



Caja, Jerome (1958-1995)

by Craig M. Corpora

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Jerome Caja on the cover of *Homocore*, one of the first queer 'zines, in 1989.

San Francisco visual artist Jerome Caja is known for his small, sensuous combinations of found objects, which he painted with nail polish, makeup, and glitter. He was also a well known drag artist, performing at alternative queer clubs during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Jerome David Caja was a second-generation Czechoslovakian-American born in Cleveland, Ohio on January 20, 1958. The third oldest of eleven brothers, he was reared in a large Catholic family.

Caja attended Catholic schools, graduating from St. Edward High School in 1976 where he received an award in recognition of his outstanding achievement as a "Scenic Artist."

Religion played a substantial role in Caja's upbringing. He belonged to a sect of Catholicism that is "as close as you can get to fundamentalist Christian as the Catholic church is willing to let you go."

Probably soon after graduating from high school, Caja came out as both gay and "born again." He said that the apparent dichotomy between his religious and sexual identities was helpful in taking his mind off himself. As part of his religious expression, he did a lot of volunteer work, including teaching art to retired nuns and disadvantaged kids.

From 1978 through 1980, Caja attended Cuyahoga Community College, then he transferred to Cleveland State University, where he earned a B. A. in Ceramics in 1984.

After graduating from Cleveland State, he moved to San Francisco to attend graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute. He earned his M.F.A. in 1986. During this period, he switched from a concentration on ceramics to painting.

In 1988, Caja tested positive for HIV. By 1993, the infection had progressed to full-blown AIDS.

Caja painted on pretty much any surface he could get his hands on. Everything became a site of artistic expression. Sandpaper, tip trays, flattened bottle caps, and used condoms were painted on with nail polish, makeup, and white-out, sometimes in combination with more traditional media like watercolors and gouache. These "Little Lovelies" (as he called them) were mounted onto lacy fabrics and set inside thrift-

store frames.

Caja often employed Greco-Roman mythology, Catholic iconography, and art historical references, alongside his own personal iconography of fruit bowls, eggs, birds, and happy faces. His narrative works and portraits typically included irreverent humor, overt sexuality, and gender fluidity.

By using such icons and tropes, Caja expanded the expression of seemingly immutable signifiers so that they apply more broadly to all walks of life. Although his work is sometimes associated with the trauma of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, he believed it conveyed a more universal sense of the fragility of life.

In 1989, Caja received critical attention for his first solo show, which was called "Cosmetic Miracles" and was exhibited at the Force Nordstrom Gallery in San Francisco. David Levi Strauss, in the April 1989 issue of *Art Forum*, said Caja's show displayed "more spunk and eloquence per square yard than any local exhibition in recent memory."

Two years later, Caja was featured in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Facing the Finish: Some Recent California Art," which presented a sample of California artists who were pushing beyond entrenched modes of visual expression. This show also included queer artists Nayland Blake and Millie Wilson.

The following year, in October 1992, "Remains of the Day" opened at Southern Exposure--a San Francisco Mission district nonprofit art organization. This exhibition featured works by both Caja and his good friend Charles Sexton, who had died of AIDS-related complications the previous year.

The exhibition was the culmination of a pact the artists had made. They vowed that when one of them died, the "loser" would have to make art works with the ashes of the deceased. Caja infused Sexton's ashes with nail polish and resin, and used them to create narrative paintings and intimate portraits that were given away as gifts to friends and family after the show.

Caja was also known for his post-apocalyptic "skag-drag," a style characterized by harsh make-up and skimpy, tattered lingerie. He performed at San Francisco clubs such as Club Uranus, Chaos, and Product. His performances featured go-go dancing that often devolved into wrestling matches with other dancers.

Caja frequently used his exhibition openings as sets for outlandish drag performances. For the April Fool's Day 1990 opening of "Compact" at Art Lick Gallery in San Francisco, an enthroned Jerome gave jelly bean "communion" to those who knelt before him.

During the opening of "Toilet Water" at Kiki Gallery in April 1994, he lounged in a bubble bath while attendees roamed around the gallery. (Kiki Gallery was concurrently showing an exhibition by Catherine Opie called "Portraits," which included a photograph of Caja.) For the opening of his show "Dirty Little Secrets" at Gallery Paule Anglim, also in 1994, he appeared as Miss Fortune, giving "terror-ot" readings from homemade tarot cards.

Caja succumbed to complications from AIDS on November 3, 1995. He was 37.

Caja's artwork is part of many public collections, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the New York Public Library, and the Los Angeles County Museum (LACMA). His papers and many small (and some large) works are part of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

Visual AID (1989-2013), a non-profit organization that supported the creative production of artists living with life-threatening illnesses, created "The Jerome Caja Terrible Beauty Award" in 2008. The award was funded by the Jerome Caja Estate and Gallery Paule Anglim and was given to four artists in the period from 2008 to 2012.

Interest in Caja's work has had a resurgence. For example, one of the works from "Remains of the Day," "Charles Devouring Himself" (1991), was included in the exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," which was held at the National Portrait Gallery from October 30, 2010 through February 13, 2011.

Many of Caja's works were on display in "Contemporary Painting, 1960 to the Present: Selections from the SFMOMA Collection," which was exhibited from May 18 through August 12, 2012. Also, Caja's work "The Birth of Venus in Cleveland" (1988) is included in the book by Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, *Art and Queer Culture*, which was published 2013.

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About the Author

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