



Hujar, Peter (1934-1987)

by Linda Rapp

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Photographer Peter Hujar created stark, stunning, affecting, and sometimes disturbing images in black and white. His oeuvre ranged from portraits of famous writers and artists to homoerotic subjects and pictures of domestic animals.

Hujar was born on October 11, 1934 in Trenton, New Jersey, but soon thereafter his father—said to have been a bootlegger—abandoned his wife and son. Hujar's mother gave over the care of the infant to her parents. Growing up on his grandparents' farm, Hujar spoke only Ukrainian until he started school.

Hujar remained on the farm until 1946, when his grandmother died and, according to Klaus Kertess, "his aunts and uncles began to make life miserable for him." At the urging of her father, Hujar's mother reclaimed her son and brought him to live with her and her second husband in New York City.

At the age of thirteen Hujar got his first camera and used it to photograph the creatures who had been an important part of his youth, the animals on the farm. His fascination with animals as subjects would continue throughout his life.

While Hujar was a student at the High School of Art and Design in New York, Daisy Aldan, one of his teachers, appreciated his talent for photography and encouraged him to pursue it as a career.

Upon graduation in 1952 Hujar began working as a photographer's assistant. As an apprentice, he already began to establish an artistic identity of his own, yet he was also a student of his predecessors and sought to be part of the history and tradition that included the work of Matthew Brady, Judy Margaret Cameron, Berenice Abbott, Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus, Cecil Beaton, and Lisette Model, the last of whom he particularly admired.

Through his work, Hujar became acquainted with other members of the artistic community in New York, among them Joseph Raffael, with whom he went to Italy in 1958 for a two-year sojourn.

Upon returning to New York in 1960 he took an apartment on Second Avenue that would be his home base for the ensuing fourteen years, but Italy drew him back. He returned there in 1962 and made a series of photographs of mummified bodies from the catacombs on Palermo, Sicily. He combined the gruesome and haunting pictures with photos of members of the contemporary New York arts community in the only book of his work produced in his lifetime, *Portraits in Life and Death*, published in 1976.

Once back in New York again, Hujar worked as a commercial photographer until 1966, when Richard Avedon introduced him to Ruth Ansel, the art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, whereupon he launched a brief career in fashion photography.

Seeking his own direction, in 1969 Hujar opened his own commercial studio whose celebrity clients included



Peter Hujar created the photograph for this poster the Gay Liberation Front used to publicize New York City's first gay pride march in 1970.

such stars of the entertainment world as Peggy Lee and Jayne Mansfield. He also photographed drag artists including Divine, Charles Ludlum, and Ethyl Eichelberger, who posed as various characters, such as Nefertiti and "Auntie Bellum."

In his thoughtful essay "In and Out of Fashion," published in *Peter Hujar: A Retrospective* (1994), Max Kozloff stated, "Hujar . . . stands apart from them all [i.e., previous photographers] because of the fact that transvestism was part of his world. He beheld such homosexual display from a much closer perspective than his straight predecessors. And that is why homosexuality has a different charge in his work than it does in theirs. So much are men's desires part of his mental environment that it never occurs to him to photograph in a sensationalist spirit."

At the same time Hujar was also becoming active in the gay rights movement, and he volunteered to make a picture for the Gay Liberation Front to use as a poster to publicize the first gay pride march, held in June 1970 on the first anniversary of Stonewall.

Hujar hoped to photograph hundreds of subjects, but only fifteen people had the courage to appear for the photo shoot. Undaunted, he mounted a lamppost and arranged the shot, telling the volunteers to move back and then run toward him.

Although Hujar had only fifteen brave marchers, he knew how to direct them to create a photograph of importance and power. Fran Winant, one of the participants, told Steven F. Dansky of *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, "Peter Hujar's photograph is a reminder of an important time in my life when, with love, exuberance, and daring, we launched the modern gay movement and gave a gift of human rights and freedom to the people of the future. As a measure of our success, no one now can know the fear we felt then at being in this photo and the poster made from it. Each year millions celebrate gay liberation with us. I imagine them filling the empty space in the photograph behind us."

Most of Hujar's art was not, however, overtly political. Indeed, much of it was intensely personal; many of his subjects were also his lovers. In a contribution to the *Retrospective*, Robert Levithan writes that "Peter was as complex and straightforward as his photographs. The boundaries between life and work were virtually nonexistent. . . . the act of picture taking was always intimate, tender—often erotic or overtly sexual. . . . When taking pictures he was both a wise old man and an innocent child playing."

In the same volume, Dieter Hall comments on the complexities and dichotomies in Hujar's work, saying, "Attraction and detachment, formal rigor and relaxed embrace of the moment. Pride and love, utterly unabashed sexuality and contemplative withdrawal, sustained mystery in unbroken directness, discipline and ironic undertones. No matter what he photographed, Peter retained, or perhaps one should say, heightened its absolute singularity. Every person, every animal, every single thing is unique, proud, alone."

Another contributor, Jean-Christophe Ammann, observes that Hujar found a "moment of dignity" in his photographs. It was true for the mummies, for the rich and famous, for his lovers, for residents of psychiatric hospitals, for pets, and for farm animals.

Among Hujar's best-known photographs is "Candy Darling on her Deathbed" (1974). The twenty-eight-year-old drag artist who was about to succumb to bone cancer appears at the center of the image, glamorously made up, seductively posing, and surrounded by flowers. It is only as one studies the arresting portrait that one notices the presence of the inescapable accoutrements of a hospital room—the typical functional but unattractive wall-mounted light fixture, the corner of the mobile table on which patients are served their meals, the plastic identification band on her arm.

Kozloff writes of this photograph, "In the psychological delicacy with which he recognized the dying Candy

Darling's seductive charade, Hujar took leave of all his photographic mentors, outside as well as inside the studio. Like much of his work, it is a heart-breaking picture, suffused with a moral beauty that goes beyond its already exquisite physical beauty."

Hujar continued taking photographs until he was on his own deathbed. When he lay dying of AIDS, artist David Wojnarowicz, his companion during his last years, brought him a camera so that the bed-ridden Hujar could take pictures of him. "The dying man tries to capture life literally through the lens of a camera," notes Lori B. Harrison of this image. "The irony is that the man in the photograph, who appears so alive externally, will also die of an AIDS-related illness. The sense of 'you are next' that Hujar and Wojnarowicz try to convey is operative in much AIDS art."

Hujar, who had been diagnosed with AIDS in January 1987, died later that year, on Thanksgiving Day, November 26.

Hujar was widely admired by other photographers as well as friends and lovers, many of them connected in one way or another to the world of the arts.

Although he inspired affection and loyalty in his acquaintances, many were aware of the enigma of his being able to move through and participate in various communities while still always remaining an "other," a man in some essential way isolated.

Stephen Koch, for example, remarks that "The unsayable truth—I dislike saying it now—is that his isolation, cruelly though it hurt him, was part of his strength. It was part of his art. It may have been essential to his art."

Hujar's difficult personality undoubtedly affected his career. As Koch observes, "There were some curators and dealers who had grasped his place in American photography: Not many. A few foresighted collectors had stood by him: Not many. (This was not, by the way, exclusively the fault of the dealers and collectors. Hujar was an angry and difficult man. He could suddenly lash out at perfectly well intentioned people, and 'inexplicably' reject them. Collecting or showing him required not merely foresight. It also took nerves of steel.)"

For all the complexities of his personality, however, Hujar managed to endear himself to many. In a piece in the *Retrospective*, photographer Nan Goldin recalls, "The thing that was most amazing at Peter's funeral was how many people came who thought they were Peter's best friend. And many of us had never met each other. He lived in different worlds, he touched many people, and his work, like so few photographs, can't be forgotten and becomes even deeper and more compelling over time. Peter's work is not just photography—it's about birth and death and the stages of life and variety of identity and all the friends in between."

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