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Sandwich Portraits

MARK MORRISROE

by Rupert Goldsworthy

Born under a bad sign? Born in 1959 to a drug-addicted mother in a poor suburb of Boston, Mark Morrisroe left home and began hustling at the age of 15. His mother was a tenant of Albert De-Salvo, the Boston Strangler, and Mark often claimed he was De-Salvo's illegitimate son. When he was 17 years old, allegedly one of his disgruntled johns shot him in the back, leaving him with a bullet lodged next to his spine, which gave him a pronounced limp for the rest of his short life.

Morrisroe studied at Boston's Museum School, where he started the early US gay punk zine *Dirt* and graduated with a degree in photography. He moved to New York in the mid 1980s and after a short, complicated life, he died at 29 from AIDS. However, during his short troubled lifespan he produced an incredibly beautiful series of photographs which documented his world. During his lifetime, Morrisroe had found no artistic acclaim. Success and credibility were sainted on him much later. Morrisroe, erstwhile friend of several rising Boston photographic art stars, may have died penniless, but in death, like William Blake and Karl Marx, his work was suddenly canonized. In the wake of his death, his old college friends Pat Hearn, Jack Pierson and Stephen Tashjian rescued his substantial archive of photographs from his cluttered apartment.



*Born under a bad sign
I been down since I begin to crawl
If it wasn't for bad luck,
I wouldn't have no luck at all.*

*Hard luck and trouble is my only friend
I been on my own ever since I was ten.*

"Born Under A Bad Sign"
by Albert King



Above Sunset over Central Park East, 1986, C-print, cm 50.8 x 40.6
Right Deceit, 1986, C-print, cm 40.6 x 50.8

During the 1990s, concurrent with the AIDS crisis, the post-humous careers of certain young dead gay artists blossomed into museum retrospective tours. The work of Felix Gonzales-Torres, David Wojnarowicz, Morrisroe, and several others skyrocketed in value after their deaths. The estate of Mark Morrisroe is now located at the Fotomuseum Winterthur, near Zurich and his work is now in many important collections including the Whitney Museum and LA MOCA.

Morrisroe's life has been cast in the same mold as many romantic Victorian and Modernist heroes. Names in that lineage include Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Genet, Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, the list continues - drug-addicted, broke, isolated, imprisoned, destitute, fugitive outsider artists. More recently the Seventies Cold War and rock culture have thrown up similar tragic icons, Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, Ian Curtis, Darby Crash of the Germs, Ulrike Meinhof, -too troubled to keep on living, too young to die.

Morrisroe joins the pantheon as a young, gay, penniless, tragic art photographer who died of AIDS. His estate became eminently buyable. The rarity and exceptional status of this slim body of work is part of the Morrisroe's legend and acts as an introduction to his mysterious diaristic images.

How does the work of Morrisroe now appear ten years after his canonization as a leading underground American photographer of the Punk generation? Has the work itself retained its resonance beyond the hype around Mark's life?

What first strikes one about looking at Morrisroe's work in 2010 is that is quickly identifiable. The work has its own particular signature style, a scruffy, rough-around-the-edges look, with scribbled texts in Indian ink around the border of the images - these details thumbprint the work as Morrisroe's as much as their soft-lit sepia and cinematic color palette. The soft focus, the cocktail-hour lighting effects, the gritty bedside aesthetic that Morrisroe made his own have now become known the 'Morrisroe Effect.' The new iPhone Application 'Hipstamatic' even seems to mimic Morrisroe's grainy Fifties look.

Morrisroe's career as a photographer began when he was given a Polaroid Model 195 Land camera. He experimented with unusual development techniques. He applied for, and was given, free supplies of new and experimental film and chemicals developed at the Polaroid Corporation. He also made stills from Super 8 films. Morrisroe's work from the Eighties looks prescient because he had access to new processing materials long before they came on the market and because he created his own unique visual language.

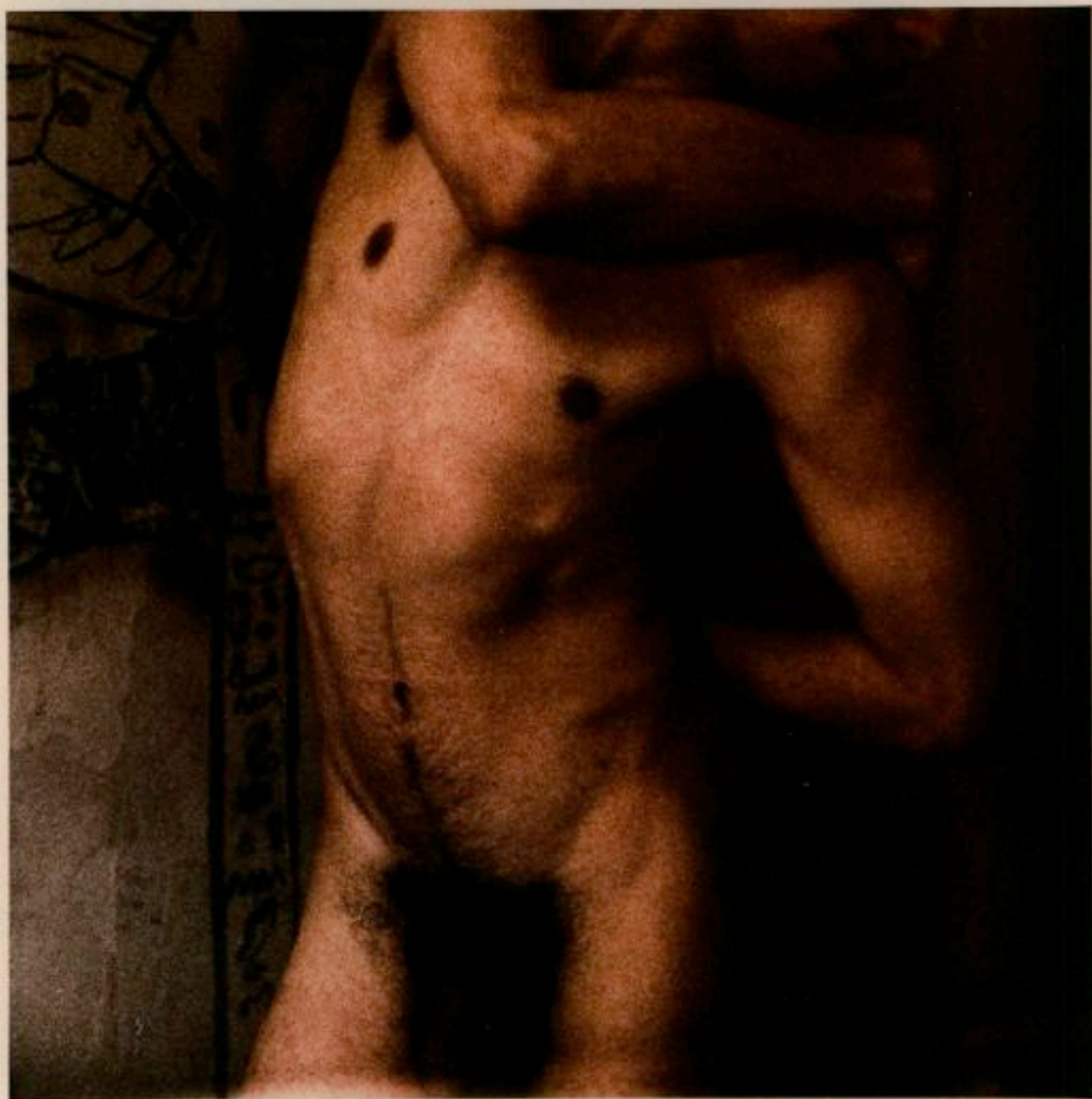
Morrisroe's photographs are primarily portraits. His subjects include lovers, friends, hustlers, and people who visited his apartment. His images present a world filled with longing, desire, shadowed by troubled histories and pain-drenched nostalgia. Nothing can ever be the same. The dawn/dusk

skyline of Manhattan looms across the Hudson River, its silhouette bleary and daunting. The empty spaces of dank apartments, the grey morning light and soft shadows all conjure the sense of lonely abjection. The nude flesh lit by table lamps is reminiscent of the lighting for porn mag sections 'Readers' Wives.' But here the models are young, mordant, sometimes lying comatose - headless scrawny nude bodies displayed like offered cuts of meat in visceral, scuzzy settings. Drawn faces, proffered sex parts, curtains, charcoal wall drawings and an air of melancholy.

I never knew Morrisroe personally, but have known several of his college friends and models since the late 1980s. Asking some of them about this series of images, a number of particular things occur concerning his oeuvre: The setting is very important. It's a man's world, the images are all mostly set in a male home, there's a lack of the feminine touch to the surroundings, the setting is bleak, sparse, anonymous. They are set in Boston and New York in marginal areas of these cities. Stephen Tashjian's Avenue C apartment (the setting for some images from this series) is filled with the detritus of the rundown neighborhood, rescued Fifties lamps, furniture, stuffed animals and bric-a-brac. A nostalgia for childhood is apparent in a Patty Duke photograph, a Fifties inflatable hassock, and chintzy fabric patterns. A pre-Stonewall flavor is present in the bowed, obscured (unidentifiable) heads of the nude male models, in the down-at-heel kitchen-sink milieu, and in the complete lack of psychedelic or Seventies/Eighties glamor references. This is a world purposefully bathing in the twilight of Fifties decline.

And this attention to detail is what pushes Morrisroe's photographs into a new place. From Punk's rejection of hippie excess comes the new punk/romantic/gothic aesthetic that Morrisroe eschews. (US psychobilly band The Cramps were a favorite in Morrisroe's art school.) Early Punk style looked back to the Fifties and its dark rough carnie edges, eroticizing its working class outlaw culture, its Hollywood fuck-ups, its sordid undercurrent of nudies, and gross-out movies, while also championing a pre-Modernist classicism and hyper-orthodoxy. Punk reinvents these details as arch style, as deliberate gesture against the blandness of wholesome Seventies Modernist style, as finger raised to authenticity. Each of Morrisroe's photographs draw their layout from art historical sources, from David's death of Marat, from the work of Man Ray and others. Morrisroe's bad luck was that he himself needed to die before his own work became recognized as historic.

The Sandwich Portrait works by Mark Morrisroe featured here are soon to be published in the artist's first comprehensive monograph, realized on occasion of the exhibition at the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, and in collaboration with the Morrisroe Estate. The exhibition is curated by Beatrix Ruf and Thomas Seelig, and the book is published by JRP|Ringier. jrp-ringier.com; fotomuseum.ch



Mesopotamia [Paul E] 1982, C-print, cm 50.8 x 40.6

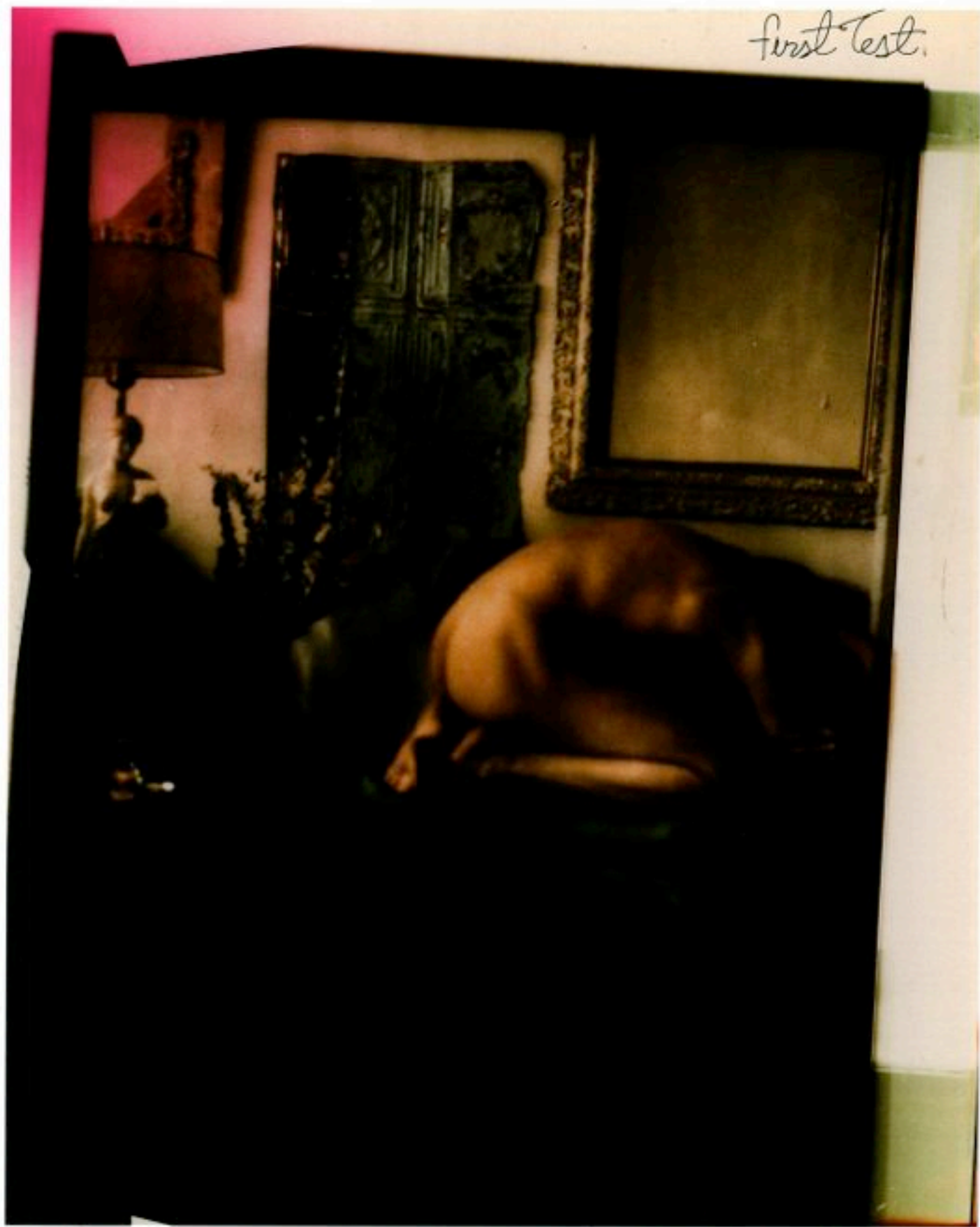
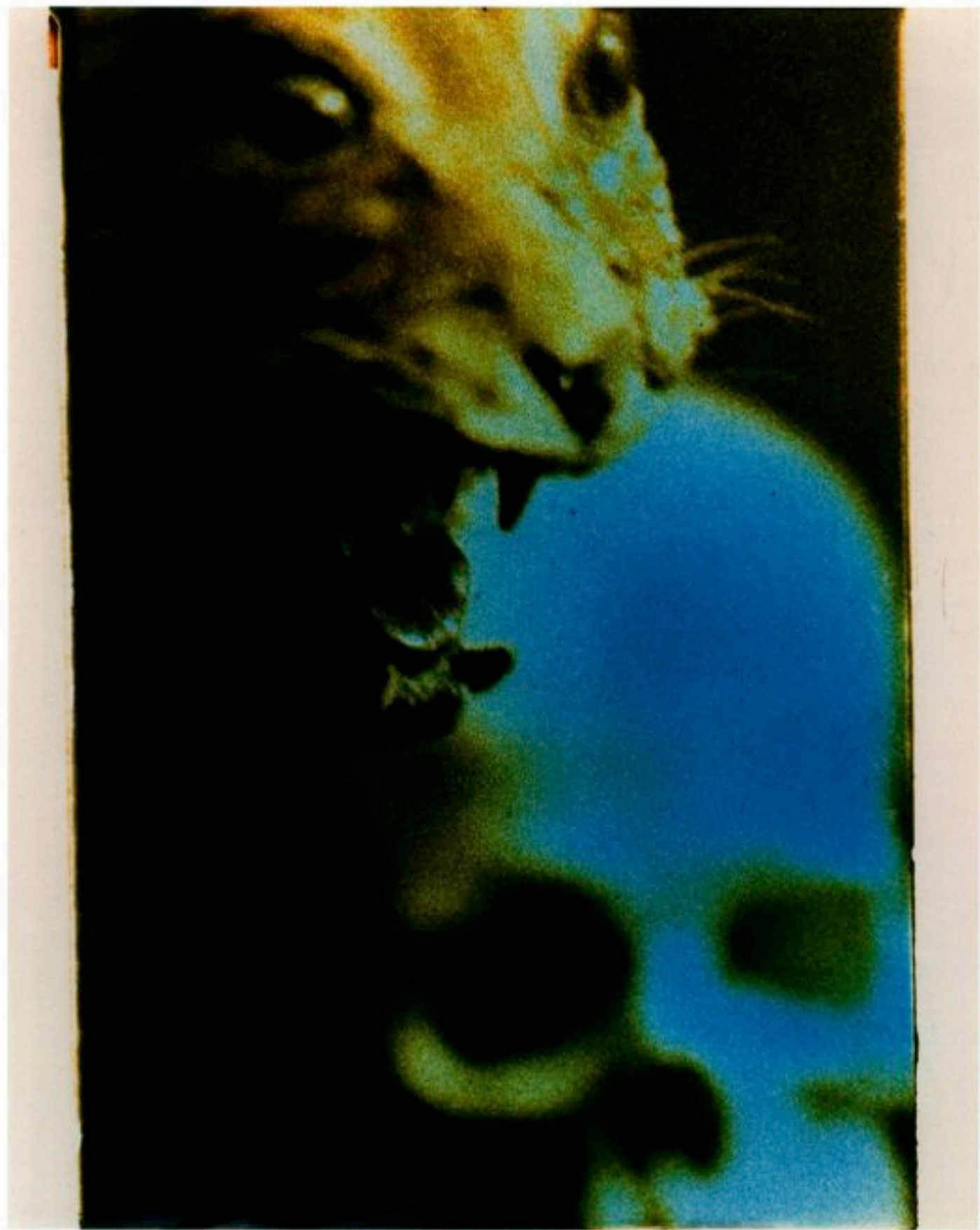


Figure Study, 1985, C-print, cm 50.7 x 40.6



Untitled, c. 1988, C-print, cm 40.5 x 50.5



Scary Picture, 1988, C-print, cm 50.7 x 40.5



Untitled, 1986, C-print, cm 50.8 x 40.7