PRESENCE AND ABSENCE:
BRUCE CRATSLEY AND THE ART
OF THE SPLIT SECOND

List Gallery, Swarthmore College
September 15 — October 30, 2016
During List Gallery’s 25th year of serving Swarthmore College and the surrounding area, it seems fitting to begin the academic year with an exhibition that features a photographer who has intimate ties to this special community. Bruce Cratsley, son of Edward Cratsley, who was Swarthmore College’s vice president for administration from 1950 to 1978, grew up on campus and graduated from Swarthmore in 1966. His work as a photographer began in 1972 at the New School for Social Research under the advising eye of Lisette Model, one of the most famed street photographers of the 1940s. Cratsley’s relationship with Model and her work is crucial to any investigation of his career. Model became known for her street portraits, which captured the human condition and her immediate surroundings in New York City. Like Model, Cratsley created visceral, accessible photographs that explored change, despair, and self-consciousness. Cratsley also echoed his mentor with expressive use of light and shadow—often noted as Cratsley’s most characteristic quality.

The List Gallery’s exhibition, Bruce Cratsley, Shifting Identities, presents select photographs taken between 1977 and 1999. It is hard to neatly categorize this diverse array of photographs, which document ideas and communities that often intertwine and relate to one another. The exhibition reflects Cratsley’s wide-ranging interests as he captured still lifes, bodies in motion or transition, statues, mannequins and reflections, and the tragic yet beautiful existence of queer communities. However varied his subjects, his photographs demonstrate consistent thematic concerns and a preoccupation with dualities: light and dark, self and other, stasis and movement, inside and outside and, most notably, presence and absence.
Bruce Cratsley spent his youth at Swarthmore College, including his years as a student, majoring in art history (1962-1966). Swarthmore did not award credit for fine art study in those days, but he benefited from extracurricular painting classes with alumnae Harriet Shorr ’60. Although Cratsley did paint at Swarthmore, mostly in oils, he did not study photography until much later. According to his brother, John Cratsley, Bruce’s most influential experience as a college student was his time spent working as an assistant curator at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. His work at the Rosenbach fostered not only a love for art but also for rare books and collectibles, as well as the curatorial process. After graduating, Cratsley began working for several major collectors and sellers of art photography in New York City.

Bruce became a widely respected photographer while working at the Magnum Photo Archive, and also at Marlborough Gallery, where he became director of Graphics and Photography. He exhibited his photographs in prominent galleries such Howard Greenberg, Laurence Miller, Lee Witkin, Yancy Richardson, and Sarah Morthland. In 1986, he left Marlborough Gallery to devote himself full-time to his art; a decade later the Brooklyn Museum recognized his achievement by organizing a retrospective exhibition of his work.

Cratsley’s photographs are more than mere relics of a successful career, however. They also serve as a means of understanding who Bruce Cratsley was as a person. Deeply involved in his community, he found inspiration on the streets of New York City (and occasionally those of Paris and Venice) and he remained fascinated by the human form. In addition, we can discern from his numerous informal portraits and documentary photographs of gay pride parades and the annual Wigstock festival that Bruce was a charming, outgoing, and social person who loved his family, friends, and partners deeply. Cratsley passed away in 1998 from complications from AIDS, a subject he documented in his work with frankness and compassion.
Still-Compositions

Cratsley often photographed flowers and seemingly innocuous inanimate objects around his apartment. Photographs such as Tulips 1, Shadows and Photo, Picture, and Goblets, Chez Moi shown on the right, exemplify Cratsley’s varied approach and primary artistic concerns. In my conversations with Cratsley family members, former classmates, as well as people encountering his photographs for the first time, the adjectives commonly used to describe his work included “sensitive,” “gentle,” “sweet,” and “romantic.” His photographs of flowers especially elicit such impressions. In Tulips 1, Shadows, rays of light stream in from the upper right, illuminating a bouquet of tulips that appear to be on the verge of fully blooming, bringing to mind the serenity of a warm spring day. Additionally, a painting just behind the bouquet seems to show the curvature of a slender neck. This feminine and delicate vocabulary of forms pervades much of Cratsley’s work, whether it depicts still lifes or animated street scenes.

Cratsley was intent on capturing the interplay of light and shadows on objects. In Photo, Picture, and Goblets, Chez Moi, he used strong contrasts to dramatize ordinary subjects: two glasses, a photograph, and a goblet. Opting for a slightly more posed and balanced composition than we see in his street scenes or images by his mentor, Lisette Model, Cratsley captures a black-and-white snapshot of a woman, perhaps a relative, resting against what looks like a wastebasket. The snapshot stands in relative contrast to surrounding inanimate objects, enlivening an otherwise placid composition. We can glimpse but not fully identify the figure, whose face disappears in shadow. Creating strong patterns of light across the table, Cratsley articulates the interplay of light and dark, presence and absence.

A brief note on technique

Bruce Cratsley used a Rolliflex camera with a twin lens and a mirror that would flop out to allow light to reach the viewfinder and strike the film. The Rolliflex’s square format tends to result in a central focal point and forces the photographer to think about how to compose an arrangement in relation to that strong central focus. Cratsley printed his own photographs on Agfa Portiga paper in his in-house studio on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. This paper allowed him to create the beautiful highlights and velvety blacks in his photographs. Most of his works are intimate in scale, usually ranging from 8 1/8 × 8 1/8 to 15 x 15 inches.
Tulips 1, Shadows, 1985

Photo, Picture, and Goblets, Chez Moi, 1985
Transient Bodies

Whereas still life arrangements lend themselves to more static—or formal—compositions, many of Cratsley’s most beautiful works explore transitional states, particularly moments between life and death and motion and stillness. *Wings of Light* shows one of Cratsley’s partners, William Leight, crouched in bed. His right arm is visible, but his left is shrouded in bright white light. This light extends across his back and creates the shape of wings in a visually arresting composition. The contrast between the earthly realm of a bedroom in New York City and the heavens conveys notions of bodily transience and spiritual transfiguration. Cratsley’s allusion brings to mind the epidemic of AIDS among gay men, which William himself died from. While Cratsley worked in New York City on the Lower East Side in the 1980s and 1990s, many of his friends and lovers were dying of the disease. The man’s crouched position hints at the physically exhausting nature of the disease. The beautiful wings of light add a layer of poignancy, evoking a mixture of remorse and serenity, heartbreak and love. This photo, along with images such as *David in Bed Hugging his Animal Friends at Home*, portray the precarious relationship between life and death.

Cratsley also explores the ability of photography to challenge conventional notions about time and space, present and the future. In *Charlie Descending*, we see a young boy turn his head (although we can’t tell which way) while climbing down a flight of stairs. The photograph’s title signifies his downward motion, but his movement is suggested by his blurred head and left arm. Cratsley does not focus on the boy’s position before the photograph was taken nor where he ended up after. Instead, he emphasizes the process in between. This transitional state is at odds with our habit of thinking about going down a staircase, one stair at a time, in a sequential fashion. Instead, Cratsley portrays the boy’s motion in progress. The boy is presented as a swirl of kinetic energy, but he is absent as a resolute figure.
**Statues**

Cratsley often considered the human form (or shadowy intimations of figures) by photographing people he knew and loved and people he encountered on the street. He also explored human physiognomy through his photographs of statues. His many images of sculptures, in my mind, showcase his perpetual interest in thinking about photography as an expression of spontaneity and movement. For example, in *French Legs* he zooms in on intertwined body parts of a sculpture group at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We know the sculpture is motionless, but Cratsley’s photograph does not feel static. We associate Greco-Roman sculpture with posed nudes that feature tensed musculature and show both the perfection of the human form and the mastery of the artist. *French Legs* differs from conventional representations of sculpture, which emphasize the inanimate nature of the material and its pedestal. Here, Cratsley photographs parts of the sculpture, obscuring their physical context and leaving the viewer to imagine the remaining anatomy. The intertwined and softly lit legs, torso, and what appears to be a phallus, do not appear to be made of marble. One might confuse those beautifully naturalistic legs for human flesh if not informed of the work’s title.

Other photographs such as *Greek Torso*, where the sculptural material appears more obvious, still appear animated, inviting a certain level of projection. Dark shadows and a close focus prompt us to fill in the gaps and ask: Who is this sculpture portraying? Where is it? How big is it? Cratsley’s photographs of sculptures remind me of how, when seeing people whiz past on the street, human forms often appear cropped or blurred. In this sense, Cratsley’s fractured portrayals of Greco-Roman bring sculpture to life. Such sculptures are no longer relics of history, traceable to a specific person, place, and legend. Their bodily ambiguity echoes the street photography of Lisette Model, where little is known of the individuals portrayed, but the snapshot allows the viewer not only to fantasize or sexualize, but to imagine their past, present, and future. By detaching his images of sculptures from their historical and architectural contexts, he makes them appear both present and absent, physically concrete yet imaginary.
French Legs, 1989

Greek Torso, 1989
Mannequins and Reflections

Cratsley also animated lifeless forms in his many images of mannequins in New York City store windows. Cratsley’s photographs of these figures differ from his statues in the sense that he gives these mannequins more personhood. Some works, such as Fashion Ghost, Barneys, show most of their anatomy. More frequently, however, works such as Crawling Mannequin suggest the mannequin’s seemingly willful participation with the world outside its glass enclosure. Imbuing such mannequins with aspects of human identity is, in part, ironic because unlike statues, we think of mannequins as generic vessels or frameworks, lacking specific identity or character of their own. Also, since mannequins symbolize a form of absence and provide metaphors for soullessness, animating them and providing them with mystery is all the more haunting and surprising. One experiences a surreal and profound discomfort in viewing these mannequins. Cratsley portrays them in such a way that they beg for a recognition we are unable to bestow.

Cratsley seems to visualize a comfort with ambiguity by situating himself as the reflected image in many photographs, including Crawling Mannequin. In such compositions it is hard to distinguish the objects located inside the shop from those that are outside or those that are reflected in the windowpane. Our eyes constantly shift between these three worlds. In this sense, we experience a sort of indeterminate state of existence between inside and outside. We are both present and absent from each space as our perspective shifts, never resting comfortably anywhere.
Fashion Ghost, Barneys, 1991

Crawling Mannequin, 1988
Gay Pride Parades & Wigstock Festivals

In my opinion, Cratsley’s documentation of Gay Pride parades and the annual Wigstock drag festival provides us with his most emotionally evocative photographs. These images convey more clear, immediate, and direct emotions. Some works are flamboyant (Costumed Man), some are intensely poignant (we’re here), and others are tender (Couple Hugging). Cratsley continues to use strong contrasts of light and dark in these photographs, but the impression of light dominates, adding to to their celebratory nature.

In photographs such as Men Gazing and Crowned with Flowers, the figures are bathed in sunlight. In both images an ethereal glow emanates from the center of the composition, highlighting the idiosyncrasies and unique personal styles of his subjects. No doubt, this abundance of light derives from the fact that these parades happened during the day. However, it also seems a poetic choice to literally illuminate a community that was for so long—and still is—left in the shadows. Cratsley conveys pride, intense passion, and desire for equality by showing the agents of social change: individuals. For this reason, Cratsley’s documentation of the parades resembles portraiture more than journalism. We are privileged to see queer people present in society and present in a fight—the same people who are so often forced into absence by oppression.

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Crowned with Flowers, undated

Men Gazing, undated