



Fayette (Cockette), photographed by Peter Hujar, 1971.

HIGHLIGHT

All About Peter

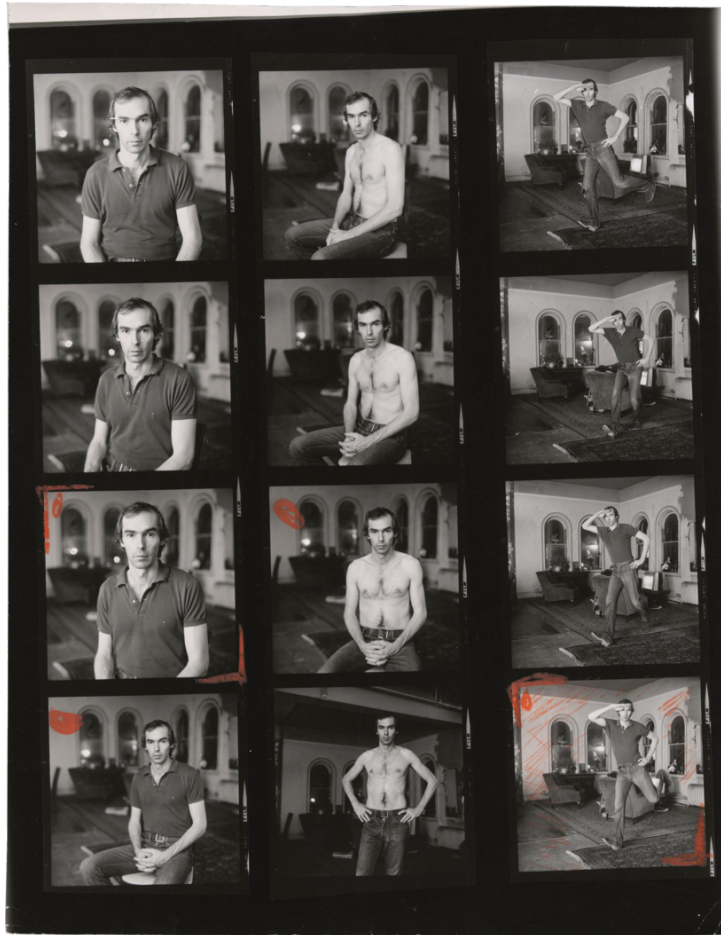
Six months after the release of Ira Sachs's film *Peter Hujar's Day*, three exhibitions in New York give long-overdue attention to the American photographer

BY OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

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Farm animals were Peter Hujar's first subjects. The photographer's early years were spent with his Ukrainian mother and grandparents on a farm in central New Jersey, which exposed him to the emotionality of nature. Decades before his lens moved between nocturnal vagabonds in the East Village and names such as Diana Vreeland, William Burroughs, and Fran Lebowitz, the young man realized the power of his eye. He could monumentalize any subject, even if it was an aloof cow or a dilapidated shack.

The art dealer Gracie Mansion, who gave Hujar his final exhibition—a year before his AIDS-related death in 1987, at age 53—agrees that his gaze was revelatory. “When you look at his photograph of a blanket crumpled on the back of a chair,” she tells me, “you realize that it is actually a portrait of that blanket.” Mansion sometimes has to resist the impulse to turn away from the artist’s arresting black-and-white photographs, largely captured at his East Village studio, “because what you see is often so raw and intimate.”



Self-Portraits on Heel, shot by Hujar in his East Village loft, 1974.

This spring, Manhattan sees a trio of exhibitions that walk us through Hujar’s enigmatic images. Ortuzar remounts “Peter Hujar: The Gracie Mansion Show” exactly four decades after it went up in Mansion’s gallery. The 70 photographs, installed to the artist’s specifications in a two-row grid at the tiny Alphabet City storefront, now occupy the Tribeca gallery’s soaring walls in the same grid formation. Mansion remembers that she had to hire an art handler to meet Hujar’s arduously “specific spacing” demands between each photograph. “He would avoid hanging two portraits together so you could pay attention to everything equally.”



Peggy Lee, 1974.

Whether nude or landscape, the images possess a similar tactile texture. And the juxtapositions are gripping. A newly skinned cow hanging from its hind legs in a Germantown slaughterhouse unexpectedly complements the unsettling calm in the expression of David Wojnarowicz, another seminal East Village artist and the photographer's longtime companion.

Ortuzar's concurrent show, "How Beautiful This Living Thing Is"—organized by the author and editor Andrew Durbin, who wrote the recently released book *The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek*—exhibits artists who crossed paths with Hujar. The grouping begins in the late 1950s, when the emerging artist turned to professional photography, and also visited Italy for the first time. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Hujar did editorial freelancing, which brought him modest fame. Besides Wojnarowicz and Paul Thek (Hujar's first serious love), the show features colleagues such as Ray Johnson, Greer Lankton, Sheyla Baykal, and Susan Brockman. Durbin says he visualized the show as a "poetic laboratory" and sought artists who suggested kinship to Hujar's photography and "who were thinking about what is inside and outside the frame."



Vince Aletti and Fran Lebowitz, shot by Hujar in
Morristown, New Jersey, 1974.

In late May, the Morgan Library & Museum resumes its exploration of Hujar's art, begun in an exhibition eight years ago, with a show dedicated to his contact sheets. For "Hujar: Contact," the museum's curator and department head of photography, Joel Smith, has cherry-picked around 110 contact sheets from the 5,700 in their Peter Hujar Collection and delves into the more intimate and process-driven aspect of Hujar's output.



Palermo Catacombs #8 (Skull in Window), 1963.

These three exhibitions come six months after the release of Ira Sachs’s film *Peter Hujar’s Day*, starring Ben Whishaw. “This should have happened a long time ago,” Mansion says of the burgeoning interest in Hujar’s photographs. In our age of over-manipulated and downright fake imagery, Hujar’s nuanced eye toward mortality, performance, and sexuality is enduringly authentic. “We all come into the world with masks,” says Durbin, “and he was both interested in that mask and was compelled by what was behind it.”

“Peter Hujar: The Gracie Mansion Show” and “How Beautiful This Living Thing Is” run through May 30 at Ortuzar, in New York; “Hujar: Contact” opens on May 22 at the Morgan Library & Museum, in New York

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