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Art Gallery Shows to See in May



By Will Heinrich

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This week in Newly Reviewed, Will Heinrich covers Ceija Stojka's naïve expressionism, Mao Ishikawa's sprawling bodies and a redo of an important show by Peter Hujar.

TRIBECA

Peter Hujar

Through May 30. Ortuzar, 5 White Street; 212-257-0033, ortuzar.com.



Peter Hujar, "David Wojnarowicz: Manhattan-Night (III)" (1985). The Peter Hujar Archive, via Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and Ortuzar, New York

Four decades ago, at the East Village gallery Gracie Mansion, Peter Hujar staged his last photo show. A year later, in 1987, he died of AIDS at the age of 53. For that final show, Hujar arranged 70 black-and-white portraits into two long, neat rows, accomplishing the surprising feat of treating his subjects equally without leveling their differences. A dead cat in Queens and a dead man in his coffin are presented as equally worthy of close attention, as are “Greer Lankton in a Fashion Pose” and “John Heys Standing Nude.”

But while it’s true that the nudes are no sexier or more vulnerable than the clothed figures, or that the performance artist Ethyl Eichelberger, say, looks equally theatrical whether he is costumed as King Lear or in ordinary dress, the differences that Hujar stripped away were only the superficial ones. What he left was the raw, glowing particularity of real life in all its strangeness and resistance to generalization.

Reinstalled at Ortuzar gallery in TriBeCa, which is presenting it in collaboration with the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, which showed a version last year, the photos remain haunting. Most of Hujar’s subjects look directly into the camera, and with their unrelenting charge of out-of-frame emotion, these gazes are arresting.

The artworks are especially impressive in the context of “How Beautiful This Living Thing Is,” a concurrent group show curated by Andrew Durbin, who just published a dual biography of Hujar and the artist Paul Thek, his longtime friend and lover. A pair of rare Ann Wilson textiles, David Wojnarowicz’s first painting, two modestly scaled works of genius by Thek and other pieces give you a sense of the dreamy, sensual, cinematic scene Hujar was working in. But his photos still resound against them all like so many claps of thunder.