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Jimmy Wright's Hymns to Queer Nightlife

"The sense of freedom I felt in New York had nothing to do with the art world," the painter told Hyperallergic.

Elaine Velie | June 16, 2024



Artist Jimmy Wright (photo Benjamin Fredrickson, all images courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey)

This article is part of Hyperallergic's 2024 Pride Month series, featuring interviews with art-world queer and trans elders throughout June.

Raised in rural Kentucky, artist Jimmy Wright moved to New York City in the early 1970s and discovered a place of true freedom — but not in the city's galleries. He crafted drawings of his nights out at gay clubs (deemed too raunchy), then still lifes of oversized flowers (too emotive). Wright persisted, and his Meatpacking District club scenes secured their first gallery show in 2013.

It was during these early years in New York that Wright met his partner Ken Nuzzo. After Nuzzo was diagnosed with HIV in 1988, Wright began painting large-scale canvases of flowers. He would record them withering in his studio, sometimes spending years observing the same petals and stem. Three years later, Nuzzo passed away.

In a phone call with Hyperallergic, Wright delves into the lifelines that sustained him through his youth and the AIDS crisis, the establishment's hesitancy to show his work, and the version of the art world that's finally welcomed him with open arms.

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Hyperallergic: What did it feel like to move to New York City in the early 1970s?

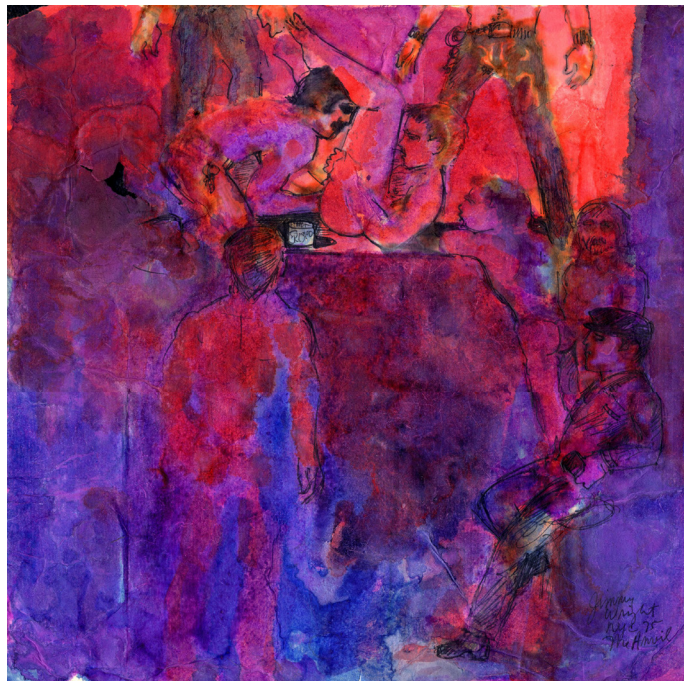
Jimmy Wright: When I moved to New York, it was in defiance to the world. I knew I could live as myself and survive without being murdered. I'd had a very traumatic experience in Chicago where a best friend was killed in a homophobic murder.

New York in 1974 was, for a gay man, unbelievable.

My larger recognition in the art world has come from a series of drawings I did of gay life before AIDS. It showed my experiences going out in New York as a gay man from 1974 through '76. I would recount the night from memory in drawings of what I had observed or experienced the night before.

H: Did the art world feel accepting to you?

JW: I think I'm one of those individuals who has appeared gay to others since I was a very small kid.



Jimmy Wright, "Anvil #1" (1975), color ink on paper, 10 1/4 x 10 3/16 inches

H: Are there any specific works from this series that you particularly love? Can you share your memory of one of those nights?

JW: I love the black-and-white drawings, but one piece that can almost represent the entire series is "The Anvil" (1975). It's a small, neat drawing of a bar with a sex scene. I was at the Anvil with my new partner.

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He was like my tour guide — we would hear of a new club, then go together. I remember the audaciousness of what I was seeing and the immense freedom within this group of gay men. It remains unforgettable.

The work is at the Whitney, and they have another black-and-white graphite drawing of an anonymous figure in the corner of a public restroom. The person that's cruising him is looking out the louvers of the entry door to see if anyone's coming in. It indicates that there's the anonymous hookup between two gay men who have intuitively recognized and signaled their availability to each other. It's a kind of intuitive recognition — a silent language.

H: How did these spaces and communities change with the start of the AIDS epidemic, and how did your work change with them?

JW: I'd found a partner, so those spaces had become less important to me, but they existed up until the early part of the AIDS crisis, when the mayor started closing bathhouses and similar places.

My partner had not been diagnosed yet, but we were suspicious about his status. Neither of us had taken the AIDS test even though it was newly available, because you would immediately lose your health insurance if you tested positive for HIV. Health insurance companies were allowed to discriminate. As part of a political strategy, Ronald Reagan would not publicly acknowledge HIV until 1985. We were invisible.

I think the big change was the gay community coming together to not only take care of its own, but to be a political voice. I marched with the gay men's health crisis group ACT UP in the first year they were in a Pride Parade, in the early '80s. It went from the euphoria of freedom to being code-red invisible. That sense of invisibility and of being tainted lasted. I was aware of it even when I started showing my work in person.

H: When did you start making your flower paintings?

JW: My partner was diagnosed in 1988 with Kaposi sarcoma and was having serious health issues within a year. From '89 until his death in September of '91, I was his caretaker.

I could no longer set aside time for myself in the studio, so I came up with a strategy for myself; I discovered still lifes. I had never done them, even when I was a student. Discovering them for myself was a revelation — I had always loved Morandi's still lifes. They don't move. You set it up and then it's there waiting for you. All I have to do is walk into the studio, even if I haven't been there for a week or three weeks, and resume observing and recording what I see. The first object I depicted was a giant sunflower head from the farmer's market. It withered and dried. I painted it for three years.

In retrospect, that's when I started being able to verbalize the importance of emotional content in art, which had been taboo in the art world, especially when I arrived in '70s New York where minimalism was the dominant voice. I couldn't really discuss these out-of-scale flower paintings critically in terms of their meanings surrounding being gay and the AIDS crisis because that was a turnoff for collectors. It felt like I was an outsider.

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Jimmy Wright, left: “Flowers for Ken, Sunflower Head” (1989-92); right: “Flowers for Ken, Sunflower Stem” (1988-91), oil on canvas, 72 x 72 x 2 1/4 inches

H: Do you still feel like an outsider?

JW: That’s what’s so immensely satisfying to me: knowing there’s a younger generation that looks at my work and understands it and appreciates it. But it’s like I skipped two generations. Thanks to my two dealers — Corbett vs. Dempsey and David Fierman — I now have a community with younger artists. Not all of them are gay, but it’s been an opportunity to communicate with a much younger generation. That has been the biggest change for me in recent years.

The art world I know now is very welcoming. It was very hard-earned. I’m not going to say I feel like a “survivor,” but it was not an easy journey to get here. The ’90s were really rough with losing all my closest gay friends. I’m at the age now where friends who are five and 10 years younger than me have passed, not from AIDS necessarily, but from other health issues. You quickly realize that part of life is learning to value the moment and the friends and relationships you have at home.

H: Did you have mentors?

JW: In 1965 at the Art Institute of Chicago, there was a man named Hugh Edwards in the prints and drawings department. He was from Paducah, which is 40 miles from my hometown in the middle of nowhere Western Kentucky. I went in one day and introduced myself as being a local boy who ended up at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Unbeknownst to me, he immediately read me as a young gay man and sat me down at a huge table and said, “There’s something I want to show you.” He brought out a portfolio that he had recently purchased for the artist’s collection: David Hockney’s *The Rake’s Progress*.

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Jimmy Wright, "Prospect Park: portrait and sketch" (1975), watercolor, 5 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches

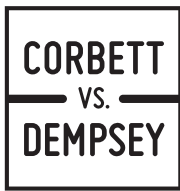
One by one, we looked at every etching in that series. Years later, I was befriended by Paul Cadmus, whose brother-in-law Lincoln Kirstein's friend Hugh Edwards stayed with Kirstein as a house guest. Here I had made this connection as a naive young art student, recognized by a gay man in the art world. There have been these sorts of incredible friends in my life who, especially in my younger years, were invisible lifelines.

My other mentors are artists I don't know — I only know their work. Alice Neel, then David Hockney, who was a very early mentor I found during a time that I was discovering artists I immediately knew were gay. One of those was Francis Bacon: I have a whole bookshelf of Bacon books. Then I discovered the writings of Jean Genet. They had a kind of raw sexuality — like Lou Reed's saying, "Take a walk on the wild side."

H: What are you working on now and what are you excited to work on next?

JW: I've started a new series that I'm just calling The Bowery Series. I moved to New York in the '70s when the city was in complete economic decay. I've lived on the Bowery since 1975 and have seen an immense population of people struggling with addiction and mental illness. I live almost next door to the Bowery Mission, and since COVID, it's as if all of Manhattan is like the Bowery. I grew up in the Jim Crow South. It's about the unspoken cruelty of our lives being quite visible to us.

I'm working with a figure, but I'm trying to put it in the context of something I have lived amongst and seen — and still see every day of my life in New York City.



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H: How do you think about Pride Month?

JW: In the early '70s, I founded one of the nation's oldest gay campus organizations, and one of the biggest surprises for me in recent years was being recognized with an honorary degree by Southern Illinois University for that. I marched in the first Pride parade and marched in every one up until around 10 years ago. It's immensely important for me to be connected to my gay community. The struggles I had as a young gay person aren't necessarily the same challenges they face now, but it's important to me that younger generations understand the importance of strength, resilience, and resistance.

I've lost so many people that I cherish. I'm so incredibly lucky to be alive in this moment and to have my art recognized, and to have *me* be recognized.