

Art Review

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Reviews: Europe

Mark Morrisroe

Blick ins Archiv Kunsthalle Koidl, Berlin

22 September – 13 December

By Axel Lapp

It would be easy to miss this exhibition. Kunsthalle Koidl, in a former substation deep in West Berlin that functions as a private showcase for collectors, is not a very active institution – since its founding, in June 2008, this is only its second show.

The Ringier Collection, which oversees the estate of Mark Morrisroe and organised this presentation, has also kept fairly shtum about it. This selection from the archive is a taster and trial for Morrisroe's estate, which will be exhibited comprehensively next year at the Fotomuseum Winterthur, where it is held, and at the same time for the Zurich-based Ringier Collection, as there has been talk about a museum for a long time, and also about representative exhibitions in Berlin, where the company owns several magazines.

Mark Morrisroe is not a well-known artist. Born in 1959, he is usually grouped among the 'Boston school' of photographers: David Armstrong, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin and Jack Pierson. The subject of his photography was his own life, with numerous self-portraits and portraits of friends and associates, hustlers and performers. Morrisroe died of AIDS in 1989, and his estate passed through several hands before it was acquired by Michael Ringier.

This is a small show, in two rooms, providing a glimpse of the treasures the estate contains: Polaroids, gum prints and c-prints, as well as letters, invitations, magazines and manuscripts in two rows of showcases. But then a good exhibition does not necessarily need much space, especially when most of the works measure only 9 by 11 centimetres. The Polaroids are a revelation. On one wall Beatrix Ruf – Ringier's

curator – groups more than 30 of them. Most are self-portraits – at home, in bed, in various states of dress, ready to go out, in drag, in hospital – though some are of friends, performing, and all are stunningly beautiful. In retrospect, these photographs constitute a romanticised image of a bygone era, erotic and innocent at the same time. That there is another layer to the story, of drugs, prostitution and despair, can only be guessed. The grime and seediness of the environs, even, together with the tonality of the black- and-white Polaroids, in their soft, almost tinted shades, provide them with a certain historicity, an appearance of documents from long ago.

Untitled (Lynelle) (c.1985), a girl's face in a bed of swirly cream, as if she were dressed up as a giant meringue, could also be the portrait of a showgirl from the 1930s. These photographs of New York in the 1980s are in all but name a sequel to Christopher Isherwood's tales from Berlin, unveiling glamour in the destitution – and sex. In the other room, the colour prints seem much more contemporary. Printed on larger sheets and then signed and crudely inscribed in the wide white margin, they are direct and in-yourface: see *Baby Steffenelli* (1985), probably the best-known of Morrisroe's images, of a youth in white vest, cigarette in hand and smoke blowing out through his nose – every inch a modern version of James Dean – or *Blow Both of Us, Gail Thacker and Me, Summer 1978* (1986).