

Stills

Peter Hujar

Saturday 16 February - Sunday 27 April 2008

Peter Hujar

Peter Hujar is one of the most important American photographers of the 70s and early 80s. He is best known for his black-and-white portraits of New York's avant-garde and underground stars, but his subjects also include nudes, animals and the night time streets of downtown Manhattan. Hujar was a highly significant figure in the art scene that flourished in New York's East Village during this period, and his work was an important influence on younger artists such as Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Hujar was born in 1934 in Trenton, New Jersey, to parents of Ukrainian descent. Raised by his grandparents on their farm in New Jersey, at the age of 12 he went to live with his mother in Manhattan. From the early 50s Hujar worked on the fringes of New York's commercial photography world, and in 1960 he moved to the Lower East Side, where he would be based for the rest of his life. By the early 70s Hujar had become deeply involved in the cultural life of New York's Downtown – with its circuit of gigs, parties, openings and drag shows.

Hujar was a famously 'difficult' personality, who refused to pander to the marketplace, and his work received little public recognition during his lifetime. He died from AIDS complications in 1987.

Front Gallery

This room includes a selection of Hujar's images of New York itself, taken at night or in failing light. The 'night photography' of cities is associated with figures such as Brassai and Weegee, but Hujar's images of New York – although little known until relatively recently – are of a similar power.

These urban landscapes reflect the condition of the city in the mid 70s, when New York was suffering in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973, and when Downtown was notorious as a locale of criminals and bohemians. Hujar depicts the abandoned nocturnal streets of areas such as the Meatpacking District, but also the skyline of Lower Manhattan – including the two towers of the World Trade Centre, which opened just before the onset of recession.

In the mid 70s Hujar also took a powerful series of male nudes, drawing on his background in fashion photography as well as on the liberated sexual culture of New York's gay community at the time (a subject matter which he was exploring at the same time as Mapplethorpe).

Back Gallery

Hujar first made a name for himself with his male nudes and his portraits from the gay scene, and this room contains a number of the photographs of drag artists that he took in the mid 70s. Hujar's image of Candy Darling is one of the photographer's most celebrated, and shows its subject – who had become famous as one of the 'Superstars' of Warhol's movies – in hospital, dying of bone cancer at the age of 28. Other subjects shown here include Ethyl Eichelberger, who specialised in historical roles, and Divine, who was then becoming famous through the films of John Waters. Along with Andy Warhol, Waters drew on the camp / trash aesthetic that had been pioneered in the gay scenes of cities such as New York and San Francisco.

Waters was also among the 'faces' that Hujar featured in his 1976 publication *Portraits in Life and Death* which contained 29 images of New York's cultural movers and shakers, including the artist Paul Thek and the writer Susan Sontag (who also wrote the introduction). Hujar's portraits from this time usually show their subjects in highly introspective mode, often reclining. Most of them were taken using a tripod and a very few props in the artist's Second Avenue loft.

Stairwell

Some of Hujar's earliest photographs, on his grandparents' farm, had been of animals, and it was a subject to which he returned from the late 70s onwards. Hujar depicted animals with the same square format film, and the same concentration on the singular subject, that he brought to his portraits. These photographs also typify the sense of mortality which had always characterised Hujar's work.

Lower Ground

A group of photographs that Hujar made in 1963, on a prolonged trip to Italy, offers a postscript to the exhibition. These are images of desiccated bodies in the catacombs of Palermo in Sicily, and photographs from this group feature alongside the famous faces in *Portraits in life and Death*. Susan Sontag, in her text for the book, remarks how in one group, "fleshed and moist -eyed friends and acquaintances stand, sit, slouch, mostly lie - and are made to appear to meditate on their own mortality." The Palermo photographs, meanwhile, complete and comment upon the former images: "Peter Hujar knows that portraits in life are always also, portraits in death."

List of Works:

Clockwise from right

Front Gallery:

Daniel Schook Sucking Toe, 1981
The World Trade Center at Night, 1976
Boy on Park Bench, 1981
Woolworth Building, 1976
Leroy Street, 1976

Girl in My Hallway, 1976

Man in Park, 1981
Pier, Five Doors, 1983
Hallway, Canal Street Pier, 1983

West Side Parking Lots, NYC, 1976
San Gennaro Festival, 1976

Above Stairs:

Ethyl Eichelberger, 1981

Back Gallery:

Edwin Denby, 1975
Candy Darling on her Deathbed, 1974

Jackie Curtis Dead, 1985
Greer Lankton's Legs, 1983
Susan Sontag, 1975

David Lighting Up, 1985
Bill Elliott, 1975
Divine, 1975
Robert Masturbating, 1977
Paul Thek, 1975 Vintage Silver Print
John Waters, 1975

Unless otherwise stated all photographs are silver gelatin prints, 37 x 37cm.

Peter Hujar is an ICA touring exhibition supported by the Arts Council England.
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Stairwell:

Lynn Davis Nude, 1985

Goat, Westtown, 1978

Cow's Head, Severed, 1979

Lower Ground Level:

Hudson River, 1975
Palermo Catacombs (7), 1963
Palermo Catacombs (13), 1963
Palermo Catacombs (9), 1963
Palermo Catacombs (3), 1963



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