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# Peter Hujar and the Lost New York



The Peter Hujar Archive LLC

**By Guy Trebay**

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“I like people who think they’re going to have a better time tomorrow,” the filmmaker John Waters said. “I’m not interested in looking backward.”

The subject was nostalgia, particularly the acute yearning that seems to be threaded through the culture lately for the gritty bohemian New York of the late 1970s.

In an essay last September, Edmund White noted a spate of recent works with links to what you may term lost downtown, among them Rachel Kushner’s 2013 novel “The Flamethrowers,” Garth Risk Hallberg’s 2015 “City on Fire,” the HBO series “Vinyl” and a retrospective of work by the artist David Wojnarowicz set to open at the Whitney in 2018.

Then came an exhibition at the Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea that had “Lost Downtown” as its title. The retrospective, mounted in collaboration with Pace/MacGill Gallery, brought together roughly two dozen images by the photographer Peter Hujar — visual poète maudit of the place and era — and coincided with New York Fashion Week.

Suddenly, the Hujar exhibition became destination viewing for style cognoscenti, who made a point of stopping off in Chelsea between Proenza Schouler and Rodarte for a glimpse of Hujar’s hauntingly luminous portraits of Mr. Waters, Fran Lebowitz, Susan Sontag, the drag performer Ethyl Eichelberger and the Andy Warhol superstar Candy Darling on her deathbed.

That the brilliant photographer is experiencing a fame that eluded him during his lifetime (Hujar died of AIDS in 1987) surprises even those who struggled for decades to rescue his work from obscurity. “In a sense, during his lifetime, though he knew everybody and was highly productive, Peter had hardly any career at all,” said Stephen Koch, director of the Peter Hujar Archive.

In recent years Hujar’s work has turned up on album covers (Antony and the Johnsons’ “I Am a Bird Now”), in ad campaigns (for the men’s wear designer Patrik Ervell) and on the cover of Hanya Yanagihara’s novel “A Little Life.”

A suite of Hujar’s images was a central feature of an exhibition curated by Caroline Bourgeois and the artist Danh Vo at the 2015 Venice Biennale, and a full-scale Hujar retrospective is planned for the Morgan Library in 2018.

In October, Christie’s auctioned a single print of the 1973 photograph “Candy Darling on her Deathbed” for \$50,000.

To an extent, the celebrity visited on an artist who died nearly three decades ago can be chalked up to his having documented inhabitants of a New York that has all but vanished. “For me, Hujar has always been the huge romantic figure from the period, the

embodiment of New York when it was truly bohemian,” said Mr. Ervell, 36. “My generation and people in the generations younger than me look at the period as an extremely authentic time. In my imagination, Hujar’s images were of true bohemians living in a New York that has no room for that kind of life anymore.”

It was the New York, as the critic and curator Vince Aletti (and Hujar subject) noted in an interview, of Charles Ludlam’s Theater of the Ridiculous, the Cockettes, the Fillmore East, the Fun Gallery, the back room at Max’s Kansas City, the Tenth Floor, Fire Island Pines and of such barely imaginable phenomena as disco and cruising. “Downtown felt full of possibilities,” Mr. Aletti said. “You didn’t have to be rich or pretty, though it helped if you could dance.”

Handsome, perennially broke, the product of a troubled family (“The high road to Peter’s A-list was to have been an abused child,” said Mr. Koch, the archive director), Mr. Hujar lived for much of his adult life in a quasi-legal loft on lower Second Avenue rented for \$200 a month.

Like another former inhabitant of that same loft, the Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis, he often went without heat and disposed of his household garbage in public trash cans. “Peter was so poor, he washed his jeans in the sink,” said Cynthia Carr, biographer of Hujar’s lover Mr. Wojnarowicz. “And he dried them on the radiator.”

Still, as Mr. Aletti noted in an essay accompanying the Kasmin show, Hujar rarely missed an evening’s screening, concert, dance performance, press party, nightclub opening or “tour of the baths.” He was a walker in a city Mr. White characterized as far more intimate — or, at least, less strictly stratified — than the one we now inhabit.

“When I look back on it now, a lot of it was great, people celebrated so many things, but a lot of it was also very, very tragic because so many people died,” Mr. Waters said.

While AIDS and its specter hung over the Kasmin show (roughly a third of the portraits depict people claimed by the disease), it was the vitality of the period and not its grim coda that the largely youthful gallerygoers responded to, said Mariska Nietzsche, the gallery director. “I was startled by the youth of the people who came,” Ms. Nietzsche said. “They’re clearly a generation or two out from all of this,” she said, and yet “seem to be having a bit of a love affair” with a Manhattan long gone.

When Mr. Aletti first came to New York in 1969, the apartment he rented on East Eighth Street cost \$125 a month. Even without steady employment, Hujar managed to scrape up just enough every month to get along.

“Downtown New York was a very intimate, local world,” said the writer Steve Turtell, a onetime Hujar intimate. “And the city was so wide open, you could set up shop as anything you wanted. It wasn’t a world of credentials. All people cared about was, can you do it? You say you’re a painter, a writer, a photographer? Let’s see.”