



Dianne Benson's collection of Peter Hujar's photographs, primarily from promotional work the artist did for her Dianne B. stores in Manhattan, have been on view lately in a Hujar retrospective at the Morgan Library ("Blanket in the Famous Chair," above center) and at Christie's auction house, where a sizable number of images from her collection were for sale. Clockwise from above left, "Oh, Thank God," a portrait of Ms. Benson; "Kaz" (Ms. Benson's design assistant); "You Wouldn't Dare" (Lori Goldstein); "Forbidden Fruit" (David Wojnarowicz), and a portrait of Ethyl Eichelberger from 1981. *Collection of Dianne Benson, Peter Hujar Archive/Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York/Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco Photos*

A Downtown Chronicler's East End Connection

BY JENNIFER LANDES

It was a time of spiky hair and experimental fashion, set to the beat of disco, hip-hop, punk, and glam. New York City was dirty, gritty, and even dangerous, after dark and in neighborhoods like Times Square, now gentrified into its own version of Disneyland. The exuberance of the sexual revolution in previous years waned and then evaporated as AIDS emerged and a multitude of creative voices were extinguished while waiting for a cure.

This world and the convergence of art and fashion that was possible during that time are being celebrated through the photography of Peter Hujar, who is having a moment in New York City.

At the Morgan Library there is "Peter Hujar: Speed of Life," a celebration of his achievements and the Morgan's own sizable archive, on view through May 20. Hujar was a portraitist and chronicler of downtown life in the period between the Stonewall uprising in 1969 and the AIDS crisis before the disease took his own life in 1987. His images, the Morgan said, "come across as more empathetic than those of an older artist, Diane Arbus, and more soulful and psychological than those of a younger one, Robert Mapplethorpe."

Included in that exhibition is an image of the artist Malcolm Morley that Hujar took on the beach in East Hampton around Christmas in 1976.

In addition, several of the artist's photographs in the collection of Dianne Benson made up the entire sale of his work in Christie's photography auction on Friday. Some photos sold far above their estimates, while others did not sell at all.

At the Morgan is another work, "Blanket in the Famous Chair," borrowed from Ms. Benson, who now lives in East Hampton. She collaborated with Hujar over several years for images for her Dianne B. stores in Manhattan, which she owned and operated in the 1970s and 1980s. At the Christie's sale, "David Wojnarowicz in Bed," a portrait of the artist and activist, who was a lover and then protégé and longtime friend of Hujar's, features the same blanket. (Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992.)

"Hujar was one of the most active and influential figures of the lively downtown New York art scene during the 1970s and 1980s," Christie's noted in its catalog. Ms. Benson's store was "a cutting-edge boutique" credited with being the first to import designs by Issey Miyake and Jean-Paul Gaultier.

"I was fortunate to be in the business of fashion

when the mixing of it and art was noncommercial and combusted spontaneously," Ms. Benson said recently. She first worked with Hujar in 1979, and "although he was particular and moody, he liked our exchange because, I think, he had total freedom."

In the following years, "as a way of differentiating — now one would say branding — my Dianne B. stores, I worked with many great artists in the same sort of exchange." She paid \$500 to her artist collaborators and ran the ads in *Interview* ("when it was the real thing"). These included up-and-comers of the time such as Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman.

"Of course, not with Cindy, but with the others, sometimes I was the subject in the pictures, and other times they decided the scenario. But I, always went back to Peter because his ideas excited me the most and I loved his unpredictability coupled with his sense of beauty, his rigor, and his insistence on quality."

An image from her collection was on the Christie's catalog cover and the lots were featured in a special "spotlight" section inside. Included were two photos of Ms. Benson in Miyake silks. Other images included portraits of her design assistant at the time and a number of notable people in the downtown creative fields of the day.

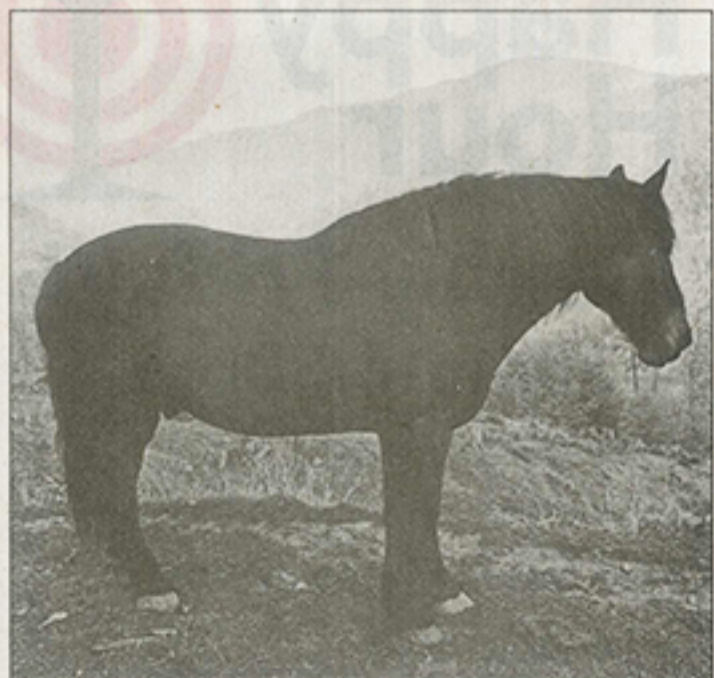
In addition to serving as magazine advertisements, five of the images in the sale were part of a set of postcards the store sent out for Christmas in 1983. Her "Twelve Perfect Christmas Gifts From Dianne B." consisted of Hujar's images and others featuring models in clothing and gift items. In "Forbidden Fruit," part of the series and in the auction, Wojnarowicz eats an apple in a Miyake shirt. (The print sold for \$18,750.)

In another photo in the auction, "Ethyl Eichelberger for Dianne B. in Jean-Paul Gaultier," from 1981, Hujar chose the drag performer to wear the outfit Ms. Benson wanted to feature in an *Interview* ad. "I said, 'Peter, this is the outfit. Put it with my ivory bracelets. Put it on anyone you wish in any way.' This was Gaultier's early early career, notice the printed legs, etc. This was not the norm in 1979." (That image sold for \$15,000.)

"I loved it. He loved it. At that time no one knew how famous or iconic these artists would become. It's nice to think I put myself in the right place at the right time. I call them the great old days."



"The Philip Glass Ensemble in Clothes From Dianne B." is one of two images of the group from 1984 that were in the Christie's sale. Both are considered to be unique prints.



"Horse in West Virginia Mountains" shows another side of the artist, who took photographs of animals throughout his career. This one is from 1969.