

# Joy Is The Essence Of Success

JAMES BIDGOOD  
Photography + Artworks

LUKE ABBY  
Text



James Bidgood is a legend. The complete artist. The day we met, he wrote in my copy of *Pink Narcissus*: "Luke we only just met, knowing you has been so lovely, forgive the handwriting, I am stoned. Please don't abandon me too soon. Love, Jim". I remember the first time we spoke on the phone. It was winter. I was stoned laying in the bath. We must have spoken for hours. I couldn't believe I was talking with *the* James Bidgood! The first time I met him was on the street outside his house on 14th Street. There he was, sitting on the water hydrant in his purple shirt. I had my dog with me and he bit James on the hand. Later that day I took him to get his flu shot, then we went to my place, got stoned and he showed me the staircase scene from *The Great Ziegfeld*. He told me it changed his life as a kid. Then it all made sense.

**Luke Abby. How was it being born and raised in the Great Depression?**

James Bidgood. My mother and I were in a dime store one day and I begged her to purchase a 10-cent book of paper dolls for me—probably one featuring Sonia Henie or maybe Deanna Durbin—but the price of one dime was more than she could afford to spend on such silliness. That sort of occurrence or deprivation I am sure can partially be faulted for how I turned out. It's the "Why do kids put beans in their ears?" syndrome.

**LA. Tell me about the Ziegfeld paper cut-out dolls?**

JB. Well, whatever the denial above did not accomplish, the "Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" production number from the film *Ziegfeld Girl*, originally created for *The Great Ziegfeld*, did. It completely screwed me up. Forever. That book of paper dolls ... Mom splurged and spent the 10 cents on [it]. I used some pins from her sewing kit to attach a staircase I had fashioned from folded letter paper to the cardboard—actually, Homasote walls of my bedroom—with all those cut-outs of fabulous, Adrian-clad fantasy women parading down it. Oh, the glamour! The awesome spectacle! All so unlike my impoverished gray existence at the time.

**LA. Why have you never felt comfortable with the word "artist"? And tell me about your thoughts on art as an emotion vs. a craft, and art being something that should come from the soul.**

JAMES BIDGOOD

New portraits of James Bidgood by Luke Abby  
with Creative Direction by Moss Roberts.  
Monday 18, September 2017, New York City



James out of drag, 1950s.





My parents Silver Anniversary, 1949.



Rehearsal for *Prince Fairy Foot*. Late 1940s.



Terry Howe Club 82 backstage, 1950s.



Terry Howe seated at bar in Miami Beach club, 1950s.



Kitt Russell directing rehearsal for Club 82 show, 1950s.

JB. Well, that's a tricky one. I have often said, "I don't know what art is. I only know it is very much like Yiddish and not at all like plumbing." If you don't know what art is, how can you know if what you are doing is art? If it isn't art, you are not an artist. And I think there are so many degrees involved. Let's start with the obvious: I think Van Gogh was an artist, and Francis Bacon's "screaming pope" is art and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. I think Jackson Pollock was a great artist and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Being able to render a perfect likeness of something is craft or technique. What determines whether it is art or not, I think, boils down to, corny as it may sound, is the work born from the person's soul, the person's interior? It could be joyous or filled with anguish and every emotion in between, but it must be particular and personal, like no other person would express these feelings. I am not really qualified to speak about all this and I really have no answer, although I have thought about it a great deal. I am not very knowledgeable about very much of anything. I think I am gifted and have terrific ideas. And I know I am multi-talented because I have been and done so many things: fashion designer, costume designer, photographer, window trimmer, half-assed set designer, female impersonator; I wrote a screenplay and a musical; for a short time I wrote an advice column; I sang and danced in an Off-Broadway musical; I have decorated parties; let's see... oh, I was a photo stylist for years. But it doesn't mean I was all that good at any of them.

**LA. What does zoning out mean to you?**

JB. I do it all the time. I have nearly been run over by automobiles many times while writing a lyric in my head and crossing a street at the same time. You leave the now, the conscious. It's sort of like being in a hypnotic state while gluing glitter on a project or sketching or whatever creative thing you are working on, and you forget about eating or hydrating, even trips to the loo, and then suddenly you look up and 8 or 10, sometimes more hours have passed... but it seems like you have only been doing whatever for a few minutes. Weird!

**LA. What was your drag name?**

JB. Terry Howe.

**LA. How old were you when you started doing drag?**

JB. Eighteen.

**LA. What years were you involved in doing drag?**

JB. From about 1951 until 1957 or '58-ish. I am really not sure.

**LA. Other than performing, what were your other responsibilities during this time?**

JB. I designed the costumes and sets and lighting for the revues.

**LA. Why aren't there a whole bunch of photos of you in drag?**

JB. Well, there were no cell phones and the non-professional cameras available then were not made for interior photography. There was a girl photographer with a flash camera, like all the old news reporters used, who worked for the club. She would go from table to table and ask if the customers wanted a souvenir photo of their visit, especially if a member of

the cast was sitting with them. I mean it was the Fifties and to go back to Podunk with a photo taken of them in a New York nitery and with one of the cast members at their table—and a man that looked like a glamorous woman no less—HELLO!

**LA. Were you around the night Steven the owner was murdered?**

JB. I think I was working in Miami Beach at that time, at the Circus Bar and another club—I forget its name.

**LA. Were you always scared of traveling by plane?**

JB. Well, there is of course the "If God meant us to fly we would have wings" explanation and everyone is a tad frightened, I think. Planes do crash now and again and with my luck... Actually, Alan and I were flying somewhere together through a fierce blizzard and we had to make an emergency landing, but we were together, holding on to one another, and somehow that made it all less scary. I was with Alan and that pretty much was all that mattered.

**LA. Why do you refuse to travel?**

JB. You mean outside of not wanting to fly? It takes time and frankly a monument is a monument and once you have seen one... There are places I would love to live for a short time, like Holland or London or the Italian countryside, but I do not like to leave my cat babies in another person's care for that long. We are very attached to one another. I did travel with Alan but traveling is best experienced with someone you love—like so many things—and he died.

**LA. How was it attending Parsons and facing discrimination?**

JB. I am not sure I ever really faced discrimination. I mostly ignored it or was too dumb to notice or got around it as best I could. I never felt "wrong" or [like a] "heathen" because I loved men in an "unnatural" way. I was what I was. I had no choice in the matter—like being born with a tail... only a tail can be surgically removed. There was some resulting awkwardness because I was gay, even at Parsons. In those days, in a community such as a school of art, it was more or less "don't ask, don't tell." Everyone knew but mostly ignored the great abundance of poof in the room. However, the Norman Norell award for best design was denied me because I was entrapped in a public men's room and arrested by the police for committing an indecent act I did not actually have time to commit, even if that had been my intention—I really just had to pee. No matter. Parsons could not possibly give an award to so wanton and shameless a person, although the award had to do with my ability as a designer, not my private life or sexual preferences. Outside of being robbed of so prestigious an award, I was asked not to use the Parsons lavatories in the future. I am not sure which was the most hurtful, but I still feel a slight twinge when I think about it.

**LA. What have you been spending your time working on recently?**

JB. Pop-ups and what I call "galaxy cards," and preparing for a couple gallery shows, sometime next year I think.





Top: Terry Howe "mixing" at Club 82, 1950s.  
 Bottom Left: Terry Howe performing at 82 Club, 1950s.  
 Middle Right: Terry Howe performing at Circus Bar Miami Beach, 1950s.  
 Bottom Right: Jack Hughes in camping in 82 Club dressing room, 1950s.



Top Left: 82 Club souvenir postcard 1950s.  
 Top Right: Backstage at the Vinnie Summers, a dresser, Jan Richards and Terry Howe, 1950s.  
 Middle Left: Terry Howe, Miami Beach Club, 1950s.  
 Middle Right: Terry Howe mixing at Club 82, 1950s.  
 Bottom: Cast members "mixing" at Club 82, 1950s





**LA. There are hidden messages in your musical lyrics, as with all of your photography work.**

JB. Well there are double entendres and references that are not hidden, only obscure. However, in the past I have often hidden images in my photography. I wish I had the opportunity to do this more often. I think the eye sees a great deal more than the conscious mind can handle but I believe it registers in the subconscious.

**LA. Tell me about the inner rhymes within your lyrics.**

JB. Inner rhymes? Very few lyrics these days even rhyme the last word of a line. This is the beginning of a rap song from my musical, *The Almost Magnificent Seven*:

*I was born  
Cherubic, dubious, even boob wary  
To an aberrant pair of adversary  
Parents whose marriage was regularly  
Knuckles bared ... incendiary!  
Too intent  
On venting their mutual  
Discontent  
To be dutiful  
And have lent  
Sufficient attention to that  
Incontinent they begat  
Twelve pound twenty-four-inch brat!*

Not all lyrics should have inner rhymes. For instance they can be distracting in a very serious song.

**LA. Would you say you're a perfectionist? When do you put something down, call it finished and move onto the next project?**

JB. I seldom think I am as talented or gifted as most anyone else, so in order to compete I have to try that much harder. It takes a lot before I am ready to say whatever I am working on is "good enough." I do not compromise my original vision/idea that easily. As for the second part of the question, there is nearly always more one can do to improve a project, but these discoveries are usually made in hindsight when it is too late to make changes.

**LA. What are your thoughts on youth and stars of today?**

JB. I won't answer that here—I already have enough enemies. I love Lady Gaga, though she seems to be pushing the "Lady" part more

now more than the "Gaga" and I think that's the right direction to take. Unlike most of her peers, she has REAL talent. Now, if she will only get rid of those dreadful tattoos. The test of a great singer is not if she or he can dance, the test is can they sing better than an average person a cappella. I don't think 90 percent of the pop stars today can. I remember being thrilled years ago to discover Bowie could really sing. He had a truly sweet voice.

**LA. What's the difference for you between a girl and a showgirl?**

JB. That's a dumb question. But the difference between a pony girl and a showgirl might begin with height, having a sleek body type and the ability to walk—parade—gracefully.

**LA. Can you tell me about that morning you woke up and started singing and you left your depression behind?**

JB. I have been plagued by clinical depression most of my adult life. It was the worst before Prozac came along. Since Prozac things have been a whisper better, but one morning recently, I woke up singing an old Irving Berlin tune, "Count Your Blessings," and I felt very different, lighter, as if Kate Smith or a herd of buffalo had been lifted off my shoulders. I knew my demons were gone and hopefully they will never return. But if they do, I will have felt like a normal human being for however long until then. Unless you suffer from very deep depression you cannot begin to understand what it is like, or how interfering it can be. It is not just a blue Monday, it is not just feeling sad, it is overwhelming hopelessness and a great deal of self-loathing.

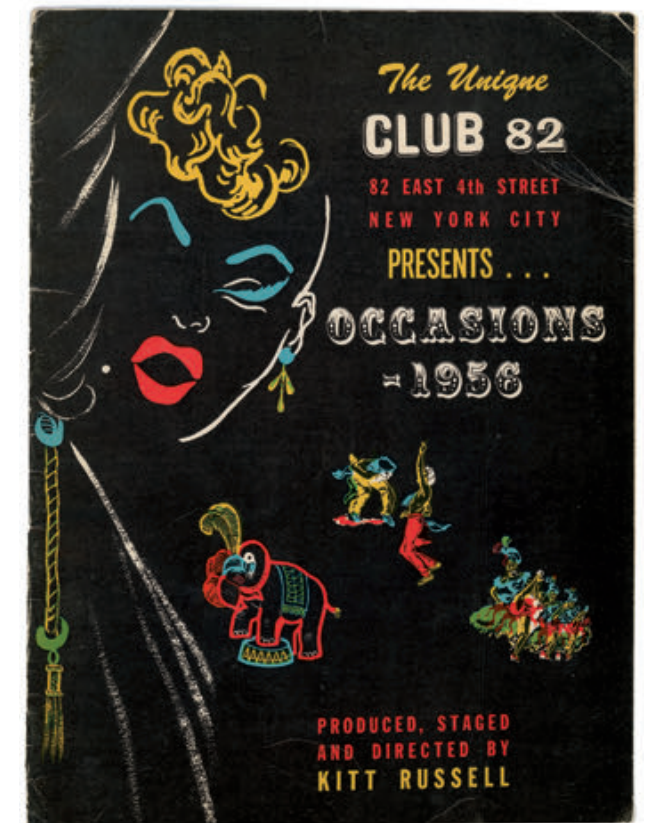
**LA. You have multiple voices that you jump in-between. How many dead movie stars live inside of you and how long have you had them?**

JB. Any old queen, well at least a great many of we ancients, have always attempted to imitate Bette Davis or Tallulah "Dahlin'" [Bankhead] and of course Mae [West]. My impressions are really not all that good and are getting more and more difficult. I can barely do an impression of myself anymore. Age takes away so many cherished abilities. My favorite impression or voice, age does not interfere with as much. It is Dame Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell. I have been tinkering with that vocal impression since I first saw the 1952 film of Wilde's *Earnest*.

**LA. What would you and your soulmate Alan both enjoy doing together?**

JB. Most everything. We had very similar tastes, if that's how you say it, although somehow that sounds a tad off-color.

"I seldom think I am as talented or gifted as most anyone else, so in order to compete I have to try that much harder."



Top: James Bidgood painting back drop for 82 Club revue, 1950s.

Bottom Left: Junior League Mardi Gras Ball Costume.

Bottom Right: Program cover from Club 82, 1956.





Top Left: Alan and Bidgood at Niagara Falls, 1970s.

Top Right: Alan in leather outfit at 1970s "The Saint" discotheque.

Bottom Left: Junior League Mardi Gras Ball Costume, 1950s.

Bottom Right: Costume for Junior League Mardi Gras Ball Pageant.

**LA. What is one of the most memorable times you have had using acid?**

JB. That's a very difficult choice to make, I so love to trip—but I guess the day I met my Alan would be my choice, because meeting him was like winning 50 Tony Awards, a hundred Academy Awards and being born looking like Ian Somerhalder. No, even better. I mean consider my imagination, and then my meeting a hottie who got dressed up for special guests in incredible head-to-toe leather outfits—and we were both tripping! We scorched 14th Street that night.

**LA. What has brought you happiness in life and what remains a source of positivity and happiness?**

JB. Alan. Alan. Alan. And like almost everything else good and promising in my life, the greatness took him from me. I have uniquely bad luck. But there is definitely something wrong with me well more than one thing—but as much as I would like to, I don't know how to stop, to throw in the towel. I have been getting back up on the horse for so many years. I've gone through a dozen horses or more.

**LA. Let's talk about the present—how do you feel at this point in life?**

JB. I am an Aries and I think losing one's ability to do as much of the physical work as we might have been able to do most of our lives might be harder on us than other signs. I am having a terrible time adjusting to getting old. My mind is sharper than ever before, though that may not be saying all that much! I spend far too many hours on the computer everyday working in Photoshop or writing lyrics, zoning out! Lady Gaga was born on the same day as I was and Bette Davis was an Aries ... and Swanson and Crawford... and Brando... we are a very pushy bunch.

**LA. *Pink Narcissus* continues to be an inspiration for many artists including myself. Can you tell me something about making it that you have never told anyone?**

JB. Actually, I have never told anyone [that] I storyboarded most of it while I was very, very ill, for a month or so, and had an extremely high fever.

**LA. When someone looks at one of your images you know instantly that it's a Bidgood. For you, what makes something a Bidgood?**

JB. For one thing, I use only color light—I mean, I use gels on all my photo lights—and then I sort of paint with them. And the sets are somewhat elaborate, especially for the type of photography I do, or did, and I think, generally speaking, they mostly involve fantasy and glitter—oh, and beauty.

**LA. How did you meet Bobby Kendall and how did your relationship develop?**

JB. A close friend of mine met him and recommended I have a look. I did and was very taken with him—he had no idea how good looking he was. He had an older brother who was extremely handsome, so I guess no one noticed Bobby, and the girls around him did not pay much, if any, attention, even though he was straight. He thought he was goofy looking. I think that was part of what appealed to him about being photographed by me: He was the center of attraction for the first time in his life. The fairies all fawned over him and he had costumes made for him. He was the center of a great deal of attention. He felt important; I do not think he ever felt important before. What I thought was the most beautiful thing about Bobby was not the exterior—he was a really nice, extremely sweet and loving human being. And he laughed at my jokes. I think beauty that is not supported by an even more beautiful person inside vanishes very quickly, and their features can even begin to look grotesque.

**LA. What are your wishes and hopes for the future?**

JB. Most importantly, to see my musical *The Almost Magnificent Seven* on Broadway. If I live to see that happen, I should be around 184 years old and then some. And I have another one I want to write, but until I learn how to pick the lock to get inside that extremely closed and unwelcoming community, I think I'd best invest my time elsewhere. I wrote my first musical, a revue, when I was a teenager. That's what I wanted to do: musical theater. I didn't learn which end of a camera you looked through until I was almost 30.







HIGHLIGHTS FROM JAMES BIDGOOD'S *PINK NARCISSUS* SERIES, STARRING BOBBY KENDALL. LATE 1960S.  
All images in the following pages are courtesy of the artist and the ClampArt Gallery, New York

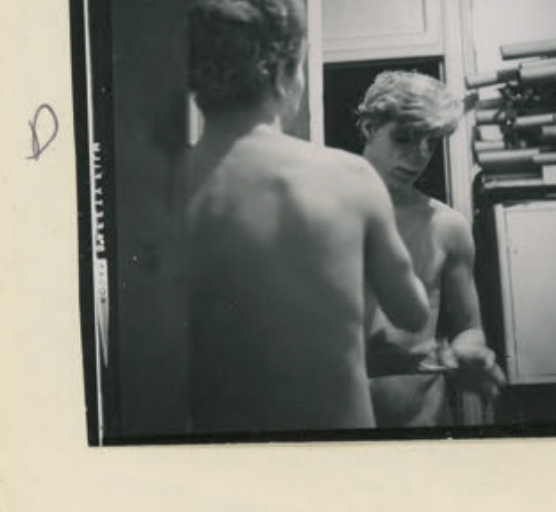




Backstage during the *Pink Narcissus* series shooting.

BACK STAGE ~~BLACK AND WHITE~~

PAGE II 167



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Bobby Kendall Taking Off Shorts.





Matador Arena, Bobby Kendall.





"I think beauty that is not supported by an even more beautiful person inside vanishes very quickly, and their features can even begin to look grotesque."



Jay Garvin Hovering Over Lobsters, from the *Water Colors* series, 1960s. Right Page: Tommy Coombs and Eiffel Tower, 1960s.

