



Jack Pierson, *Stephen Tashjian, 1982*  
Courtesy the artist and  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles

# Speeding Along the Edge

As young artists in Boston, Jack Pierson and Mark Morrisroe made life into a queer utopia—and showed the joy of young people being themselves.

**Evan Moffitt**

At least one thing was true: he was the toughest fag in Boston. He called himself Mark Dirt then, and he published *Dirt*, a fanzine of fake celebrity gossip for the late 1970s Beantown punk scene—“the magazine that DARES to print the truth”—along with his friend Lynelle White. His stories, which shifted over the years, always seemed like approximations of his exceptionally brutal childhood: his mother was a prostitute, and his father abandoned the family to frequent periods of homelessness. He was hustling at fourteen when a john shot him in the back, crippling him for life. Lies, like masks, can help shield us from truths too difficult to face, and so they often appear in the vivid accounts of Mark Morrisroe, as he is mostly known, and the revolutionary body of work he left behind, what the art historian David Joselit has called a “photographic masquerade.”

Morrisroe first saw Jack Pierson in 1980, through the porthole door to the kitchen of C'est Ci Bon, a French café in downtown

Boston where Morrisroe worked as a dishwasher. Their mutual friend Kathe Izzo worked the till and would let Pierson eat there for free. Morrisroe asked her to set them up, Pierson told me on an icy day in February at his studio in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick. A freshman at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt) at the time, Pierson came to the medium of photography later than Morrisroe, who was a few years ahead of him at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA). Pierson was making color copies and writing poetry when he discovered *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph* (1972). “I saw the edges of society,” he said, and wondered, “How do I get there?” And then there was Mark, all edges. “I felt like I had met somebody from a Diane Arbus photograph—and he really was. He liked that about me, and he capitalized on that.”

Pierson wears a roguish grin when he talks about Morrisroe, a dynamo who crashed into—and eventually out of—his life. Arbus is an obvious reference for the early photographs both presented in *Boston School*, a 1995 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, curated by Lia Gangitano, which also included work by David Armstrong, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Stephen Tashjian, and Shellburne Thurber. The “Boston School,” as the group came to be called, was as much about the artists having studied together—and being schooled by Boston—as any shared aesthetic concern.

Goldin was already well known by then for *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1983–2008), her slideshow of intimate friends and lovers dancing, sunning, fucking, and grieving, which, like Arbus’s work, formed an archive of the margins, yet one she documented from within. At SMFA, Goldin shot mostly in black and white; the film was cheaper, but it also gave her photographs a timelessness



Mark Morrisroe,  
*Nymph-O-Maniac*, 1983  
 © The Whitney Museum of  
 American Art and courtesy  
 SCALA/Art Resource,  
 New York

her cohort revered. Pierson first heard about Goldin, a legend almost as soon as she left school, when a teacher described one of his first pictures as “very Nan.” Goldin’s early black-and-white photographs, Pierson says, “made Boston look like Paris in the 1960s.”

In a few of Pierson’s freshman-year photographs, the edges are inky and off-kilter, a bit like the “sandwich” prints and Polaroids for which Morrisroe is best known. In his portrait *Lynelle in Provincetown* (1981), Lynelle White appears in semi-profile, like a 1930s film star, on a darkened street. Pierson also took many photographs of Tashjian, his best friend at MassArt, better known as the artist and drag queen Tabboo!, often decked out (whether butch or femme) in 1950s vintage threads. “Caspar David Friedrich in a donut shop,” Pierson once called Morrisroe, referring to his ex-boyfriend’s gritty lyricism. Then there’s the glamour of diCorcia’s *Mary and Babe* (1982), with its handsome couple, flush from sex or fighting, in a midcentury living room. Babe, in the title, refers to the dog. Bruce, a slender, headless figure, is blurry in motion as he pulls up his pants, while Mary, partly nude, smokes a cigarette in an overturned armchair. She and the dog in her lap shoot Bruce the same quizzical look in a feat of coordination straight from a golden-age Hollywood film.

The same pair appears repeatedly in Goldin’s *The Ballad*; in *The Hug* (1980), for instance, all that’s left of Bruce is an arm curled tightly around Mary’s waist. It’s unclear if we’re witnessing an embrace or a kidnapping. Goldin’s photograph, like diCorcia’s, is sexually charged and tinged with references to the past. Yet the

**Pierson wears a roguish grin when he talks about Morrisroe, a dynamo who crashed into—and eventually out of—his life.**



Jack Pierson, *Steve Stain and Janet Masoomian in front of Stephen's painting*, 1980  
Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

**Then, as now, the United States was run by a celebrity showman openly hostile to women, minorities, and the poor.**



harsh flash and the shadow it throws behind the couple are deeply unsettling. This is Goldin at her best, employing an effect that suggests immediacy—the quality for which she is perhaps best known—yet in a composition that appears precisely wrong. On the other hand, diCorcia won acclaim for scenes like *Mary and Babe* that he beautifully and painstakingly staged. Occasional resemblances between both artists' work are the results of a shared texture—and shared experience—of living life on the edge, but at different speeds.

"I was very invested in making things look more glamorous than they actually were, and not at all like the present day," Pierson says, "because this was in the midst of the '80s, which to me seemed horrible, and must be like what kids are going through today." Most accounts of Ronald Reagan's presidency, looking back, seem to ignore how much it was like Donald Trump's. Then, as now, the United States was run by a celebrity showman openly hostile to women, minorities, and the poor; his administration treated AIDS as a low-budget slum-clearance measure. It wasn't exactly a good time to be queer, healthy or otherwise, and yet these photographs testify that nothing could've been better: they show the joy of young people bravely being themselves. That may be why Goldin, Morrisroe, Pierson, and others were so often anachronistic, eager to create their own queer utopia out of time and place.

Goldin captures moments as they are unfolding, while in Morrisroe's pictures, Norman Bryson writes in the *Boston School* catalog, "the scene is already vanishing, even in its moment of appearance." (Bryson calls this "a post-coital tenderness," and many were, in fact, taken just after sex.) It's hard not to think of that vanishing in the painfully literal terms of Morrisroe's death, in 1989, at thirty, from complications related to AIDS, and the way the images of his friends he left behind crystallize their mutual development as artists. The photographer Collier Schorr called such retrospective readings a kind of "visual necrophilia," a nostalgic impulse I find hard to resist. If photographers such as Arbus and Brassai sought to show society its margins, diCorcia, Goldin, Morrisroe, and Pierson inverted this act of intrusion: as viewers, we're invited to look at their photographs as if spying a queer family album.

When I look at these pictures, I'm sixteen again, the queer, lanky teen at a punk show in Los Angeles, trying to figure out where he might fit in. Pierson and Morrisroe were misfits learning to live in their own skins, an experience borne out especially in the grainy surfaces of Morrisroe's sandwich prints, made from multiple negatives layered atop one another, which Joselit writes are very much like skins. The queer bodies they depict, never static, are engaged in a kind of masquerade, an "oscillation or collapse between figure and ground, negative and print" that mirrors the unstable performance of the self. In one early example, *Nymph-O-Maniac* (1983), Pierson and two other figures cluster in a doorway, the walls around it collaged with images from male physique pictorials, the two men holding masks. It's suffused with a grainy romanticism that seems to embrace the theatricality of queer relationships as one true measure of their authenticity.

As I left Pierson's studio, I noticed that from his front door he can see what used to be the Spectrum, an underground queer club that closed in 2018. Its scuffed wooden floors took my cum and my tears. It wasn't a utopia, but it came as close as any place I've ever known. Scenes from the dance floor, the stage, the torn leather couches flickered by, blurry yet brimming with color, like one of Morrisroe's sandwich prints or one of Goldin's slideshows. At least, that's how I have to imagine it. I never took any photographs there.

Evan Moffitt is a writer and critic based in New York and the associate editor of *frieze*.



Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled*, ca. 1980  
© The Estate of Mark Morrisroe (Ringier Collection) at Fotomuseum Winterthur