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ART & DESIGN

He Made Them Glow: A Maverick's Portrait Live On

Peter Hujar's photographs of friends and lovers, at the Morgan Library & Museum, captured downtown Manhattan's golden age before the emergence of AIDS

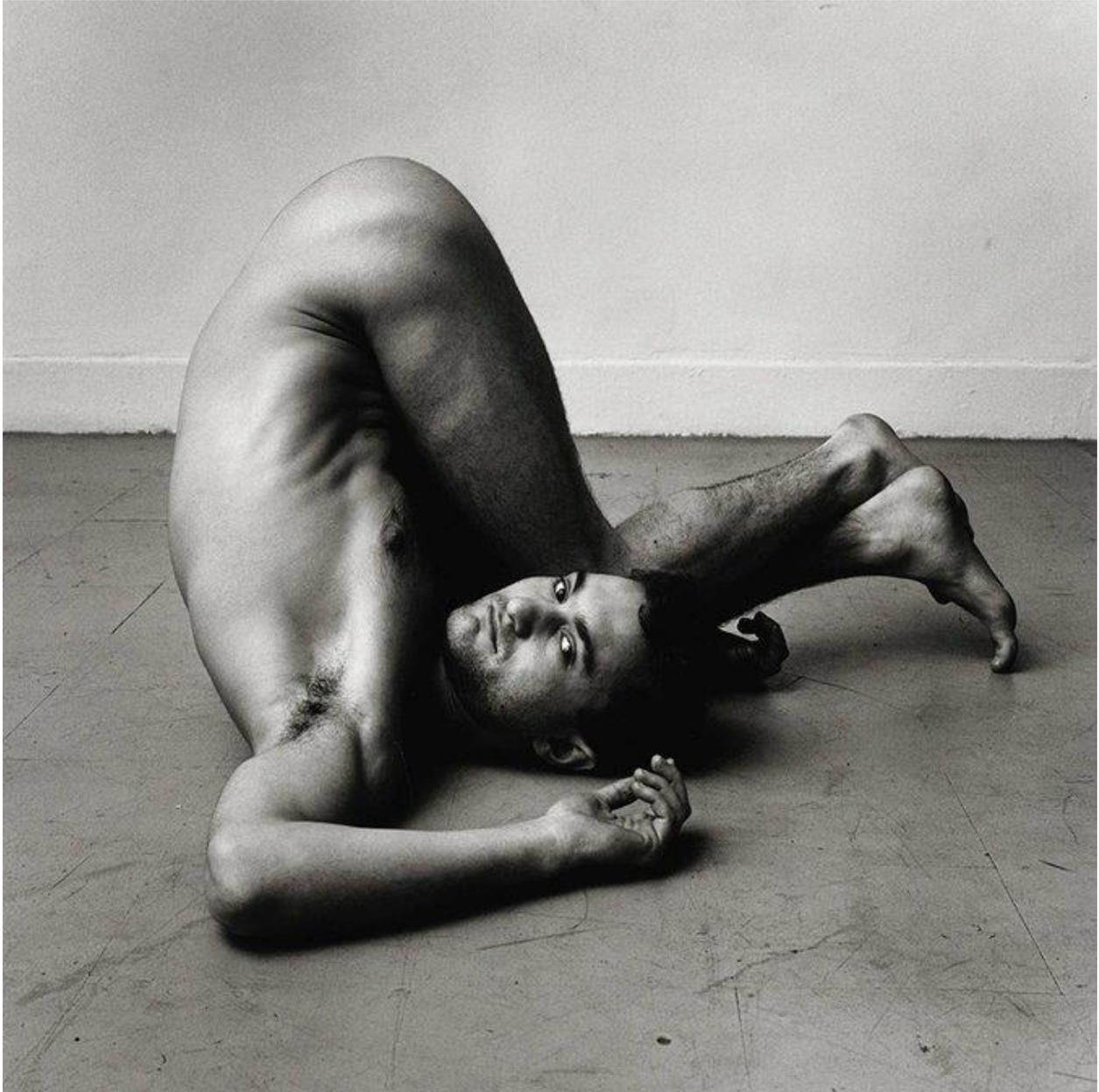
PETER HUJAR: SPEED OF LIFE

By HOLLAND COTTER | FEB. 8, 2018



“Gary Indiana Veiled,” from 1981. Peter Hujar captured the downtown Manhattan arts scene of the 1970s and '80s, and now his works are being exhibited at the Morgan Library & Museum in “Peter Hujar: Speed of Life.”

It's hard to say which is more surprising: that Peter Hujar's photographs of 1970s and '80s underground life in New York life have found their way to the Morgan Library & Museum, or that this Classically-minded institution has become unbuttoned enough to exhibit them in a heartbreaker of a show called "Peter Hujar: Speed of Life."



"Gary Schneider in Contortion," from 1979. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Hujar, one of the major American photographers of the late 20th century, was a familiar figure in the East Village four decades ago. You'd spot him, tall and dark, ambling the streets with older friends like the dance critic Edwin Denby, or young artists like David Wojnarowicz, to whom he was lover and mentor. At some point maybe you'd visit Hujar's studio, which was also his home, over an old Yiddish theater on Second Avenue.

He did most of his indoor photographs there, using available furniture — a kitchen chair, his bed — as props. His sitters were often neighborhood friends, usually male, frequently nude, sometimes in a state of sexual arousal. Whether identified by name or not, the likenesses went well beyond being those of studio models; they had a particularity that made them read as portraits. He also shot outdoors all over the city: Midtown skyscrapers, downtown loading docks, the Hudson River “sex piers.” And for many years in the summer, he headed out of town for upstate or Long Island and turned his eye to photographing animals, wild and domestic, he found there.



“Boy on Raft,” from 1978. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Born in 1934, Hujar grew up with animals. His father disappeared before he was born and his mother deposited him with her parents on a semirural New Jersey farm. Ukrainian was the household language, and Hujar seems to have spent more time with the local livestock than he did with other children. He very early picked up a camera. Like a tourist unnerved by culture shock in a foreign land, he could distance, control and communicate with the world through it.

By 11, he was living in Manhattan with his remarried mother, an unhappy arrangement. By the end of high school he was on his own, but with some valuable guidance from one of his teachers, a gay poet named Daisy Aldan (1918-2001), who encouraged his acute sense of difference. His 1955 studio portrait of her — Joan of Arc haircut, hand raised in self-amused benediction — is the show's earliest picture and a true beauty.



“Ethyl Eichelberger as Minnie the Maid” (1981). Hujar referred to his favored sitters as people who were “chic, but in a dark kind of way.” Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

By this time, he was working as an assistant to a commercial photographer, hanging out at West Village cafes and bars, and meeting artists — Joseph Raffael, Paul Thek — who would become, for varying lengths of time, friends, lovers and travel mates. On a 1963 visit to Sicily with Thek, he wandered into a Roman Catholic catacomb filled with antique corpses dressed in moldering funeral finery. He only stayed about half an hour, but the pictures he took are among the most memorable of his early career.

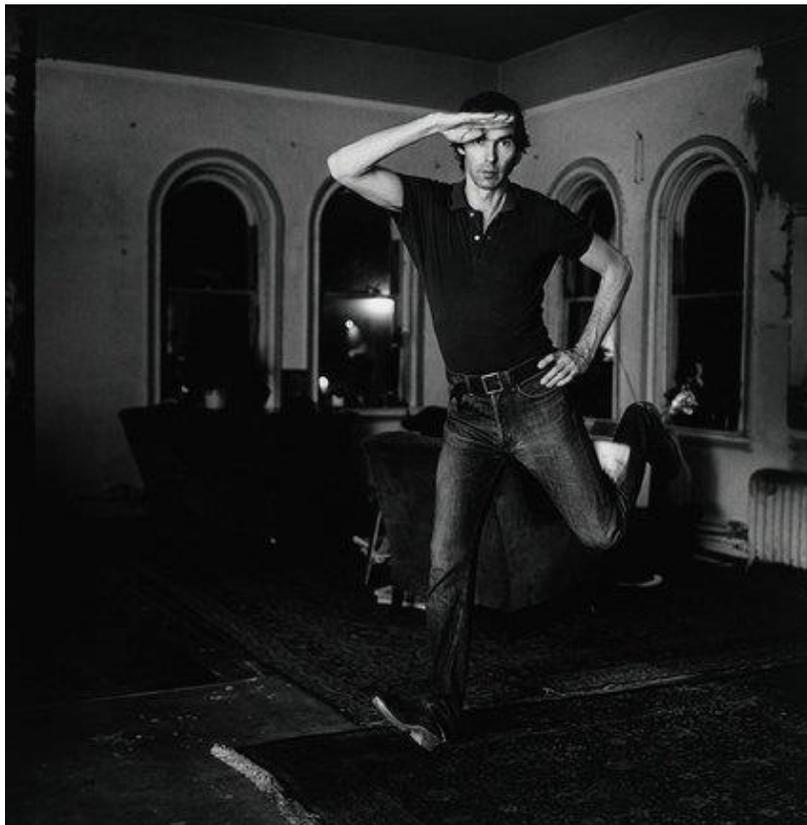
Back in New York, he dropped salaried jobs in favor of flexible freelance gigs in fashion and advertising that would support his own work. With his magnetically reticent personality, he moved with ease through the overlapping countercultural spheres that comprised the downtown avant-garde, from Judson Dance Theater to the Warhol Factory and the nascent gay movement. He was around for the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion. And when, in its wake, his then-lover, Jim Fouratt, became a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front, Hujar contributed to the cause the only way he knew how, with a photograph — of GLF members staging a protest march for his camera. It remains one of the signature images of the time.



“Dog, Westtown, New York,” 1978. Nowhere is Hujar’s sense of tenderness and vulnerability more evident than in his photographs of animals. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

But Hujar himself had no interest in activist politics. By this point, he was 35 years old, struggling professionally, cash-poor, but rich in downtown connections. The world he cared about was the one he could view, edit, speak to and shade through his camera. And in the '70s and early '80s, that's what he did by initiating his own personal golden age of portraiture.

A few of his portraits of famous figures — the singer Peggy Lee, for example — may have been a product of freelance assignments. Most others were self-assigned. Some were of high-profile personalities like Susan Sontag. But the fame of most of his sitters extended little farther than a few blocks downtown. Occasionally he would shoot “on location,” as he did in the case of the Warhol transgender superstar Candy Darling (born James Lawrence Slattery), who, dying of cancer at 29, vamped for him in her hospital bed. But generally, people came to his Second Avenue studio.



Hujar's "Self-Portrait Jumping (1)," from 1974. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

They included such protean theater figures as Charles Ludlam and Robert Wilson; the poets John Ashbery and Anne Waldman; critics like Vince Aletti and Fran Lebowitz, who were also close personal friends; and drag performers like Jackie Curtis and later — repeatedly — the endlessly versatile Ethyl Eichelberger. Hujar referred to his favored sitters as people who were “chic, but in a dark kind of way.” Whatever their darkness, he made them glow with sumptuous black-and-white chiaroscuro. And he made even the edgiest figures — a man tying his limbs into knots, a woman locked in a body cast — look relax and softened.

To create this effect, he used a technique that could easily have been lifted from therapy. He asked many of his 1970s portrait subjects, male and female, clothed and nude, to pose lying down on his bed, where they seem to be drifting toward asleep, or just waking up, or lost in post-coital trance. And nowhere is a sense of tenderness and vulnerability more evident than in Hujar's photographs of animals that he encountered in the wild or on farms belonging to friends.



“Christopher Street Pier (2),” 1976. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

He would slowly approach cows or sheep or birds, talking softly, conversationally, calming them into stillness. He seems to have regarded the animal portraits — along with his several portraits, early and late, of children — as, in some sense, self-portraits. They certainly feel like images understood from the inside: emblems of innocence threatened. Yet more than even the most composed of his human subjects, Hujar's animals seem self-controlled and self-contained. They have the inviolate dignity of bodhisattvas.

A few of these photographs, along with several of the prone human portraits, appeared side by side in the only book Hujar published in his lifetime, "Portraits in Life and Death," which arrived, with an introduction by Sontag, in 1976. And intermingled with those pictures were some of his shots of corpses from the Palermo catacombs. The book got a mixed reception. Some people hated it. They thought the combination of living and dead, human and animal, was perverse and grotesque. I loved it, still do.



"Daisy Aldan, June 18, 1955," a studio portrait of one of Hujar's high school teachers, a gay poet who encouraged his acute sense of difference. Credit Peter Hujar, via Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

It demonstrates that each of Hujar's photographs is a stand-alone object, masterfully conceived and printed, complete in itself. Yet the work overall is the product of a single complex, difficult sensibility. It shares a pervasive and insistent atmosphere of otherness, and — this comes through only gradually — a spirit of level-eyed fortitude in the face of damage. (The same point is made in the show, organized by the Morgan's curator of photographs, Joel Smith, which replicates the book-like, edge-to-edge hanging of 70 disparate pictures in vertical pairs that Hujar created for his 1986 solo show at Gracie Mansion Gallery.)

And damage did come, with the emergence of AIDS. Many of the people in Hujar's photographs — Eichelberger, Ludlam and Wojnarowicz lead a long list — died as a result of the disease, which makes the show itself a portrait in life and death. Hujar, who remained little known to the art world at large while the reputations of near-contemporaries like Robert Mapplethorpe soared — received his diagnosis in 1986. He put down his camera in despair and never worked again. He died a year later, at 53.

In a way, the Morgan has picked up the thread of his art for him. Its exhibition catalog, with essays by Philip Gfelter, Steve Turtell and Mr. Smith, gives the first full account of his life. And the museum itself has acquired a substantial chunk of his work — more than 100 lifetime prints and thousands of contact sheets — for its permanent collection. In the process, a venerable institution has refreshed itself, and a resistantly singular artist has become the Classic he always was and will always be.

Peter Hujar: Speed of Life

Through May 20 at the Morgan Library & Museum, Manhattan; 212-685-0008, themorgan.org.
The show heads to the UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive in July 11.

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