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Peter Hujar's Gay Lower East Side: Out of the Shadows

By RENA SILVERMAN | Jan. 23, 2017



Cockette John Rothermel in Fashion Pose, 1971.

The Peter Hujar Archive/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Every enclave seems to produce one successful photographer. On the Lower East Side's gay arts scene of the 1970s, Robert Mapplethorpe broke out to achieve fame and notoriety. But, there was also Peter Hujar, Mapplethorpe's prolific contemporary. He, like Mapplethorpe, depicted aspects of gay life, was an insider among a circle of famous artists and writers, and even preferred the square format. Yet his photographs, overshadowed by Mapplethorpe's, tell different stories. Now, 30 years after he died from

complications of AIDS, Mr. Hujar is finally getting his due: a traveling retrospective, organized by the Morgan Library & Museum.

“Part of the reason he was eclipsed was because of the great success of Mapplethorpe, who filled a niche and very spectacularly filled the image of a bad-boy photographer privy to those kinds of secrets of dark, nighttime gay lifestyle,” said Joel Smith, curator of photography at the Morgan Library & Museum. “It was easy for the mainstream culture to think of him as ‘the other one,’ or ‘the minor one.’ He did not have Mapplethorpe’s knack of promoting himself.”



Christopher Street Pier (2), 1976

Credit The Peter Hujar Archive/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Mr. Hujar’s retrospective is likely to change that. Consisting of some 160 images, it will begin at the Fundación Mapfre in Barcelona this month, go to the The Hague in July, the Morgan in January of 2018, and end that fall at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive. A catalog published by Aperture accompanies the exhibition and includes essays by Mr. Smith, photo critic Philip Gefter, and a personal anecdote by friend and poet Steve Turtell.

“Mapplethorpe was considered menacing and sinister because he represented sexual behavior on the edges of mainstream society so directly, and people found it horrifying,” said Mr. Gefter. “I think Hujar’s work is psychologically dangerous in that he explored territory more emotionally uncomfortable.”

One key difference is that Mr. Hujar printed his own work, while Mapplethorpe did not. Both explored themes of gay male desire, but Mapplethorpe's prints are as shocking as his subject matter, with piercing highlights and rich blacks. Mr. Hujar's provocation, however, hangs in his midtones. Whether the photograph is of a man in mid-orgasm or a pile of grass in Port Jefferson, Mr. Hujar's ability to achieve a certain, stormy luminosity in the darkroom is what invites the viewer to linger.



Sheyla Baykal Asleep Backstage, Palm Casino Revue, 1974

Credit The Peter Hujar Archive/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

“The midtone is not always about pretty, it’s about the psychological and emotional place,” said Gary Schneider, who now prints Mr. Hujar’s work. “It becomes murkier in the gray, so that you’re kind of stuck there emotionally when you are looking at the prints.”

One of his most famous photographs is of Candy Darling, a transsexual icon of the Andy Warhol studio, on her deathbed. Mr. Hujar could have focused on the cancer that was killing Ms. Darling, the sickness of the scene, the glow of hospital white. Instead, as Mr. Gelter notes in his essay, he chose to take a portrait “imbued with the glamour of a Hollywood film still.”

(In contrast, as Arthur C. Danto noted in his 1998 essay, “The Naked Truth,” Richard Avedon’s “Andy Warhol and Members of the Factory,” depicts Candy Darling in what Danto called an “aggressive picture.” For this group photograph, Avedon chose some

men to stand naked and others clothed. All the women were clothed, though, except for Candy Darling, who with her long hair, is grouped with the naked men, her gender assignment fully revealed.)



Daisy Aldan, June 18, 1955

Credit The Peter Hujar Archive/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Despite Mr. Hujar's prolific talent, "he could not emotionally promote himself," said Stephen Koch, a writer friend who inherited Mr. Hujar's entire estate. "He would hang up on dealers."

His bouts of anger and depression might have stemmed from an abusive childhood. His parents abandoned him. By the time his mother took him back, she was drunk most nights and eventually threw a bottle at his head, prompting him to leave for good at the age of 16.

Mr. Hujar died on Thanksgiving day, in 1987, at age 53. He died so poor that, according to another friend, Fran Lebowitz, he couldn't afford to do laundry. But he seemed to have an inkling he would become famous after death.

"He once said when he died he wanted two graves, one for his body and one for his work," said Mr. Koch. "He knew he was good, knew his work was important; he did not know how, exactly. Somewhere in him he had profound confidence in what he was doing."



Candy Darling on her deathbed, 1973.
The Peter Hujar Archive/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

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