

Resurrecting the Forgotten Art of the AIDS Era

In amassing work made by the mostly overlooked gay artists who lived and died during the crisis, a global group of collectors is redefining what the Western canon looks like.

By Nick Haramis Photographs by Blaine Davis

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GROWING UP IN Denver, Neal Baer used to study the way straight men walked, how their legs moved with strides that seemed more declarative than his own. At school, he would lower the register of his voice. When he drank from a glass of water, he made sure to keep his pinky down. For as long as he can remember, Baer believed that being gay was an aberrance — and that to indulge it would lead to a lonely death. He rejected that part of himself, attempting to cure, or at least curb, his gayness through therapy and abstinence.

To an outsider, Baer entered middle age as a happily married straight man with a quirky career path that made him popular at dinner parties: In addition to being a Harvard-educated doctor, he also wrote and produced hit TV shows such as “ER” and “Law & Order: SVU.” But even as he helped introduce gay and trans characters to television, his desire gnawed at him, as did the attendant shame. In 2013, as his 60s loomed, he came out to his then wife and their college-age son; the relief he felt was immediate and transformative.

Endeavoring to make up for lost time, Baer, who had been a casual art collector, started buying work solely by gay artists, beginning with a colorful 1990 watercolor portrait by Don Bachardy of the writer Paul Monette, whose 1992 coming-out memoir, “Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story,” helped Baer do the same. Today, next to that painting of Monette is another work by Bachardy, from 2014, of Baer himself.

“I don’t know that the world can change for the better except with stories,” says Baer, 67, from the apartment he shares with his husband, the 37-year-old psychologist Brandon Weiss, which overlooks a secluded tangle of ginkgo, ailanthus and cork trees in Central Park known as the Ramble, where gay men have gone cruising since at least the 1920s. Presiding over Baer’s sofa like a patron saint of sodomy is a 1956 pencil drawing by Jean Cocteau of a harlequin dancing, his penis hanging out for all to see. Much of Baer’s collection includes subject matter he’d long considered taboo — maybe distasteful — and which he now displays throughout his home on Manhattan’s Upper West Side for the same reason gay bars screen vintage porn: as a way to carve out a space for himself and others like him where tolerance, even acceptance, of queerness isn’t enough. In these rooms, gayness is worshiped, championed, defended and shared.

Baer’s interest in queer art spans gender and sexual identities, but there’s an emphasis on work by gay men from the early days of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and ’90s, many of whom created in relative obscurity and have often been forgotten, only to be reclaimed in recent years by a new generation of collectors. In his living room, a stenciled stamp image titled “Jean Genet Masturbating in Metteray Prison (London Broil)” (1983), by the East Village multidisciplinary artist and activist David Wojnarowicz, hangs alongside a pair of almost Expressionist canvases depicting rare moments of comfort under the specter of death, “In the Closet” (1987) and “Reach” (1992), by the lesser-known painter Hugh Steers, whose uncle was Gore Vidal and whose mother was related to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. There’s also an etching of objects associated with incarceration — a bar of soap, a razor blade — called “77th Precinct” (1987), after what was then considered a New York Police Department dumping ground for dirty cops, by the Lower East Side-based Chinese American painter Martin Wong, who used to subsidize his income as an artist by buying undervalued antiques from flea markets and selling them for more money to auction houses; portraits by Peter Hujar, the eminent chronicler of New York’s downtown scene, of Darrel Ellis, “Darrel Ellis (III)” (1981), taken when the mixed-media artist was 23 and starting out, and of Hujar’s friend and former lover the painter and sculptor Paul Thek, “Paul Thek Showering, Fire Island” (1966). Next to them is a self-portrait circa 1991 by Ellis, a contemporary of the so-called Pictures Generation who will have his first major show, co-organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, later this year.



"Urinals" (1993) by Hugh Steers hangs in the collector's guesthouse. Blaine Davis

Baer has arranged these works with a curator's eye, picking up common threads among the artists: Wojnarowicz's and Wong's frustration over feelings of isolation and confinement; how Steers and Hujar could make even an ailing gay man — *especially* an ailing gay man — look like a king; the special curiosity and care with which othered people saw one another and, in one another, themselves. But what binds these six artists is the least remarkable thing about them: At the average age of 44, when their careers were just taking off, they all died of complications from AIDS.

There are many obvious reasons so much work from the AIDS era has been ignored. At the time, some audiences found depictions of sickness too disturbing to study or hang above a credenza, among them even gay men who needed to have their pain understood but may not have wanted to live with constant reminders of a plague that had infected every aspect of their lives. Others reacted with homophobic distaste to what they saw as disorderly expressions of anger and sexual deviance in an era when the gay male body was largely feared. Certain gatekeepers simply felt that these men hadn't made enough work to deserve their greatness, that they died before getting a chance to prove it.

But Baer's collection isn't just about acknowledging that he, too, overlooked these artists, or about atoning to himself for having stayed in the closet as long as he did. By buying and bidding on these pieces, he and other like-minded (not to mention rich) gay collectors are using their power to insist that institutions and auction houses reconsider art that hasn't been given its full due. By uncovering shared approaches and techniques, fears and fetishes and an entire network of friendships, love affairs and rivalries, they're mapping the connective tissue of a 20th-century queer canon and drawing it forward to inform how queerness is discussed today, with its specific alchemy of rage and lust.

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"This is who we are," says Baer about the art that surrounds him, which, taken together, gives one the sense of attending a circuit party at a mausoleum. Here, a back-room encounter is a legitimate first date; a drag mother is as important as a biological one; and sex and activism are the same thing. "It's like building one's tribe."

II.

STRIP AWAY THE nuance, and the art market isn't terribly complicated: The amount of money for which a piece is bought and sold is calculated by dealers based on a combination of the artist's past and predicted sales, as well as on the work's perceived cultural value. That latter assessment is where things get more interesting. Through programming and acquisitions, art institutions and blue-chip galleries have the power to anoint new stars (like the Pakistani-born gay American painter Salman Toor, 39, whose first major exhibition was at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 2020) and to remind audiences about established ones (like the American portraitist Alice Neel, whose retrospective at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art last year reinvigorated her cultural cachet nearly four decades after her death). Such venues have the clout to right historical wrongs: That's why it's so important when an institution mounts a show of work by a previously unsung artist, which is what the Brooklyn Museum will do in November with the first career survey of the East Village punk photographer Jimmy DeSana, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1990 at the age of 40.

Private buyers have always been integral to the art establishment, but seldom are collectors such dogged participants in shaping an artist's commercial and cultural legacy. Consider, for example, an investment banker who wishes to remain anonymous and who has admired Frank Moore's work since he first saw it at New York's Sperone Westwater gallery in 1993. The artist's dazzling, Surrealist paintings, which often come in custom-made frames, became, after his H.I.V. diagnosis in 1985 at the age of 34, increasingly focused on the intersection of two crises: AIDS and the environment.

The banker soon tracked down the artist himself. After hearing about the collector's interest in his work, Moore called Angela Westwater, a co-founder of the gallery, to find out what was still available from the show. The banker immediately bought three drawings, and yet he pined for a specific piece: "Wildlife Management Area" (1990), a painting of a reindeer whose head has been mounted despite the fact that the animal is still alive. Eventually, that work landed in the hands of Gianni Versace, whose estate sold it at auction for \$60,000 a few years after the fashion designer was murdered in 1997. Last year, it wound up in a show at David Zwirner

in New York, as part of a series of eight solo exhibitions organized by the gallery's senior director Robert Goff on the 40th anniversary of the arrival of H.I.V. titled "More Life," about artists — including Moore — who died because of the virus. Naturally, the banker bought the painting right away, for nearly six times what it had commanded in the Versace sale. He talks about finally getting the work with the excitement of someone who's just won a very long race.

Elsewhere in his 18th-century country home in Connecticut are paintings by the English interdisciplinary filmmaker Derek Jarman; a bedside portrait of Hitler and the names of gay men he persecuted during the Holocaust by McDermott & McGough, an art duo who lived and dressed throughout much of the 1980s as if it were the Victorian Age; and his latest acquisition: a \$125,000 cast plaster head by Wojnarowicz.

It's probably easier to spend so much time in the company of such sad, often confrontational work — to look at a mournful slow dance between wasted bodies, or a sailor lying unconscious on a restroom floor, scenes that are represented in the Steers paintings he owns — when you know how much it's worth. Goff takes Moore's steadily rising prices as a good sign, although what happens next remains to be seen. "It's early days," he says about whether Moore's market value will lead to a museum show. "I mean, it should."

Another collector, Brian Saltzman, a 64-year-old infectious disease specialist and internist who often received gifts of art from his East Village patients, now owns over 300 pieces that he keeps in five storage facilities across Manhattan. His collection serves as a reminder: not of the statistics related to AIDS — between 1987 and 1997, the illness claimed over 300,000 lives in America alone — but of the talented men he treated and befriended, how they brimmed with promise until the disease took hold. "The work is deeply moving for me, and it makes me smile," he says. "That's why I keep it around."

AIDS shattered the notion of what it meant to be a gay artist. No matter what their practices looked like before the crisis, those who didn't die right away were expected to dissect and distill the tragedy of the virus while it was still killing them. "I loved what David [Wojnarowicz] was doing, but I just wanted to make art about my friends. I missed them," says the Los Angeles-based Chicano artist Joey Terrill, who, at 66, recently stepped down as the director of global advocacy and partnerships at the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, where he'd worked for the past 17 years, partly because he has too many shows coming up. Last fall, Ortuzar Projects in New York hosted his first solo exhibition in the city in 40 years, which was followed by another one this past spring at Park View/Paul Soto gallery in Los Angeles. Earlier this summer, the Whitney acquired his telenovela-style painting series "Breaking Up/Breaking Down" (1984-85), in which a version of the artist is shown pining over an ex in the course of a year: crying, masturbating, self-medicating and trying to sleep. As AIDS spread, Terrill says, "It was like wartime. The idea of trying to pursue a career [in art] was preposterous." Then there was the fact that these largely figurative works had been pushed aside by Neo-Geometric Conceptualism, whose rise in popularity coincided with the epidemic: By the mid-80s, the emerging Neo-Geo star Jeff Koons had replaced Wojnarowicz as the artist of the moment — which also meant that gay artists found themselves in the impossible position of having to make sense of and articulate the trauma of their lives, even as people grew disinterested. "No one cared about this work anymore. All the collectors suddenly wanted a [Koons] bunny," says Wendy Olsoff, a co-founder with Penny Pilkington of PPOW gallery, who nonetheless never stopped representing Wojnarowicz and Wong.

III.

LATE ONE EVENING in the mid-1980s, Charles W. Leslie drove to the Hudson River docks, on the West Side of Manhattan, in a red pickup truck with metal shears in his back seat. The area was once a bustling shipping port and became a cruising hot spot only after it had fallen into decrepitude. To make room for redevelopment, the city planned to demolish a chunk of wall that had been tagged a few years earlier by Gustav Von Will, a street artist who went by the name Tava. Leslie, who with his late partner, Fritz Lohman, opened a New York gallery in 1969 devoted to archiving and exhibiting work by queer artists — it became the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in 2014 — was not prepared to let that happen. "We knew we had to save that stuff," says Leslie, now 88. "I thought we were going to get arrested." It wouldn't have been his only run-in with the law: Leslie was one of the first art dealers to exhibit the controversial B.D.S.M. photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, thus becoming familiar with the local police who were called to shut him down. "I used to say, 'Hello, officers. Here to see the show?'" he recalls.

In 1969, Leslie debuted his first group exhibition of homoerotic art in his SoHo loft; today, the Phallus Palace, as it's become known, is crammed with penises: not just in etchings and paintings by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring and in photographs by Stanley Stellar but in the shape of salt and pepper shakers, vases, paperweights and bars of soap that were given to him over the decades as gifts. "The love that dare not speak its name now just won't shut up," he says.

Elton John has been a similarly loud advocate for gay men and the prevention and treatment of H.I.V. since 1992, when he founded the Elton John AIDS Foundation. The 75-year-old English musician wonders if this reappraisal of queer work from that time has taken so long because most collectors, even if they might have considered buying pieces, felt too sheepish to display them. But, John says, "I love people to be shocked. ... I never went through that thing about being gay and being ashamed." In fact, he has 8,500 pieces scattered throughout his houses around the world, most of them by queer artists who died because of AIDS, including 37 photographs by Mapplethorpe, about whose work he says, "I love the really rough ones." John, who also appreciates the gritty Polaroid portraitist Mark Morrisroe and the classical fashion photographer Herb Ritts, started collecting in 1991, the year after he got sober. "A lot of people don't want to show that work because they don't want to be lambasted for who they are," he says. This September, Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco will open a show curated by John of 50 photographs by Hujar, best known for his self-portraits, as well as for

the pictures he took of his close friend Wojnarowicz, the drag personality Divine and the Warhol superstar Candy Darling, who posed for him on her deathbed. “He was portraying his real identity as a gay man,” says John, who has 15 Hujars of his own. “It’s just wonderful.”

Museum boards are often stacked with conservative members who might disagree. As recently as five years ago, with a grant from the Herb Ritts Foundation — a Los Angeles-based charitable arts organization that also contributes to H.I.V./AIDS research — Baer approached an institution with whom he had previously mounted a show about doing a group exhibition of gay artists from the onset of AIDS. After initial interest, the idea fell apart when Baer received word that the program might “alienate their family audience.” Similarly, in 2007 an acquisitions committee member balked when the art historian and curator Don Bacigalupi, 62, then the director of the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, petitioned to purchase its first piece of openly gay art: a 1931 painting by Paul Cadmus of his lover and collaborator Jared French lying in bed, a copy of James Joyce’s “Ulysses” in his hand: “It’s a ... quality issue,” Bacigalupi recalls being told. The committee ended up buying the piece anyway, and the museum has since become a forerunner in acquiring queer artwork.

Guilt is a bit like the killer in a slasher movie: Just when you think it’s dead, it pops back up. The same is true of shame. Maybe that’s why some of the proudest collectors of gay art often keep their brashest works in the restroom or the closet. Bacigalupi — who jokingly refers to a powder room tucked away on the main floor of his Los Angeles house as the “porn room” — put “Untitled (ACT UP Diptych)” (1990), a stream-of-consciousness screen print containing passages like “the fine line between the outside and the inside is beginning to erode,” made by Wojnarowicz two years before his death, in his stairwell, a place not meant for lingering. As a young man, Bacigalupi didn’t yet know how to deal with Wojnarowicz’s fury; it embarrassed him. “But I knew he was important,” he says about seeing the artist at one of his spoken-word performances in the ’80s. “And then he was gone.”

IV.

NOW, OF COURSE, there’s a rising cohort of artists and their collectors, most of whom know that buying art isn’t just about decorating a room or accumulating capital. By living with a piece, they keep the memory of the AIDS era and its people alive. “None of this archival work is about changing history,” says the 35-year-old curator Jarrett Earnest, who worked with Goff on “More Life.” “It’s about changing the future.”

Around 15 years ago, the Irish fashion designer Jonathan Anderson, the founder of JW Anderson and the creative director of the Spanish brand Loewe, wandered into a bookstore in Montreal and came across a monograph of Hujar’s images, with which he’d only been slightly familiar. “I fell in love with every guy in it,” he says over Zoom.

Among his roughly 200 pieces of queer art, Anderson now owns 20 Hujars, 35 works by the midcentury American photographer George Platt Lynes and his favorite painting, “Untitled (Diver)” (1969-70), by Thek, along with the artist’s seemingly putrefying “Meat Cable” (1966) wax sculptures and his mischief of bronze mice figurines, “The Personal Effects of the Pied Piper” (circa 1975). For Anderson, 37, as for other younger collectors, one artist opened the door to a handful more: Hujar led him to Thek and Wojnarowicz, all of whom were variously friends and lovers. “Then you hit the ’90s and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and it sort of splinters,” says Anderson, referencing the Cuban-born American sculptor who died in 1996 at 38 and whose durational installations — strings of lights threatening to expire, a pair of wall clocks that tick in unison until they don’t — explored the incalculable loss resulting from AIDS. (Gonzalez-Torres, whose work now sells for millions, is unique in that he was wildly popular during his lifetime.)

“For me, I’d much rather have a Thek than a trip to St. Barts,” says Anderson, who dressed the Canadian actor Dan Levy at the 2021 Met Gala in a flamboyant suit onto which he printed a repurposed 1984 collage by Wojnarowicz of two men kissing, with permission from the artist’s estate. About the skepticism directed at luxury fashion’s appropriation of high art — Earnest derided it as “an artist’s body of work whittled down to a cardigan” — Anderson responds, “I suppose I don’t care. I work as a fashion designer. We’re kind of biblically hated.” Besides, as the PPOW co-founder Pilkington says, “Guess what? David did an Agnès B. campaign.”

In any case, Anderson is passionate about introducing gay artists to a new audience, as he did in his fall 2021 Loewe collection, when he incorporated the New York poet and assemblage artist Joe Brainard’s pansy prints into pants and as leather marquetry on handbags. (When asked how Brainard might feel about his posthumous success being due in part to a clothing label, the 68-year-old actor and writer Keith McDermott, Brainard’s lover of nine years and the subject of many of the artist’s witty, often lovestruck assemblages, says, “Let me put it this way: After being complimented once for wearing his shirt open, he never buttoned it again.”)



Also in the collector's guesthouse, two works by Hugh Steers, from left: "Sink and Bowl" (1993) and "Black T, White Tank" (1993). Blaine Davis

Like Anderson, the 40-year-old art dealer Graham Steele has built his collection the way someone might put together the guest list for a fantasy dinner party, organizing work by mood rather than by date or provenance. “We aren’t exactly sure what to do with this room,” says Steele, whose X-rated den in the Hollywood Hills makes the Phallus Palace look subdued by comparison — and who now has a baby with his husband, the 41-year-old contemporary design dealer Ulysses de Santi. “What we do with this room when we start having play dates with kids, I don’t know. But [the art] will never go in a bathroom. It will never go in a closet.” In his estimation, the very act of buying this work is an expression of love. It reassures a new wave of gay artists that their visions of the world are worthy of museum shows, critical dialogue, scholarly writing and, yes, market value mania.

As they wrestle with how to articulate the glory and grotesquerie of being gay, particularly under the threat of regressive legislation, the next generation of artists has inherited a tradition of defiance and celebration that it is navigating differently than its forebears. Using vintage gay photography, Kyle Dunn, 32, questions our perceptions of masculinity in his paintings of hot men reminiscent of Greek gods. Through his unflinching depictions of gay male sex, Louis Fratino, 28, manages to reveal the interiority and emotion hidden in our most physical acts. In his hyperpigmented paintings, Doron Langberg, 37, conjures a kind of gay male desire that reaches beyond the body. And even if only on the canvas, Salman Toor imagines a rich, genteel atmosphere in which his ethnicity and queerness come together in harmony.

There’s nothing particularly shocking about these pieces, although some of them are quite explicit: Fratino’s depictions of gay lovemaking are as intimate as Steers’s portraits of dying young men from the 1990s, which themselves treat their subjects with the same love Lynes had for the male bodybuilders in his black-and-white photographs from the 1930s and ’40s. In other words, the work itself is no longer taboo, which might be the most outrageous thing about it: Art patrons, gay and straight, are finally willing to look.

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