

# ARTFORUM

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Opposite page: James Bidgood, *Willow Tree* (detail), ca. 1965, digital C-print, 19 x 15".

Above: James Bidgood as Terry Howe backstage at Club 82, New York, ca. 1950s.

Right: James Bidgood as Terry Howe (third from right) "mixing" at Club 82, New York, ca. 1950s.



## AGAINST NATURE

WILLIAM E. JONES ON THE ART OF JAMES BIDGOOD

**PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILMMAKER** James Bidgood might agree with a sentiment expressed in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*: To be natural "is such a very difficult pose to keep up." From 1960 to 1970—the period between the US court decisions affirming the redeeming social value of male physique photographs and subsequent ones establishing a legal definition of pornography—Bidgood constructed an elaborate artificial world for himself. His small, hermetic body of work combines eroticism and a vivid, campy vulgarity. Although artists such as Pierre et Gilles, David LaChapelle, and Steven Arnold have ransacked Bidgood's oeuvre for inspiration, his work is too idiosyncratic and homemade, and the artist himself too reclusive, to be called canonical. Stranded outside any easily definable mainstream, he has been

rescued for posterity on a number of occasions, the latest being the exhibition "James Bidgood: Reveries" at New York's Museum of Sex.

"Reveries," curated by Lissa Rivera, presents new prints of choice examples of Bidgood's photography, as well as vintage prints and publications from the 1960s, along with the work for which he is best known, the film *Pink Narcissus* (1971). Snapshots displayed in vitrines reveal how Bidgood, born in 1933, spent the '50s: as a dressmaker, costumer, and performer, most notably at Club 82, a drag mecca and Mafia clip joint in the East Village. One especially striking picture shows Bidgood in his drag persona Terry Howe at work "mixing" with spectators to encourage them to buy more drinks. As an androgynous and manic Carol Channing, he stands out with makeup that gives him

a startled look and a toothy grin reminiscent of a Kabuki demon's. His persona is a perfect example of what Susan Sontag (some years later in her essay "Notes on 'Camp'") would call "instant character . . . understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing." Bidgood transformed himself from a female impersonator to an artist pursuing one very intense thing: his obsession with the young male figure, which he most often placed in highly stylized settings bathed in saturated colored lights.

*Willow Tree*, from the mid-'60s, combines many distinctive elements of Bidgood's photography. Beneath drooping branches, a nude male figure reclines on a bed of flowers and shields his eyes against a rosy sunrise in a landscape of hills and mesas. Amid the luxuriant vegetation, only the youngster's body is what it seems to be.

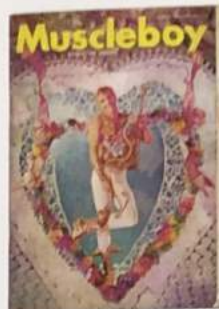


The rest was recycled from a gown Bidgood created for a client attending a Junior League Mardi Gras ball. He painstakingly arranged the appliqué, molded, and shredded materials of the dress into a forced-perspective composition of vibrant greens, pinks, and blues.

Bidgood's work is so self-contained that it appears to exist outside of time. Historical referents and views of exteriors hardly impinge at all on his visual world; and yet Bidgood was very much a man of his era. He contributed lush color photographs to magazines such as *Muscleboy* and *The Young Physique* during their vogue in the early 1960s. He began work on *Pink Narcissus* in 1963. That year, Jack Smith finished *Flaming Creatures* and shot *Normal Love*, Andy Warhol began making films, and Kenneth Anger directed *Scorpio Rising*; the following year Sontag would publish "Notes on 'Camp.'" As the '60s were happening outside his door, Bidgood was shooting mainly inside, in his cramped Hell's Kitchen apartment, constantly augmenting and revising his elaborate sets and compositions to approximate the baroque ideal he envisioned. Production of *Pink Narcissus* dragged on, and he did not see a completed version until 1971, the year of the first famous hard-core gay theatrical feature, Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand*. By that time, the soft-core film over which Bidgood had labored so feverishly had taken on the aspect of a quaint curiosity, and one that didn't even bear his name. Sherpix, producer and distributor of exploitation films and erotica, had provided money to finish *Pink Narcissus*, but, exasperated by Bidgood's perfectionism, had taken the film away from him and imposed their own edit and soundtrack. Bidgood removed his name from the project, and the script, direction, and photography were credited to "Anonymous."

The release of a version of *Pink Narcissus* over which Bidgood had no final say was a trauma from which he never recovered. There followed more photographs, but no films, except one: a hard-core orgy sequence called *Baghdad*, part of a feature that was never completed for the New York porn company Hand in Hand. (The scene was eventually included in the compilation *Good Hot Stuff* in 1975.) After these debacles, Bidgood found himself in a moment of gay culture not to his taste; he preferred the epicene ephebe to the macho clone. His work and identity as an artist, inasmuch as they had ever been acknowledged in the first place, were forgotten. Some spectators assumed that *Pink Narcissus* was an unsigned work by Smith, Warhol, or Anger, or even the private project of a closeted Hollywood luminary. Sui generis and seemingly bereft of self-awareness, the film exerted a powerful and mysterious attraction; it was revived periodically and acquired the aura of folk art. In the 1990s, author Bruce Benderson researched the artist and wrote the authoritative book *James Bidgood* (1999). For the first

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Cover of *Muscleboy*, March/April 1965. Photo: James Bidgood.

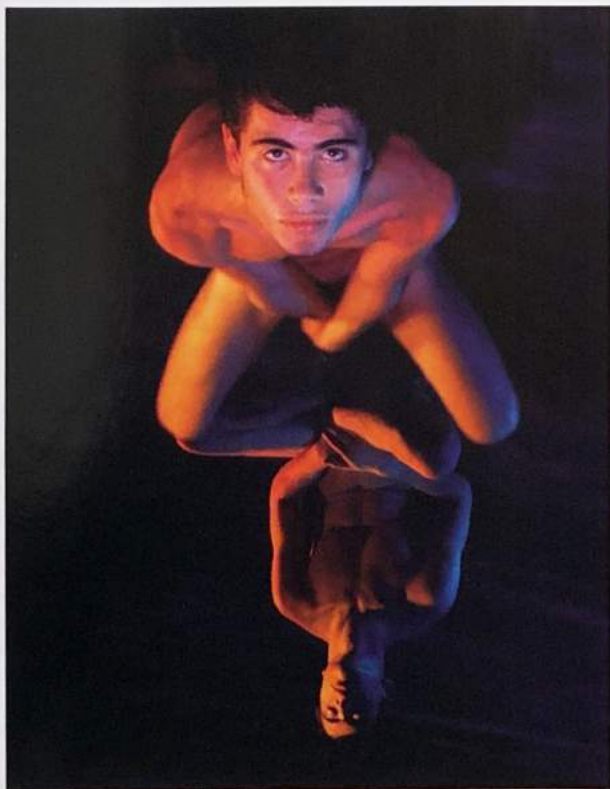


Cover of *The Young Physique*, August/September 1964. Photo: James Bidgood.

Below: James Bidgood, *Huck Finn*, ca. 1965, digital C-print, 17 x 15".

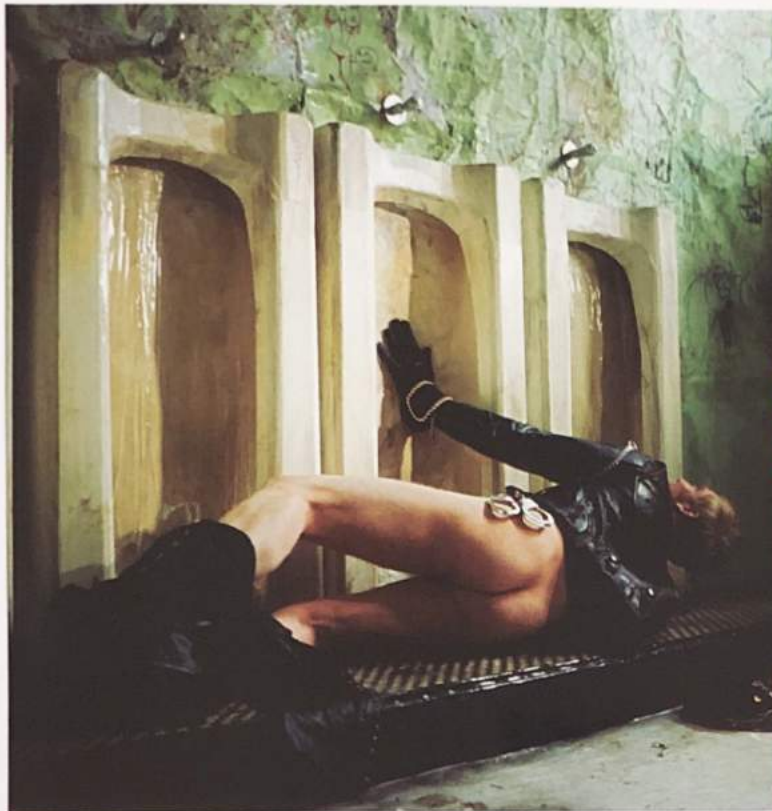






Clockwise, from top left: James Bidgood, *Pan*, ca. late 1960s, digital C-print, 22 x 22"; James Bidgood, *Lobster*, ca. early 1960s, digital C-print, 15 x 15"; From the series "Water Colors," ca. early 1960s. James Bidgood, *Neath the Willow*, ca. early 1960s, C print, 3 1/2 x 3 1/2"; James Bidgood, *Double Image*, ca. early 1960s, digital C-print, 19 x 15". From the series "Test Shots," ca. early 1960s.





Four ca. 1965 production stills from James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus*, 1971.



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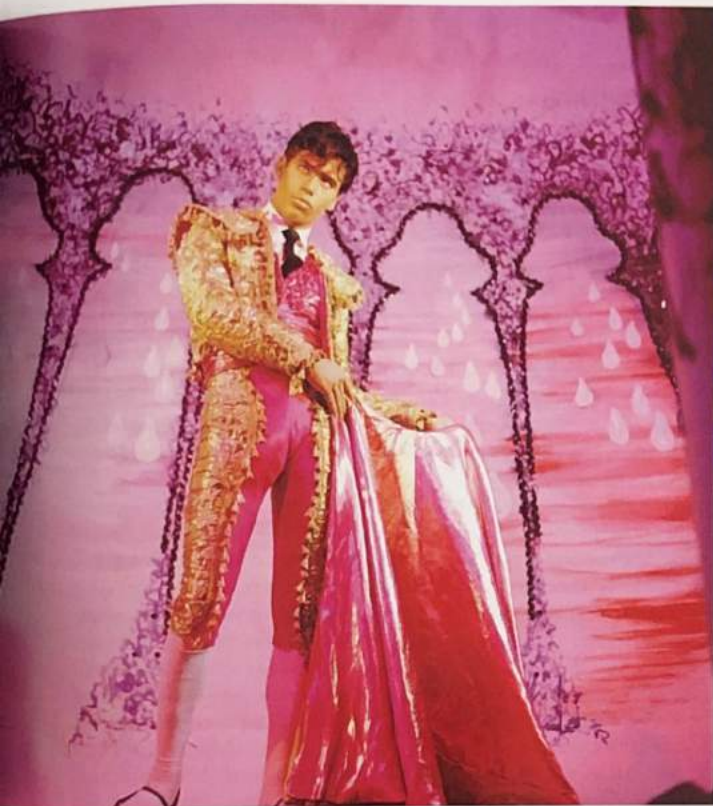
time, an audience beyond the small circle of physique-magazine collectors could see Bidgood's sumptuous photographs reproduced in all their lurid glory.

Bidgood's working methods are nothing if not perverse. He recoils from the natural world or indeed any reality that cannot be manufactured from scraps of fabric, a few lights, and the simplest of implements. During the production of *Pink Narcissus*, he lived for months on end in the midst of environments he created for the film with its star, a pretty (but inept and mainly heterosexual) hustler who went by the name Bobby Kendall. Instead of shooting a tearoom scene at a real public men's room, Bidgood constructed a row of urinals at home out of foamcore. When a loft was placed at his disposal by the film's producers, he used it to construct a Times Square set populated by grotesque and oversexed characters, including a dildo-and-"pissicle" salesman played by Ridiculous Theatrical Company founder Charles Ludlam, who is seen in the film greedily licking his wares made of frozen urine.

The narrative content of *Pink Narcissus* is insubstantial in the extreme, a circular plot consisting of episodes serving mainly to link a succession of remarkable visual

effects. Kendall lounges alone in an elaborately decorated pink apartment, fondling himself, waiting for johns to call, and fantasizing about various men. Figures of submission (servant, slave, delivery boy, peon) abound. *Pink Narcissus's* symbolism—pearls for semen, a rain shower for purification, mirrors for vanity—is so simple and deadpan that it comes off as vaguely comic. The action reaches a climax (in every sense) in the oneiric Orientalism of a harem scene. A dancer with an impressive erection draped in diaphanous veils performs for a bearded Middle Eastern potentate and his catamite (both played by Kendall) to the sound of a K-Tel record of Turkish belly-dancing music. With a riot of double exposures, Bidgood multiplies the characters and their actions, as well as innumerable strings of pearls. The fantasy ends with an ejaculation—the only one in the film. The harem dance should be pure kitsch, but the scene plays out with such fervor that it achieves a breathtaking sublimity. It recalls another of Sontag's observations about camp: "The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying, in all earnestness: Voilà! the Orient!"





Sontag recognized camp as a form of dandyism in the age of mass culture, and its connoisseurs—the homosexuals—as aristocrats of taste. These new arbiters supplanted the old-style dandies: actual aristocrats who were degenerate, exhausted by ennui, and seeking rare sensations unavailable to the plebes. In “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag invokes as precedent Duc Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* (most often translated as *Against Nature*, 1884). Although Des Esseintes is not a homosexual by the standards of nineteenth-century medicine, he is about as queer as the mores of the era’s literary culture allowed him to be. Neurotic, narcissistic, sterile, and obsessed with aesthetics, he is the end of the family line. He abhors the vigor and fecundity of anything found in nature; instead, he prefers cunning simulations. He lives alone in rooms decorated to his specifications, while unseen servants and tradesmen attend to his needs. His solitary pursuit of pleasure does not lead to excitement, but rather to a kind of stasis that even interactions with a bit of rough trade and a muscular female acrobat cannot disrupt. *À rebours* does not rely very much on plot,

but is instead propelled forward by a bravura play of language inspired by the surfaces of things. The text drifts through extended descriptions of sensory phenomena, artworks, and books. In the most memorable scene, Des Esseintes has a pet tortoise encrusted with exotic gemstones, and the poor creature, struggling under the weight of its shell, dies of exhaustion. Bidgood films a similar scene in *Pink Narcissus*: Kendall puts a gilded record on an old-fashioned gramophone, but the disc is encrusted with so many jewels that it can barely move on the turntable.

*À rebours* caused a huge sensation on publication and attracted an enduring cult following. It is described in detail (though not named) by Oscar Wilde as the “poisonous French novel” with “metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in color” that corrupts Dorian Gray, thereby discreetly entering the cultural lineage that would one day be called camp. *À rebours* also provoked conservatives. In a review, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, author of *Du dandysme et de George Brummell*, warned Huysmans that he would “have only to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross.” He chose the latter,

becoming a devout Catholic, but only after writing his satanist masterpiece *Là-bas* (The Damned) in 1891.

Bidgood, after the devastating experience of losing control of *Pink Narcissus*, did not kill himself, nor did he convert to the American religion, money. He made a third choice—pornography—but it didn’t work out. At the time of this writing, he lives in poverty in New York City. He still makes photographs when he can, but his filmmaking is on indefinite hold.

“Notes on ‘Camp’” begins: “Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described.” On a meager budget and without the explicit intention of doing so, Bidgood produced the closest thing we are likely to get to a film adaptation of *À rebours*. In this way, *Pink Narcissus* encompasses the history of camp, from the sensibility that Wilde embodied but dared not name to the cultural phenomenon that Sontag described. □

*“James Bidgood: Reveries” is on view at the Museum of Sex, New York, through September 8.*

WILLIAM E. JONES IS AN ARTIST AND FILMMAKER BASED IN LOS ANGELES. HIS FIRST NOVEL IS A PORNOGRAPHIC BILDUNGSROMAN TITLED *I’M OPEN TO ANYTHING* (WE HEARD YOU LIKE BOOKS, 2019).