

PETER HUJAR'S SEARCH FOR SECRETS

The photographer's portraits bring certain truths to the surface.

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Jackie Curtis, circa 1970. Hujar returned again and again to the spiritual life of his sitters—an invisible presence in his images. Photograph by Peter Hujar / Courtesy © Peter Hujar Archive / ARS / Morgan Library & Museum / Fraenkel Gallery / Ortuzar

It's a fine measure of the curator Joel Smith's visual and emotional acuity that the first standout images one encounters on entering "Hujar:Contact," his fabulous show of Peter Hujar's photographs and contact sheets (at the Morgan Library, through October 25th), are of the performer, writer, and director Jackie Curtis. Hujar, who was a friend of Curtis's, photographed him, circa 1970, in Jackie drag. (Curtis alternated between "boy" Jackie and "girl" Jackie throughout his too brief life.) Resplendent in a dark top and flowered scarves, Jackie has his hair ratted out, creating a kind of nimbus around his poignant, ready-to-laugh

face, which is powdered white, with shiny, metallic-looking paillettes around the eyes. It's a great face, a great look, one that speaks to—or, more precisely, articulates—hip, vital New York as it was during the years of Curtis's ascendancy, as a playwright at La Mama and as one of Andy Warhol's more comedically gifted superstars. Twiggy's youthquake glam was out. Something darker, funnier, and more lucid was taking the stage, dressed in down-at-the-heel platforms and stockings with runs and sporting Corey Tippin-inspired maquillage—shaved eyebrows and brightly rouged cheeks. Gender, seemingly, was the least of anyone's problems, and who needed Broadway? One's life was the performance, and one's friends the only audience that really mattered.

You can see at least some of that spirit in the dozen or more frames of Jackie that Hujar shot in his studio, which was also his home—a loft, at 189 Second Avenue, that was owned by Jackie's grandmother. With a minimum of props—a chair here, a mattress there—Hujar posed his sitters in front of a gray backdrop or a white wall. No matter how outrageous his subjects seem—they include the San Francisco performance troupe the Cockettes and cast members from Robert Wilson's early spectacles—his photographs are some of the most silent images I have ever seen. The silence grows out of Hujar's high style, the way the people he photographed appear motionless while their eyes are alive with thought and spirit. In his work, Hujar returned again and again to the spiritual life of his sitters—an invisible presence in his images. Hujar's best pictures are still-lives that feature not apples but queer fruit. The camera he habitually used in the studio, a 120-mm. twin-lens reflex, gave his photographs a strong graphic quality infused with warmth. It also allowed his subjects to see his face without a camera blocking it—a handsome face, with pale skin, dark eyebrows, and a small mouth. But, as he looked down into the ground glass, his being wasn't the point; his sitter's was.



"Dead Fish, Fire Island," 1960-62. The image tells us so much about time and the beauty of unadorned decomposition that we have to accept the knowledge that we ourselves are always in the process of decay. Photograph by Peter Hujar / Courtesy © Peter Hujar Archive / ARS / Morgan Library & Museum

According to Andrew Durbin's essential "The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek," published earlier this year, Hujar told the writer Jill Johnston that he saw his photography as a "search." What he was searching for, Johnston concluded, were the secrets we have without knowing it. If we can't bear witness to ourselves, what allows the camera to dance in and draw us out? I think it begins with the implicit understanding that photographer and sitter are making a story together, with the sitter as protagonist, and sometimes the combined reality and artificiality of the exchange brings certain truths to the surface. When that didn't happen for Hujar, it was likely because of a sitter's resistance. In 1980, he invited members of the London-based drag troupe Bloodlips to pose. The episode was described by the group's founder, Bette Bourne, in Cynthia Carr's "Fire in the Belly" (2012), a graceful, affecting biography of the artist David Wojnarowicz, who was a friend of Hujar's. "We couldn't reveal," Bourne said. "Hujar's big thing was that you had to reveal. I know that now, but I didn't know it at the time. In other words, blistering, blazing honesty directed towards the lens. No pissing about. No putting anything on. No camping around. Just flat, real who-you-are. And then he could go inside."

It wasn't until I saw Hujar's pictures of Jackie Curtis at the Morgan that I began to see Jackie's dress-up as a display of innocence which evoked a time when little boys were not made to feel ashamed for playing with Mother's pearls or Sister's tea set. Just look at his eyes in the image, taken from the contact sheet of Jackie in drag, that Smith has hung near the entrance: they're the eyes of a newborn (albeit one with cigarette breath), seeing the world fresh and without fear. Next to this picture is a blowup of part of the contact sheet. One frame has been outlined in orange grease pencil with the word "Vogue" written across the top. The implication: though Jackie couldn't have his *Vogue* cover, because of the way the world was back then (and still is), Peter was determined to give him one. Jackie is not only Hujar's cover girl; he's also Smith's, a star among the fantastic performers, artists, writers, and leather queens whom Hujar photographed in the sixties and seventies, who bring such *life* to this exhibition crackling with insight, density, and love. What we see, in the sectioned gallery of "Hujar:Contact," is all that New York created and made significant and lost in the thirty-two years—from 1954 to 1986—that the exhibition covers. (The Morgan houses nearly six thousand of Hujar's surviving contact sheets.)



Peter Hujar with his mother, Rose Murphy, in 1977. Photograph by Peter Hujar / Courtesy © Peter Hujar Archive / ARS / Morgan Library & Museum

When I got to the end of the show, and happily turned around to walk through it again, one picture of Jackie stayed in my mind; it existed in memory and wasn't at the Morgan. Taken by Hujar in 1985, the black-and-white image shows Jackie in repose, dressed in a suit, with a fresh white flower in his buttonhole and a lovely drawing of him, in full makeup, positioned near his left shoulder. In this frame, Jackie's eyes are closed, his mouth shut, because he's dead.

Art remembers long after we have forgotten. Hujar's work is so rooted in transience and in the slippery nature of identity—the quick shutter click between being and not being—that mounting a show of his contact sheets makes great aesthetic and political sense: Who are we, moment by moment? What is our final image? Does death have a shape? A color? Hujar's exquisite early pictures, such as “Seaweed” or “Dead Fish, Fire Island,” both from 1960–62, teach us how to see life's erosions. The former shows us nine images of seaweed that has washed up on the sand. Each strand is like a beautiful clump of calligraphy all tangled up in itself, as captivating and lonely as any earthwork. “Dead Fish, Fire Island”—

whose title is self-explanatory—tells us so much about time and the beauty of unadorned decomposition that we have to accept the knowledge that we ourselves are always in the process of decay.

These early works also establish Hujar's sense of color within the black-and-white image. Throughout his career, he used gray tones to illuminate the mystery of his images. Gray dominates his thoughtful, sensual black-and-white portraits of his friend Susan Sontag reclining on a light-colored blanket and wearing a turtleneck, from 1975. Even his pictures taken outside can give the feeling that the world he's capturing is overcast—as in his portraits of the trans activist Marsha P. Johnson, so tender in her bonnet, on the Christopher Street Pier, on Easter Sunday, 1976. Hujar's gray is a curtain—a scrim—that he rarely lifts, bringing to mind Elizabeth Bishop's 1964 description of sea air: "Like a first coat of whitewash when it's wet, / that thin gray mist lets everything show through." While his lighting is the light of romance: the queer cinema light that you see in early Richard Avedon and George Platt Lynes, transformed and flecked with danger and allure.

But can we use the word "allure" when it comes to Hujar's self-portraits with his mother from 1977? In the images at the Morgan, we see the tall, thin Hujar in a plaid shirt and jeans. His attractive mother, whom he always referred to as Rose Murphy when speaking with friends, is a head or so shorter than her son, standing by his side. Her hair is done just so. In some of the frames, Hujar's right arm is on his mother's shoulder. What could he have been hoping to record in these images, if anything?

He did not grow up with Rose. Soon after giving birth to him, in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1934, she went to work as a waitress in Manhattan—his father, Joseph John Hujar, a baker and maybe a bootlegger, had split before his birth—and left Peter with her parents, Ukrainians who had a farm in Ewing Township. He spoke Ukrainian before English, and the farm animals were his earliest and most trusted friends. He got his first camera from Rose, on one of his visits to the city. As a boy, he took a picture of cows in the distance. The closeup portraits of cows and other animals that he took later were the first Hujar images I saw that I understood. They seemed to be marked by a kind of spiritual deprivation and longing—the work of an orphaned child who wanted to connect with the other vulnerable creatures of the world. The animals in his photographs are monuments to the difference between man and beast; and, because the animals got here first, the images seem to say, they have ancient qualities that trump ours—even those of the photographer and his modern camera. Like the French director Robert Bresson, in his unspeakably heart-wrenching 1966 film, "Au Hasard Balthazar," which sees the world—a black-and-white world with lots of gray—through the eyes of a donkey, Hujar blames us humans for disfiguring the natural world with our cruelty and our neglect. His animals are infused with the weight of his childhood, his wounds.

When Peter was eleven, his beloved grandmother died, and his grandfather, worried about how badly the boy was being treated by an uncle who lived with them, sent Peter to stay with Rose and her husband, Ed (Snookie) Murphy, a bookie, in their one-bedroom apartment on East Thirty-second Street. The

Murphys drank; in Carr's "Fire in the Belly," Hujar's friends remember him being humiliated and dismissed by them. Nevertheless, at the School of Industrial Art, Hujar flourished under the tutelage of his English teacher, a young gay poet named Daisy Aldan, who not only supported Hujar's dream of becoming a photographer but introduced him to her chosen family—other women, including the actress Tallulah Bankhead, who gathered at Aldan's on weekends to play poker.

Sometime before Hujar graduated from high school, his mother threw a bottle at him, and he left her apartment for good, staying at first with friends. No one in his family came to his graduation, so he sat in the audience and, when his name was called, he applauded for himself.

Durbin's book is visceral in its narrative drive; he wants you to feel what he feels about his subjects, and to share his admiration for Hujar's photographs. Inevitably, you are inspired to assess them for yourself. As I looked at photographs that Hujar had shot at the Capuchin Catacombs, in Palermo, in 1963—a trip he made with his then lover and friend, the avant-garde artist Paul Thek—I remembered why it had taken me years to get into Hujar's work.



Joseph Hykin, with Arthur Lain's dairy cows, Westtown, New York, 1978. The animals Hujar photographed seem to be marked by a kind of spiritual deprivation and longing. Photograph by Peter Hujar / Courtesy © Peter Hujar Archive / ARS / Morgan Library & Museum

After leaving home, Hujar, with Aldan's encouragement, worked for fifteen years as an assistant in various photo studios. In 1956, he became involved with the painter Joseph Raffael; two years later, the pair went off to Italy, where, given time and space, Hujar was able to find what interested him most as an artist: making images that explored tenderness and what we do or don't do to protect it. At the Morgan, there are about a dozen photographs that Hujar took at an institute for neurological disorders in Florence, in 1959. I was especially drawn to two of them. In each of these, a nun is helping a boy with his movement. The nun's habit falls in beautiful folds to the floor, and in one picture we see the child's head in profile, as though it were jutting out of the nun's wimple. In the second image, the nun faces the boy; she is smiling gently at him, and we see both figures in a mirror, the camera reflecting the reflection.

Hujar returned to Italy in 1963, by which point he was involved with Thek. The two had met in Coral Gables, Florida, in 1956, but had been with other partners then. By 1961, they were together, albeit in a way that Durbin is right to point out was different from heterosexual coupling. First of all, at that time, a man could be arrested for loving another man, and the layers of complication in being together—how out could you be, and how traditional in your expectations?—no doubt amplified the vulnerability and the risk of their love. Hujar loved Thek, but Thek often needed to be away in order to make his work, and he became enmeshed in other situations, which sometimes involved women. (He and Sontag were lovers intermittently in the early sixties; she dedicated her 1966 collection, "Against Interpretation," to Thek, whose ideas about making helped her declare, at the end of that now famous title essay, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.")

"You're never in love with the people you love," Hujar once said to a friend. "Being in love is all the anticipation; it can't really be there when you're actually with him." But, no matter what Hujar thought about love, it was, in the end, just thought, his own hermeneutics of the erotic. Ultimately, for him, love was probably driven by fear. Fear provoked his legendary rages—breaking chairs, throwing things, cutting people out of his life. Fear of the injury caused by others' words and actions, which was his primary experience of love.



The artist Brigid Berlin, shot for New Times magazine, circa 1970. Photograph by Peter Hujar / Courtesy © Peter Hujar Archive / ARS / Morgan Library & Museum

I think that, when I first saw Hujar's pictures of the catacombs in Palermo, in the only book he published during his lifetime, "Portraits in Life and Death," from 1976, I was less taken by the gothic nature of all those bodies in repose—mouths sometimes open or twisted in a grimace, hands folded over hearts that had long ago dried up—than put off by Hujar's interest in a death drama that was gawked at, rather than observed and felt. His eye does not live in these pictures; it's subsumed by them. The truth is that I discovered the book in the early eighties, when so many people were dying or beginning to die, and the catacomb pictures felt too easy to me, like talismans in a collapsing world—my collapsing world—which was infected with a form of death that would take Hujar in 1987, and Thek a year later, and Wojnarowicz in 1992, the same year that Marsha P. Johnson died, probably the victim of a hate crime.

Avedon, whose work and career had a big influence on Hujar early on, had produced a series of images of the Palermo catacombs in 1959. (Avedon's final large-scale fashion story, which appeared in this magazine in 1995, showed a live

model cavorting with skeletons in a version of the catacombs.) And, when I turned to Robert Mapplethorpe at about the same time that I first saw Hujar's book, I was reminded of another Sontag essay, "Fascinating Fascism," in which she writes that the Marquis de Sade

had to make up his theater of punishment and delight from scratch, improvising the decor and costumes and blasphemous rites. Now there is a master scenario available to everyone. The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.

Hujar, like Avedon before him and Mapplethorpe after him, had a fairy's love of costume and an understanding of appearance as an expression less of truth than of lies—lies about who we were and are, just like the lies that gay men had to tell in order to be themselves in Hujar's time. The images of the mummified bodies in the Palermo catacombs, wearing the clothes of whoever they used to be, struck me not as beautiful or true but as evidence of Hujar's interest in display and fiction. Where was the "truth" in these pictures? What did we become when we marvelled at a dead child's hair ribbon, or a mouth stretched in a scream? We all die, but not all of us view existence as a pathway to death, or death as the ultimate game of dress-up. I side with Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," which says of depictions of the dead, "Time has transfigured them into untruth." Truth happens only when we're alive to write it, to photograph it, to live it. I didn't think of Hujar's catacomb pictures as a testament to the artist's ecstatic honesty, or even as an example of perversion, in which the ghastly truth of those corpses, mediated by the camera, was a kind of payback to society and the law. I closed "Portraits in Life and Death" and didn't look at it again for years.

After Hujar returned to the States from Italy, in 1964, he took a job as an assistant to the commercial photographer Harold Krieger. A few years later, he was admitted to a master class that Richard Avedon and Marvin Israel held in Avedon's studio, and, emboldened by their support, he quit the Krieger gig and opened his own studio for a time. By 1973, he was determined to work independently as an artist. Carr writes, "He had disdain for the whole process of selling himself. Fran Lebowitz pointed out that 'he also had a profound distrust of authority, and that he couldn't make a distinction between someone who owned some little photography gallery, and the Pope.' "To get the check, you have to kiss the ring, and Hujar couldn't. So he lived as he lived. He was "the poorest grown-up I have been personally close to in my life," his executor, the writer Stephen Koch, once said.

The portraits he made between 1965 and 1975 are phenomenal and often sexy, particularly those of his close friends Lebowitz and the writer Vince Aletti, seen in different beds in Lebowitz's childhood home in New Jersey; of the artist Brigid Berlin for *New Times* magazine; and of the fashion model Maxime de la Falaise, her husband the curator John McKendry, and her daughter, Loulou de la Falaise, in 1968. In his portraits of that fashionable family, Hujar suggests the world they came from, one where you wouldn't blink an eye at a topless woman winking at *you*; by then, flirting had been replaced by the art of the put-on. One of the

strongest contact sheets from this time period is of the fashion editor Diana Vreeland. In Hujar's images, this formidable woman is drained of esprit; what remains is the mask. Fame does not console. Vreeland's isolation is Rose Murphy's isolation and her son's as well. And it's a godless place.

I stayed a long time in this part of the show, a fabulous wonderland in which the photographer leaves behind the entombed and joins life as much as he can, and his voice rings out loud and clear and essential. Smith notes in his very helpful catalogue essay, which is supplemented by Olivia McCall's thorough annotation of the contact sheets, that it was during this period that Hujar became interested in posing subjects in groups, gatherings of theatre people, activists, chosen families of a kind. And, as I looked at his contact sheets of the Cockettes, shot in 3:4, and his great 35-mm. picture of the Gay Liberation Front (1970), I thrilled to the energy of the images, every one of them, because they were about joy—even though Hujar had a hard time feeling it himself. But who can blame him? You can take the fatherless boy out of his belligerent mother's home, but you can't take the parents out of the boy. Looking at the Cockettes, those wonderful queens in their thrift-store finery, and knowing that they bombed when they tried to put on a show in New York—too much California hippie love and drift for the professional-minded New York audience—and looking, too, at all those smiling, committed, excited people with the Gay Liberation Front, seeming to rush toward Hujar's lens, I remembered how, when I was a photo editor in the late eighties and early nineties, before digital was the dominant format, and a photographer came to show me images, what I most wanted to see was not the single image but the contact sheet and what it represented: it was evidence of the photographer's hope, evidence of the dreams that he, she, or they didn't even know they were having. ♦

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