

ART

# The Most Exacting Photographer in Downtown '70s New York

By ALEXANDRIA SYMONDS FEB. 2, 2016



The photographer Peter Hujar's "Candy Darling on Her Deathbed," 1973.  
Credit Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery and Pace/MacGill Gallery

In the pages of *T* last September, the critic and novelist Edmund White asked, “Why can’t we stop talking about New York in the late 1970s?” This month, Paul Kasmin and Pace/MacGill galleries have teamed up to present an exhibition of two dozen photos from one of that period’s most celebrated photographers, the late Peter Hujar, whose archive also supplied the imagery for White’s piece. The show includes some of his most iconic images, including “Candy Darling on Her Deathbed,” above, and the portraits of Susan Sontag and Fran Lebowitz below that were also included alongside White’s article in *T*.

The title of the exhibition, “Lost Downtown,” comes from the director of Hujar’s archive, Stephen Koch, who assisted the galleries in winnowing the selection of images down from an initial edit of about 100. “Peter’s work really is about an era in New York City life that’s vanished, and I thought it would be interesting to underline that,” Koch says. “It’s saying that there was what used to be called a bohemian downtown, which was in certain ways being ignored — wasn’t part of big, fancy New York at all. But nonetheless, it was a very vital and creative time, and a lot of what’s going on has survived. It’s become a kind of myth.”



Hujar’s “Susan Sontag,” 1975, and “Fran Lebowitz [at Home in Morristown],” 1974.  
Credit Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery and Pace/MacGill Gallery

When it comes to this exhibition and others like it, Koch ventures, the primary audience isn't his or Hujar's contemporaries, but rather a younger generation keen to access the artifacts of that time. "The strong majority of people coming through were toddlers when Peter died," in 1987, Koch says. "There's a kind of paradise-lost feeling to it, which I think is very significant." (For evidence of just how far gone that paradise is, Koch cites the spacious loft where Hujar worked: "It was illegal, but it was \$250 a month! That's what he paid!")

Of course, there were many people taking photos in New York in the '70s and '80s; the persistent resonance of Hujar's work is unique. They are aesthetically elegant, even situated within the narrative of a gritty downtown. "I think that he brought absolutely classic artistic values into the underworld of New York. Those pictures are beautifully composed. They're as beautifully composed as any Renaissance painting, and they're absolutely strict," Koch says, adding that Hujar was "enormously selective" about his work and ended up satisfied with maybe one in 100 of his own photos. "Of course, I am prejudiced, but I find the work looks better and better with time. It ages very well."

---

*"Lost Downtown" is on view through Feb. 27 at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 297 Tenth Ave., New York, [paulkasmingallery.com](http://paulkasmingallery.com). A private Artsy Onsite panel discussion featuring Vince Aletti, Fran Lebowitz, Gary Schneider and Joel Smith will take place tonight, Feb. 2, at 6:30 pm at HotelAmericano, 518 W. 27th St., New York.*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/02/t-magazine/art/photographer-peter-hujar-lost-downtown-70s-new-york.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/02/t-magazine/art/photographer-peter-hujar-lost-downtown-70s-new-york.html?_r=0)