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The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is pleased to present the first major solo museum survey exhibition of work by African-American photographer Alvin Baltrop.

Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass

Opening Reception

Thursday, July 19, 6:30-9PM



Alvin Baltrop, *Three Navy Sailors*, 1969–72. Gelatin silver print.
8½ × 12¾ inches. Collection Morteza Barharloo, Houston

HOUSTON, TX (July 9, 2012)—The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is pleased to present *Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass*, the first major solo museum survey of work by this African-American photographer. Born in the Bronx, New York, in 1948, Baltrop died from cancer in 2004 at a Manhattan hospital at the age of fifty-five. His work was rarely publicly presented during his lifetime but has become a focus of art world attention in the last five years, including an article in *Artforum* magazine and in the *New York Times*. This exhibition serves to introduce audiences to Baltrop's visionary talent as a photographer, one who captured the beauty and decay of some of this country's most iconic urban landscapes as well as the pivotal moments of a society in transition. The survey features both vintage photographs and recent prints created by the artist over a thirty-five year period, including work from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s, a slide presentation of images shot by the artist that were not printed, and a sound collage taken from the artist's many phone conversations and interviews, as well as rare archival and ephemeral material lent by the artist's Trust.

Coming of age in the 1960s, Baltrop was aware of the seismic cultural, political, and social shifts taking place around him. Civil rights and women's rights were raising the consciousness of the nation. Baltrop witnessed firsthand the Countercultural Revolution that also encompassed an unprecedented sexual liberation movement that upended a period of social conformity for heterosexuals as well as for gays and lesbians. Despite the sexual revolution, homosexuality remained widely detested and viewed less as

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a legitimate self-determination of one's sexual orientation and more as a pathology from which one could be cured. A bisexual, Baltrop was aware of this unique moment in history and the growing wave of change that it would bring. Working with a twin lens Yashica camera, Baltrop captured these seminal and fleeting moments in the immediacy of a society in transition. His photographs would not only serve as an intimate visual diary but also as a public record of the era.

Baltrop enlisted in the U.S. Navy where he served as a medic from 1969 to 1972. He brought aboard with him his camera ostensibly to create a visual diary of his life aboard the vessel, though the substantial body of work preserved from this period reveals the artist's growing articulation and evolution of his art. With equal aplomb, Baltrop made himself and his camera privy to the intimate moments as well as the very public routine of his fellow servicemen. The artist revealed both the complexity of life aboard the naval vessel—the homo-societal environment—and his own sexual desire for and among other men. His time in the Navy and the documentary photographic work he would produce would serve to inform his most recognized body of photographs—those of New York's West Side piers.

Returning to New York in 1972 with an honorable discharge, Baltrop once again turned his eyes and lens on the city that had become a post-industrial wasteland. With its economy in ruins and manufacturing companies moving out of the city, Manhattan's West Side piers had become littered with empty and dilapidated buildings that stretched from West 59th Street down to Tribeca. For over a decade, Baltrop would obsessively photograph the piers. No other site embodied the microcosm of New York with its constituency of sunbathers, prostitutes, drag queens, artists, runaways, and gay men nonchalantly cruising for anonymous sex. The piers, with its complexity of lure, loathing, desire, and acceptance, became a magnet for the disenfranchised and empowered. And Baltrop would not only capture prostitutes plying their trade, sex acts between men, the plight of runaways, but also the intense beauty in the midst of what was construed by many as a dark, foreboding, and violent site. His commitment was serious. The artist once divulged to his then assistant Randal Wilcox that he had “constructed a harness that allowed him to hang from the rafters and pursue his clandestine shooting with great accuracy and precision.”¹

But Baltrop's forays were not all so unabashedly voyeuristic. Over the decade that he shot the piers, the artist befriended many of its residents and frequent visitors—sunbathers, hustlers, cruisers, and artists. He created their portraits with such authenticity and empathy that their gazes are wide open, neither defiant nor shielded. His works would bear witness the fleeting life in the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots and the advent of GRIDS (Gay-related Immune Deficiency Syndrome, later known as HIV/AIDS).

Beyond the piers, Baltrop devoted himself to the decaying, urban landscape and in doing so, also created an extensive body of work of street scene photographs. By the late 1990s, Baltrop all but ceased making new photographs, but rather combed through an archive of thousands of images he created in the preceding years. In 2003, he was diagnosed with cancer, and he chronicled the last months of his life at a Manhattan hospital.

Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass is organized by CAMH Senior Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver.

¹See Randal Wilcox, “The History That Alvin Baltrop Left Behind,” *Atlántica: Journal of Art and Thought*, no. 52 (Spring/Summer 2012): pp. 116–39.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alvin Baltrop was born in Bronx, New York in 1948 where he died in 2004. He served in the Navy during the Vietnam War from 1969-72. After an honorary discharge, he studied photography at the School of Visual Arts New York. Baltrop's work is in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Watermill Center, New York. Selected exhibitions include *Alvin Baltrop: Selected Works*, Watermill Center, New York (2011); *Alvin Baltrop: Photographs 1965 – 2003*, Third Streaming, New York (2011); *Looking Back/The Fifth White Columns Annual*, White Columns, New York (2010); *Alvin Baltrop: Color Photographs 1971-1991*, Famous Accountants, Brooklyn, New York (2010); *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2010); and *Darkside II – Photographic Power and Violence, Disease, and Death Photographed*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2009).

PUBLICATION

Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 65-page, catalogue that includes essays by the exhibition's curator, Valerie Cassel Oliver, as well as Douglas Crimp, Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History at the University of Rochester, and Randal Wilcox, Trustee of The Alvin Baltrop Trust. Available in CAMH's Museum Shop, \$14.95.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events are free and open to the public, and take place at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston unless otherwise noted. For complete listings and current information, please check www.camh.org.

Opening Reception: Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass
Thursday, July 19, 6:30-9PM

Join us for the opening reception of *Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass*. Baltrop (1948-2004) was an African-American photographer whose practice unfolded in the late 1960s amid a period of turbulent cultural, social, and political upheaval. As a young man, the artist was given a twin-lens Yashica camera that he would subsequently use to create an intimate visual diary as well as to chronicle the fleeting world around him. This survey features vintage photographs and rare archival material created by the New York-based artist from the late 1960s until his death in 2004 and is the first major museum exhibition of his work. Cash bar and [the goodie box](#) treats. *Please note that some of the works in the exhibition are intended for mature audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.*

Perspectives Talk: Clint Willour**Thursday, September 6, 6:30-7:30PM**

Clint Willour leads a Perspectives Talk on *Perspectives 179—Alvin Baltrop: Dreams Into Glass*. Willour has been curator of the Galveston Arts Center for the past seventeen years and has been an art professional for thirty-five years; he is known for the multi-disciplinary focus of his taste. Willour curates 24 exhibitions per year in Galveston, and serves regularly as a guest curator for institutions throughout the state of Texas and beyond.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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EDUCATION SUPPORT

The Museum receives support for its education programs from: Anonymous, Louise D. Jamail, Mr. and Mrs. I.H. Kempner III, Kinder Morgan Foundation, Robert and Pearl Wallis Knox Foundation, Leticia Loya, Elisabeth McCabe, M.D. Anderson Foundation, Marian and Speros Martel Foundation Endowment, Mark and Mary Ann Miller, Texas Commission on the Arts, Texas Women for the Arts, Ms. Louisa Stude Sarofim, and Martha Claire Tompkins.

Teen Council is supported by Ms. Louisa Stude Sarofim, Texas Women for the Arts, and Texas Commission on the Arts.

GENERAL SUPPORT

Funding for the Museum's operations through the Fund for the Future is made possible by generous grants from Chinhui Juhn and Eddie Allen, Anonymous, Jereann Chaney, Jo and Jim Furr, Barbara and Michael Gamson, Brenda and William Goldberg, Mr. and Mrs. I.H. Kempner III, Marley Lott, Leticia Loya and Fayez Sarofim.

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CAMH MISSION

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is a leading destination to experience innovative art. CAMH actively encourages public engagement with its exhibitions through its educational programs, publications, and online presence.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, in the heart of Houston's Museum District. Hours are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday 10AM-7PM, Thursday 10AM-9PM, Saturday 10AM-6PM, and Sunday 12PM-6PM. Admission is always free. For more information, visit www.camh.org or call 713 284 8250.