

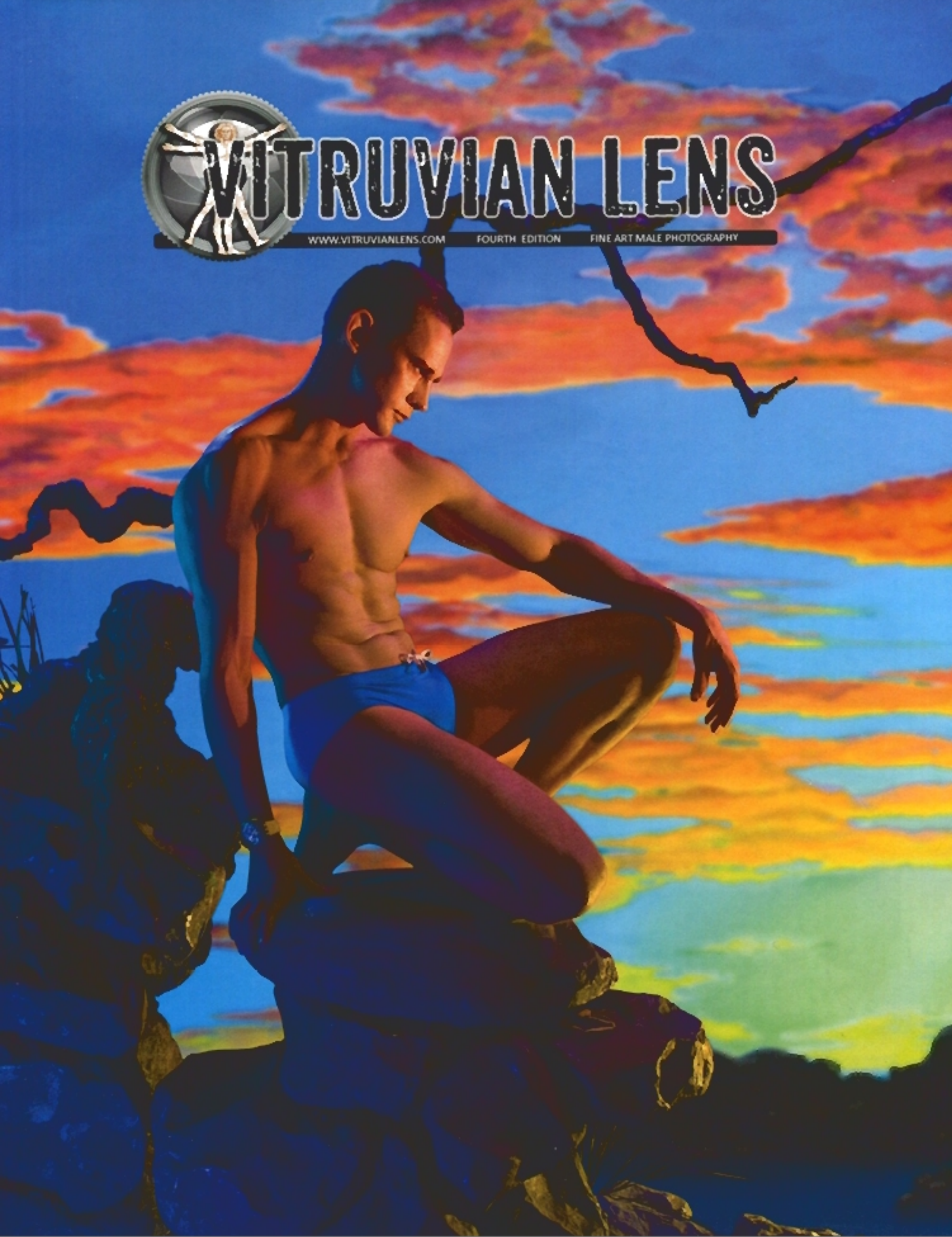


VITRUVIAN LENS

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FOURTH EDITION

FINE ART MALE PHOTOGRAPHY





JAMES BIDGOOD



Vitruvian Lens: James, you're a bit of a legend as creator of *Pink Narcissus*. Many readers may only know you via that work. When did you want to become a photographer/artist?

James Bidgood: I don't know when or if I ever made a conscious decision to be anything. I think I began having opinions in the late nineteen thirties or early nineteen forties. I recall spending hours getting lost in the iridescent rainbow swirls oil made in gutters or looking deep into the hollow of one of those faceted glass Christmas ornaments. God knows my surroundings were bleak at the time. My parents were very poor until after the war—that would be World, Number Two. But there were small escapes. Did you know milk bottles used to have colored metal foil tops? Don't ask.

And I saw two movies that are probably why my life has since gone so downhill. There was the Janet Gaynor 'A Star is Born,' and then there was that 'A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody' production number in the film 'Ziegfeld Girl,' which I think fucked me up more than anything else ever in my life. If you have seen it you will need no further explanation. If you haven't then you must keep in mind there were no hydraulics involved and no Photoshop. The number originally appeared in an earlier film 'The Great Ziegfeld,' but it was so extraordinary and expensive to produce I figure MGM thought they should get a tad more use out of it—the only difference being the cherry on top. Well, that is if either Virginia Bruce or Judy Garland were still able to boast of such an accomplishment.

Left: Bidgood, *Cove at Dawn*, 2009

V.L.: Before we get ahead of ourselves, please tell us a bit about your background, your *development* as it were.

J.B.: I was born in 1933 in Madison, Wisconsin which I did not realize until many years later was a very progressive and liberal place to be raised. My parents were the janitors of the Masonic Temple. We lived in a tiny apartment at the back of the building. My grim little bedroom had unpainted homasote walls. That's poor— but the gray fiber wall board made it possible for me to pin up my Ziegfeld Girl paper dolls and beyond those few rooms was the temple proper, which was my back yard, my playground, and there was a ballroom with a mirror ball and a large auditorium and a stage with pink and blue footlights and dressing rooms that reeked of grease paint and orange powders and these are intoxicating aromas—very dangerous if inhaled too deeply.

Whatever glamorous life such stimuli caused me to dream of having one day having was sadly only the stuff of dreams and only for those humans touched by the gods but for sure not for the likes of a grungy little sissy boy that peed himself at night and worried he stank of piss all day. Little Jimmy Bidgood would have to be content with only imaginings and fantasies. And so it began.

When I first came to the big city, whilst appearing in an off, off, off, off Broadway pass-the-hat at intermission musical entertainment called 'Dakota,' I somehow discovered drag and soon was performing in an evening gown at the infamous Club Eighty Two. I eventually also became the costume and set designer for these shows which were quite lavish, with a cast of more than thirty and an eight member band.

There was a short career after leaving the club—dressing windows at an Oppenheim and Collins on 34th street. I mention this because it was only years later I realized the Empire State Building had been standing at the other end of the block all those window nights. Unlike Deborah Kerr—rhymes with star (that's how she was introduced to the American public)—I wasn't looking up!

There were three years at Parson School Of Fashion Design and then a few more costume designing and that after about ten minutes on Seventh Avenue and somewhere in all the yards of glittering organza and mountains of ostrich plume I decided to become a photographer. Hello! Not just a photographer, a photographer that would, like Ziegfeld, glorify, in this case, the American male!

I remember being appalled that Playboy Magazine and the like did such fabulous photos, light and styled to a fare-thee-well, of near angelic looking lovely girls who, once you unfolded the page were spread wide with their happiness completely exposed and I swear if one glanced backward the young lady had started chewing gum!

"Appalled" because their gay equivalent was what seemed like page after page of the same boy in the same tacky two inches of worn stretch satin pouch held in place with two cents worth of elastic leaning against what appeared to be the very same fireplace mantle. Heterosexual men, it would appear, thought their erotic representations of women to be worth more investment than homosexuals recording the objects of their sexual fantasies. I was not only appalled—I was astonished!

I thought to begin with a series of underwater Esther Williams type photographs, never for a moment considering I knew nothing about cameras or film and had only a walk up railroad apartment to film in. I was not then, nor have I ever been, a well woman.

I think complete insanity is very much a part of whatever causes humans to go so astray. Consider The Watts Towers or Mount Rushmore. To anyone else it was only a lot of broken glass and pottery—except to one ne'er-do-well Italian construction worker who saw towers. To most people it was just a big piece of ugly rock, including those early American Indians high on peyote! Who else but a Gutzon Borglum would think to carve faces into the side of such a cliff? Ok, so it was some art historian's idea. It plays better my way. With a name like Gutzon Borglum, I figure you would have to think outside the box.

Using inherited parts of costumes I had designed for the New York Junior League Balls, I made big sets and rather teensy costumes. The cyclorama in the underwater scenes is made from a huge silk cape for one such costume. I asked around about cameras and film and the Rollei and the two and a quarter format came highly recommended. This was before credit cards and, yes, there was a time before credit cards. Anyway I came across an advertisement to buy a thirty five millimeter camera, a slide projector and a mess of other equipment and pay for it as much as two years later. I sent in the coupon and when the merchandise arrived I pawned it all in exchange for a second hand Rolleicord. Actually the rest was only common sense. I created a stage set, so to speak, in the front room, and then recorded it from the adjoining dining nook. I could paint and do lighting—I realized I was really only painting with color light fixtures.

There were no venues at the time to place the results except in physique magazines and Weider Publications were happy to use my work and quite often on the cover of their Young Physique magazines. These were closet case homosexually targeted magazines only passing for dumb bell periodicals. *Thar whar a heap 'a sneakin' 'roun' in them thar days.*

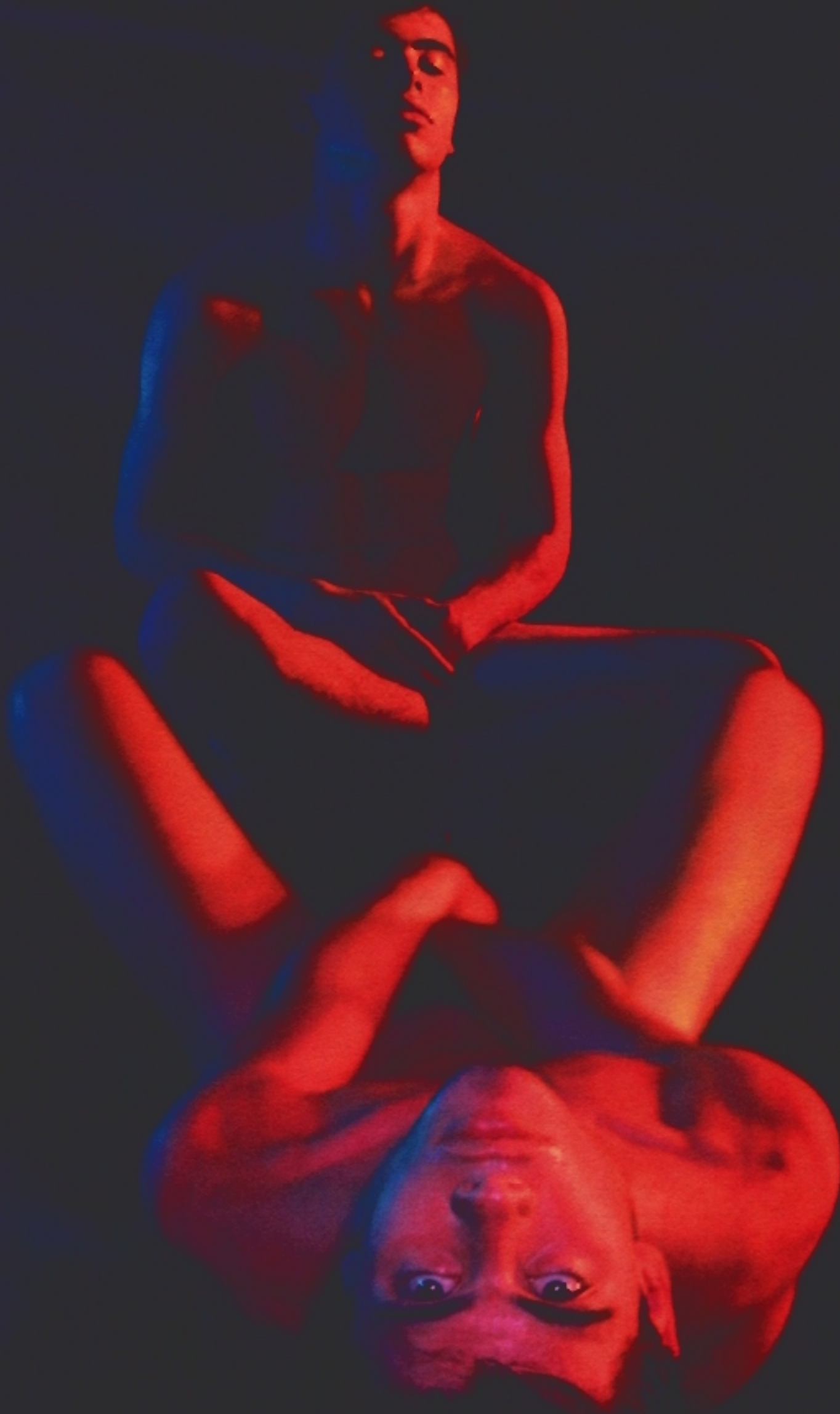


Bidgood, *Pink Flowers*, early 1960s

All this lead to the making of an eight and 16 millimeter unfinished symphony called *Pink Narcissus*, a film that took seven years to almost complete. Regardless of what is written about its impact at the time—there was none. No one thought very much of my efforts and I

completely agreed with their assessment then and pretty much do still.

It was many years later that Frameline's artistic director, Michael Lumpkin, pulled its negative from a trash bin and purchased all the rights to



Left: Bidgood, *Double Image, Test Shots*, early 1960s

Above: Bidgood, *Blue Boy*, mid- to late 1960s

it from the film's distributor, Sherpix, who actually no longer had those rights to sell. This led to the film's current mystique, if that is the correct word. Taschen published a coffee table book of my photos and soon thereafter I had a one man show at the Paul Morris gallery in New York City. It took thirty years for those seven years of hard labor to pay off—and modestly at that. The idiom "better late than never" bitterly

comes to mind.

I have since pursued all sorts of careers, never earning more than the humblest of livings. Somewhere in the early nineteen nineties the IRS pronounced me desolate, a term that made me cry at the time. I have cried many times since and currently I am worse off than I was then. What is worse off than desolate?



Bidgood, *Willow Tree*, mid- 1960s



Bidgood, *Pearl*, early 1960s

If I had my druthers I would prefer to have been born a plumber with little or no ambition. Being an artist—if that is what I am—has been a very tough road to travel. I love doing what I do. I live only to do what I do, still twelve and more hours a day every day of the week including holidays except Easter which I find unlucky. I have very little life beyond my pursuit to create pretty things. No one cares much but I cannot

stop. I am as driven as a serial killer. One such person once scribbled on a mirror with a lipstick, "Help stop me I cannot stop myself!" Oh God yes, I understand all too well what that man was suffering.

V.L.: Who would you love to get into your studio these days?

J.B.: I find men far more beautiful today than



Bidgood, Studio Shot, 2009

ever before. Chace Crawford as an example. It might be something in the drinking water. There are so many incredible faces I wish I were in a position to photograph. I am currently in love with James Franco and although his thick legs, bubble butt, and absolutely adorable face have not gone unnoticed—I would like to photograph his mind more than anything and I have no idea how I might accomplish that. He is very bright you know—every bit as bright as that winning wicked twinkle in his eyes. I find myself far more taken these days with the tilt of a man's nose, an eyelash, the pout of a lower lip, or the sweep downward of a cheek than those lower parts. The private parts of both sexes are frankly rather ugly once you get past all that lust business. I consider the line of a woman's breast to be very lovely; nice; even sweet. I enjoy drawing that line if that makes any sense to anyone.

I had always wanted to photograph Elizabeth Taylor in a series of perhaps four close ups—very relaxed just waking from an afternoon nap; no makeup on; her hair undone and unlacquered, recalling four very different episodes in her life. I would like to have recorded the subtle changes that occurred in those miraculous eyes. I have about a billion photos I wish I were able to do. I have, as someone told me recently, too many ideas. I have a very lively imagination.

V.L.: Do you have any new projects under consideration?

J.B.: I am currently attempting to create a pop up greeting card business which I pray might help at the very least pay the rent. The wolves have howled at my door so often I now keep wolf biscuits at the ready to content them.



Bidgood, Pan, late 1960s

Pop ups are great fun and very challenging and since I cannot think 'less' or 'simple' no matter how hard I try. Some take as long as six months to a year to get right. I hope maybe one day to do a pop-up book of scenes from *Pink Narcissus*. I have written a musical, *The Almost Magnificent Seven*, which I hope one day to see produced on Broadway, all the while very aware, not-so-little-anymore Jimmy Bidgood will, I fear, still have to

content himself with only imaginings and fantasies. I have made my Tony Award acceptance speech countless times in my bathtub weeping so gratefully into the warm bath water. If only. If only. If only.

James Bidgood is represented in New York City by ClampArt. Please contact the gallery directly via www.clampart.com.



Bidgood, Apache, mid-1960s



Bidgood, Bobby Kendall Seated, Leaning Back, early 1960s