



‘UNTITLED (OLDER MEN 1995)’, 1995-97

GALLERY

DEAN
SAMESHIMA

by JOSH LUSTIG

Perhaps you could read something into the baby-blue facade, or the shock of pink from the building next door. The neon OPEN 24 HOURS sign is turned off, the posters are hard to discern. The building is clearly something, disguised as nothing.

In Dean Sameshima’s work, concealment and anonymity play important roles. For more than 30 years, the Californian artist has documented the physical and psychological characteristics of queer spaces. Spaces that often had to hide themselves, to remain in some way blank, for

their own protection. From his grainy black-and-white portraits of the backs of people’s heads in Berlin porn theatres that make up the series *being alone* (2022), through to the “glory holes” in public bathrooms photographed for his series *Erdbbeermund* (2023), Sameshima’s practice is rooted in depicting something hidden.

Here we see *Melrose Baths*. “It opened in 1996 and closed in 2017,” Sameshima says. “Their lease wasn’t renewed. They survived Aids... But not greedy landlords.” It is one of seven images from the

series *Wonderland*, now on show in London. Sparse, unassuming topographic photographs of sex clubs and bath houses in Los Angeles, made between 1995 and 1997, it was Sameshima’s first mature body of work. “All the clubs I photographed in Silverlake were forced to close,” he says. “Many had years and years of battles with police, neighbours, government officials, etc. Most could not afford to keep up with the barrage of allegations.”

The photographs exist now as memorials to physical spaces that offered community and

safety. Their blankness was important. “I hope my use of anonymity becomes a tool of seduction, a lure,” Sameshima tells me. For some viewers, the image appears neutral, free of what Sameshima describes as a “demographic stamp”. But for the initiated, it means something else, something more. “There was no need for advertisements because we knew, or we knew people who knew, and word of mouth is how we discovered all these spaces.” But their closure leaves a sadness. “The advancement of technology is a double-

edged sword,” Sameshima says. “Marginalised communities have been able to develop, organise and find each other because of social media... On the other hand, it can hurt businesses. Gay bars and bathhouses served as important spaces for community development, but today, they can’t seem to survive financially because fewer people are using those physical spaces.” **FT**

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“Wonderland” is at Soft Opening, London, until May 23, softopening.london