

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### Brian Weil, 1979–95: Being in the World

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART  
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Brian Weil was an artist and an activist whose career was cut short, at the age of forty-one, by a heroin overdose. A retrospective entitled *Brian Weil, 1979–95: Being in the World* was put together by Stamatina Gregory for the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, where it was on view in 2013. In 2015, the exhibition traveled to the Santa Monica Museum of Art, as part of a continuing trajectory to reintroduce the work. Since his death, Weil's work has had little exposure, and he is far from a household name. In the 1980s, he was loosely associated with artists of the Pictures Generation, yet he was committed to a different kind of politics of representation. In Weil, the work and the person were political.

*Being in the World* showcased several bodies of Weil's evocative and disturbing work, raising questions about why now is the time for his resurgence. Perhaps audiences were shocked or surprised by his work at the time it was made. Now, Weil's oeuvre can be seen as timely. Today we celebrate work that is steeped in art and activism, with the recognition that they are not at odds, but rather mutually influential. The Republican backlash against the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1980s produced a schism between art and politics. Weil's work is aligned with those who were attacked, so it seems curious that his work is not better known.

Hung chronologically, the exhibition illustrated the trajectory of Weil's pursuits and his commitment to picturing marginal communities. Among Weil's subjects are Hasidic Jews, boxers

and bodybuilders, people with AIDS/HIV, crime scenes and victims, as well as practitioners of S&M and bestiality. The exhibition began with *Sex* (1979–81), his roughest and most unsettling series. These images depict anonymous people performing various sex acts, some with animals. Originally shot on Super 8 film, Weil rephotographed selected frames, scratching and overexposing the negatives to produce the

final large-scale photographs. The purposeful degradation of the images obscures the sexual interactions between the subjects; nonetheless, it's clear that the images depict taboo subject matter. These mural-sized, square formatted, grainy and gritty black-and-white photographs became Weil's signature style. Following *Sex*, Weil traveled to Florida to ride along with the Miami Police Department Homicide Unit photographing crime scenes and victims. The *Miami Crime* photographs (1982–84) are close-cropped images of bloodied bodies lying limply where they met their demise. Stylistically, these images resemble those of Joel-Peter Witkin, who photographed models in abject poses often referencing art history. However, the difference between the two is that Weil's images are not staged, and they are soft and grainy to the point of disintegration. After making photographs of boxers and bodybuilders (1984–85), and completing his series entitled *Hasidim* (1985–87), Weil began to photograph people with AIDS.

In 1985, Weil became involved with the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and later joined ACT UP. His photographic practice and his activism became intertwined. Weil's images of people living and dying with AIDS began with the infant of an HIV-positive acquaintance and later included images shot on travels funded by the World Health Organization to Thailand, Haiti, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Weil's photographs of hospitalized AIDS patients in New York City, Thai sex workers, soldiers in the Zimbabwe National Army, and South African miners illustrated not only the global scope of the epidemic but the fact that those infected spanned demographic boundaries and groups; more often than not these people were discriminated against because of their poverty, race, and/or sexual orientation.

Weil immersed himself in the communities he documented, never condescending or passing judgment. His collective body of work reifies subcultures without necessarily condoning or celebrating what they represent. Though he struggled with the reception of his images, Weil continued to push the limits of photography throughout his short career. His images speak to a time and an aesthetic that has passed, yet what they document continues to resonate because of the way he depicted his subjects. He treated everyone who passed in front of his lens with respect, and while the manipulated qualities of many of these images place them outside the realm of straight photojournalism—in contrast to the imagery of Mary Ellen Mark and Susan Meiselas, for example, which also documented the AIDS epidemic—they evoke a closeness to both the person and the cause that could only be achieved through trust, immersion, and commitment. Weil may not have been the most aesthetically innovative or successful photographer to emerge from the downtown New York scene of the 1970s, yet this rarely seen body of work speaks to his commitment in the face of crisis, and his ability to depict that which was abject in a powerful light.

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*Transvestite Safe-Sex Outreach Worker, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic* (1987) by Brian Weil; courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, and Kenneth C. Weil

