

photograph

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KHALIK ALLAH AT GITTERMAN GALLERY

By Drew Thompson



Khalik Allah, *Hospital (Frenchie)*, 2013. Courtesy Gitterman Gallery

The street corner of Lexington and 125th Street in Harlem is worlds away from the skyscrapers of Midtown East and the Gitterman Gallery, where work by the filmmaker and photographer Khalik Allah is on view through May 12. The exhibition features 17 color photographs taken between 2012 and 2016 on that Harlem corner at night, drawn from his 2017 book, *Souls Against the Concrete*.

Allah chose to focus on a group of people under the influence of K2, a synthetic marijuana, photographing them at night and in moments of instability and addiction. The only lighting in the images is provided by streetlights or shop windows, giving these color prints a grainy immediacy. The photographer has spent significant time getting to know his subjects, such as Frenchie, the subject of his 2013 short film *Antonyms of Beauty*. As Allah writes in *Souls Against the Concrete*, Frenchie immigrated to the United States from Haiti in 1983; his brothers frequently picked him up from the street to feed him. Frenchie appears in five of the prints at Gitterman; two show him in a subway station,

presumably under the influence of K2, holding a brown paper bag to his ear in one and blowing smoke toward the camera in the other. The raucous, surreal color in these pictures can be read as a reflection of Frenchie's state of mind.



Khalik Allah, *Sapphire Smoking*, 2013. Courtesy Gitterman Gallery

Hung on the gallery's white walls, and without contextualizing captions, the photographs are jarring. Allah, though, is no hit and run photographer – he has photographed his subjects in their most vulnerable states over the course of years. His subjects presumably never envisioned these images of themselves, yet these photographs are evidence of their existence. Since finishing this series, Allah has returned to the corner of Lexington and 125th, and Frenchie is nowhere to be found.