "Smile and Relax (for Brent Sikkema and Kenneth E. Silver)" (2016), MDF with embedded frame and lettering; Richard Avedon, "John Martin of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, New York" (March 15, 1975), gelatin silver print, 14 x 16 ¼ inches (framed), courtesy the Richard Avedon Foundation; 91 x 38 inches

Hilton Als continues at the [Artist's Institute](#) (132 East 65th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until August 7.

Hilton Als

Holly Woodlawn

The Artist's Institute