

An Eye for an I: Hilton Als's 'One Man Show' Begins His Season at the Artist's Institute

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

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Sean Pressley

The American writer and cultural critic Hilton Als has been roundly and rightfully praised as one of the great literary portraitists of our time. In the pages of such publications as the *Village Voice* and the *New Yorker*, and in his books *The Women* and *White Girls*, he has written with breathtaking grace and clarity on the complex conditions of being in, or of, or despite one's time.

Over the years, however, Als has been more reticent about his photographic portraiture. Apart from the Instagram account he maintains and the pictures collected in his book *Justin Bond/Jackie Curtis*, image-making has been something he's largely kept private — until now.

Earlier this month, Als opened "One Man Show: Holly, Candy, Bobbie, and the Rest," the first of three exhibitions he will present as part of his six-month season at the Artist's Institute, the nonprofit contemporary installation and research space on Manhattan's Upper East Side. He is the first writer to receive a season at the Institute — that, traditionally, has been the province of established visual artists. For Als, his time there marks "a real coming-out."

"One Man Show" honors some of Als's heroes, many of whom are now gone: Warhol Superstars Candy Darling, Holly Woodlawn, and Curtis; drag performer/playwright Ethyl Eichelberger; the trans performers at the circus-cum-disco GG's Barnum Room; his friend Bobbie Derecktor. The exhibition is a hybrid of sorts — an "atmosphere," Als offers — that defies easy description. It can be thought of, variously, as a self-portrait refracted through the I's of others; a personal retrospective conducted via photographs found, borrowed, owned, collected, commissioned, and taken by Als; and a series of installations that electrify the photographic form, restoring its presence as a product of light and shadow. Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, the work can be understood as Als's celebration of the art and craft of self-invention.

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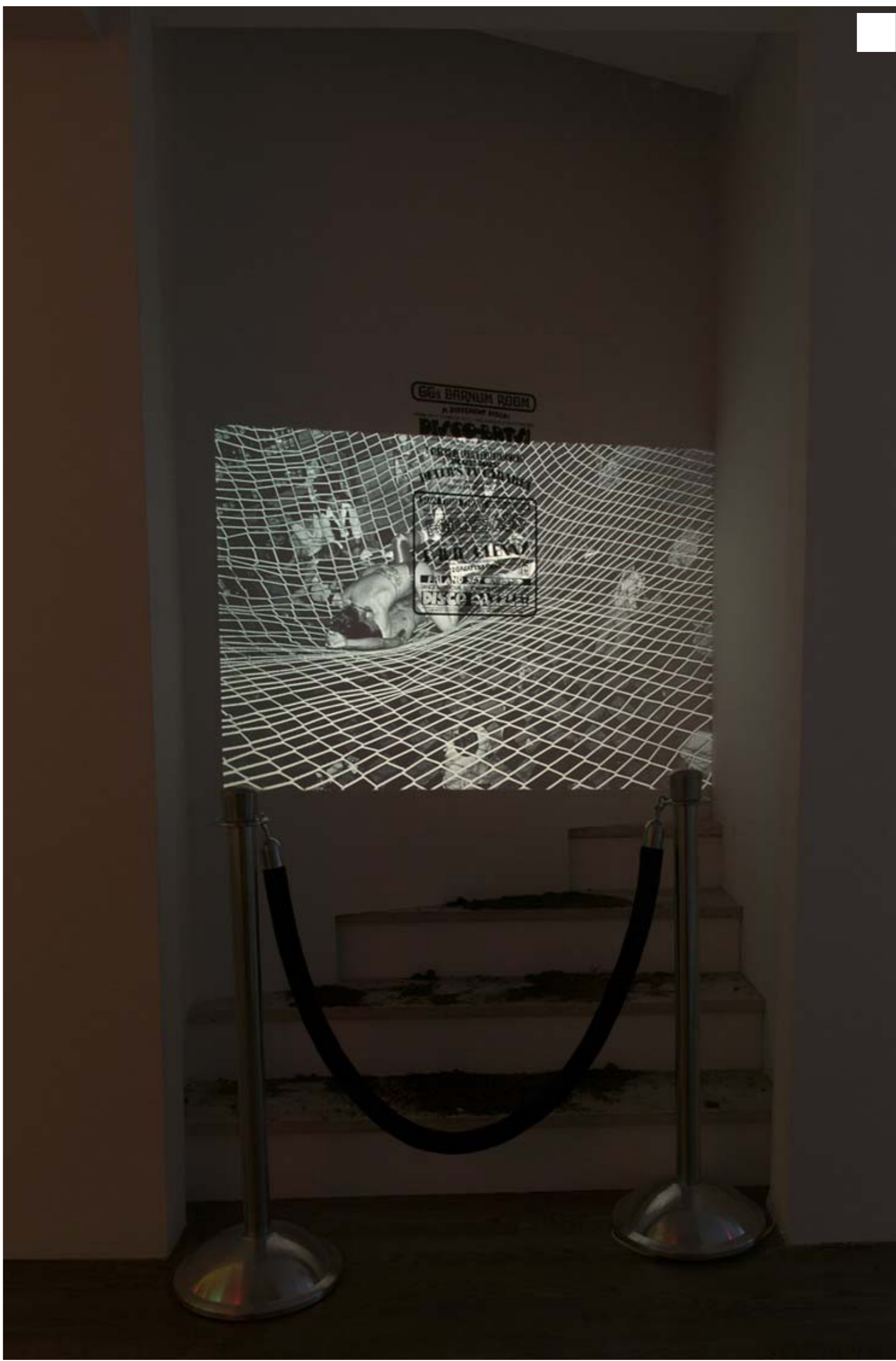
"To me the show is really about transformation in two ways: through the body and through photography," he tells me over lunch one overcast afternoon at a restaurant in the West Village. He explains that in a cultural moment that hails the success of *Transparent* and the coming-out of Caitlyn Jenner, those who paved the trans-way are too often forgotten, left out of the conversation. "People like Candy and Holly and Jackie and my friend Bobbie were amazing because there was no context for them other than themselves," he says. "I love them because their politics are in what they're doing." Without mainstream approval, or the buffer of money, or the language with which to talk about themselves, "all they had were their bodies and their bravery."

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Where words fall short of articulating the self, the self can be written on the body and captured in an image. "I've always loved photography as a medium of self-presentation," Als says. When he was a boy, he would take pictures with a Polaroid; his older sister Yvonne would sit for him ("my great model," he calls her). For a child, photography can offer an early lesson in the power of one's own eye to frame the world, to see something in it and then hold proof of this vision in hand. But for Als, photographs also stirred in him a sense of responsibility for their subjects. He needed to make sure they were safe, saved. "I was one of those kids who would archive pictures — would write information on the back of them — because I didn't want anyone to be forgotten," he explains.

Als's writing has likewise served to guard against forgetting. *The Women* weaves together stories of people dear, if not always near, to him — all forces that shaped his sense of self in one way or another. He writes of the poet and playwright Owen Dodson, who was both mentor and lover to Als when he was a teenager. He revives Dorothy Dean, a legendary New York "fag hag," who died in Boulder, Colorado, far from the circles who knew her best. And he recounts some of the details he learns of his mother's life — about her first husband back in Barbados, about how she followed Als's father to New York — she having always avoided telling them herself.



Als's *Dirt Nap/Disco* (2016) revisits the acrobats of GG's Barnum Room.

Hector Rene

"Tristes Tropiques," an essay collected in *White Girls*, his most recent book, is another tour de force of Als's form. In it, he aches for those no longer around: his college friend "K," who died of AIDS in 1992 ("my heart's desire"), and photographer/filmmaker "SL," or "Sir or Lady," a close friend with whom he experienced an intimacy he likens to twinning. "I have always been one half of a whole," he writes, revealing that his mother named him Hilton in tribute to a friend's stillborn son. "The minute I was born, I was not just myself, but the memory of someone else."

To perform the memory of someone else is in many ways Als's ambition for "One Man Show." He conjures his subjects, materializes them, while also pointing up their disappearance. For *Bobbie*, a slideshow of images of his beautiful, androgynous friend, he leaves certain slots in the tray empty so that as the display advances, sometimes you see a photograph and sometimes you stare at nothing. *Candy* is a wall-size screenprint on cellophane, for which Als evaporated Richard Avedon's iconic frieze of Warhol's Factory members, leaving only the faintest traces of the superstar's image. Als plays with light and shadow so that it feels as though phantoms flicker all around: in the transparency projected over a Diane Arbus photograph to create the image-object *Stormé, Bobbie, and the Rest*; in the films of Werner Schroeter and Darryl Turner that dance across a wrinkled scrim tacked to a wall; in the disco light that throws changing colors into a corner of the gallery.

When "One Man Show" comes down on April 24, Als will install the second part of his season, which is dedicated to James Baldwin. The third will pair sister Yvonne with performer Sheryl Sutton, who worked with Robert Wilson in the 1970s. "They both introduced me to the avant-garde," he says. Als mentions that, the day before our meeting, he'd had an idea and gone back to the galleries to install a new light. Like memory, the exhibition may shift over time, enacting its very own living portrait: that of its creator at work.

Hilton Als
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 Through August 7