

OFF TO CAMP

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF

James Bidgood



BY PHILIP GEFTER

What is “gay art”? A rhetorical question, first of all, since art transcends genre, hovering in a perfection of its own. Still, the “love that dare not speak its name” evolved over the course of the twentieth century into a way of thinking and being now implicit in what has come to be regarded as “gay.” (That way of being turns out to have been a potent influence on a great deal of twentieth-century art.)

Although attitudes have shifted remarkably in recent years, homosexuals were of course long alienated in a world organized around the coupling of men and women. Humiliated by society’s collective disdain, they had to affect a secret language or code to shield themselves: self-deprecating wit, ironic interpretation, an ever-present subtext of eroticism, and an acutely cultivated style, in all its sublime artifices. Susan Sontag defined all this incisively in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp”—a virtual template for the putative “gay sensibility.” She wrote:

Camp is the love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not. . . . Paris Metro entrances . . . in the shape of cast-iron orchid stalks. . . . The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility . . . the swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry. . . . Camp draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. What is the most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is the most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.

In the early 1960s, not a few artists in Manhattan exemplified what Sontag had picked up on in formulating her ideas about Camp. This

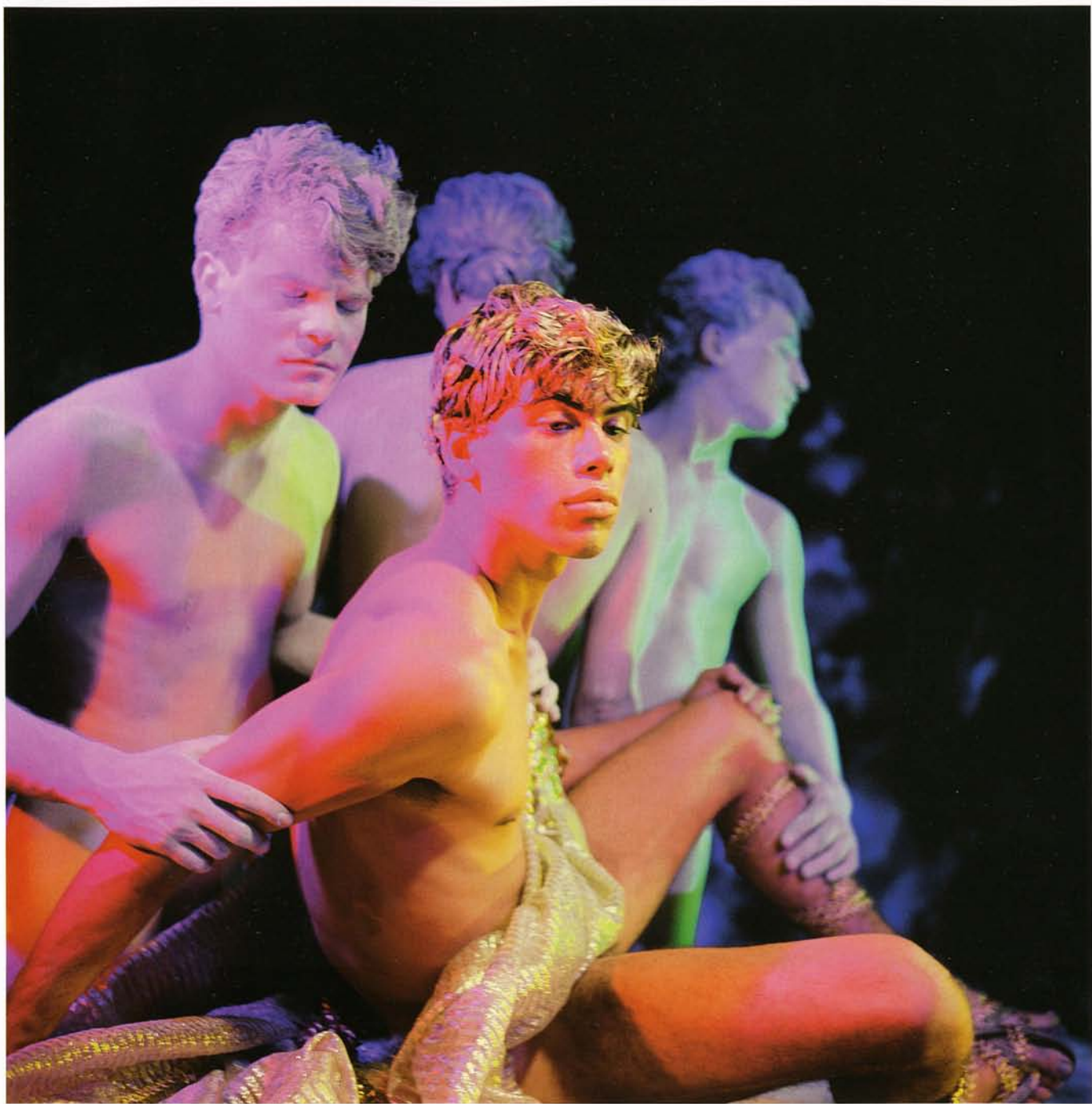
was in the nascent period before the gay-rights movement sprang to life with the Stonewall uprising in 1969—when a group of indignant drag queens attacked the policemen who raided the Stonewall Inn, a West Village gay bar, on the night of Judy Garland’s funeral. The scene itself was a Camp tableau, if ever there were one.

All this brings us to the work of James Bidgood, who was young and gay in Manhattan in the late 1950s and early ‘60s, and whose photographs embody the essence of Sontag’s meditation on Camp. Jim Bidgood arrived in New York in the early 1950s at the age of eighteen from Madison, Wisconsin; his ambition was to work in musical comedy. While he managed to land a few small off-Broadway roles, he appeared regularly as a drag performer at Club 82 in the East Village throughout the 1950s; he also designed sets and costumes for the club’s special events. Bidgood supported himself as a window dresser and eventually attended Parsons School of Design.

Clearly, the theater was home to Bidgood’s native imagination. In the late 1950s, he started taking pictures for physique magazines, staging lithe, naked young men in elaborate scenes that drew as much from mythology as from the street.

Over the course of his creative life, Bidgood would incorporate his experience on the stage and as a costume designer into a body of photographs as well as one film, *Pink Narcissus* (1971), which reflect a vibrant strain of idealization in image-making running through not only the history of photography, but the larger history of art—think of Caravaggio’s painting of Bacchus (ca. 1595) or Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin’s *Jeune homme nu assis au bord de la mer* (*Nude Youth Sitting by the Sea*; 1836).

“I was heavy into Flo Ziegfeld and his follies and the Folies Bergère and Petty Girl calendars, and I know I borrowed



Emperor with Statues, front: Bobby Kendall; back, left to right: Louie, Shane, and Richie;
on the set of *Pink Narcissus*, 1960s.

a lot from [George] Quaintance paintings," Bidgood said in a recent conversation about his influences. "My parents had a print of Maxfield Parrish's *Daybreak* in their bedroom—set in a baroque silver frame and mounted on tufted purple satin. *Hello—and they wonder why?*"—why he turned out to be gay, that is. (Sontag's Note #41: "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. . . . One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.")

Bidgood's photographs of naked young men are dressed up with mythological references and visual trickery: enchanted scenes of languorous godlike figures in ersatz splendor are rendered with such theatricality of gesture, mood, color, texture, and fabric as to parody the very desire they are designed to elicit.

Necessity was the mother of invention for Bidgood, who created elaborate photographic tableaux in his small midtown Manhattan studio apartment. His first erotic series was an underwater epic called *Water Colors*, made in the early 1960s, in which he used a dancer from Club 82 named Jay Garvin as his subject. The underwater atmosphere is completely fabricated: the bottom of the ocean was created with silver lamé spread across the floor of Bidgood's apartment; he made the arch of a cave out of waxed paper, and fashioned red lamé into the shape of lobsters. He coated Garvin with mineral oil and pasted glitter and sequins to his skin so the silver fabric under photographic lights would reflect on his body like water. For weeks at a time, Bidgood would eat and sleep within the sets he constructed in his apartment.

But Bidgood's creativity also derived from the many imperatives of self-invention: the glamorous or original identities assumed by so many who came to New York from someplace else: roles that gay men assumed in a world that mitigated their fantasies at every turn, a world in which you could roam freely and reach for the height of pleasure and splendor—if only in your own apartment. For Bidgood, this was where the theater queen and the porn photographer merged. He created elaborate romantic stage sets, both sugar-coating and ennobling masturbatory fantasies with as much scrupulous attention to the accoutrements—fabrics, patterns, textures, and colors—as to the skin, gestures, and interactions of the models themselves. Bidgood reached for a patina of glamour with Technicolor saturation, giving these operatic moments a modern flair.

Bidgood is clearly winking at us, even as we are being seduced by the innocence and magnetism of his models in their unlikely guises. While the scenes are all so improbable, they are salvaged from the ridiculous by Bidgood's earnestness, his painstaking diligence, and the singularity of his vision. These tableaux come out of some pure, deep strain of homoerotic desire, and the influence of the Hollywood dream machinery permeates his style of aestheticizing it. (Sontag's Note #38: "Camp is wholly aesthetic. It creates

a victory of style over content, aesthetics over morality, of irony over tragedy.")

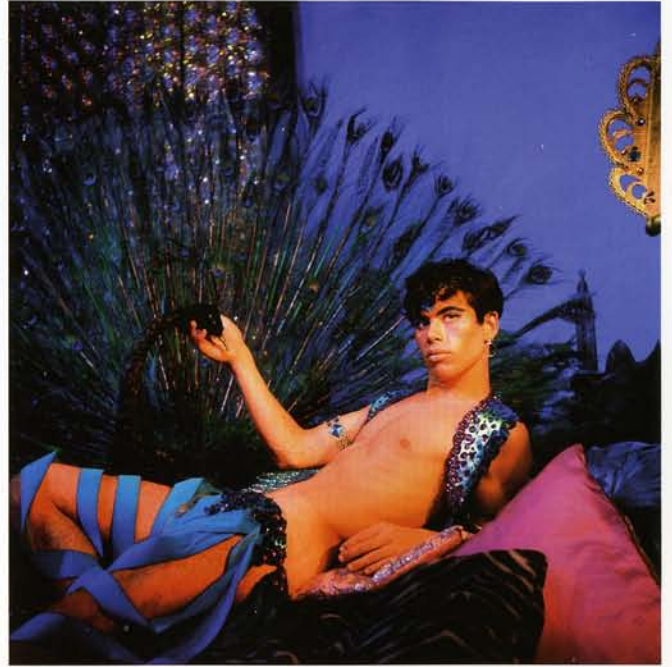
Irony over tragedy. Bidgood was not alone in exploring the fantastic and the erotic in such campy terms. Jack Smith, who made the film *Flaming Creatures* in 1963 and influenced avant-garde artists from Andy Warhol to John Waters, drew directly from his experiences as a gay man in postwar America and his own infatuation with Hollywood movies. Like Bidgood, he used draping fabrics and drag queens in his work. The similarities between Smith's films and Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* are striking, if only for manifesting the "gay sensibility" that places these two artists so decidedly outside the mainstream, and yet reflects something fundamentally true to their time (if not acknowledged in it).

To call Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* a cult porn classic is to deny it its full cultural due. Drawing on many of the scenes in his still images, which he created often in sequential order, the film falls into a trajectory of homoerotic filmmaking that was, in fact, more fully resolved by others—consider Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982) or Pedro Almodóvar's *Ley del Deseo* (*Law of Desire*; 1987).

In 1967, Charles Ludlam formed the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in downtown Manhattan. It gave nose-thumbing interpretations of mainstream culture a platform on the downtown stage, turning playful mockery into original art. Peter Hujar's wonderfully tender, honest photographic portraits of members of that theater company serve as a cultural document of a community of artists who were, if not all gay, certainly the personification of Sontag's notion of Camp. Like Bidgood, they define a time, a place, and a sensibility, and their influence has long surfaced in the cultural mainstream, for better or worse. (Harvey Fierstein as Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray* on Broadway? Camp. John Travolta as Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray*, the movie? The co-option of Camp by popular culture.)

The French artists Pierre et Gilles have long acknowledged Bidgood's influence, as has David LaChapelle, whose glam-glitz images command the kind of money Bidgood could never have imagined when he was inventing a genre forty years ago. In the realm of homoerotic photography, these artists share one basic thing with George Platt Lynes, Robert Mapplethorpe, Bruce Weber, and Herb Ritts: the idealization of the male nude figure. But the former group typifies sublime camp vulgarity and inventiveness, while the latter aims for high-minded perfection through figure studies in elegant black and white.

In his era, Bidgood found a way to give artistic expression to his homosexuality by cloaking it in the artifice of the stage, imbuing it with starry-eyed, Technicolor modernity, and portraying it in the context of an interpretive fairy-tale mythology. With this recipe, the homoerotic was hidden in plain sight. Now, how campy is that? ●



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jay Swimming Through Pink Flowers, Jay Garvin in the series Water Colors, early 1960s; Harem Boy in Front of Peacock, Bobby Kendall on the set of Pink Narcissus, 1960s; Pan, Bobby Kendall on the set of Pink Narcissus, 1960s; Bobby in Pink Chair, Bobby Kendall on the set of Pink Narcissus, ca. 1960s.

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