

5 Artists Capturing the Spirit of Nightlife

Osman Can Yerebakan Feb 2, 2022 10:00am



“At that point the music is always good, there’s plenty of room on the dance floor, and only the serious discoers are left,” wrote the late art historian and queer activist Douglas Crimp in his autobiography, setting the scene of a late night in the disco era. “But the best of all your body has quit resisting. It has unstoppable momentum. That is the one thing about disco comparable to any other experience. It’s like what happens in distance running or swimming.”

Crimp’s illustration of his and his peers’ nocturnal routine captures the ethos that once shaped downtown New York’s cultural landscape, particularly from the 1970s until the rise of gentrification into the mid-’90s.

Nostalgia for the grungy DIY soul of that bygone era’s after-hours continues to populate the art-world lexicon. Yet simultaneously, contemporary New York artists are articulating their own cosmos of nightlife, where geography is broader (hello, Brooklyn and Queens); gender terminology is inclusive; and racial visibility is diverse. Echoing the intersection of art and AIDS activism that took place at bars and sex clubs a few decades ago, a similar sense of camaraderie and community permeates queer venues, as well as the streets, today.

Perrotin’s current New York group exhibition “Late Night Enterprise” sheds light on the dimmed corners of nighttime social dynamics, from clubs, bedrooms, and shops to computer screens, where the moon’s mauve-colored veil reveals more than it hides. In the featured artists’ works, we see temples of the night that are backdrops for vagabonds to retreat, shelter, and thrive: homes for chosen families to bond; hubs for minds

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to converse; and nooks for pleasure seekers to play. In addition to portraying club culture as a platform of performativity and reverie, the exhibition steps into moments of nightlife, when time and reason operate on alternative rhythms. The waning of sunlight, as the curatorial premise suggests, exposes possibilities of self-fashioning, introspection, commerce, and pleasure.

The show's roster of artists is a party of cross-generational attendance: The statements of seminal artists Lyle Ashton Harris, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Betty Tompkins, Sophie Calle, and Robert Yarber mingle with a suite of new generation voices, including Kayode Ojo, Caitlin Cherry, Sam McKinniss, Alina Perez, and Ryan Wilde. Sculpture, painting, film, and photography capture various rituals of life in the early a.m., ranging from those as collective as sleep, to deeply intimate experiences of BDSM.

"You pass a point where you're beyond tired, beyond pain, beyond even thinking about stopping, thinking only that this could go on forever and you'd love it," Crimp wrote in his accounts. "It's pure ecstasy." Living at night is an art of anarchy, a rebellion against the productivity and normalities of the day, as well as against the traditional flow of time on the clock.

Here, we feature five of the show's artists—and their recollections of the nightlife that inspires their work.

Richard Kennedy



The creative stimulus and the bodily rituals of Spectrum also inspire Richard Kennedy, a multidisciplinary artist whose practice expands to theater, music, and choreography. After touring with mainstream theater productions, such as Fosse and Wicked, Kennedy turned to painting to embody the strictly collective and, at times, tolling labor of stage acting. *The War of the Rose?* and *It's Giving > Torn Florals* (both 2021) materialize performance through the abrupt gestural swipes of acrylic paint. The artist later cuts the canvas into long strips and weaves the pieces back together to capture the same energy in a fresh format.

The last New Year's Eve when Kennedy performed the queer anthem "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" at Spectrum still lives with him. "Looking around the audience of familiar faces and carrying on well beyond the sunrise, I was in a room full of some of the most creative people in the universe; I didn't want the dream to end," he said. "Spectrum was a time in space that will reverberate for generations, which I don't think I fully appreciated, but looking back, being in [Spectrum owner] Gage's room for the usual 'after afters' made me see a new reality."